A MYSTERY IN GRADED ENGLISH

The Blue Suitcase

by Trey Violet



LEVEL

A2

BRITISH ENGLISH

DIGITALBOOK AI SERIES

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The Blue Suitcase is part of the Digitalbook AI Series of graded readers: complete novels, written in clear English for adult learners.

CONTENTS

	Introduction — The List	1
1	The Airport	5
2	The Wrong Bag	11
3	The Drawing	16
4	A Hotel Room	21
5	The Man at the Café	26
6	A Strange Phone Call	31
7	The Old Watch	36
8	A Train Ticket	42
9	The Little Village	47
10	The House by the Sea	52
11	Another Suitcase	58
12	The Missing Girl	63
13	The Last Clue	68
14	Back at the Station	73
15	The Owner	78

INTRODUCTION

The List

Emma Clarke likes lists.

There's a list on her fridge. There's a list on her phone. In her bag there's a small notebook, and it's full of lists. Shopping. Birthdays. Things to do on Saturday. Things to do on Sunday.

"You're very organised," people tell her.

"Thank you," she says. She isn't sure it's a compliment.

Emma is twenty-six. She lives in Leeds, in a small flat on the second floor. It has one bedroom, a kitchen and a window. The window looks at a car park. She likes the flat. It's quiet, and it's hers.

She gets up at twenty past six every morning. She has toast and a cup of tea. She leaves the flat at half past seven and walks to the bus stop. The bus comes at seven forty-two. She always sits in the same seat, near the window, on the left.

She works at a dentist's in the city centre. She's the receptionist. She sits at the front desk, and she answers the phone, and she writes everyone's appointments in a big diary.

"Mrs Patel, Tuesday at ten o'clock."

"Mr Brown, Friday at half past two."

Emma knows everyone's week. She knows when they're busy and when they're free. She knows when Mr Brown is late, and he's always late.

Her own week is easy. It's the same every time.

She doesn't mind. She likes to know what happens next.

Some people love surprises. Emma doesn't. A surprise is just a thing that nobody put on the list.

On Fridays she sees her friends. On Sundays she has lunch with her mum and dad. Once a year she goes on holiday, and she never goes alone. She goes with her parents, or she goes with Hannah.

Hannah is her best friend. They met at school when they were eleven. Hannah talks fast, laughs loudly and never makes lists. Emma doesn't understand how she lives.

Three years ago, Hannah moved to Portugal. She teaches English in a small city on the coast. It's called Alvar. She sends Emma messages about the sea and the sun and the cheap coffee.

"Come and visit!" she says. "It's beautiful here!"

Emma always says yes. Then she always finds a reason not to go.

But this time it's different.

This time Hannah is getting married.

Her husband-to-be is called Miguel. He's Portuguese, he's very kind, and he laughs at all of Hannah's jokes. The wedding is on Saturday afternoon, at four o'clock. And Emma is the bridesmaid.

So tomorrow, Emma flies to Portugal.

She flies alone.

It's Tuesday evening, and the flat is very quiet. There's a new suitcase on the bedroom floor. It's blue. It has four wheels and a long handle.

It's the most ordinary suitcase in the shop. Emma knows this because the man in the shop told her. "That's our most popular one," he said.

Emma liked that. A popular suitcase is a safe suitcase.

She opens it. She takes out her notebook and reads the list.

Passport.

Plane ticket.

Phone and charger.

Clothes for five days.

THE DRESS.

Shoes for the wedding.

Present for Hannah and Miguel.

The dress is pale green. It's long and soft, and it's in a special bag. Hannah chose it. Emma lays it in the suitcase very carefully, like a sleeping child. She puts the shoes next to it.

The present is two glasses for wine. They're wrapped in silver paper. There's a card on it, and on the card Emma writes Hannah's address. *Rua das Laranjeiras 14, Alvar.* She wants to take the present to Hannah's flat on Friday. She practises the address quietly, because the Portuguese words are difficult.

She puts her phone charger in the suitcase. Then she puts in the clothes. Then she closes it.

She ticks every line on the list.

Then she checks her passport.

It's in her bag. She knows it's in her bag. She checks it again.

Her phone rings. It's her mum.

"Have you got your passport?" her mum asks.

"Yes, Mum."

"And the dress?"

"Yes, Mum."

"Did you use the ribbon?"

On Sunday her mum gave her a yellow ribbon. It's bright yellow, like a lemon.

"Tie it on your suitcase," her mum said. "Lots of suitcases look the same. With a ribbon, you know it's yours."

"I'm doing it now," Emma says.

She takes the ribbon out of her bag and puts it on the chair next to the bed.

"Good girl," her mum says. "Text me when you land. And Emma?"

"Yes?"

"Enjoy it. Try to enjoy it, love."

"I will."

After the call, Emma checks her passport one more time.

She sets three alarms on her phone. Ten to five. Five to five. Five o'clock.

Then she turns off the light. She lies in the dark and listens to the cars in the car park. She doesn't sleep for a long time.

The yellow ribbon is still on the chair.

CHAPTER 1

The Airport

Emma's dad drove her to Manchester Airport.

They left Leeds at a quarter past five. The roads were empty and the sky was grey. Her dad played the radio quietly, and Emma looked at the list in her notebook.

At the airport, her dad parked the car and turned off the engine.

"I can come in with you," he said.

"No," Emma said. "It's OK. I can do it."

He looked at her for a long moment. Then he smiled.

"I know you can," he said.

He lifted the blue suitcase out of the car. He kissed her on the head. Then he waved and drove away, and Emma was alone.

She pulled her suitcase into the airport.

It was very big and very bright. There were people everywhere. Families with small children. Businessmen with coffee. A group of young men in matching T-shirts. They were all walking fast, and they all knew where they were going.

Emma stopped and looked up at the big screen.

AV 207 — ALVAR — 08:05 — CHECK-IN DESKS 40–44.

She walked to desk 42 and waited in the queue. When it was her turn, she showed her passport.

"Are you travelling alone today?" the woman asked.

"Yes," Emma said. It sounded strange.

"Did you pack this bag yourself?"

"Yes."

The woman put a label on the suitcase. Then the suitcase moved away on a black belt. Emma watched it until it disappeared.

She checked her passport.

Security was slow. Emma waited in another queue. She put her bag and her jacket and her phone in a grey plastic box. A man in a uniform looked at her boarding pass and nodded.

After security, she walked to gate 12. She was very early. She sat down and looked at the board, and then she looked at the clock, and then she looked at the board again.

At half past seven, a voice spoke above her head.

"Flight AV 207 to Alvar is now boarding. Please have your boarding pass and passport ready."

Emma's stomach jumped. She joined the queue.

Her seat was 14B, in the middle. A young woman with headphones was already in 14A, next to the window. She didn't look up.

Emma had a small bag with her. She tried to lift it into the locker above the seats. It was too high, and her arms weren't long enough.

"Here. Let me help you, love."

It was an old man. He was tall and big, with white hair, a brown face and a grey cardigan. He took her bag and lifted it into the locker easily.

"There you go," he said.

"Thank you," Emma said.

"No problem."

He sat down in 14C, next to her, on the aisle. He sat down slowly, the way big men do on small seats.

Emma listened to his voice. It was strange. He had a foreign accent, maybe Spanish or Portuguese. But he said "love" like her grandmother in Leeds.

The plane started to move. It turned and stopped, and turned again. Then the engines roared, and the plane raced along the runway and climbed into the sky.

Emma closed her eyes.

"First time flying?" the old man asked.

She opened her eyes. "No. First time flying alone."

"Ah." He nodded. "Where are you going? Alvar?"

"Yes. My friend lives there. She's getting married on Saturday."

"Lovely," he said. "A wedding in September. That's the best month."

"Is Alvar your home?"

He laughed. "Well. I live in Manchester. Forty-five years now. My wife is English. But I was born near Alvar. So it's home too. Two homes. It's a lot of work, two homes."

Emma smiled.

"I'm visiting my family," he said. "My daughter. And my granddaughter."

His face changed when he said "granddaughter". It became softer.

"She's seven on Saturday," he said.

"Saturday? Like the wedding."

"Like the wedding." He laughed again. "Saturday is a big day, then. For both of us."

He told her about the girl. "She's very clever," he said. She talked to him in English and in Portuguese, and sometimes in both languages in the same sentence. She liked drawing. She liked the sea. She asked a lot of questions.

"Too many questions," he said happily.

Then he looked at the notebook on Emma's knee.

"What's that? Homework?"

"It's a list," Emma said. She felt a bit silly. "For the trip."

"A list for a holiday?"

"A list for everything."

He laughed. It was a big, warm laugh, and the woman with the headphones looked up.

"My wife is like you," he said. "Pat. She writes lists. Then she writes lists about the lists. I tell her, Pat, love, enjoy the day. Don't write it down."

"Does she listen?"

"Never." He smiled. "But she's always right. That's the problem with people who write lists. They're always right."

Emma laughed too. It surprised her.

"What do you do?" she asked. "I mean, what's your job?"

"I was a cook. Forty years in kitchens, in Manchester. I cooked eggs and bacon for half of the city." He patted his stomach. "Now I'm retired. Now I just eat."

"I'm a receptionist," Emma said. "At a dentist's."

"Ah. So you're the person who says, *The dentist is ready for you now.*"

"Yes. That's me."

"I don't like you very much, then," he said, and they both laughed.

He didn't say his name. Emma didn't ask. And he didn't ask Emma's name. It was that kind of conversation, the kind you have with a stranger on a plane.

A woman with a trolley stopped next to them. The old man ordered a cup of tea.

"A proper brew," he said, and he winked at Emma.

He finished his tea. Then he folded his arms, closed his eyes and started to snore quietly.

Emma looked past the young woman at the window. There was nothing outside, only white clouds. She checked her passport. She read her list. She checked the time on her phone.

Two hours passed very slowly.

At last, the plane started to go down. Emma looked out of the window again. Now there was blue sea, and a long yellow beach, and a city of white and orange buildings.

The plane landed at twenty past ten. Everyone stood up at the same time.

The old man helped Emma with her bag again.

"Thank you," she said.

"My pleasure, love."

In the airport, she followed the signs to baggage reclaim. Her flight was on carousel 3. She waited next to it with the other passengers.

The belt started to move. Bags came round one by one. Black bags, red bags, a pink bag with flowers.

The old man was there too, a little way along. He looked at the clock on the wall.

"Come on, come on," he said quietly. "My taxi's waiting."

Then two blue suitcases came round together.

They were exactly the same. Same blue. Same four wheels. Same long handle.

The old man was nearer. He picked up the first one and pulled it off the belt.

"That's mine," he said. He looked at Emma and smiled. "Have a lovely wedding!"

"Thank you! Happy birthday to your granddaughter!"

He waved, and walked quickly towards the exit.

Emma picked up the second suitcase. It felt heavier than this morning. But she was tired, and she was hot, and she wanted to get out of the airport.

She didn't look at the label.

She pulled the suitcase through the big doors and out into the sun.

CHAPTER 2

The Wrong Bag

Outside, the light was very bright. The air was warm and smelled of the sea.

Emma stood on the pavement and took a deep breath. She was in Portugal. She was really here. She did it.

There was a long queue for taxis. Emma joined it. Then she took out her phone.

The battery was at eight per cent.

"Oh no," she said.

She always charged her phone at night. But last night she put the charger in the suitcase. It was on the list, so she packed it.

She found a bench next to the taxi queue. She laid the suitcase on its side and opened it.

There was a shirt on top.

It was a man's shirt. It was white, with thin blue lines. Someone folded it very carefully.

Emma stared at it.

