

TREGARTHUR'S PROMISE

ALEX MELLANBY



TREGARTHUR'S SERIES

BOOK 1

TREGARTHUR'S PROMISE



Alex Mellanby

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This book is dedicated to Pat Read who has safely led so many expeditions across Dartmoor and to the many who have faced the Ten Tors challenge.

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LOST ON THE MOOR

One advantage of having a drug dealing family with a reputation for extreme violence is that you get left alone at school. There are disadvantages, several disadvantages, and they had all mixed together into one big mess. That was the reason I was on a bus – a school trip. I needed to get away, a quiet time to think.

‘Off!’ A piercing screech crashed into my thoughts. I looked up to see Demelza Honey – the queen of slap and supposed school beauty – march down the aisle and take over the back seat with her followers. There was only just enough space for their overstuffed makeup bags.

Not far behind, the wiry little rat face of Zach Bishop appeared. ‘Move!’ he shouted and poked someone sitting in the seat he wanted, pulling the boy to the ground and kicking him before slumping down, sticking his feet into the aisle and telling his two slimy hangers-on to sit opposite.

This trip wasn’t a good idea – whatever it was. Someone had mixed the bad and dangerous with the small and weak, school leavers and some from the junior school. This wasn’t a dream, someone had nightmares this one up. Peace and quiet? No chance.

‘Alvin, you came.’ Big Jen – Jenna Karen – squashed into the seat beside me and pointing backwards: ‘What are they doing here?’ But Jenna could see I didn’t have answers. She went on: ‘Things at home just as bad then.’ That wasn’t a question. Jenna knew. Her family were on the same road.

A teacher got on, she looked wild – eyes that almost popped out of her head when she talked, and dressed in army gear with enough kit for a year long expedition. Wild and a bit familiar. Miss Tregarthur, the trip sheet said. I think she taught at the junior school, but I recognised her from somewhere else. She stared down the row of seats. I was sure I’d seen her around our house, talking to my aunt. That set me worrying.

I didn’t want to think about home right now so I actually listened to the roll call, the instructions. The teacher told us about the other two mothers who were there to help, they were weird too – they looked like twins with the same hair problems. The three of them sat down and let the mayhem continue. Stuff was flying in the air – boots, coats, and cuddly toys from the smaller kids. The bus moved off.

Outside we passed woods and fields, quiet and peaceful. Inside Zach was torturing those smaller kids and Demelza was trying new shades of eyeliner on reluctant volunteers.

The teacher looked asleep. Leave them alone, I thought and made myself look out of the window. A couple of hours passed before we pulled up, piled out, and this Joint Venture school walking trip walked off, with most in a rush to get away from trouble. Some hope.

We walked.

‘Where are we?’ I looked hopefully at Jenna. I could see hills

rolling away into the distance, but no houses. It didn't look like anywhere I wanted to be. 'It's a huge nothing.'

Jenna didn't answer. She looked as worried as me.

'Dartmoor Park,' started Miss Tregarthur, swinging into full lecture mode. 'The largest area of granite ...'

I switched off. She was going on about wild stuff. It certainly looked wild. Miss Tregarthur led, not looking back. Her two helpers lagged behind.

At first, wherever we were, looked like it was straight out of a nature film – warm sunlight, a sparkling stream bordering the path, sheep grazing in the distance. Zach pushed most of the younger ones into the water. I stuck to higher ground just in case. I wasn't looking for a fight, yet. The bus journey had brought back all my other worries. Only a few more weeks until I was sixteen, only a few more weeks before they threw me out.

We walked some more and then even more. I looked up to the hills. Huge grey stones stood out on their tops.

'Must be the granite,' Jen muttered. Perhaps she'd been listening more closely to the teacher.

We stopped to eat; packs had been handed out on the bus. Zach and his groupie pair made lunch painful for many. I lost count of the times Jenna told me: 'Leave them, it's not worth it.' I couldn't understand why they were annoying me. Sorting them seemed so much easier than sorting my life.

Off we went again. The path became steeper as we left the stream. It wasn't easy and the group spread out. Soon we were picking our way over rocks, climbing towards one of the peaks.

'Didn't know this was a rock climbing trip,' muttered Jenna.

'Looks worse further up,' I peered ahead – huge boulders

seemed to be closing in around us.

A breeze started. Weather here changed fast. The wind grew stronger, rolling in the clouds and hiding the sun. I pulled my fleece tighter. Higher up the boulders were as big as houses, looming over the path. The sky became a nasty threatening grey. A few watery drops fell in the wind.

Miss Tregarthur waved us on. 'Only a bit of rain. Don't stop. Nothing unusual. But hurry up.' There was something rather like panic in her voice.

The rain fell harder, huge paintball size drops splattered on the ground. The air was soon thick with wet cloud.

No one hurried, just more pushing and shoving. The teacher had no idea how to control this lot. She took another look at the dark clouds. Then her shouting started: 'Get up that hill! Run.' And now shrieking: 'Run! Run! Run!' but it was too late, even if anyone had taken any notice of her. Rain pelted down and the wind blew her shouts away.

If rain wasn't unusual I knew it wasn't normal when the ground started shaking. Someone screamed, 'Earthquake!'

I might never have been on the moor or on a school hiking trip before, but when the huge boulders crashed down the hillside like giant beasts coming out of the gathering mist I knew this was even worse than Zach and the rest of them. Death looked more than likely.

I ran through blinding rain, but rocks seemed to be everywhere in my way and seconds later I crashed into a cliff wall I was sure hadn't been there before. I felt my way along the rock face and tripped, tumbling into a gap and sliding down into darkness. Scrambling to my feet I saw I was in a cave stretching in front of me into the hillside. Dark and gloomy but in the distance a

faint blue light radiated out of the dark. I could hear sounds of the storm outside. In the cave it was still and quiet, almost as though the earthquake, or whatever it was, didn't exist.

I turned, climbed back up, and looked for the others. For a second, the wind cleared the cloud of mist. I saw Miss Tregarthur further up the hill. A giant slab of stone had fallen across her, pinning her to the ground. She struggled frantically, unable to escape, screaming. But she wasn't screaming for help. A gust of wind carried her strange words: 'Keep my promise. Keep it. Save him.' More rocks fell on her. A swirl of cloud curled down the hillside, she started to disappear, then she looked up. Almost as though she was searching me out. Her face twisted in a hideous snarl as she howled: 'YOU – Alvin Carter – YOU – keep my promise.' That was the last I saw of her.

I had no idea what she meant, it made no sense and I didn't much care. I was thinking about survival. There was nowhere out there to run, nowhere safe. Disappearing into the cave felt safer.

The cloud cleared again. I saw the others – mud soaked, lashed by the wind and rain – they were trying to get down the hill. But the way seemed blocked as though the stones of the moor had moved to trap them. Torrents of water washed down the path. I looked away. What did I care? Then I heard Jenna's calls for help. Peering back I shouted, 'Over here! Over here!' again and again, and waved my arms.

Jenna made it but she wasn't alone. When I saw the others I wished I hadn't bothered: that spoilt bitch Demelza and ... surely not ... Zach. But they were just part of the group, difficult to tell how many in that chaos.

We all slid down into the cave, crowding around the entrance, but the driving rain soon pushed us further into the gloom.