She lifted it. Underneath, there were more shirts. There were brown trousers. There were socks, rolled into small balls. There was a brown jacket.

There wasn't a long, pale green dress.

There weren't any wedding shoes. There wasn't a present in silver paper.

Emma closed the suitcase very quickly, like a person who sees a spider. She felt hot and then cold.

She looked at the label on the handle.

It was torn. Half of it was gone. On the half that was left, she read:

T. FERR—

There were three numbers under the name. The rest of the phone number was gone too.

It wasn't her name. It wasn't her suitcase.

Emma thought of the old man. *That's mine,* he said. And he took the first suitcase. Her suitcase.

She stood up so fast that the bench moved.

She ran back to the doors of the airport. They didn't open. A sign said *NO ENTRY* in English and Portuguese. Emma knocked on the glass. A security man came to the door and opened it a little.

"You can't come in here," he said. "This is the exit."

"Please. A man took my suitcase. I need to find him."

"Sorry. No entry here." He pointed to the left. "Go to door B. Then turn right."

"Door B?"

"Door B. Next to the pharmacy."

The door closed. Emma went to the left. She found another door. She went inside and ran back along the hall, pulling the wrong suitcase behind her.

Carousel 3 was empty. It wasn't moving any more.

There was no old man.

Emma looked everywhere. She looked at the exit. She looked at the café. She looked at the people in the taxi queue through the window.

There were lots of old men, but he wasn't one of them.

He was gone. And her dress was gone with him.

She saw a sign on the wall. *LOST LUGGAGE.* There was an arrow under it.

The lost luggage desk was in a corner. There was a short queue. Emma stood in it and tried to breathe slowly. In front of her, a man spoke angrily in French.

When it was her turn, she walked to the desk. A young woman sat behind it. Her badge said *Sónia*.

"Good morning. Do-you-have-your-baggage-reference?" Sónia said.

She said it very fast, like one long word.

"Sorry," Emma said. "Could you say that again?"

"Your baggage reference. The paper. From check-in."

"Oh. Yes."

Emma found the small paper in her passport and gave it to her.

"So. What's the problem? Your bag didn't arrive?"

"No. It arrived. But a man took it. And I took his."

Emma explained everything. The plane. The old man. The two blue suitcases. She spoke too fast, and she said "sorry" four times.

Sónia listened. Then she typed something on her computer.

"Your bag isn't here," she said. "And nobody reported a problem. Nobody came to this desk."

"But he took my bag. He has my bag. Can you call him?"

"What's his name?"

Emma showed her the torn label.

Sónia looked at it. "T. Ferr-something. That isn't a name. That's half a name. And three numbers isn't a phone number."

"He was on my flight. He sat next to me. 14C."

Sónia typed again. Then she shook her head.

"I'm sorry. I can't give you the names of other passengers. It's the law."

"Oh."

"But I can take your details. And we can send him a message. If he calls us, we call you." Sónia gave her a form. "Write your name. Your phone number. Your hotel in Alvar."

Emma wrote it all on the form. *Emma Clarke. Hotel Sol, Alvar.* She wrote her phone number very carefully.

"Can I leave his suitcase here?" she asked. "With you?"

"Yes. But then we send it to our central office in Lisbon. It takes one week, maybe two."

"Two weeks?"

"Maybe."

Emma thought about this. Two weeks was too late. The wedding was on Saturday. And if the old man called, she wanted to give him his suitcase immediately. Today. Not in two weeks.

"I'll keep it," she said.

"OK." Sónia gave her a copy of the form. "We'll call you."

"When?"

"When we know something."

Emma said thank you. She said sorry again too. Then she walked away from the desk, pulling the suitcase that wasn't hers.

She sat down on a hard plastic chair and looked at her phone. Seven per cent.

She had to call Hannah.

She practised in her head.

Hi, Hannah! Don't worry, but there's a small problem.

No. When people said *don't worry*, everyone worried.

Hi, Hannah! Funny story. You'll laugh.

But it wasn't funny. And Hannah wasn't going to laugh. The wedding was in three days. Hannah had the flowers, the food, the music and a hundred guests. And now she had a bridesmaid without a dress.

Emma's phone buzzed. It was a message from Hannah.

Landed?? Can't wait to see you!!! Dress OK??

Emma looked at it for a long time.

She wrote *Yes, all fine*. Then she deleted it.

She wrote *Landed! See you soon x*, and she sent that.

It wasn't a lie. It just wasn't everything.

Then she remembered her mum. *Text me when you land.*

She wrote *Landed safely! Hot here. Love you x*.

Her mum answered in one second. Her mum always answered in one second.

Wonderful!! Did you find your suitcase OK?

Emma looked at the blue suitcase.

Yes, she wrote. *I found a suitcase.*

Then she deleted that too, and sent a smiling face instead.

She put her phone in her bag. She looked at the blue suitcase next to her chair. It looked exactly like hers. But it wasn't, and now it was her problem.

The old man went home with her dress. Maybe he was opening the suitcase now. Maybe he was looking at a long, pale green dress and saying, *Oh no.*

Maybe he was coming back.

There was a café upstairs. From the café, you could see the whole hall and the lost luggage desk.

Emma took the wrong suitcase and went upstairs to wait.

CHAPTER 3

The Drawing

The café upstairs was small and quiet. It had six tables, a long glass counter and a big window. Through the window you could see the whole arrivals hall.

Emma chose the table next to the window. From there, she could see the lost luggage desk, carousel 3 and the exit. If the old man came back, she could see him immediately.

A waiter came to her table. He was young, with very short hair and a white apron.

"Bom dia. What would you like?"

"A coffee, please. With milk."

"A big one or a small one?"

"A big one. A very big one."

He smiled. "Anything to eat? We've got sandwiches. Cheese, ham, or cheese and ham."

"Cheese and ham, please."

"Good choice," he said. "The cheese is good. The ham is better."

The coffee came in a tall glass. Emma held it with both hands and watched the hall.

People came and went. A family with three children. Two women with surfboards. A man in a suit, talking loudly on his phone. Every few minutes, an old man walked through the doors, and every time, Emma's heart jumped.

But it was never him.

The man from 14C was tall and big. He had white hair and a brown face. He had a kind voice. These old men were too small, or too young, or too thin. One of them had a long grey beard. One of them had a dog.

An hour passed. The coffee was finished. The sandwich was finished.

Emma looked at the blue suitcase next to her chair.

Maybe there was a name inside. A letter. An address. Something.

She didn't want to open it. It felt wrong, like reading someone's diary. But she needed her dress, and he needed his suitcase. And the suitcase was the only thing she had.

She pulled it onto the chair opposite her and opened it a little.

The white shirt with the thin blue lines was on top. Under the shirt, she found the brown jacket. It was an old jacket, soft and heavy, and it smelled a little of coffee. It had two big pockets on the front. She put her hand in the pockets. They were empty.

There was a washbag too. It was dark blue, with a broken zip. She didn't open it. Some things were private.

There was a black phone charger. She tried it. It didn't fit her phone.

There was a book. It was thick, and it was in Portuguese. On the cover there was a ship on a grey sea.

There weren't any letters. There wasn't an address.

Emma felt like a thief. She closed the suitcase quickly and sat back in her chair.

Then she saw the pocket on the front of the suitcase. It was a flat pocket with a zip. Her own suitcase had the same pocket. She always put her plane ticket in it.

She opened the zip. There was a piece of paper inside, folded in half.

She took it out and opened it.

It was a drawing.

A child drew it. Emma knew that immediately. It was in crayons, in bright colours, and the lines went everywhere.

In the middle of the drawing there was a little girl. She had long black hair and a red dress. She had a very big smile, much bigger than her face.

Next to the girl there was an old man. He was tall, much taller than the girl. He had white hair and a big round stomach. He was holding her hand.

Behind them there was a yellow house with a blue door. Behind the house there was the sea, blue and green, with small white waves. And in the sky there was a big yellow sun. It was round, with twelve short lines around it and two lines in the middle.

Across the top of the paper, in big uneven letters, someone wrote:

ME — 7 ON SATURDAY! COME EARLY AVÔ!

Emma read it once. Then she read it again.

Seven on Saturday.

She heard the old man's voice in her head. *She's seven on Saturday. Saturday is a big day, then. For both of us.*

"It's him," she said out loud.

The waiter looked up from the counter. "Sorry?"

"Nothing. Sorry." Emma held up the drawing. "Excuse me. Can I ask you something? What does this word mean?" She pointed. "*Avô.*"

The waiter came over and looked.

"Avô? It means grandfather. Grandad." He smiled at the drawing. "Is this your daughter?"

"No. I don't know her."

He looked at her strangely.

"It's a long story," Emma said.

"Ah," he said. "OK." And he went back to the counter.

Emma looked at the old man in the drawing. He was big and round, with white hair. He was holding the little girl's hand.

It was the man from the plane. She was sure of it.

So now she knew something. The suitcase belonged to a grandfather. His granddaughter was six, and on Saturday she was seven. She had long black hair. She lived in a yellow house with a blue door, near the sea.

And on Saturday, her grandfather wanted to be there. Early.

Emma folded the drawing very carefully and put it back in the front pocket. Then she took it out again. It felt safer in her own bag. She put it inside her notebook.

She paid the waiter and took the suitcase back downstairs to the lost luggage desk. There was nobody in the queue now. Sónia was eating an apple.

"Hello again," Emma said.

Sónia looked up. "Did he come back?"

"No. But I know more about him now. Can I tell you? Then if he calls, you know it's him."

Sónia put down her apple. "OK. Tell me."

"He's old. About seventy-five, maybe eighty. He's tall and big. He's got white hair and a brown face. He's got a big laugh. He's Portuguese, but he lives in Manchester. And he's got a granddaughter. Her birthday is on Saturday."

Sónia wrote something on her form.

"Anything else?" she asked. "Glasses? A hat?"

Emma thought. "No glasses. A grey cardigan. And he says 'love' a lot."

"Love?"

"Like, *thank you, love.* It's what people say in the north of England."

Sónia looked at her for a moment.

"A lot of old men have got white hair," she said. "But not many say 'love'. OK. I'll remember."

"Thank you."

"We'll call you," Sónia said, and she picked up her apple again.

Emma went back upstairs. She ordered another coffee, a small one this time, and she sat at the same table and watched the doors.

At half past two, she gave up.

She went outside, into the heat, and joined the queue for taxis. When it was her turn, a man with a big grey moustache put the blue suitcase in the back of his car.

"Where to?" he asked.

"Hotel Sol, please. In Alvar."

"Ah. The old town. Twenty minutes."

Emma sat in the back of the taxi. Outside the window there were palm trees, white houses and, sometimes, between the buildings, a flash of blue sea.

She took out her notebook and opened it to a new page. At the top she wrote *THE OLD MAN*. Under it she wrote:

Tall. White hair. Lives in Manchester. Says "love".

Granddaughter — 7 on Saturday.

Yellow house. Blue door. The sea.

T. FERR—

It wasn't much. But it was a list, and Emma felt a little better.

CHAPTER 4

A Hotel Room

Hotel Sol was in a narrow street in the old town. It was a tall, thin building with blue and white tiles on the front. There were flowers on every balcony.

Emma pulled the suitcase up three steps and through the door.

Inside, it was cool and dark. There was a small desk, a red sofa and a big plant. Behind the desk there was a young man in a white shirt and a dark blue tie.

"Good afternoon, madam," he said. "Welcome to Hotel Sol. How may I help you?"

"Hello. I've got a reservation. My name's Emma Clarke."