In the next second everything seemed to stop outside. The wind died. All became still and silent. I looked again at the back of the cave and now I could make out a narrow tunnel, the entrance lit by the faint blue haze of light. A damp rotten smell hung in the air. The still quiet wasn't right. I knew something bad was about to happen. I was good at that sort of prediction, bad things often happened around me.

A deep rumbling started. It came from way out on the moor, growing louder and louder until a thundering wave of noise rushed towards us. The ground shook and cracked under my feet. Sounds of the earth breaking filled the cave. Demelza screamed the loudest as rocks smashed down over the entrance. We couldn't stay here and we couldn't get out.

I went for the tunnel, yelling: 'This way.'

'What? In there? No way!' Jenna yelled back, seeing the dimly lit narrow passage.

There was no time to argue. Huge rocks fell into the cave entrance, rolling down towards us. Everyone pressed towards me, moving into the tunnel, onwards into air thick with dust and fear. I felt my way forward in the faint blue light. The rest were still pushing against me. There was no way back – the entrance now completely blocked.

'Quick.' 'Help.' 'Move!' came the shouts from behind me.

Voices echoed against the stone walls.

'What about that teacher?' someone called.

'She's had it, I think.'

'Shouldn't we go back for her?'

'Can't,' I shouted. 'And if we hang on we'll all die. Come on.'

Nobody went back. The blue light grew stronger, always just ahead of us, as though showing the way. I stood to one side

as some of the others pushed past. Then I heard more stones crashing down. The tunnel roof was crumbling behind us.

‘Move it!’ I was pushing with the rest.

One of the younger ones fell to his knees shaking and whimpering. Someone grabbed the fallen figure and pushed him forward. I couldn’t see who had helped but he looked bigger than most of the others.

Then I heard more shouts: ‘Get out of the way.’ Zach barged through. I thought of tripping him up but in the end I just moved aside, waiting for Jenna. She appeared, pushing, shoving and half-carrying two smaller children. I liked Jen but I never thought of her as a caring sort of person. She tripped over Demelza who had slipped and lay moaning.

‘Get up.’ Jenna seized Demelza’s arm, wrenched her to her feet and shoved her hard. Grabbing the two other children again Jenna pushed onwards.

Another boy kept stopping and looking back as though expecting Miss Tregarthur to reappear. She didn’t. His scream echoed in the tunnel. I turned and saw the boy’s leg pinned underneath a massive lump of fallen stone. If Jenna was helping, maybe I should too. I turned back and tried to lift the rock but I couldn’t do it on my own.

‘Help, back here!’ I yelled. ‘Where’s that big bloke? Help.’

A shape appeared through the dust. Together we heaved. The boy screamed and passed out but we’d moved the rock enough for me to drag him clear. We carried his unconscious body onwards.

The tunnel ended, the blue light disappeared and in a rush we stumbled out. Daylight was fading. Behind us the rumbling and crashing continued. Everyone was spluttering and coughing, wiping away the dirt from their faces. We lowered the injured

boy onto some grass outside the entrance. The rest collapsed on the ground, picking places between the rocks.

‘Is he still alive?’ asked Jenna.

The boy groaned.

‘Seems so.’ I turned to see if anyone else had followed us in the tunnel; there was no one.

The sounds of the earthquake stopped again, leaving an empty silence. Looking around it felt like something from history – an old war picture in black, white and mud. People slumped on the grass, some shivering even though it wasn’t cold. No one talked, no one stirred, nothing happened. We hadn’t moved far from the end of the tunnel. It was too dark to move about safely.

‘What do we do?’ Jenna stood and was silhouetted against the last of the light.

She seemed to be speaking to me – I had no idea.

‘I suppose we wait until they find us,’ someone said.

‘Don’t think they will,’ a girl’s voice came from back in the tunnel, her voice miserable enough to spark off even more crying.

‘Of course they’ll find us, they have rescue teams.’ Another girl sounded just as uncertain and other voices started up.

‘What happened to the others?’

‘Left behind.’

‘Did you see the teacher?’

‘I think she got hit by a rock.’

‘If they’re all dead then no one will know to come after us.’

‘They’re not all dead. Some must have gone back.’

‘Why don’t our phones work?’

All our mobile phones were blank: no signal, no power. Dead no matter how much poking, all dead.

It started to rain again. I could just see that we were at the top of a slope. Behind me the tunnel came out from a huge cliff. I couldn't see any way to get out of here. Nothing felt right. At the bottom of the slope it looked as though there might be a forest. I saw shapes moving in the wind. Rustling and scuffling noises came from the trees, but nothing else. There were no lights, no sounds of cars or people.

The injured boy let out another groan. His leg was still bleeding. 'Let me help.' One of the girls moved towards him.

I'd almost felt it was my job to do something, as though leading them all through the tunnel meant I was responsible. I didn't like that thought and I had no idea what to do. Better that someone else should do it. The girl tried to look at the wound and I heard another painful moan.

'I can't see. It's too dark,' she said to Jenna, who had joined her. 'I need to tie something over the wound.'

I knew the girl who'd helped – Mary – everyone called her 'Nurse Mary' even before this walk. She'd always talked about becoming a nurse like her mother. Did she know what she was doing with a real emergency? Mary took off her jacket and tied the sleeves tightly across the wound, a strange bandage. The injured boy shrieked with pain but the bleeding seemed to stop.

'Help me move him.' Mary looked over at me but I turned away. She let out an angry sigh and I felt my face burn. Why me? I'd done my bit, someone else could help.

The rain fell harder. The tunnel provided the only shelter and we all moved back under cover. Inside the opening it seemed as though there was another cave, much larger by the sounds of our echoing voices, but it was impossible to make out any details.

We waited. Sometimes we could hear rocks falling. There was still no sign of rescue. Night came. I don't know what I expected to happen – sirens and the sounds of emergency teams perhaps – but there was nothing; mostly just a deep silence, but occasionally the noise of something moving outside. Someone would shout: 'Who's there?' but no one answered. And no one was going out to look around.

Finally I stretched out on the cave floor. A dim moon gave the only light; a darkness blacker than I'd ever known. I pulled my jacket over my head, trying to keep out the sobbing, moaning, and constant unanswerable questions. It didn't work.

'What happens if the roof falls in?' whined one of the younger children. I soon came to recognise that whine.

'You get buried alive.'

And I did recognise that voice – Zach. Everyone recognised Zach's voice.

During the long night on the stony cave floor Zach continued to make fake animal noises, shouting, 'What was that?'

Then a far louder howl seemed to answer Zach's pathetic call, and screeching wails echoed round the cave. Someone started screaming and others joined in. I wanted them to shut up in case whatever was howling heard the noise. I wanted to tell them to shut up, but I couldn't find my voice. Mary, treading with care in the dark, moved over to those whimpering the loudest and tried to comfort them. The sounds outside the cave fell quiet again in the deep night.

Nothing made sense. Had we been abandoned? I'd led us out of the earthquake, or whatever had happened. It wouldn't be long before they blamed me if no one came to rescue us.

The night passed slowly.

THE CAVE

I gave up trying to sleep. Rocks on the cave floor jabbed my every move. Restless bodies sprawled around me, more restless in the first signs of light in a strange grey dawn. I looked out. Sounds had started up – squawking birds mixed with grunts and more scuffling. Nothing sounded like the noises we’d heard yesterday on the moor, nothing sounded friendly.

And it didn’t look like the place we had left. Even in daylight I couldn’t make sense of it. The tunnel had ended in another large cave with a roof stretching up above me. The floor was a mess of sand and fallen stone, mostly dry, but gloomy and dark. I moved outside and sat on a rock.

‘Where are we?’ Jenna squashed down beside me. She wasn’t a small girl and it was good to have the warmth of someone next to me.

‘No idea.’ I worried that she expected me to know.

‘No way up there.’ She pointed at the cliff behind us. It seemed endless in all directions. ‘And I don’t like the look of anything down there either.’

Below our cave it looked as though a rock fall might have cleared the slope down to the forest. The ground was strewn with broken trees and bushes.

‘Do you know anything about that teacher?’ I asked. I didn’t

want to talk about the scenery. The forest was just trees going on forever and I didn't like it.

'Eh?'

'Have you ever seen her before this trip?'

Jenna gave me a growl. 'No, she joined the Junior school last term. Don't know anything else about her, don't want to know anything about her. What do you mean?'

'Nothing. I think she got crushed in the earthquake.' Why had she been shouting at me? Her twisted face stuck in my thoughts. How did she know my name? What had she meant by keeping her promise?

'Did you hear her shouting?' I said.

'Shouting? No. I heard a lot of screaming. I think it was Jack saying we should go back for her.'

'Jack?'

'The one who hurt his leg. He's in our year isn't he?' Jenna gave me one of her looks. We shared quite a lot, but I'd not spent much time in school recently.

'Lucky what's his name was there, otherwise Jack would still be stuck under that stone.'

'Big Matt you mean, nice guy, bit slow.'

Jenna stood and took a step back towards the cave, watching the others. I didn't want her to go.

'So you didn't hear that teacher going on about some promise?' I blurted out.

'What? No. What do you mean?' Jenna turned and gave me a very suspicious look.

I tried to laugh. 'Nothing, I just thought I heard her say something.'

'What?' Jenna had on her fierce face.

‘I’m not sure. She was really frantic. I just caught her eyes. Like she was looking for me. She seemed to be shouting something about keeping her promise and saving someone.’

‘What are you on about? Sounds weird. Have you been taking something?’

‘No, you know I don’t. I may live with it but I’m not stupid. You didn’t have to ask.’ I was angry that she’d asked about drugs even though she was right that I had sounded weird.

‘Sorry. Anyway it’s too late to find out now what she meant.’ Jenna looked as though she wanted to get away from me.

I glanced up at her face. She often tried to frown, but it didn’t always work. Jenna caught me staring and looked back with a, ‘What?’ I turned away, just catching the hint of one of her rare smiles.

I changed direction: ‘Home just as bad?’

Jenna’s head fell forward. She took a while before saying anything. ‘I just can’t get through to Mum. She’s got it into her head that it’s Ok to keep changing boyfriends – or step-dads as she wants me to call them.’

‘Nice.’ It was the wrong thing to say.

‘NICE? Not nice at all. When they’ve had enough of Mum they seem to think I’m the next best thing.’

This time I didn’t say anything, just waited. I thought she was going to give me the full on Jenna glare but there was no anger in her look now. She seemed near to breakdown.

‘She even stopped me putting a lock on my bedroom door.’

And with that she walked away. I could understand why she was always angry back at school. But in the earthquake she’d seemed a different person – helping.

I sat still, watching the rest, thinking about Jenna. Zach

tried to swagger out of the cave, as always with his two creepy followers, and then Demelza with her own hangers-on. Rescue better come quick or there would be murder in the air.

As the light grew stronger some of the others moved on to the patchy grass near to the cave. I didn't know how many had come through the tunnel. Looking back at the group I made it fourteen including me, but they kept moving around, maybe it was more.

'This place doesn't smell right either,' said one of the younger girls who I think had been listening to my conversation with Jenna.

A stale rotten stench came up from the forest of trees, blown on a wind carrying gusts of drizzle along with the smell. Damp and a summer cool.

'Where is everyone? How long is it going to be before they come and get us? What do we do now?' Demelza was practically stamping her feet.

I could think of several things she could do, all painful, although she was saying what I guess we all thought. To me this place looked like real trouble, maybe even worse than the trouble I had at home.

'What are those? They don't look real.' One of Demelza's followers pointed to the gigantic plants that became clearer, trees with enormous branches reaching out in twisted shapes, covered with long trailing creepers. New noises started.

'Sounds like the zoo,' said one of the two girls still staying near to Jenna. 'One of those big cages full of birds.'

Then a wild roar echoed against the cliff followed by grunts and howls. Squeals and cries came from our group. The two girls clung round Jenna's neck. Roars and grunts grew louder

and louder, ending with a screaming wail. I thought something was coming towards us. A dark shape moved in the bushes but nothing appeared. Jenna pushed the girls away.

Demelza stood over me. 'Where are we? Why hasn't anyone come to help?'

I ignored her and turned away.

'Well? You got us here.' And she poked me.

'How should I know?' I really didn't want a conversation with Demelza and I didn't want poking either, so I prodded her back rather hard. She slipped and sprawled on the ground, looked up with her mouth open and hate on her face.

'When are we going to go home?' the whining boy whined.

'Shut up Stevie,' hushed one of the others from the junior school.

If that boy didn't shut up himself then I thought someone would do it for him.

'I'm hungry.' Stevie could moan as well as whine.

The girl who had told him to keep quiet gave him a piece of chocolate she'd saved. No one had much left from the lunch we'd been given on the walk. We were all hungry.

'What you got then?' Zach stood over one of the younger girls. She froze.

'Back off Zach,' Jenna snarled at him.

Zach moved away with a stupid grin pretending to make it a joke. His face twisted and he spat some words that I didn't hear. I looked at Jen, there was something strange about her. Almost as though coming through that tunnel had made her different, or was that just normal? Zach wasn't going to have it all his own way.

Checking my own pack I found I'd not really eaten much

the day before so I handed a sandwich to Jen.

‘Thanks, maybe I should give it ...’ she looked around at the younger kids, but thought again and bit into it. ‘Thanks,’ she mumbled again.

Jack had been keeping quiet, but as he moved to get at his pack he groaned and held his leg.

‘Let me look.’ Mary knelt down beside him.

Mary was doing her best to keep up the nursing. I watched, everybody watched, as she gently untied the jacket she had used to bandage the injury. The blood soaked cloth stuck to the wound and Jack flinched, tears in his eyes. As she pulled the jacket away, the bleeding started again.

‘We need some sort of dressing,’ Mary said to Jenna in a hushed voice.

‘I’ve got a spare T-shirt,’ someone offered.

Mary tore the shirt and wrapped the cloth around the wound using strips of the material to tie it in place.

‘I should have cleaned it,’ Mary said looking at Jack’s leg. ‘But ... someone will come soon and rescue us ... they’ll bring a medical team ... at least the T-shirt won’t stick to the wound ... like the wool did from my jacket ...’ Mary shut up as she saw everyone looking at her, listening to her anxious chatter.

‘Thanks,’ Jack mumbled.