"One moment, please." He looked at his computer. "Ah, yes. Miss Clarke. Five nights. A single room with a balcony. Is that correct?"

"Yes. That's right."

"May I see your passport, please?"

Emma gave it to him. His badge said *Paulo*.

"Thank you, Miss Clarke. You are in room 12, on the second floor." He gave her a heavy old key with a wooden ball on it. "Breakfast is from half past seven until ten o'clock, in the room on the left."

"Is there a lift?"

"Yes, madam, there is a lift." He pointed to a small door in the corner. Then he lowered his voice. "But I must be honest. The stairs are faster."

Emma laughed. "Thank you."

"Is there anything else I can do for you?"

Emma hesitated. Then she took a deep breath.

"Actually, yes. Can I ask you some questions?"

"Of course."

"Is there a shop near here? A shop for clothes?"

"Yes. There is a small shop at the end of the street, on the right. It is not very fashionable. But it is cheap."

"Can I buy a toothbrush there?"

"No. For a toothbrush, there is a pharmacy next to it."

"And where can I buy a phone charger?"

Paulo looked at her. Then he looked at the blue suitcase.

"Miss Clarke, may I ask you a question?"

"Yes."

"Is there a problem with your luggage?"

So Emma told him. The plane. The old man. The two suitcases. The dress. She told it better this time. She only said sorry once.

Paulo listened carefully, with his hands together on the desk.

"I see," he said. "This is a very unusual situation."

"Yes."

"Which phone have you got?"

Emma showed him. Paulo opened a drawer under the desk. It was full of phone chargers in every colour.

"Guests forget them," he said. "Every week. Please. Take this one. You can give it back when you leave."

"Really? Thank you. Thank you so much."

"It is my pleasure, madam."

Room 12 was small and white, with a blue tiled floor. There was a bed, a wardrobe, a chair and a little table. There was a glass door, and behind it a balcony the size of a doormat.

Emma opened the door and stepped outside. She saw roofs. Hundreds of orange roofs, going down the hill. And at the bottom, the sea, very blue and very bright.

For a moment, she forgot about the dress.

Then she remembered.

She charged her phone. She went to the shop at the end of the street and bought a white T-shirt with a picture of a fish on it. It was the only one in her size. She went to the pharmacy and bought a toothbrush and toothpaste.

Back in her room, she had a shower. She put on the fish T-shirt and her jeans from the plane.

Then her phone rang. It was Hannah.

Emma looked at the screen. She took a breath. She answered.

"EMMA! You're here! You're actually here! Where are you? Are you at the hotel? Is it nice? Is the room OK?"

"Hi! Yes, I'm at the hotel. It's lovely. The room's got a balcony."

"A balcony! Did you see the sea? Can you see the sea from your balcony?"

"I can see a little bit of it."

"Oh, I'm so happy you're here. Listen, I'm sorry, I can't see you tonight. Can you believe it? I'm at Miguel's mum's house, and there are about fifty aunts here, and they're all making food. Why do Portuguese weddings need so much food?"

Emma laughed. "I don't know."

"And tomorrow I've got the flowers, and on Friday I'm at the Quinta all day. It's crazy. But Saturday, we've got hair and make-up at my flat at twelve. You're coming at twelve, OK? Not ten past. Twelve."

"I'm never late."

"I know. You're Emma." Hannah stopped. "You've got the dress, haven't you? Tell me you've got the dress."

There was a short silence.

Emma looked at the blue suitcase on the floor. It looked back at her.

"Yes," she said. "Don't worry about the dress."

It was not exactly a lie. It was a sentence with no answer in it. Emma knew the difference, and she didn't feel better.

"You're the best," Hannah said. "I've got to go. An aunt is shouting at me. Love you!"

"Love you too."

The phone went quiet.

Emma sat on the bed. She looked at the suitcase for a long time.

What did she know? He was a grandfather. He lived in Manchester. He was born near Alvar. His granddaughter lived in a yellow house near the sea.

But what was his name? Where was he now? Was he looking for her too?

She opened the suitcase again. This time she was braver. She looked in the pockets of the brown trousers.

In the back pocket there was a small card. It was dark red, with a gold star on the front. It said *CAFÉ ESTRELA*, and under that, *Praça da Estrela, Alvar*.

She turned it over. On the back there were ten little boxes. Nine of them had a gold star inside. One was empty.

Emma knew this kind of card. Buy nine coffees, and the tenth coffee is free.

Nine stars. He went there a lot.

She ran down the stairs. It was faster than the lift.

Paulo was still at the desk.

"Paulo, sorry. One more question. Do you know Café Estrela?"

"Of course. Everybody knows Café Estrela. It is in Praça da Estrela, five minutes from here. It has the best coffee in Alvar." He thought for a moment. "And the best pastel de nata. Possibly in Portugal."

"What time does it open?"

"At eight o'clock in the morning. Every day. It is a very old café. The owner is very old too."

"Thank you, Paulo."

"Miss Clarke?"

"Yes?"

He smiled. "I hope you find your dress."

Emma went back up to room 12. She went to bed early, in her fish T-shirt. She set three alarms.

And for the first time since Tuesday, she fell asleep quickly and slept well.

CHAPTER 5

The Man at the Café

Praça da Estrela was a small square with old trees and a fountain in the middle. Pigeons walked around the fountain like little grey businessmen.

Café Estrela was on one side of the square. It had a red door and a red sign with a gold star. Outside, there were five small tables in the shade of the trees.

It was ten past eight. Emma was the first customer. She sat at a table outside, with the blue suitcase next to her.

She looked at the menu. It was in Portuguese. She understood the word *café* and the prices. That was all.

A minute later, a young man sat down at the next table. He had a big backpack, a red baseball cap and very white teeth. He looked at the menu too. Then he looked at Emma.

"Hey. Sorry. Do you speak English?"

"Yes."

"Awesome. I'm trying to order breakfast, but I don't understand anything. What's a *galão*?"

"I don't know," Emma said. "I'm trying to understand it too."

He laughed. "OK. So we're both lost. I'm Tyler."

"Emma."

"Nice to meet you, Emma. Where are you from?"

"England. Leeds."

"Cool. I'm from Ohio. In the US." He put the menu down. "So what are you doing here? Are you on vacation?"

"Vacation? Oh. A holiday. Yes. Sort of."

"Me too. I'm travelling around Europe for two months. Spain, Portugal, then France, I guess. I'm going north this weekend, to surf."

The red door opened, and an old man came out. He was small and thin, with a white moustache and a long white apron. He walked slowly, but his eyes were quick.

"Bom dia, bom dia," he said. "English?"

"Yes," Emma and Tyler said together.

"Good. I speak English. A little." He smiled. "What do you want?"

"What's a galão?" Tyler asked.

"Galão is coffee with a lot of milk. In a tall glass. Very good in the morning."

"OK. One galão, please. And something to eat?"

"Pastel de nata," said the old man. It wasn't a question. "Everybody eats pastel de nata. It's a little cake. Egg and cream. Very good."

"Two galãos and two pastéis, then," Tyler said. He looked at Emma. "Is that OK? My treat."

"Oh. Thank you."

The old man went back inside.

"*Treat*?" Emma said.

"It means I'm paying. You don't say that in England?"

"We say *my treat*. We just say it more quietly."

Tyler laughed. "I like you," he said.

The coffee came in tall glasses, pale brown and hot. The pastéis de nata were small and golden, with dark spots on top. Emma ate one. It

was warm and sweet and perfect.

"Oh," she said.

"Right?" said Tyler, with his mouth full.

The old man watched them happily. "Good?"

"Very good," Emma said. Then she took the red card out of her bag. "Excuse me. Can I ask you something? Is this card from your café?"

The old man took it. He looked at the front. He looked at the back. He counted the stars.

Then his face changed.

"This is Tomás's card," he said.

"Tomás?"

"Yes. Tomás. My friend. Look." He pointed to the nine stars. "Every time, he wants a star. Every time, I give him a star. Then he loses the card, and he starts again." He looked at her. "Why have you got it? Where is Tomás?"

So Emma explained again. She was getting good at it.

The old man listened. When she got to the green dress, he laughed so hard that he had to sit down.

"Tomás has got your dress!" he said. "Oh, Tomás. Oh, that's very good."

"It isn't very good for me," Emma said. But she was smiling too.

"I'm sorry. I'm sorry." He wiped his eyes. "My name is Abel. This is my café. Fifty years."

"I'm Emma. What's Tomás's other name? His family name?"

Abel thought. "Ferreira? Maybe. I don't know. Here we call him Tomás Inglês. English Tomás. Because he lives in England."

"Does he live in Manchester?"

"Yes. Manchester. He comes every year in September. Every year, he sits here." Abel touched the table next to them. "At this table. He always

drinks a galão. He always eats two pastéis de nata. Never one. Always two. And he always comes on his first day in Alvar."

"His first day? But he arrived yesterday."

"Yesterday?" Abel shook his head slowly. "Then this is strange. He didn't come yesterday. And he isn't coming today, I think. It's after eight. He always comes at eight."

"Can you call him?"

Abel took an old phone out of his apron. He found a number and called it. He listened. Then he put the phone down.

"It's off. Tomás never charges his phone. Never."

Emma thought of the black charger in the blue suitcase, next to the shirts. She didn't say anything.

"Where does his family live?" she asked.

"In a village. On the coast, to the north. His daughter lives there." Abel hit his own head gently with his hand. "Vila... Vila something. Every year he tells me, and every year I forget. I'm old. My head is full of coffee."

Tyler was listening to all this with big eyes.

"Wait," he said. "So you're looking for a guy, and he's got your bag, and you've got his bag, and you don't know his name?"

"I know his first name now," Emma said.

"That's insane. You're like a detective."

"I'm not a detective. I'm a receptionist."

"Well, right now you're a detective." He finished his coffee. "Right now you're sitting in a square in Portugal, and you're eating cake, and you're looking for a mystery man with your dress. That's the best vacation story I ever heard."

Emma wrote her phone number and her hotel on a paper napkin. She gave it to Abel.

"If Tomás comes, can you give him this? Please?"

"Of course." Abel put the napkin in his apron pocket, next to his phone. "If Tomás comes, I give him this, and I give him a star. And I tell him he's a silly old man."

Tyler stood up and put on his big backpack.

"I've got to go. My walking tour starts at ten." He held out his hand. "Good luck with your mystery, Emma from Leeds."

"Thank you for the coffee."

"Any time." He walked away across the square, and the pigeons ran in front of him.

Emma sat at Tomás's table for a little longer. The sun was moving across the square. In the fountain, the water was making a soft, cool sound.

She opened her notebook and added to the list.

Name: TOMÁS. (Ferreira?)

Family in a village to the north. Vila something.

Phone: off.

Then she sat in the sun, with Tomás's suitcase beside her, and she waited.

CHAPTER 6

A Strange Phone Call

At eleven o'clock, Emma took the suitcase back to the hotel. She was tired of pulling it everywhere. Its wheels made a terrible noise on the old streets, and everybody turned to look.

"Any news, Miss Clarke?" Paulo asked.

"A little. His name's Tomás. But his phone's off."

"Ah. A name is a good start," Paulo said. "I can keep the suitcase behind the desk, if you like. It is safe here."

"Thank you, Paulo."

Without the suitcase, Emma felt light and free. She walked down the hill towards the sea. She looked in shop windows. She bought a bottle of water and an orange. She sat on the wall by the harbour and watched the fishing boats.

It was nice. It was very nice. But every few minutes, she took out her phone and looked at it.

At five past one, she was sitting on a bench in a small square near the cathedral. Her phone rang.

The number was long and strange. It started with *+351*. That was Portugal.