A strange looking girl came slowly out from the back of the cave. I’d missed her in my count. She had always been a loner; I can’t remember ever talking to her at school. Her tall, thin body was usually dressed in homemade black clothes, odd, and so miserable. ‘There’s no one here to save us.’ Her slow, sad, hopeless cry echoed against the dripping stones. ‘We’re all going to die – eaten by that roaring thing.’

Her words started the sobbing off again.

‘That’s rubbish. Ivy, you always say miserable things. Someone will find us soon ... won’t they?’ I heard so much uncertainty in Mary’s voice.

‘It’s like the Lost World ... you know ... like that old film, isn’t it?’ Another boy pointed towards the forest and the mountains that now became visible in the far distance.

‘Sam! Where did you come from?’ He’d appeared behind Mary and startled her.

I hadn’t seen Sam before either. ‘Are there any more in there?’ I pointed into the darkness of the cave.

‘No. It was just me and Ivy,’ said Sam.

I knew Sam. He was a small fat boy with a round face which made him look younger than the rest of us in our year. Sam always seemed to be trying not to get noticed and somehow always failed. He needed to keep out of Zach’s way.

Yesterday I overheard a conversation between the hair-problem mothers on the bus talking about Sam. It had almost made me forget my own problems. One of them had said something about Sam’s dad dying in a car crash and, ‘Yes and no mother either,’ the other had replied. I hadn’t heard the rest.

‘Lost world – that means real monsters.’ Zach moved up close to Sam, roared in his ear and smacked him hard on the head.

‘Shut it Zach,’ said Jenna.

‘You again, what’s up with you?’ Zach sounded genuinely surprised.

‘I’m tired and fed up with you going on.’ Her words met silence.

‘You want to try and shut me up then?’ Zach squared up to Jenna.

Jenna stood her ground and stared back at him. Jen might be

a big girl, but with Zach and the other two she didn't have much of a chance. Somehow I found myself standing next to her. It was enough. Zach turned away, confused, but with something much worse in his eyes. Everyone else must have been holding their breath and now it seemed that they all breathed out at the same time.

'I wonder what happened to the rest of them on the walk,' Jack said. 'There were a lot more of us when we started out.'

'At least they're not stuck in this stinking cave.' Zach looked at me.

'Probably all dead,' muttered Ivy.

'Bout time Alvin came up with a plan.' Zach pointed at me. 'You got us stuck here. Now do something about it.'

Backing down had got to Zach; it wouldn't be long before this came to more than words. I wasn't that hard, I didn't have to be – I relied on my family's reputation. They weren't here, but it wasn't the thought of fighting Zach that worried me. I wondered why I had led the way yesterday. Had it really been my decision? It felt more like the falling rocks had chased us down the tunnel.

'If Alvin hadn't got us out of the earthquake we'd all be dead.' Jenna seemed determined to antagonise Zach.

'Might be best if we were,' said Ivy.

I needed to do something. Had that teacher's screams only been aimed at me? Had she singled me out or was that my imagination? I needed to find out if anyone else had heard her. Not now though – now I needed a plan.

'Has anyone looked at the tunnel?' There was no reply so I walked into the dark at the back of the cave. Everyone else followed.

Even in the dim daylight I could see the huge boulders piled up, closing off any hope of escape. I pushed at the stones and kicked them, nothing happened.

‘Is there anyone there?’ Mary shouted at the wall of rocks and everyone joined in: ‘Hello ...’ ‘Help ... can you hear me?’ ‘Get us out of here!’

We stood back, listening. No sounds came from the other side of the rock pile, only echoes on ours. We tried again and again, hammering on the rocks with bits of stone.

‘Great idea Alvin,’ muttered Zach and jabbed his finger at me. I caught it, held on while our eyes met. Zach snatched his hand back and sneered at me. But my idea had been useless. I moved away. That was the last time I was going to make a suggestion.

From time to time one or two went back and banged on the rocks blocking the tunnel and called out. No response.

‘Do you think we should go looking for help?’ Mary said.

‘What, down there?’ Jenna pointed at the forest as the sounds we’d heard in the night started again.

‘We have to stay here ... don’t we? Otherwise they won’t be able to find us.’ Jack sounded desperate.

‘Jack’s right,’ Mary said. ‘We should stay here.’

Jack was stuck here and Mary seemed so keen on agreeing with him. I felt that Jen was right. There was nothing down in the forest that looked hopeful. Or safe.

The day went on and on, just expecting someone to arrive, some sound of people. You don’t go for a walk and everyone vanishes. What had happened? What did we need to do?

There were lots of useless suggestions. Nobody did anything. Demelza kept going on, saying someone should go down into the forest – but not her. I could see they were looking to

someone to lead. There wasn't anyone. Even Zach was quiet and I wasn't going to do anything. The teacher's words and her face kept coming back to me. Surely what she said meant there had to be someone here? I thought we should wait. If we wandered off then nobody would find us. Since no one did anything and no one went anywhere, the day just passed away and the light started to fade again.

None of us were going anywhere in the dark. Zach had been right – I didn't have any idea what to do. It had been stupid to think I could do anything. I tried to sleep, an empty stomach made that difficult. I suppose we were all starting to think that there might be no rescue. Tomorrow we were going to have to do something for ourselves.

FOOD

My sleep ended in another grey dawn. Jenna was already standing at the cave entrance.

‘Where are they?’ I heard her whisper. ‘Where are we?’

I tapped her on the shoulder and she jumped. ‘Talking to yourself?’

‘No one else,’ Jenna replied.

A sound from Jack made us turn. He sat rocking backwards and forwards, holding his injured leg. He looked up. ‘Anything? Any sign of anyone?’

‘Nothing,’ said Jenna.

My thoughts couldn’t leave the teacher’s screaming words. What could they mean? We all needed saving but I couldn’t see anyone special in our group. Had anyone else heard her, made sense of her words?

‘Jack, you looked like you were waiting for that teacher. Did you see her?’ I asked.

‘Thought I saw her get hit by a rock or something.’ Jack winced as he spoke.

‘Did you hear her say anything?’

‘No. Like what?’

‘Nothing.’ Maybe it had been a hallucination, I’d dreamt up the words.

The rest were waking, stretching and groaning. They looked a mess – particularly the group from the junior school. They'd tried to look after each other. Scared of anyone from the senior school. I thought only four of them had made it through the tunnel, three girls and the boy who whined – Stevie. Two of the girls were called Sara and there didn't seem much difference between them. Both were rather small and freckly. One was blond and the other a bit more ginger. Both looked miserable.

'Nothing is going to happen, we're all going to starve to death,' said the gingery Sara. 'And I want a wee, but everyone's watching and I'm too scared to go down there.' She pointed towards the trees, but stopped with her mouth open, noticing everyone listening to her. She pulled her jacket over her face.

In the dark, there were several large boulders to crouch behind. But in the light it wasn't so easy. The cave had started to smell. Sara was right – everyone watched if anyone moved.

Jenna gave out an angry sigh, walked over to Sara, took her hand and led her out of the cave. The rest watched. Jenna stopped and turned, hands on her hips, and glared.

'What?!' she yelled and everyone looked away. The two of them headed for the nearest bushes.

I wondered if she would bring Sara back, the old Jenna probably wouldn't, but here? I didn't know. Getting away from home seemed to have changed her.

Sara's words about starving sounded about right. I must have been muttering about getting food because Jack looked at me and said, 'How?'

I stared back at him. I wasn't going to make any more suggestions, not that I had any.

'Suppose we'll have to go and look,' Jack went on. 'Might be

something we can eat down in the forest.’

‘Like what?’

Jack shrugged. ‘Do you think they’ll find us today?’ and he looked down at his leg.

‘Not sure who you mean.’ I was thinking that the noises might mean anything could find us and might be looking for food as well.

Jack didn’t seem to pick up what I meant. ‘Rescuers, police, someone on the moor. They have teams that rescue people.’ He tried to be cheerful.

I was out of cheerfulness. ‘We’re not on the moor. No idea where we are or who is around. There’s nothing out there.’

‘Won’t they break through the tunnel?’

‘Maybe.’ It didn’t seem likely to me so I moved away from Jack in case he asked more questions.

Today the sun burnt off the mist hanging over the forest and the sky cleared. Jenna did return with Sara. If Jenna could go wandering about then so could I. I left the cave and walked along the cliff; staring upwards I still couldn’t see the top. The slimy stone was far too steep to climb.

Cascades of water tumbled down the rock face and splashed onto the ground. One cascade poured into a hollow, creating a small pool. I bent down, scooped some of the water into my hand and tasted it with the tip of my tongue. It seemed alright, but what would poison water taste like? Thirst stopped me worrying for long. I just drank and drank. The rest had been watching and seeing that I didn’t drop dead they ran to the small pool.

‘Is it safe?’ Mary asked. I gave her the ‘no idea’ look. Mary drank.

It was a fight. There wasn’t enough room, everyone scabbled

to get to the pool, jostling for space, driven by a day of having little to drink other than what they had left in their water bottles from the walk. I stood back watching them. How long would we survive without help, without any equipment and no food? Watching the pushing and shoving to get to the water, I knew it would soon turn to punches; Zach wasn't the only one who would cause trouble.

I moved off and walked along the bottom of the cliff as it curved away from the cave. The ground sloped upwards and after a while I could hear crashing water. Rounding a corner I saw a huge waterfall, with spray making rainbow colours in the sunlight. Thick plants and trees hid the bottom of the waterfall, but there was a river which looped around the forest below the cave. Several others had followed me.

'I think we're cut off by that river.' Sam stretched his arm and pointed.

'That might keep us safe from whatever made those noises,' said Stevie the whining boy.

'Unless they're on this side.' I couldn't see why I should make things sound better than they were, but it just made Stevie add whimpering to his selection of noises.

Worse still, something slithered off into the bushes. Everyone jumped back. Wherever we were this place wasn't safe.

'Snakes,' muttered Matt, who didn't seem to mind. Jenna gave him a look and held a finger to her lips. I didn't think it was worth pretending. If we were going to stay alive we all needed to know about the danger.

'What are we going to eat?' Jenna said and I thought she was trying to keep off the subject of snakes. 'We've nothing left and

it doesn't look like anyone is coming to rescue us.'

'Maybe we can find something in the woods – berries or fruit,' suggested Mary.

'Poisonous,' said Ivy.

You've got to love Ivy. She's so consistent.

'We have to find something,' I said, even though I knew Ivy was right and it would be difficult to know whether anything was safe to eat.

'The noises in the night must mean that there are animals nearby. We'll have to eat them if nothing else happens,' Sam suggested.

'You're joking.' Jenna poked Sam in the chest. He turned red and didn't say more.

'I think I'd rather starve to death than go looking for the thing that roared in the night,' came another whine.

'Of course you aren't going to starve.' Zach was the last to leave the water pool having driven everyone else away. 'I'm going to eat you!' he stepped towards Stevie who screwed his fists into his eyes and bawled.

Zach was really getting to me. At school I just let him get on with bullying and making things awful for anyone weaker than him, although he still kept his two followers just in case. I'd had other things on my mind. I didn't care what he did so long as he stayed away from me – which he did because he'd once met my older brother, who had talked about ripping off his legs. Now he was right here in my face. Yesterday he'd almost poked me. Perhaps fighting him would take my mind off feeling hungry. If it came to it I didn't really care if I lost. Jenna might have been able to do the superwoman bit and change into some caring person but that wasn't me, I'm not a bully but I'm not

very nice either. My muscles tightened and I eased through the group who were wandering back to the cave.

Then Jenna was at me, 'Alvin ... please.'

I shrugged her off but she grabbed my arm and stopped me. The rest were moving away.

'What now?' I said as we stood alone beneath the cliff.

Jenna looked up at me and I saw fear in her face – I could feel my eyes burning, my breath came fast, and every part of me felt ready to fight.

'If you take on Zach you're going to scare everyone,' she said.

'And?' It sounded to me like she meant, if you take on Zach and lose.

'You won't know when to stop. Or his friends will join in. Someone's got to hold this together.'

'And you think it should be me?'

'There's no one else. Look at them. You're the only one who's any good at organising ...'

'Yeah, but only if there's something in it for me. That's how our family works. You know that. Something in it or someone gets damaged.' I was pulling away from her.

'I thought you were different.' Jenna looked hurt.

'No chance, no chance to be different.'

'But you weren't like that in the earthquake, not then. If you hadn't done something we'd have all been crushed by rocks.'

I looked at her. Was she right? It hadn't come easy. Should I tell her all the things the teacher said? I thought that would bring me more trouble. Then even Jenna would blame me, saying it was all because of me, something to do with me and that teacher. Was it all because of me anyway, something to do with home? The fighting idea drained away.

Looking at Jenna I felt a grin slowly starting on my face. 'Are you always going to save Zach?'

'Maybe, but why don't you go and try to find something to eat – take Zach with you.'

'You don't ask much. Do I have to bring him back?'

Jenna didn't answer that question. I could read her thoughts. If something happened at least it would be away from the others. I splashed my face with water from the pool and returned to the cave. Zach was still taunting Stevie.

So I tried to do what Jenna wanted. 'Zach, instead of getting at Stevie, why don't we go and see if we can find something else to eat?'

'Eh?' said Zach as though he couldn't believe what he heard.

'That's if you're up to it?'

Zach looked around him. Everyone watched.

'Yeah, we'll go.' Zach tried to sound as though he was up to it but turned to his two followers looking for support. 'You two can come.'

Did I care if there were three of them? Back at school they wouldn't have touched me. Not unless they wanted to end up in hospital. But here there was only me. I turned and raised my eyebrows at Jen. She mouthed 'no problem' at me.

'Should we start a fire?' Jack asked before I left. 'You know, in case there's someone around. They might see the smoke.'

'And how do we do that?' Jenna frowned.

'You rub sticks together or bash bits of stone,' suggested Sam.

'Zach! Any of you lot got a lighter?' I called down to Zach and the other two who had already started slowly down the slope.

'Yep,' shouted one of them and he turned back rather more quickly. 'Can I help light the fire?' he said holding up the lighter.

‘Ryan, get back down here,’ Zach demanded.

I went down with Ryan. Sam followed, I thought I should have stopped him but he just tagged along. We caught up with Zach at the edge of the forest where he had stopped in front of a tangled mass of dripping green.