Emma's heart started to beat fast. She answered.

"Hello?"

There was a loud crackling noise. Then a voice. An old man's voice, very far away.

"Hello... is that... Emma... Clarke?"

"Yes! Yes, this is Emma. Who's calling?"

"...Tomás... from the plane..."

"Tomás! Oh, thank goodness. Hello! Sorry, it's a bad line. I can't hear you very well."

The crackling got worse. She pressed the phone hard against her ear and put her hand over her other ear.

"...blue suitcase... your dress..."

"My dress? Is it OK? Have you got it with you?"

"...my phone's... dead... I'm going... this afternoon... about four o'clock..."

"Sorry? You're going where? I can't hear you. Can you speak up, please?"

"...o'clock... wait for me..."

"Where? Tomás? Where are you going?"

There was a loud click. Then there was nothing.

"Hello? Hello? Tomás?"

The line was dead.

Emma looked at her phone. Her hands were shaking a little. She pressed the number and called it back.

It rang. It rang five times. Then a woman's voice spoke, very clearly and politely. It was a recorded message, in Portuguese.

"*Relojoaria Lopes, bom dia...*"

The rest was fast, and Emma didn't understand any of it. There were some numbers in it. Maybe they were times.

She called again. She listened to the message again. This time she wrote the first words in her notebook, the way they sounded.

Rel-o-jo-ria Lo-pes.

She called a third time, to check. Then a man walking past with a small dog looked at her strangely, and she stopped.

What did she know now?

Tomás had her number. That was good. It was on the label of her suitcase. So he was looking for her too. That was very good.

He had her dress. He said *your dress*. He didn't say *your dress is ruined*, or *your dress is in the sea*. So it was probably fine.

His phone was dead. That explained a lot.

And he was going somewhere this afternoon. At about four o'clock. But where?

She walked back up the hill to Hotel Sol, quickly.

Paulo was at the desk, eating a sandwich. He put it down when he saw her face.

"Miss Clarke? Is everything OK?"

"He called! Tomás called me. But it was a terrible line, and then it stopped. And when I called back, I heard this."

She showed him her notebook.

Paulo read it. He said it out loud, properly. "*Relojoaria.* Relojoaria Lopes."

"What does it mean?"

"A relojoaria is a shop for watches and clocks. Where you buy a watch, or where they repair your watch."

"A watch shop," Emma said. "Why is he calling from a watch shop?"

"Perhaps his watch is broken," Paulo said.

"Perhaps." She didn't think so. "Can you find it? Where is it?"

Paulo typed on his computer. "Relojoaria Lopes. Rua das Pedras, number 7. Near the cathedral."

"Near the cathedral? I was near the cathedral!"

"It is a very old shop," Paulo said. He read from the screen. "Monday to Friday, nine o'clock to seven o'clock. Saturday, nine o'clock to one o'clock." He stopped. "Ah."

"What? What is it?"

"Thursday. Nine o'clock to one o'clock only. It is closed on Thursday afternoons."

Emma looked at the clock on the wall behind him. It was twenty to two.

"So it's closed now."

"I'm afraid so."

"And he called me at five past one."

"Perhaps he called just before they closed," Paulo said. "Perhaps they let him use their phone, as a favour."

Emma sat down on the red sofa. She held her notebook against her chest.

"He's going somewhere at four o'clock," she said. "And he wants me to wait for him. But I don't know where."

Paulo thought about this.

"Miss Clarke. What are you doing this afternoon?"

"I don't know."

"Then may I suggest a plan? You are staying here. At the hotel. If he wants you to wait, the hotel is a good place to wait. And if he comes to the hotel, you are here."

"But he doesn't know my hotel."

"The airline knows your hotel. Perhaps he'll call the airline."

It wasn't much of a plan. But it was a plan.

"And tomorrow," Paulo said, "the shop opens at nine. What are you doing tomorrow at nine o'clock?"

Emma almost smiled. "I'm going to the watch shop."

"Exactly."

So Emma waited.

She sat on the red sofa in the hotel and read the same page of a magazine many times. At four o'clock, she watched the door. At five o'clock, she still watched the door.

Nobody came.

At six o'clock, she walked to Rua das Pedras. She just wanted to see it.

It was a narrow street of old grey stones, behind the cathedral. Number 7 was a small shop with a dark green door. The window was full of clocks. Big clocks and small clocks, gold clocks and wooden clocks. All of them were ticking, and all of them showed the same time.

There was a sign on the door, in Portuguese and English.

FECHADO — CLOSED.

Emma looked through the glass for a long time. Then she walked back to the hotel.

Her phone buzzed. It was a message from Hannah.

What are you doing tonight?? I'm STILL at Miguel's mum's. 200 little cakes. Send help.

Emma wrote back.

I'm having a quiet night. I'm reading. Good luck with the cakes!

That was true. She just didn't say what she was reading. She was reading the same short list, again and again.

Tomás.

Relojoaria Lopes.

Four o'clock?

CHAPTER 7

The Old Watch

EMMA COULDN'T SLEEP.

At eleven o'clock she was lying in bed with the light off. Through the open balcony door she could hear people in the street, laughing and talking. Somewhere a dog was barking. She could hear the sea too, very quietly, a long way down the hill.

She turned on the light and looked at the blue suitcase in the corner. Paulo brought it up to her room at nine o'clock, after his shift.

On Wednesday and Thursday she opened it and closed it many times. She took things out and put them back. Now the shirts weren't folded any more. The socks were everywhere. It looked like a bomb went off inside it.

Tomás folded everything so carefully. She couldn't give it back to him like this.

She got out of bed. She took everything out and laid it on the floor. Then she started to pack it again, properly. Shirts at the bottom. Trousers on the shirts. Socks in the corners.

That was when she found the box.

It was at the very bottom, under everything, in a corner. It was small and square, about the size of her hand. It was made of dark wood, and it

was very smooth and old.

There was a label tied to it with a piece of white string. On the label, in an old man's handwriting, it said:

For Lara — 7

Lara.

Emma said the name quietly. The girl in the drawing. The girl with the long black hair and the very big smile. Now she had a name.

Emma held the box in her hand. It was a present. She couldn't open somebody else's present. That was a terrible thing to do.

But what if it was something important? What if it was broken? What if it was something that couldn't wait?

She opened it very gently.

Inside, on a bed of dark red cloth, there was a watch. It was round and silver, with a silver chain. It wasn't a wristwatch. It was a pocket watch, the kind men wore in old films.

It was ticking.

Emma picked it up. It was heavier than she expected, and it was warm. There was a small button on the top. She pressed it, and the front opened.

Inside there was a white face with black numbers. Two thin black hands. The short hand was on the eleven. The long hand was on the two.

Ten past eleven. It was right.

On the inside of the lid, there were some small letters. She held it close to the light.

LOPES · ALVAR · 1961

Emma sat down on the floor, among Tomás's socks.

Lopes. Relojoaria Lopes. The watch shop.

She looked at the watch for a long time. It was very old and very beautiful. And Tomás was giving it to a seven-year-old girl for her birth-

day. On Saturday.

Suddenly, the dress didn't seem so important.

She closed the watch very carefully and put it back in the box. She put the box in her handbag. She didn't want to leave it in the suitcase any more.

The brown jacket didn't fit on top, so she hung it on the chair. Then she finished packing, turned off the light, and lay awake until two.

At five to nine the next morning, Emma was standing outside the dark green door on Rua das Pedras.

At nine o'clock exactly, all the clocks in the window started to ring at the same time. Big bells and small bells. High notes and low notes. It was beautiful and very loud. Then the door opened.

An old woman stood in the doorway. She was small and straight, with white hair in a tidy bun. She wore a grey dress and a pair of glasses on a chain.

"Bom dia," she said.

"Good morning. I'm sorry. Do you speak English?"

The old woman looked at her over her glasses.

"I do. How do you do." She held out her hand. "My name is Graça Lopes. This is my shop. How can I help you?"

Her English was perfect and very correct, like an English teacher in an old film.

"My name is Emma Clarke. I think... I think you know a man called Tomás."

Dona Graça's face changed at once.

"You are the young lady with the suitcase."

"Yes!"

"Come in, my dear. Come in. Please sit down."

The shop was small and dark and full of ticking. There were clocks on every wall. There was a long wooden counter with glass on top, and

under the glass there were rows of watches. Dona Graça gave Emma a chair and sat down behind the counter.

"Tomás came here yesterday," she said. "At half past twelve. He was very tired and very worried. He could not call you from his own telephone. It was dead. So he asked to use mine."

"He called me. But the line was very bad. I couldn't understand him."

"No. My telephone is older than I am." Dona Graça shook her head. "He called you at five past one. I was already closing the shop. I had an appointment with the doctor, so I am afraid I had to send him away."

"Do you know where he went?"

"I'm afraid I do not. He did not say."

Emma opened her handbag and took out the wooden box. She put it on the counter.

"I found this in his suitcase."

Dona Graça looked at the box. She didn't need to open it. She knew.

"Ah," she said softly. "So it is safe. Thank goodness."

"Can you tell me about it?"

Dona Graça opened the box and took out the watch. She held it in her hand like a small bird.

"My father sold this watch in 1961," she said. "To a man from a fishing village. A poor man, but a good one. He wanted a present for his son. It was his son's thirteenth birthday. The son was Tomás."

"Oh," Emma said.

"Tomás carried this watch every day for sixty-five years. To Manchester and back. It never stopped." She smiled. "Well. It stopped once. He brought it to my father. My father could repair anything."

She turned the little wheel on the top, carefully, many times. "Tomás winds it every morning," she said. "Today I will do it for him."

She pressed the button. The watch opened. She looked at the clocks on the wall and moved the hands.

"What time is it?" she asked.

Emma looked. "It's... twenty-five past nine."

"Correct." Dona Graça looked pleased. "Last September, Tomás sat in that chair. He said to me, 'Graça, when my Lara is seven, I'm giving her my watch. And I'm going to teach her to tell the time.' The child cannot tell the time yet, you see. She is only six."

"Seven on Saturday," Emma said.

"Seven on Saturday," Dona Graça agreed.

"Can you tell me where his family lives? Where Lara lives?"

Dona Graça thought for a long time.

"I'm afraid I cannot. A village on the coast, to the north. Near the sea. Tomás told me the name, of course. But I could never remember it." She tapped the side of her head. "It begins with *Vila*, I think. Half the villages in Portugal begin with *Vila*."

Emma laughed, but her heart sank.

"Could I leave the watch here, with you? Then when he comes back, he can have it."

"No, my dear." Dona Graça closed the box and pushed it gently back across the counter. "It is not mine to keep. He gave it to the suitcase, and the suitcase is with you. You must give it to Tomás yourself."

"But I don't know where he is."

"Then you must find him." She took out a small card and a pen. "But you can leave a message. If he comes back, I will give it to him."

Emma wrote on the card.

Tomás — I've got your suitcase. Lara's watch is safe. Please call me! Emma. And her number, again.

"Thank you," Emma said. "Thank you so much."

"It is nothing." Dona Graça stood up and opened the door. Outside, the street was full of sunshine. "Miss Clarke?"

"Yes?"

"He was not worried about his clothes, you know. Or his suitcase. Only the watch. He said, 'I cannot go home without it.'"

Emma held the box tightly in her bag and walked out into the light.

CHAPTER 8

A Train Ticket

Back in room 12, Emma put the wooden box on the bed. She sat next to it and thought.

I cannot go home without it.

So Tomás wasn't going home. Not without the watch. He was somewhere in Alvar, looking for Emma. And Emma was in Alvar, looking for Tomás. It was like a stupid game.