‘What about snakes?’ asked Sam.

‘Go find out.’ Zach grabbed him and shoved. Sam toppled into the vegetation and yelped. The plants weren’t soft and squidgy; they were tough and spiny. Sam stood up digging thorns out of his arm.

‘No snakes then,’ sneered Zach as he pushed Sam out of the way.

So, whether I cared or not I suppose Zach had done something useful. If there were snakes then sacrificing Sam might not be a bad idea. Next time maybe I’d push Zach. That thought cheered me up quite a lot.

We could only move slowly. It didn’t look as though anything had passed this way recently – if ever. We tore branches from the trees and smashed a way through. Zach managed to get me into the lead. The slope flattened out. Tough thorny bushes tore at our clothes. The sound of running water grew louder and a narrow track appeared. I stopped.

‘Wonder what made this track?’ Sam said as he peered ahead.

‘Hope it wasn’t that thing that roared in the night.’ Ryan had made sure he stayed in the middle of the group.

‘Scared are you Alvin?’ Zach said – but from behind.

‘Yeah,’ I said. ‘I’ll let you go first.’

We went more slowly after that. Sam kept looking over his shoulder at the shadows. Then we were out of the trees, onto a river bank.

‘What are those?’ Zach stopped and pointed.

In front of us a huge flock of weird birds was spread out by the river. They looked like a cross between a chicken and a duck – ugly scrawny things with a smell worse than the school loo. There were hundreds of them, possibly thousands. The river bank had been trampled to bare earth.

The birds stayed almost silent, no squawking or birdsong, only the occasional rustling of their feathers. Even when we walked into the flock, the birds didn't appear very interested. Zach still had his branch in his hand. With a jump and a yell he smashed the branch down on the first small bird, killing it and breaking the branch. That got them moving. With a loud rushing sound they took to the air. Zach held up the dead bird as though expecting praise.

'Brilliant Zach. You've scared them off,' I said.

Zach looked at me and took a step forward. So did I. Zach's face reddened and his eyes narrowed. I didn't move and I saw Zach's shoulders slump. He was probably remembering my brother's leg-ripping threat.

'At least I've got some food, better than you've done.' Zach tried to reassert himself, but his voice quivered. 'Anyway, they've all come down again.' He pointed ahead, finding something to take the attention away from himself.

Zach was right. The birds had flown around in an arc and just landed further along the river bank. It didn't take much to catch them. They'd struggle when you'd caught them but Sam seemed to know what to do. I thought it was pretty gruesome but he picked up the birds and twisted their necks until they were dead. I let him get on with it. Zach was still smashing away with a new branch – more club-like, and I thought he was imagining smashing me.

‘I think we’ve got enough.’ I looked at the mangled pile of dead birds. ‘Let’s take them back to the cave.’

‘What are they?’ asked Zach’s other follower, who had stayed very quiet. ‘If they aren’t chickens or ducks, then what are they?’

‘Chuckerns?’ Ryan suggested and that name stuck. ‘Do you think we can eat them?’

‘No idea,’ I replied. ‘I’ve no idea what we should do with them.’

Zach sneered at my answer, but he didn’t have any ideas either.

‘Pluck them and draw them,’ Sam said quietly.

‘Oh, so you’re an expert eh?’ Zach poked him with his stick. ‘Like you ever know anything.’

‘My dad was a butcher. He showed me what you do with chickens. You pull all their feathers off. Then you cut out their guts. ‘Drawing’ is the bit when you cut out the guts.’ Sam sounded convincing.

‘Great Sam,’ I said. ‘You’re in charge of plucking and drawing.’ Zach sneered again.

I went down to the river, splashed water on my face and took a drink. I was trying to stay calm. Sam stuck close.

‘How do we know if the water is safe to drink?’ Sam said.

‘We don’t,’ I snapped, getting fed up with stupid questions. But we needed Sam if these birds were going to be of any use so I tried to be friendlier. ‘But I guess no one has died yet and we’ve all drunk it.’

We headed back. Coming out of the forest I looked up and saw smoke billowing from the cave and the others wiping their streaming eyes. I shouted something and that seemed to set them off screaming and running back under cover.

Then I understood. We were carrying a pile of dead birds, blood and feathers stuck to us. Sticky, thorny; bits of bush, tree

and creeper had torn our clothes from the forest. Zach, bloodied from head to foot, hair matted with pieces of massacred bird, waved his killing club in the air.

In some other place this might have been a joke. But no one was laughing here. Zach made it worse by letting out a yell and making a mock charge, club swinging. When the rest calmed down they tried to make excuses for their panic.

‘It was the smoke in our eyes,’ Jack said. ‘We didn’t recognise you. You were all covered in stuff.’

‘We thought we were going to be attacked by savages,’ Stevie added.

We hadn’t fooled Jenna who just pointed at the blood stained mass of feathers and said, ‘We’re not eating those.’

‘What are they?’ several voices asked.

‘Chuckerns,’ replied Ryan.

‘Yuck,’ said Stevie.

‘It’s them or nothing,’ I said. ‘Sam knows what to do.’

Everyone turned to Sam and he froze. Sam really didn’t look like he knew anything. That was the person I remembered at school. Sam would make out he knew stuff, but it was made-up, fantasy. I’d believed him this time, thinking he wouldn’t make up things about his dad who had just died. Another one of my great thoughts.

‘You’ve no idea ... pathetic ... useless pile of ...’ And Zach hurled one of the birds at Sam. It caught him in the face and he fell to the ground.

‘I do know,’ Sam said, looking up. ‘Dad was a butcher, it’s just ...’

‘Just what?’ Zach threw another bird. ‘Just that he’s as useless as you?’

‘No he isn’t ... wasn’t.’ Sam started to get up and I could see he was about to do something stupid and fly at Zach. Bad idea even if Zach wasn’t holding a club. I was tired and hungry. Zach did have a point – Sam seemed to have no idea.

‘Sam do you really know what to do?’ Jenna stood in his way.

Sam stopped, turned to her and nodded.

‘Well get on with it.’

Sam still looked confused and it was Matt who walked over to Sam and took Jenna’s place in front of him, using his body to shield Sam from the taunts.

‘What do you need to do first?’ Matt asked in his slow voice.

‘You need to c ... c ... c ... cut their heads off,’ Sam stammered.

‘But I haven’t got a knife.’

‘Could you use this?’ Jack asked as he slid himself across the cave. He held a piece of stone which could have broken off during the earthquake. It looked like flint. ‘I know it’s very sharp because I sat on it,’ Jack said.

Matt took the stone and showed it to Sam, who just shrugged. Matt knelt on the ground, picked up one of the birds and holding it with one hand hacked off the head with the sharp stone. It took him several attempts. Someone puked.

‘Go for it, Matt,’ Zach cheered, although he looked a little green.

The headless bird brought Sam back into action. ‘Now you stick your finger in its neck and pull out stuff – I think it’s called the crop.’

Matt gave the bird to Sam without saying more. I thought it was a waste of time. But Matt’s help seemed to work. Sam took over and scooped something out with his finger.

‘Now you’ve got to pull off the feathers – pluck them.’ Sam gave

a running commentary as he pulled at the feathers. I wondered if he was trying to sound like his dad. Sam found the feathers hard to pull out and it took a long time.