She looked at the brown jacket on the chair. She hung it there last night, but it was still a bit untidy. She picked it up to fold it again.

Something inside it made a small noise. A paper noise.

She looked at the front pockets. They were empty. She checked them on Wednesday. But then she opened the jacket and looked at the inside.

There was another pocket. A long, thin pocket inside the jacket, on the left, with a button. She didn't notice it yesterday.

She opened the button. Inside there was a small orange and white ticket.

Her hands were shaking a little as she read it.

ALVAR → VILA AZUL

11/09/2026 — 15:20

1 ADULTO — €4.60

Emma read it three times.

Vila Azul. Vila something. That was the village. That was where Lara lived.

And the date was the eleventh of September. That was today. Friday. The train was at twenty past three this afternoon.

Tomás was going to take this train today. He was going to go to his family's village. But the ticket was in his jacket, and his jacket was in the suitcase, and the suitcase was with Emma.

What was he going to do now?

Emma stood up and walked up and down the small room.

She was going to go to the station, she decided. She was going to be there at three o'clock. Maybe Tomás was going to be there too. Maybe he was going to buy a new ticket and take the same train. If he was there, she was going to give him his suitcase, and his watch, and his ticket. And he was going to give her the dress.

And if he wasn't there?

Then she was going to take the train herself. She was going to go to Vila Azul and find the yellow house with the blue door. She was going to give the watch to Lara's family. They could find Tomás. Families always could.

And then she was going to come back to Alvar on the last train tonight. Tomorrow at twelve she was going to be at Hannah's flat. Not ten past. Twelve.

She went downstairs.

"Paulo. Where's the train station?"

Paulo looked at her face and smiled slowly.

"You have a plan, Miss Clarke."

"I have a plan."

"The station is at the bottom of the hill, by the river. Fifteen minutes on foot. With that suitcase, twenty." He paused. "Are you going to come

back tonight?"

"Yes. Definitely. I'm going to take the last train back."

"Then I am going to keep your room," Paulo said. "And I am going to keep the lift ready." He winked.

Alvar station was a big old building made of yellow stone. Emma pulled the blue suitcase through the main doors at twenty past two.

Inside, the hall was high and cool and full of echoes. There were pigeons in the roof. There were wooden benches and a small café with tables outside it. People were waiting with bags and children and dogs.

And above the café there was a big clock.

It was round, with a white face and black numbers, and the frame around it was painted yellow. It was enormous. A little boy ran across the hall under the clock and into the arms of a woman with grey hair. The woman laughed and lifted him up.

Emma looked for the timetable. It was a big black board with white letters.

15:20 — VILA AZUL — LINHA 2

Platform 2. Twenty past three.

There was a queue at the ticket office. Emma stood in it. In front of her, a woman bought a ticket in Portuguese, very fast. Emma practised what to say.

She had Tomás's ticket in her notebook. But it was his ticket, not hers. She wanted to give it back to him.

At the window, a man with a grey moustache looked at her.

"Hello. Do you speak English?"

"A little."

"A ticket to Vila Azul, please. On the three twenty."

"Single or return?"

"Return, please. I'm going to come back tonight."

"The last train back from Vila Azul is at nineteen forty. Twenty to eight. OK?"

"Twenty to eight. OK."

"Nine euros and twenty cents, please."

Emma paid and took her ticket. It was orange and white, like Tomás's. She put the two tickets together in her notebook, next to the drawing.

It was a quarter to three. She sat on a bench where she could see the whole hall. She watched everybody. Every old man. Every blue suitcase.

"No way! Emma from Leeds!"

She turned round. It was Tyler, with his big backpack, his red cap and a long white surfboard under his arm.

"Tyler! What are you doing here?"

"I'm going north! I told you. I'm going to surf." He sat down next to her. The surfboard nearly hit a man with a newspaper. "Sorry, sir! So? What about you? Are you still looking for the mystery guy?"

"Yes. I'm going to Vila Azul. It's his family's village."

"You found the village? That's awesome!" He looked at the blue suitcase. "Is he coming? Is he going to be on the train?"

"I don't know. Maybe."

"What are you going to do if he isn't?"

"I'm going to go anyway."

Tyler looked at her for a moment. Then he grinned. "I'm going to get off at Praia Grande. Two stops after Vila Azul. Let's ride together."

At three o'clock they walked to platform 2. The train was already there. It was short, only three carriages, painted white and blue.

Emma stood on the platform and watched the gate. People came through. A family. Two students. A woman with a basket of bread.

At ten past three, an old man came through the gate, and Emma's heart jumped. But he was small and thin, and he walked with a stick.

At a quarter past three, there was still no Tomás.

"Emma," Tyler said gently. He was already on the train, at the door. "It's leaving."

A whistle blew.

Emma looked at the gate one more time. Then she lifted the blue suitcase, took a deep breath, and got on the train.

The doors closed behind her. The train started to move.

CHAPTER 9

The Little Village

The train left the city slowly. It went past the backs of old houses, past gardens with lemon trees, past a football pitch with no grass. Then the houses stopped, and suddenly there was the sea.

It was on the left, very close, very blue. The railway line ran along the top of the cliffs. Below, there were small beaches and big rocks and white waves.

"Wow," Tyler said. He took out his phone. Then he put it away again. "No. I'm just going to look at it."

Emma looked at it too. She held the blue suitcase between her knees and her handbag on her lap. Inside the handbag, the watch was ticking in its wooden box. She couldn't hear it, but she knew it was there.

The train stopped at small stations with white walls and blue tiles. A few people got off. A few people got on. An old woman with a basket of eggs sat opposite Emma and smiled at her all the way.

"So what's the plan?" Tyler asked. "When you get there?"

"I'm going to find a yellow house with a blue door. Near the sea."

"That's it? That's the whole plan?"

"It's a small village."

Tyler laughed. "OK, Detective."

At twenty-five past four, the train slowed down. A sign went past the window. *VILA AZUL.*

Emma stood up. Her legs felt strange.

"Good luck, Emma from Leeds," Tyler said. He held out his fist. Emma looked at it. Then she understood, and she touched it with her own fist. "Text me how it ends, OK?" he said.

"I will. Enjoy the surfing."

"Enjoy the mystery."

The doors opened. Emma lifted the suitcase down onto the platform. The doors closed, and the train moved away along the cliff. Tyler waved from the window until he was gone.

The station was tiny. It was one platform, one bench and one small building with a closed door. There was nobody there. There was no taxi. There was only a cat, asleep on the bench in the sun.

From the station, a narrow street went down the hill. At the bottom, between the houses, Emma could see the sea.

"OK," she said to the cat. "Down, then."

The street was very steep and made of old stones. The suitcase bumped behind her the whole way. The houses on both sides were white, with coloured doors and coloured windows. Green doors, red doors, grey doors. But no yellow houses. Not yet.

Halfway down there was a bakery. The door was open, and it smelled of warm bread. Emma went in.

A young man was standing behind the counter. He had flour on his arms and flour in his hair.

"Boa tarde," he said.

"Hello. Sorry. Do you speak English?"

"Yes. A little. I worked in London for one year. In a hotel kitchen." He made a face. "Very cold. Very grey."

Emma smiled. "I'm from Leeds. It's worse."

He laughed. “How can I help you?”

“I’m looking for a man called Tomás. He’s old. He lives in England, but his family lives here.”

“Tomás?” He thought about it. “In Vila Azul there are maybe ten Tomás. My grandfather is Tomás.”

“This one lives in Manchester.”

“Ah! Tomás Inglês!” He smiled widely. “Of course. Everybody knows Tomás Inglês. His daughter is Marta. She lives in the yellow house. With the little girl.”

“Lara?”

“Yes, Lara. Lara comes here every morning for bread. She always wants the biggest one.”

Emma’s heart jumped. “Can you tell me how to get there?”

“Sure. It’s easy.” He came round the counter and stood with her at the door. He pointed down the hill. “Go down this street to the bottom. At the bottom, there’s a church. A small white church. Turn left at the church. Then go straight on, to the beach.”

“Left at the church. Straight on to the beach.”

“Yes. Then at the beach, ask Dona Rosa.”

“Who’s Dona Rosa?”

“She sells fish. On the beach, next to the boats. She knows everybody and everything.” He grinned. “Don’t buy any fish. She talks for an hour.”

“Thank you. Thank you so much.”

“Wait.” He went back behind the counter and put something in a paper bag. “For the walk. It’s free.”

It was a small round cake, still warm, with sugar on top. Emma ate it on the way down the hill. It was delicious.

At the bottom of the street there was a small white church with a bell. Emma turned left. The street became flat and wide. The houses

stopped, and there was a low wall, and on the other side of the wall there was the beach.

It was a long, curved beach of pale sand. The sea was quiet, with little white waves. And on the sand there were boats. Fishing boats, about ten of them, pulled up out of the water. They were wooden, and they were painted bright blue, with a white line along the side.

Next to the boats there was a table under a big umbrella. On the table there were fish on ice. Behind the table there was a woman in a black dress and a white apron. She was sitting on a plastic chair and shouting at a man with a bicycle. The man shouted back. Then they both laughed.

That was Dona Rosa. Emma was sure of it.

Emma pulled the suitcase across the sand. It was very hard work. The wheels didn't like sand at all.

"Hello," she said. "Dona Rosa?"

The woman looked at her. She looked at the blue suitcase. Then she looked at Emma again.

"Sim?"

"Do you speak English?"

Dona Rosa held up her thumb and her finger, very close together. A very little.

Emma thought. She chose the simplest words she had.

"I'm looking for Marta. Marta. Tomás. Lara."

"Ah!" Dona Rosa stood up. She said something very fast in Portuguese. Emma didn't understand any of it. Then Dona Rosa pointed at the suitcase and said, "Tomás?"

"Yes. Tomás's suitcase."

Dona Rosa said a lot more in Portuguese. She looked worried. She looked at the sky. She put her hand on her heart.

"Sorry," Emma said. "I don't understand."

Dona Rosa stopped. She took Emma's arm and turned her round, so she was looking along the beach.

"Look," she said. She pointed. "Boats. Blue boats. Go." She walked her fingers through the air. "Boats... after... end." She stopped at the end of the beach. "There. Casa amarela. Yellow. House."

Emma looked.

At the end of the beach, behind the last blue boat, on its own, there was a house. It was two floors high. It was painted yellow, the yellow of butter. The windows looked at the sea.

And the door was blue.

"Obrigada," Emma said. "Thank you. Obrigada."

Dona Rosa patted her arm and said something kind. Then she sat down again and started shouting at the man with the bicycle.

Emma walked along the beach, past the blue boats, one by one. The suitcase left two long lines in the sand behind her.

Up close, the house was a little old. The yellow paint was coming off in places. There were pots of red flowers by the door, and a child's bicycle against the wall, and a towel drying on the balcony.

It looked exactly like the drawing.

Emma stood in front of the blue door. She fixed her hair with her hand. She looked down at her fish T-shirt and wished she was wearing something else.

Then she lifted her hand and knocked.

CHAPTER 10

The House by the Sea

The door opened very quickly, as if someone was waiting behind it.

A woman stood there. She was about forty, with long dark hair in a messy knot and a pen behind her ear. She was wearing jeans and a big green jumper with paint on it.

She looked at Emma. Then she looked down at the blue suitcase.

"Oh my God," she said. "That's Dad's suitcase."

Her English was perfect. More than perfect. It was pure Manchester, and it was very fast.

"Where did you get that? Is he OK? Where is he? Is he with you? He rang yesterday, he said there was a problem with his suitcase, and then nothing, not a word, and his phone's off, and I'm going mad here, love, honestly, I'm —"

"Sorry," Emma said. "Could you speak more slowly? Please?"

The woman stopped. She took a breath.

"Sorry. Sorry, love. I talk faster than anybody in Portugal. My husband says I talk faster than the train." She held out her hand. "I'm Marta."

"Emma. Emma Clarke. And your dad's fine. I think. I've got his suitcase, and he's got mine."

Marta stared at her. "He's got *yours*?"

"Yes. At the airport. They're the same."

There was a short silence. Then Marta started to laugh. She laughed so much that she had to hold on to the door.

"Oh, Dad," she said. "Oh, that's so him. Come in. Come in, come in. You look dead tired. Do you want a brew?"

"A brew?"

"A cup of tea, love."

"Oh. Yes, please. I'd love one."

Inside, the house was cool and bright and very untidy. There were books everywhere, and shoes, and toys, and a guitar with three strings. The kitchen was at the back. It had a big wooden table, and a big window, and through the window there was nothing but sea.

Emma stopped in the doorway.

"I know," Marta said. "It's the best thing about the house. It's the only tidy thing, too."

She made two cups of tea. Emma sat at the table and told her everything. The plane. The suitcases. The drawing. Café Estrela. The phone call. The watch shop. The train ticket.

She told it very well now. She didn't say sorry at all.

Marta listened with her mouth open.

"You did all that? In three days? On your own?"

"Yes."

"In a foreign country? With an old man's socks?"

Emma laughed. "Yes."

Marta shook her head. "So where is he now?"

"I don't know. He told me he was going somewhere at four o'clock yesterday. But I couldn't hear where."

"He rang me yesterday too, from a shop. He said, 'Marta, there's a problem with my suitcase. Don't worry. I'm coming on Saturday.' And then he put the phone down. That was it. That's my dad. Short phone calls and long stories."

Marta picked up her phone and called a number.

"Relojoaria Lopes?" Emma asked.

"Dona Graça. She knows everybody." Marta spoke quickly in Portuguese. Then she listened. Then she said *obrigada* three times and put the phone down.

"He didn't go back to the shop today," she said. "But she says you're a very nice young lady, and very polite. Better than her granddaughter."

Emma went red.

There was a noise in the hall. Small, quiet feet.

A girl stood in the kitchen doorway. She was about six, with long black hair and big serious eyes. She was wearing a red dress, and there was a yellow ribbon in her hair.

She didn't look at Emma. She looked at the blue suitcase on the floor.

"That's Avô's suitcase," she said.

"Lara, this is Emma," Marta said. "Emma's a friend of Avô's."

Lara looked at Emma now. She looked at her for a long time, the way children do.

"Why have you got Avô's suitcase?"

"Because Avô has got mine," Emma said. "It was a mistake. At the airport."

"Where is Avô?"

"He's in Alvar. He's looking for me."

Lara thought about this.

"Why?"

"Because he's got my dress. It's a very special dress. For a wedding."

Lara looked at her mother. Then she looked at Emma. And then she started to laugh. It was a big, surprised laugh, much bigger than her.

"Avô has got a *dress*?"

"A green one," Emma said. "A long green one."

Lara laughed so much that she sat down on the floor.

"OK," Marta said. "She likes you. That's good. She doesn't like many people."

Emma wanted to give the watch to Marta. She opened her handbag and showed her the wooden box, very quickly, under the table. Marta saw the label. Her eyes went soft and shiny.

"Oh," she said quietly. "He told me about that. Last year."

"Do you want to keep it?"

Marta looked at Lara on the floor. She shook her head.

"No. You keep it, love. Lara finds everything in this house. She's better than a police dog. And Dad must give it to her himself. He waited all year for this."

Emma closed her bag.

The evening came slowly. The sea turned from blue to gold. Lara showed Emma the bicycle, the garden, the flowers, and a crab in a bucket. Marta talked about Manchester.

"It's bigger than here, obviously. And busier. And much rainier," she said. "I loved it. But this place is better for Lara. It's quieter. It's safer. And the sea is closer." She smiled. "And the fish is cheaper."

"It's the most beautiful place I've ever seen," Emma said. Then she heard herself, and she was surprised. It was true.

Her phone buzzed on the table.

It was a message from Hannah.

Em. My neighbour says an old man came to the flat with a blue suitcase. Looking for YOU. TWICE. Yesterday AND today. What is going on????

Emma looked at the message. She looked at it for a long time.

The address on the present. *Rua das Laranjeiras 14.* Of course. That was where Tomás went at four o'clock. That was where he wanted her to wait.

He was looking for her in the one place she didn't go.

"Everything OK?" Marta asked.

"I have to call my friend."

She went out onto the beach. The sand was cool now. She called Hannah.

"EMMA. WHAT IS GOING ON?"

So Emma told her. All of it. From the beginning.

When she finished, there was a long, long silence on the line.

"Hannah?"

"So let me get this right," Hannah said slowly. "On Wednesday, a strange old man took my bridesmaid's dress. And you didn't tell me. Then you went to a hotel, a café and a watch shop. And you didn't tell me. And now you're in a fishing village. With his family. And his socks."

"Yes."

"And you didn't tell me because you didn't want me to worry."

"Yes."

Another silence. Then Hannah started to laugh. She laughed and laughed, and then she was crying a bit, and then she was laughing again.

"You're the craziest person I know," she said. "You. Emma Clarke. Who has three alarms. Who checks her passport ten times."

"Three times."

"Is the dress OK?"

"I think it's safe."

"Then it's fine. It's fine! Listen. If he comes back tomorrow, I'll be here. I'll tell him where you are. OK?"

"OK."

"And Emma?"

"Yes?"

"Twelve o'clock tomorrow. Not ten past."

"I know."

Emma took the phone from her ear and looked at it. Then she looked at it again.

It was nineteen forty-one. Nineteen minutes to eight.

The last train to Alvar was at nineteen forty. Twenty to eight. And the station was at the top of the hill, fifteen minutes away.

Far away, up on the cliff, she saw the little white and blue train move slowly along the top of the hill, and disappear.

Marta came out onto the beach behind her.

"You've missed it, haven't you, love?"

"Yes."

"Good," Marta said. "We've got a spare room. It's the smallest room in the house. But it's got the best view."

CHAPTER 11

Another Suitcase

Dinner was sardines.

Marta cooked them on a small grill in the garden. While she was cooking, she was talking on the phone in Portuguese. While she was talking, the sardines were burning. Smoke was going everywhere.

"Mum!" Lara shouted. "The fish!"

"Oh, no. Oh, no, no, no."

They ate them anyway, at the big wooden table, with bread and tomatoes and a lot of salt. Through the window, the sea was getting dark. A light was moving far out on the water. It was a fishing boat.

"Is that Daddy?" Lara asked.

"No, love. Daddy's on a big ship. Very far away. He's coming home in two weeks."

Lara looked at Emma. "My daddy works on a ship. It carries boxes. Big boxes. To China."

"That's a long way," Emma said.

"Yes. Avô says it's further than the moon." Lara thought about this. "It isn't."

After dinner, Marta started to wash the dishes. Emma tried to help, but Marta pushed her away.

"You're a guest. Sit down. Lara, show Emma her room."

Lara took Emma's hand. Her hand was small and warm and a little bit sticky.

The spare room was at the top of the stairs. It was very small. There was a narrow bed with a blue blanket, a chair, and a window. Through the window there was only the sea and the sky, both dark blue now, and a few stars.

"This is the smallest room," Lara said. "But it's got the best view. Mum says that to everybody."

"It's true, though."

"Yes," Lara agreed. "It's true." Then she pulled Emma's hand. "Now come and see my room."

Lara's room was next door. It was bigger, and it was full of things. Shells on the windowsill. A box of crayons, open, with the crayons everywhere. A cat made of wool on the pillow. Pictures on the walls, held up with tape. Pictures of fish, and boats, and a very large crab.

And on the floor, next to the bed, there was a suitcase.

It was blue. It had four wheels and a long handle. It was exactly like Tomás's suitcase, and exactly like Emma's.

But it was small. Very small. It was a child's suitcase.

Emma stared at it.

"That's mine," Lara said proudly. "Avô gave it to me. Last year. It's the same as his."

"It's lovely," Emma said.

"Look." Lara opened it.

It was already packed. Very carefully. There were two T-shirts, folded. A pair of shorts. A toothbrush in a plastic bag. A book about the sea. A packet of biscuits. And a dog made of wool, the cat's brother.

"Are you going somewhere?" Emma asked.

"Yes. After my birthday, Avô and I are going on a trip. On the train. To Lisbon. Just me and Avô." She closed the suitcase and sat on it. "I packed it on Monday. I'm ready."

"On Monday? That's very organised."

"Mum isn't organised," Lara said seriously. "So I am."

Emma laughed. She liked this child very much.

"Where is Avô sleeping tonight?" Lara asked. Her voice was smaller now.

"In Alvar. In a hotel, I think. Or with a friend."

"Is he sad?"

Emma thought about the old man on the plane. His big laugh. His careful folding. *I cannot go home without it.*

"I think he's a bit worried," she said. "But he's OK. Avô is very good at looking after himself."

"Is he coming tomorrow?"

"He told your mum he's coming on Saturday."

"Saturday is tomorrow."

"Yes."

Lara nodded slowly. "Then he's coming tomorrow. Avô always comes. He promised."

She said it in a very certain voice. It wasn't a hope. It was a fact, like the sea outside.

"Lara! Bed!" Marta called from downstairs.

Lara got into bed. She didn't want a story. She wanted to ask questions. While Marta was finishing the dishes downstairs, Lara was asking Emma about England.

Was it really always raining? Did Emma have a cat? What was her favourite colour? Did the Queen live in Leeds? (No. And it was a king now.) Could Emma swim? Did she have a little girl? Why not?

"Can you tell the time?" Lara asked suddenly.

"Yes."

"I can't. Not yet. Avô is going to teach me. When I'm seven." She yawned. "That's tomorrow."

Emma thought about the watch, ticking quietly in her handbag on the chair.

"That's tomorrow," she agreed.

Lara's eyes were closing. "Emma?"

"Yes?"

"Is the green dress pretty?"

"Very pretty."

"Avô can't wear it," Lara said, and smiled, and fell asleep.

Downstairs, Marta was sitting at the kitchen table with two glasses of wine. They sat together and looked at the dark sea and talked quietly. About Tomás, and Manchester, and Hannah's wedding. About Lara. About Emma's job, and her lists.

"Lists," Marta said. "Dad says my mum writes lists about her lists."

"He told me that on the plane."

Marta laughed. "He tells everybody that."

At eleven o'clock, Emma went up to the small room. She lay on the narrow bed under the blue blanket. The window was open. She could hear the sea, much closer than in Alvar. It was going in and out, in and out, like somebody breathing.

She was thinking about Hannah. She was thinking about the green dress, somewhere in Alvar in a stranger's room. She was thinking about the watch. She was thinking about the little blue suitcase, packed and ready, next to Lara's bed.

She was falling asleep when her phone buzzed. A message from Tyler.

Waves are AWESOME. Did you find the guy??

Not yet, she wrote. *But I found his family. Tomorrow!*

She put the phone down and closed her eyes.

Later, much later, she was dreaming. In the dream she was on a train, and the train was full of blue suitcases. She was looking for hers, and every one she opened was full of clocks.

Then a sound woke her. It was very small. A door closed quietly, somewhere downstairs.

Emma opened her eyes. The room was grey. It was early morning. Outside, a seagull was crying.

She looked at her phone. It was ten to seven.