‘Sam, this is going to take for ever – we’ll have to help.’ Jenna grabbed one of the birds. ‘Matt can you cut some more heads off and we can all do this.’

‘No way!’ said Demelza, who had been unusually quiet. She tried to strike a pose, one hand on her hip, pouting. It looked stupid. No one took any notice of her, even her own two hangers-on.

‘No plucking – no food,’ Zach said with a nasty grin.

Demelza pouted again, this time at him. He looked confused and his blush was red enough to be seen even through the mess of chuckern still plastered on his face.

Demelza turned to her friends with a mischievous smile.

‘Demelza’s got him. As if we don’t have enough problems,’ Jenna whispered. At the time I didn’t get what she meant.

In the end we all tackled the birds and, with a bit of help from Mary and Matt, everyone ended up with a scrawny headless chuckern with most of the feathers removed. It smelt, we smelt and the feathers stuck to us. There were a few birds left over.

‘What now? Do we cook them?’ Mary asked.

‘Um ... not quite.’ Sam, having finished plucking his bird, had been staring at it while we caught up. ‘You’ve got to make a hole near its bum and pull out the guts.’ He tried, and failed, to make it sound easy.

His words met a stunned silence. Zach might be the only one holding a club, but everyone looked pretty angry. Sam had to do it. He took the sharp flint piece from Matt and chopped into the bird’s belly. The stone sliced into the soft

skin, exposing a tangled mess of guts.

I watched him stick his fingers through the cut, into the bird, and with some wiggling he pulled out the squidgy innards, which he plopped onto the grass. They slithered on the slope, almost as though they were alive. Sam looked relieved, and rather proud. 'Just be careful when you do that, don't damage the guts, and get them all out,' he said, his voice sounding much firmer.

'Why?' asked Stevie, who had been crouching over Sam, watching everything he did.

'Dad always said you must remove all the guts ... something important about it. I can't remember exactly why, but he went on about it.'

'Because they stink?' Stevie suggested.

'Maybe.'

Sam poked the slithery mess with his sharp stone and the guts came apart. Stevie reeled at the smell.

Sam tackled a couple more birds before the rest of us tried to 'draw' our own chuckerns. It wasn't easy and I could see that not everyone carried out the task perfectly. Sam still didn't remember the really important thing his dad had told him. Soon all of us, smeared and bloody, sat near a pile of stinking innards.

'Next time we do this by the river,' Jenna said, looking at the mess of guts, feathers and birds' heads.

'Next time? How long are we going to be here?' wailed the ginger Sara.

Jenna leant over to me and said, 'That's the 'Other-Sara'. Sara and Other-Sara in case you get confused.'

'Remind me.'

'One Sara is blonde, the other is more ginger. The ginger one is Other-Sara.'

‘Oh, right.’ I was only half listening and I was confused. ‘Any ideas on how to cook them?’

‘Sara or the birds?’ I wasn’t sure Jenna was joking.

I looked at my chuckern. ‘The fire’s not much good.’

‘We can’t keep the fire burning in the cave if it’s going to smoke like this.’ Jack’s leg made it difficult for him to get out of the smoke.

‘Isn’t the smoke meant to show the rescuers where we are?’ the Sara who wasn’t ‘other’ said.

‘No one will find us without it,’ added the other one, they were both looking at me. I wasn’t answering.

‘Not sure who or what might see the smoke,’ Jenna replied for me. ‘There isn’t anything normal out there. Maybe we should only make the fire smoke if we hear something. But now it doesn’t look any good for cooking.’

‘It smokes because of all the green stuff on it. We need to use dead wood, as dry as possible.’ Matt seemed to be a bit of a survival expert.

While we’d been searching for food, no one else had gone into the forest to get firewood. So they had just collected bits of bush from near to the cave – wet green bits of bush that burnt with a dense smoke.

‘Let’s go.’ I set off to get some dry wood. After a few steps I turned. No one else had moved. ‘Matt, Sam come on. And the rest of you.’ I stood watching, feeling a bit stupid. Would anyone take any notice and follow me? They did, at least most of them came – slowly. Zach and Demelza held back with their group.

It was easy to find dead brushwood amongst the trees and soon we had a blazing fire near to the entrance of the cave.

‘We should make a spit,’ Matt said. ‘You know, put the birds

on a long stake and turn it over the fire.’

‘Oh yeah?’ Zach said sticking his bird onto the end of his club and holding it in the flames. The flesh soon burnt and the burning bird fell into the fire.

‘Give me yours,’ he said to Sam.

It went very quiet. Sam stared, looking frightened and confused. No one else moved. Did the others expect me to do something? I just wanted to work out how to cook my own bird and didn’t see why this had to be any of my business. Sam looked as though he might refuse. Zach lifted his club slightly. Sam hung his head and handed his chuckern over.

‘Good boy.’ Zach knew how to make it so much worse.

A red-faced Sam shuffled off. Everyone watched him and no one helped. Sam started to prepare another chuckern.

The fire had burnt down a little, making it easier to get nearer to the hot ashes. Like Zach, each of us stuck a bird on the end of a stick and held it to the fire, trying not to set our chuckerns alight.

‘How do you know when they’re cooked?’ Stevie had latched onto Matt.

‘No idea. I guess you try one and see.’ Matt pulled his bird out of the fire and took a bite.

We were all shouting, ‘What’s it like ...’ ‘Yeah, Matt, can we eat it? ...’ ‘Tell us ...’ ‘Hurry up! ... I’m starving.’

‘Umm,’ Matt replied with chuckern fat running down his chin. ‘Tasty, well sort of tasty,’ and he took another bite.

Matt’s words set us all ripping the birds apart, eating every last piece of meat – cooked, partly cooked, or uncooked. Apart from munching, the cave remained quiet as we ate, except for Ryan who seemed unable to eat without farting.

I was sitting next to Jenna on a stone outside the cave. We watched the sun setting as the sky darkened and turned a deep orange before darkness settled. Only the moon and stars lit the sky. The smell of burnt chuckern still hung in the air. I'd told Jenna all about the teacher, well most of it, not the bit about seeing her at home.

'What do you think will happen?' I asked because I couldn't think of anything else to say.

'Why ask me?'

'No one else around, like you said before.'

'Maybe this is just your dream,' Jenna sounded rather hopeless. 'It sounded dream-like when you told me.'

'I suppose dream-like is better than you saying it was some drug ...'

'I said I was sorry.' Jenna made it clear that the subject was closed. You didn't win arguments with Jen.

'Ok it's a dream. You mean pinch me and I'll wake up?' I wasn't sure where this was heading.

Jenna was quick.

'Ow. That didn't work, we're still here.'

'Probably didn't pinch you hard enough.' I was lucky Jenna was smiling. Then she looked more serious: 'Have you worked out what that teacher meant by her promise?'

'No idea.' I picked up a stone, looked at the chipped flint absentmindedly feeling the sharp edge with my finger. 'I don't see how we're going to survive to find out anything, whatever she meant.'

'And I don't think we need to get the fire to smoke again – there's no one out there to see it.' Jenna got up and wandered off.

The fire still burnt with occasional flames making flickering shadows on the cave walls as each person tried to find somewhere to lie down, avoiding Zach who kicked anyone who came near him.