Marta, she thought. *Getting up early.*

She closed her eyes again, and she went back to sleep.

CHAPTER 12

The Missing Girl

"EMMA! EMMA, WAKE UP!"

Someone was knocking on the door. Hard.

Emma sat up. The room was full of grey morning light. She looked at her phone. It was half past seven.

"Yes? Come in!"

Marta opened the door. She was wearing a big T-shirt and no shoes, and her hair was everywhere.

"Is Lara with you?"

"Lara? No."

"She isn't in her room. She isn't in the bathroom. She isn't in the kitchen." Marta's voice was very high and very fast. "Did you see her? Did you hear her?"

Emma's stomach went cold.

"I heard a door," she said slowly. "Early. At ten to seven. I thought it was you."

"It wasn't me. I was asleep. I was asleep, Emma."

They went into Lara's room together.

The bed was empty. The blanket was on the floor. The cat made of wool was on the pillow, alone.

And the little blue suitcase was gone.

Emma looked at the place next to the bed, where it was last night. Now there was only the floor. And a few crayons.

"Her suitcase," Emma said.

Marta looked. She put her hand over her mouth.

"Where did she go?" she said. "Where would she go?"

"Where does she usually go? When she goes out on her own?"

"She doesn't go out on her own! She's six!"

"Seven," Emma said quietly.

Marta closed her eyes. "Seven. Today. It's her birthday."

They ran downstairs. Emma pulled on her jeans and her fish T-shirt as she ran. She picked up her handbag without thinking.

The blue front door was closed, but it wasn't locked. Outside, the beach was empty and grey. The sea was flat. A few seagulls were walking on the sand.

"LARA!" Marta shouted. "LARA!"

Only the seagulls answered.

"OK," Emma said. Her voice sounded calm. She didn't feel calm. "OK. Let's think. What did she take?"

"Her suitcase."

"What's in the suitcase?"

"Clothes. A book. I don't know! Biscuits."

"Did she take her bicycle?"

Marta looked at the wall. The bicycle was still there.

"No."

"So she's walking. With a suitcase. She can't go very fast." Emma looked at the beach, left and right. "Where can she go from here?"

"Along the beach. Or up into the village. Or —" Marta looked at the sea. Her face went white.

"She can't swim with a suitcase," Emma said quickly. "And she packed it. People only pack a suitcase when they're going somewhere."

Marta looked at her. She nodded.

They went along the beach, past the blue boats. Marta looked inside every boat. Emma looked behind every boat. There was nobody there.

At the end of the beach, Dona Rosa was setting up her table under the big umbrella. She was putting ice on it. She looked up and saw their faces.

Marta spoke to her very fast in Portuguese. Emma understood only one word: *Lara*.

Dona Rosa answered. She pointed up towards the village. She made a small shape with her hands. A small square shape. Then she walked her fingers through the air, up and up.

"What did she say?" Emma asked. "What time did she see her?"

"Seven o'clock. Maybe a bit before." Marta's voice was shaking. "She was walking up the street. Past the church. With a little blue suitcase. Rosa said good morning, and Lara said good morning. Very polite. Rosa thought I was behind her."

"Which way was she going?"

"Up. Up the hill."

They ran up the street. Emma's legs hurt. Marta was much faster than her, even with no shoes.

At the bakery, the young man with the flour in his hair was putting bread in the window.

"Did Lara come in this morning?" Emma asked him.

He looked surprised. "No. That's strange. She comes every morning. I kept the big one for her."

"Did you see her? In the street?"

"No. Sorry. I was in the back. Making bread." He saw their faces. "What's wrong? Is she lost?"

"We don't know," Marta said.

He took off his apron. "I'm coming with you."

Other people were coming out of their houses now. A man in a vest. Two old women in black. An old fisherman with a white beard and enormous hands. Marta spoke to them quickly in Portuguese.

"That's Senhor Henrique," she told Emma. "Our neighbour."

Senhor Henrique nodded at Emma. He didn't speak any English. He didn't need to. He started walking up the hill, very fast for an old man.

At the top of the hill, there was only one thing. The station.

It was exactly the same as yesterday. One platform. One bench. One small building with a closed door. The cat was asleep on the bench again.

There was no little girl.

"LARA!" Marta shouted.

The cat opened one eye and closed it again.

Emma walked to the small building. There was a timetable on the wall, behind glass. She read it with her finger.

VILA AZUL → ALVAR

07:12

08:40

10:15

It was seven minutes to eight.

"Marta," she said. "There was a train. At twelve minutes past seven."

Marta came and looked. She read it once. Then she read it again.

"No," she said. "No. She can't. She hasn't got a ticket. She hasn't got any money. She can't even tell the time."

"She doesn't need to tell the time," Emma said. "She just has to wait for the first train."

Marta sat down on the bench, next to the cat. Her hands were shaking. She couldn't think.

"Why?" she said. "Why would she go to Alvar? Alvar is huge. Where would she go?"

Emma didn't know.

The baker spoke to Senhor Henrique. Senhor Henrique said something short. The baker translated.

"He says you must call the police."

Marta took out her phone. She looked at it. Her face was white.

"Yes," she said. "Yes. I'm calling the police."

CHAPTER 13

The Last Clue

"WAIT," EMMA SAID.

She didn't know why she said it. It was something about the timetable. About the word *Alvar*. About a little girl with a packed suitcase. Lara was so sure.

Avô always comes. He promised.

Emma opened her handbag. Her notebook was there, with the two train tickets inside it. And the drawing.

She took it out and unfolded it. Marta watched her.

"What's that?"

"It was in your dad's suitcase. Lara drew it. For him."

Marta looked at it over Emma's shoulder.

In the middle of the drawing there was a little girl. She had long black hair and a red dress. She had a very big smile, much bigger than her face.

Next to the girl there was an old man. He was tall, much taller than the girl. He had white hair and a big round stomach. He was holding her hand.

Behind them there was a yellow house with a blue door. Behind the house there was the sea, blue and green, with small white waves. And in

the sky there was a big yellow sun. It was round, with twelve short lines around it and two lines in the middle.

Emma looked at the sun.

Twelve short lines.

She counted them. One, two, three, four. Five, six, seven, eight. Nine, ten, eleven, twelve.

Twelve.

And in the middle, two lines. One short. One long.

It wasn't a sun.

"Marta," she said. Her voice sounded very strange. "Look. What's this?"

Marta looked. "The sun?"

"Does the sun have two lines in the middle? One long and one short?"

Marta stared at it.

"It's a clock," Emma said. "It's a big yellow clock."

She saw it again in her head. The station hall in Alvar. The pigeons in the roof. The café. And above the café, a big round clock with a white face, black numbers and a yellow frame.

"There's a clock at Alvar station," she said. "A big clock. With a yellow frame."

Marta's mouth opened.

"The clock," she whispered. "Oh my God. The clock."

"What about it?"

"We meet him there. Every year. When Dad comes in September, Lara and I take the train to Alvar. We wait for him under the big clock. Every single year. It's their place. It's Lara's favourite thing in the world." Marta stood up. "This year I told her we couldn't go. He was coming later, on his own. And then on Thursday he called and said Saturday, and Lara was listening, and she —"

"She went to meet him," Emma said. "Under the clock. On Saturday. Like always."

They looked at each other.

"She'll be there," Emma said. "I'm sure. She'll be under the clock."

Marta was already pressing numbers on her phone.

"I'll call the station," she said. "In Alvar. I'll ask them to look."

She called. She waited. She called again.

"Nobody's answering. Nobody! It's Saturday morning. Of course nobody's answering."

"Then we'll go," Emma said.

"Yes. And if she isn't there, I'll call the police. The next train is at twenty to nine. That's forty-five minutes. Then an hour on the train. I can't wait an hour and forty-five minutes. I'll go crazy."

"Can you drive?"

"No. I never learned. Pedro drives, and Pedro is in the middle of the ocean."

Senhor Henrique was listening. He didn't understand the English. But he understood the word *drive*. He took a set of car keys out of his pocket and held them up.

"Vamos," he said.

"He says let's go," Marta said.

They ran down the hill to the yellow house. Senhor Henrique's car was parked behind it. It was very old and very small and very orange. There was sand on the seats and a fishing net in the back.

Marta ran into the house for her shoes. Emma ran in after her. When Emma came out, she was pulling the big blue suitcase.

Marta stared at her. "Why are you bringing that?"

Emma looked down at it. She didn't know. She just did it.

"I always bring it," she said. "It's a habit now."

Marta laughed. It was a strange, wet laugh, but it was a laugh.

They put the suitcase on top of the fishing net. Marta got in the front. Emma got in the back. Senhor Henrique started the engine. It made a terrible noise, and then they were moving, up the hill, past the church, past the bakery, onto the road along the cliffs.

Senhor Henrique drove very fast. He drove with one hand. He talked to Marta the whole time, and he looked at her when he talked, not at the road.

Emma held on to the seat and closed her eyes.

"Will she be OK?" Marta said quietly. "Really?"

Emma opened her eyes.

"She'll be OK. She's the most organised person in your house. She packed biscuits."

Marta laughed again, a little.

"And somebody will see her," Emma said. "A little girl, alone, with a suitcase. Somebody will look after her. People are kind."

Marta turned round in her seat and looked at her.

"Will we be there soon?" she asked Senhor Henrique, in Portuguese and then in English, for Emma.

Senhor Henrique held up his hand. Five fingers. Then a zero, with his finger and his thumb.

"Fifty minutes," Marta said.

"Then we'll be there at a quarter past nine," Emma said. "And I promise you, she'll be under that clock."

She didn't know if it was true. But she said it in a very certain voice. It wasn't a hope. She made it a fact.

The sea went past the window, very blue now. The sun was up. In her lap, in her handbag, Emma could feel the small wooden box.

Somewhere in Alvar, Tomás was looking for her.

Somewhere in Alvar, a little girl was waiting for him.

And at twelve o'clock, Emma had to be at Hannah's flat. With a dress.

She looked at her phone. It was eight twenty-five.

Three hours and thirty-five minutes.

She didn't make a list. There wasn't time.

CHAPTER 14

Back at the Station

Senhor Henrique stopped the orange car outside Alvar station at nine nineteen. He stopped it in a place where you mustn't stop. A man in a uniform started to shout. Senhor Henrique shouted back.

Marta was already out of the car. Emma pulled the blue suitcase out of the back, with a piece of fishing net still stuck to the wheel, and ran after her.

They went through the big main doors.

The hall was full. It was Saturday morning, and everybody was going somewhere. Families with bags. Students with backpacks. Old couples with walking sticks. Pigeons in the roof. Voices everywhere, echoing.

A woman's voice spoke above them, first in Portuguese and then in English.

"The train at nine thirty to Lisbon is now at platform one. Passengers must have a ticket before they board."

Emma looked up.

The big clock was there, above the café. White face. Black numbers. Yellow frame. The long hand was on the four. The short hand was just after the nine.

Twenty past nine.

And under the clock, next to a café table, there was a small blue suitcase.

On the suitcase, there was a little girl.

She had long black hair and a yellow ribbon in it. She was holding a big cup of hot chocolate with both hands. She was swinging her legs. She had chocolate on her face.

Next to her stood a large woman in a white apron, with her arms folded. She looked like a guard outside a palace.

"LARA!"

Marta ran across the hall. People moved out of her way. Lara looked up, and her face opened into a huge smile, and the hot chocolate went everywhere.

"Mum!"

Marta fell on her knees and held her. She held her very tight. She didn't say anything for a long time. She just held her, and rocked a little, and kissed her hair.

Emma stopped a few steps away. Her eyes were hot. She looked up at the clock, so nobody could see her face.

The woman in the apron looked at Emma.

"Mother?" she asked, pointing at Marta.

"Yes. Her mother."

The woman nodded slowly. She put her hand on her heart.

"Good," she said. "Good."

After a long time, Marta sat back on her heels. She held Lara's face in her two hands. Now her voice came back.

"Lara Ferreira. Listen to me. Look at me. You must never, ever do that again. Do you understand?"

"But Mum —"

"Never. You mustn't go out on your own. You mustn't get on a train on your own. You have to tell me. You have to tell me where you're go-

ing. Always. Every time."

"But you were asleep."

"Then you have to wake me up!"

Lara looked at her mother. Her eyes were very big. Then her bottom lip started to shake.

"I'm sorry," she said in a very small voice. "I didn't want to be late. Avô said Saturday. And Avô always comes to the clock."

Marta closed her eyes. She pulled Lara against her again.

The woman in the apron started to speak to Marta in Portuguese. She spoke for a long time. She pointed at the clock, and at the café, and at the hot chocolate, and at her watch. Marta listened and nodded, and said *obrigada, obrigada, obrigada*.

"This is Dona Fátima," Marta told Emma at last. "This is her café. She saw Lara at about twenty-five past eight. A little girl, alone, with a suitcase. She asked her where her mum was. And Lara said —" Marta's voice broke a little. "Lara said, *My grandfather is coming. He always comes.*"

"So Dona Fátima gave her a hot chocolate," Emma said.

"Two hot chocolates. And a cake. And she stood next to her for an hour. She says she has to work, but she couldn't leave her." Marta wiped her eyes. "She was going to call the police at half past nine."

Emma turned to Dona Fátima.

"Thank you," she said. She didn't know any more Portuguese. So she said it again. "Thank you. Obrigada."

Dona Fátima smiled for the first time. She patted Emma's arm. Then she said something to Lara, very seriously, with one finger in the air.

"What did she say?" Emma asked.

"She said, *You must come back and visit me. With your mother.*" Marta laughed. "*Next time.*"

Lara looked at Emma. She looked at the big blue suitcase with the fishing net on the wheel.

"Emma," she said. "Hello."

"Hello, Lara."

"Is Avô here?"

"Not yet."

"He has to come," Lara said. "It's my birthday."

"I know," Emma said. "Happy birthday, Lara."

Lara smiled. "Thank you. I'm seven now." Then she looked up at the big clock above them. She looked at it for a long time. "I can't tell the time yet," she said.

"Love," Marta said gently. "Avô doesn't know we're here. He doesn't know you came. He might not come to the station today."

"He will," Lara said.

Emma took out her phone.

"I'll call Hannah," she said. "Maybe he went to her flat again. Maybe she knows where he is."

Hannah answered on the first ring.

"EMMA! Where are you? He came! The old man! Tomás! He came at eight o'clock this morning, and I was here, and I told him everything. I told him you're at his daughter's house. He was so happy, Em, he nearly cried. He kissed me on both cheeks."

"Where is he now?"

"He went to the station! He's getting the train to Vila Azul. To find you. He stayed for a coffee, and then he left. Ten minutes ago, in a taxi. I rang you three times! Why didn't you answer?"

Emma looked at her phone. Three missed calls. She didn't hear them in Senhor Henrique's noisy car.

"He wanted to call Marta," Hannah said. "He knows her home number by heart. He rang it twice, but nobody answered. Her mobile

number is in his phone, and his phone is dead." She stopped. "Why? Where are you?"

Emma looked up at the clock. Nine twenty-eight.

"I'm at the station," she said. "We have to wait here."

"What? Emma — he's got the dress! I told him to leave your suitcase here, with me. He said no. He said, *I promised. I'm giving it to her myself.* You have to get the dress! Twelve o'clock! You have to be here at twelve o'clock!"

"I know," Emma said. "I'll be there."

She put the phone in her pocket.

"He's coming," she said to Marta. "Here. Now. In a taxi."

Marta stared at her. Then she looked down at Lara.

Lara didn't look surprised at all.

"I told you," she said. She sat back down on her little blue suitcase, under the big yellow clock, and folded her arms. "We have to wait here. He always comes."

CHAPTER 15

The Owner

THEY WAITED.

Dona Fátima brought coffee for Marta and Emma. She brought a third hot chocolate for Lara. Marta said no. Lara said yes. Dona Fátima gave it to Lara.

Outside, Senhor Henrique was still arguing with the man in the uniform. It was a long argument. They both seemed to be enjoying it.

The long hand on the big clock moved. Five. Six. Seven.

Every time the big doors opened, Lara sat up straight. Every time, it was someone else.

At nine forty, the long hand was on the eight. The doors opened again.

A big old man came in. He was tall, with white hair and a brown face and a grey cardigan. He was pulling a blue suitcase behind him. He looked tired, and a little lost, and he was looking at the departures board.

Lara didn't see the man first. She saw the suitcase.

Then she screamed.

"AVÔ!"

The old man turned round. He saw her. His face changed completely. He let go of the suitcase and opened his arms, and Lara ran across the hall and jumped into them, and he lifted her up off the floor.

"Lara! My Lara! What are you doing here?"

"I came to meet you! Under the clock! Like always!"

"Under the clock," he said. He held her very tight. He looked up at the big yellow clock above the café. Then he looked at Marta. She was walking towards him. His face asked a question.

"Don't ask, Dad," Marta said. "Just don't ask. I'll tell you later. I've had the worst morning of my life."

She hugged him too, with Lara in the middle.

"Happy birthday, love," Tomás said into Lara's hair. "Seven! Look at you. You've grown. You've grown so much since last year."

Then he looked over Marta's shoulder and saw Emma.

She was standing next to his blue suitcase. He was standing next to hers.

For a moment, nobody said anything.

"You," Tomás said.

"Me," Emma said.

He put Lara down very gently. He walked over to Emma. He looked at her face, and then at her T-shirt with the fish on it, and he started to laugh. It was the same big, warm laugh from the plane.

"I've looked everywhere for you, love," he said. "Everywhere. Three days."

"I've looked everywhere for you too."

"I've been to your friend's flat three times. Three! I've walked up and down every hill in Alvar. I've drunk about forty coffees."

"I've been to Café Estrela," Emma said. "And to Dona Graça's shop. And to Vila Azul."

"Your friend told me. Hannah. A lovely girl. She talks very fast. But I didn't go to Abel's this time. He always laughs at me." He shook his head. "When I rang you on Thursday, I said, *I'm going to your friend's flat at four o'clock. Wait for me there.* Did you hear me?"

"I heard *four o'clock*," Emma said. "That's all."

He laughed again. "That telephone of Graça's. It's older than me. After that, I didn't ring you again. I thought, *I'll find her myself.*" Then his face became serious. "Your dress. I've taken good care of it. I've never looked after a dress in my life, love. My Pat would laugh at me. Every night I hung it up. Every morning I put it back."

He went back for Emma's suitcase and opened it, there on the floor of the station hall. On top was the long special bag. He unzipped it a little. Inside, Emma saw pale green. Soft and long and perfect.

She let out a long breath. She didn't know she was holding it.

"Thank you," she said.

"No. Thank *you*." Then his face changed again. "Wait. My suitcase. Is it all there? Is —"

He looked at Lara. Then he looked back at Emma. He didn't say the word *watch*. He didn't need to.

Emma opened her handbag. She took out the small wooden box with the label on it, *For Lara — 7*, and she put it in his big hands.

Tomás looked at it. He closed his eyes for a second.

"Thank God," he said quietly. "Thank God, thank God."

"I haven't lost anything," Emma said. "I've kept everything safe. Your shirts are folded. Better than before, I think."

"I can see that." He smiled at her. "Have you ever done anything this crazy before, love?"

"Never," Emma said. "Have you?"

"Never," said Tomás. "And I've lived a long time."

Then he turned round. He knelt down slowly in front of Lara, on the floor of the station, under the big yellow clock. His knees made a noise.

"Lara," he said. "I've got something for you. For your birthday. Remember what I told you last year?"

Lara looked at the box. Her eyes went very wide.

He opened it. He took out the silver watch on its silver chain and put it in her small hands. He pressed the button, and the lid opened.

"This was my watch," he said. "My father gave it to me when I was thirteen. I've carried it every day since then. Every single day. Now it's yours."

Lara held it like a baby bird. She looked at the letters inside the lid.

"Now," Tomás said. "Look. The short hand tells you the hour. The long hand tells you the minutes." He pointed up. "Now look at the big clock. What do you see?"

Lara looked up at the big clock. Then she looked down at the watch. Then up. Then down.

"They're the same!" she said.

"They're the same. So. Tell me. What time is it, Lara?"

Lara looked at the watch very carefully. She was very serious.

"The short hand is nearly on the ten," she said slowly. "And the long hand is on the nine."

"So it's...?"

Lara looked up at him. "I don't know."

"Quarter to ten," Tomás said.

"Quarter to ten," Lara said. She said it like a new word. Then she said it again, louder. "It's quarter to ten!"

Everybody laughed. Even Dona Fátima.

Lara looked at the watch again. Then she looked at Emma. She thought about something. Then she took the yellow ribbon out of her

hair and held it out.

"For you," she said. "For your suitcase. So you don't take the wrong one again."

Emma took the ribbon. It was bright yellow, like a lemon.

"Thank you, Lara."

She knelt down and tied it on the handle of her suitcase, with a double knot.

At ten o'clock, they said goodbye in front of the station. Tomás hugged her, and Marta hugged her, and Lara shook her hand very seriously. Senhor Henrique's car was too small for four people and two suitcases, so the others were taking the train home. Senhor Henrique waved from the orange car. The argument with the man in the uniform was finished. They were friends now.

"Come and see us," Marta said. "Any time. The smallest room, the best view."

"I will," Emma said, and she meant it.

She watched them walk back into the station together. An old man with a blue suitcase. A woman with messy hair. A little girl with a smaller blue suitcase and a silver watch on a chain round her neck.

Then Emma turned round, with her own suitcase and its yellow ribbon, to look for a taxi.

"Excuse me? Sorry. Do you speak English?"

It was a young couple with big backpacks and a map. They looked hot and lost.

"Yes," Emma said.

"Oh, great. We're looking for the old town. Is it far?"

"No. It's easy. Go straight up this street. At the top, turn left. Then you'll see the cathedral. The old town is all around it." Then she added, "And go to Café Estrela, in the square. Ask for a galão and two pastéis de nata. Not one. Always two."

"Thank you so much!"

"You're welcome."

They walked away up the hill. Emma watched them go. Then she got into a taxi.

At five to twelve, she rang the bell of Rua das Laranjeiras 14. Hannah opened the door with her hair in big rollers. She looked at Emma, and at the fish T-shirt, and at the suitcase with the yellow ribbon.

"Have you got the dress?" she said.

"I've got the dress."

Hannah screamed and hugged her, rollers and all.

The wedding was at four o'clock, under the olive trees at Quinta das Oliveiras. The sun was warm and gold. Hannah was beautiful. Miguel cried. Fifty aunts cried. Emma stood next to Hannah in a long, pale green dress, and she didn't check her phone once.

Late that evening, she sat at a table under the trees, with music and lights all around her. She took out her phone and wrote two messages.

To Tyler: *Found him.*

To her mum: *Having the best time. Tell you everything when I'm home x*

Her mum answered in one second.

Did you use the ribbon?

Emma smiled. She looked across the garden, at the lights in the olive trees, at Hannah dancing with Miguel.

Yes, she wrote. *In the end.*

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