I stayed outside alone, staring out and trying to imagine what the teacher could have meant. Then when nothing made sense I ended up going over things from home. If they did chuck me out where was I going to go? Nothing seemed clear. Maybe being stuck here was the answer.

In the dark, grunts and howls started again in the trees. I gave up thinking and found somewhere to lie down, nearly treading on Zach – deliberately. I didn't expect to have a comfortable night and I was right, but the thing that Sam had forgotten made it so much worse.

It was a new noise that woke me up. Blonde Sara was the first. She had dealt with a chuckern by herself. Probably she hadn't understood what Sam had said and probably she had been too scared to ask for help. Sara groaned, ran to the cave entrance and threw up spectacularly – silhouetted in the light of the moon. A foul smell of half digested chuckern wafted into the cave. Sara wasn't alone for long. Soon there was a row of them – clutching stomachs, retching and moaning.

A little later I felt Sam tap me on the shoulder. 'I've just remembered what dad said.'

'What?' I shoved him away, holding my hands to my ears and trying to blot out the noise.

'He said you must get all the guts out whole and clean the inside otherwise bugs get into the meat.'

I had no idea what Sam was going on about.

‘The bugs cause food poisoning – vomiting, diarrhoea; people can get very sick. It’ll be worse because not everyone cooked them properly.’

I rolled my eyes although Sam probably missed that in the dark. ‘Can’t do anything about it now,’ Sam sobbed.

‘At least ‘chuckern’ was a good name,’ I said wondering if I’d done enough to my bird.

Not everyone was sick. Sam and Matt had done a good job cleaning their birds and those they had helped were alright. I guess I was just lucky.

The first Sara slumped down, sitting with her back to the rock, holding her tummy, and it seemed with nothing left to bring up. Others joined her. Mary started taking water round to the sick, stumbling over rocks to fill plastic water bottles from the pool near the cave.

Other-Sara was the worst. She didn’t stop retching, over and over again, her ginger hair matted and streaked. Jenna told me her friends had talked about the pills Other-Sara needed to take. Some strange disease that no one could pronounce. Mary tried to hold her hand, but let go when Other-Sara’s body shook with another fit of retching. It went on for hours.

‘What do we do with her?’ Mary said to Jenna.

‘How should I know?’ Jenna shrugged her shoulders and sounded cross. That’s more like Jenna, I thought, but it only lasted a second. Jenna changed her tone: ‘I’ll try her with some more water,’ and she went and sat on the damp earth beside her.

The water made Other-Sara sick again.

Jack had taken on the task of keeping the fire going but stopped when he became exhausted, so the fire died down as the night drifted on. Only a faint red glow lit the cave, when I

saw Other-Sara try to stand. She vomited one more time and groaned loudly before falling to the ground with a heavy thud. I heard the fall and yes, I knew something awful had happened, but like the others I went back to sleep in the silence that followed.

This time it was a poke that woke me. I opened my eyes, seeing Jenna's face about an inch away from mine, behind her the faint light of dawn.

'Wake up,' Jenna hissed in my ear.

'What?' I grunted.

'I think she's dead,' Jenna's voice cracked as she whispered the words.

'Who?' I muttered stupidly.

'Other-Sara, you idiot,' replied Jenna. 'I couldn't sleep and I've just checked on her. She's not moving.'

'What do you want me to do?' I tried to turn over. 'Too tired ...'

Jenna hit me hard on the arm. 'We need to do something before the rest wake up. They'll go berserk.'

I shook myself awake. An irate Jenna was too difficult to resist and I followed her to where Other-Sara lay on the hard ground.

'How do you know she's dead?' I looked at her pale face shining in the early light. To me she looked more peaceful than when she'd been sick.

'I tried to wake her, but she doesn't move and she's icy cold. It was just like when I went to hospital with ...' Jenna stopped, sounding too choked up to explain.

Matt appeared and a few others stirred, but no one else joined us.

'Should we do something?' Matt said in a hushed voice.

'What? Give her the kiss of life you mean?' I looked down

and shivered.

‘Too late,’ Jenna said. ‘It’s too late to do anything. She’s dead, can’t you see.’ Jenna’s whispers came in angry bursts. ‘We need to move her. We need to ...’ Jenna seemed to find it impossible to say what we needed to do, but in the shadowy light we carried the small body from the cave and down into the trees.

‘What now?’ asked Matt, looking at the lifeless form.

‘I don’t think there’s anything we can use to bury her.’ I looked around.

‘Cover her up, I suppose,’ Jenna said eventually.

In silence we covered her with earth and stones. It wasn’t easy and took ages.

‘Are we meant to say something?’ The mound over her looked awful. I backed away from the grave. Neither Jenna nor Matt replied. In the end we all shuffled away saying nothing.

I knew that burials weren’t a normal part of school trips, but I didn’t think this was going to be the only one.

End of Extract

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

This is ALEX MELLANBY'S first novel, although not his first work of fiction since, as a doctor, he has had many research papers published. Unable to stick general practice, psychiatry or even being a physician, he took up a senior post in Public Health - which mostly involved drain sniffing. He was brought back to sanity with an MA course in creative writing at the Anglia Ruskin University, Cambridge. Inspired whilst living in Devon, Alex is writing the Tregarthur's series, following his characters through some of the worst of possible and impossible times.

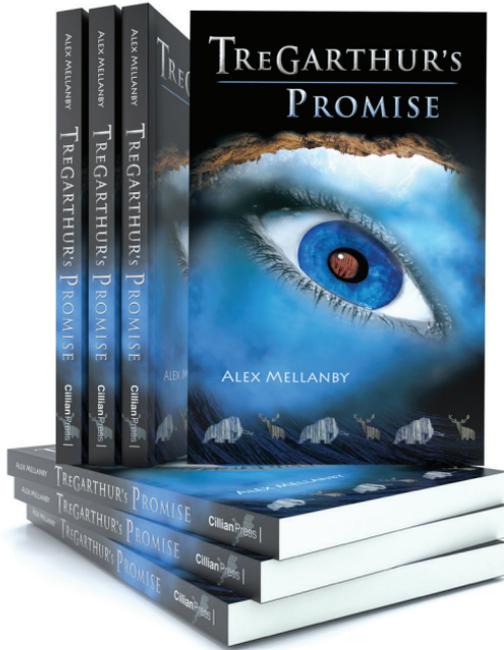
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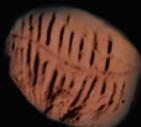
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*'Her face twisted in a hideous snarl as she howled:
'YOU – Alvin Carter – YOU – keep my promise''*



Abandoned by his mum and with his dad in prison, 16 year old Alvin is facing life on the streets. Taking refuge in a school hiking expedition across Dartmoor, Alvin sees it as a way of avoiding his problems, but he didn't account for Miss Tregarthur and her dreadful Promise.

Following catastrophic events, Alvin finds himself, together with his old friend Jenna, lost in an unknown time and place, leading a group of school children in a desperate fight for survival. Disease, death and disaster follow them as they try to decipher the Promise and search for the way back home. But Miss Tregarthur has not played her last game.

*Tregarthur's Promise is the first instalment in the
Tregarthur's Series.*

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