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at the END of the
WORLD



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Rebecca Orwin was brought up in Chesterfield, by a mum who loves books and a dad who loves films and ended up loving stories in all their forms. She has a BA in English Literature and an MA in Creative Writing from Newcastle University, and lives in Sheffield with her husband and son.

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ILLUSTRATED BY ORIOL VIDAL



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Penguin
Random House
UK

First published 2026

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Text design by Michelle Brackenborough
Printed in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

The authorized representative in the EEA is Penguin Random House Ireland,
Morrison Chambers, 32 Nassau Street, Dublin D02 YH68

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-0-241-70178-2

All correspondence to:

Puffin Books

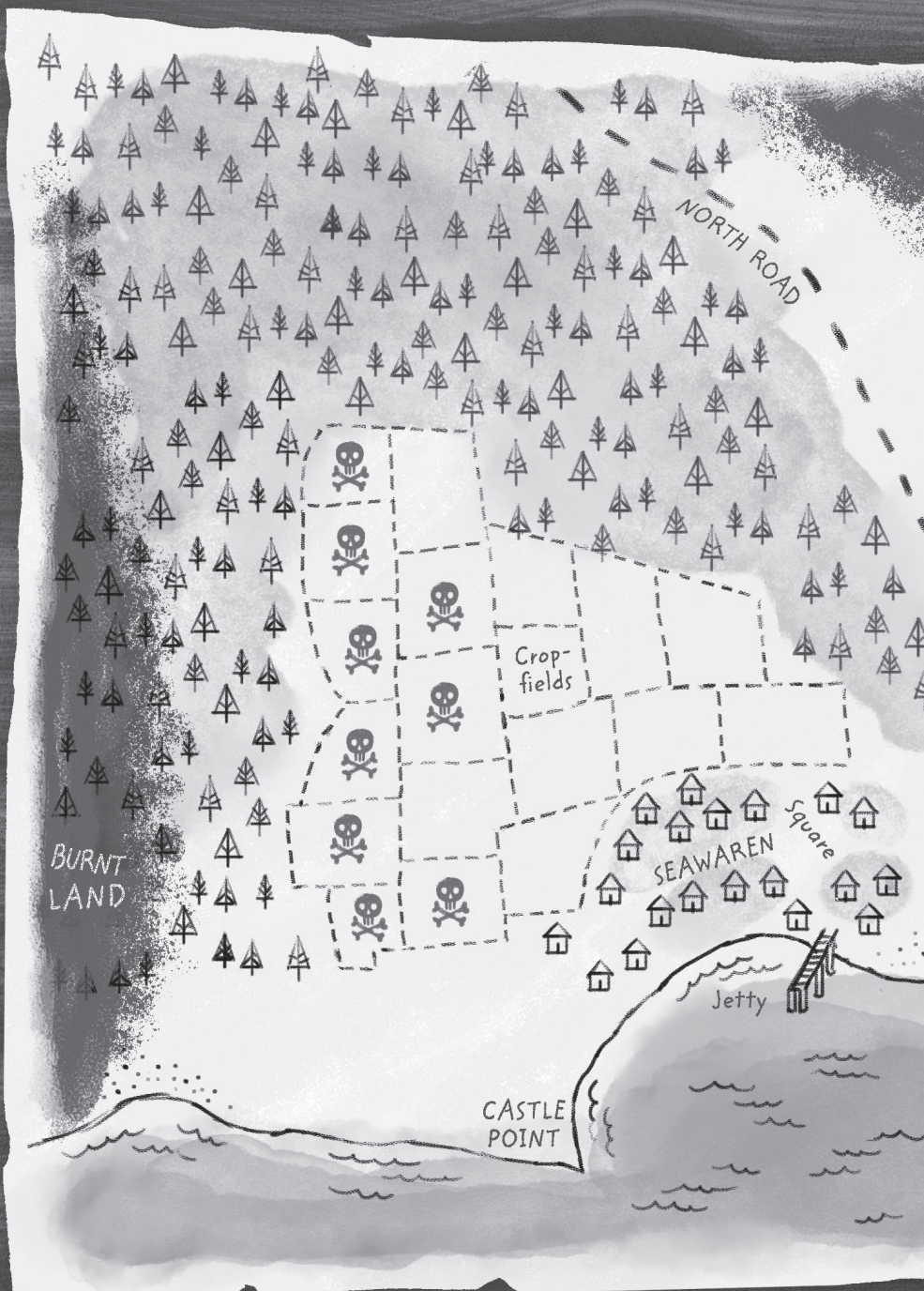
Penguin Random House Children's

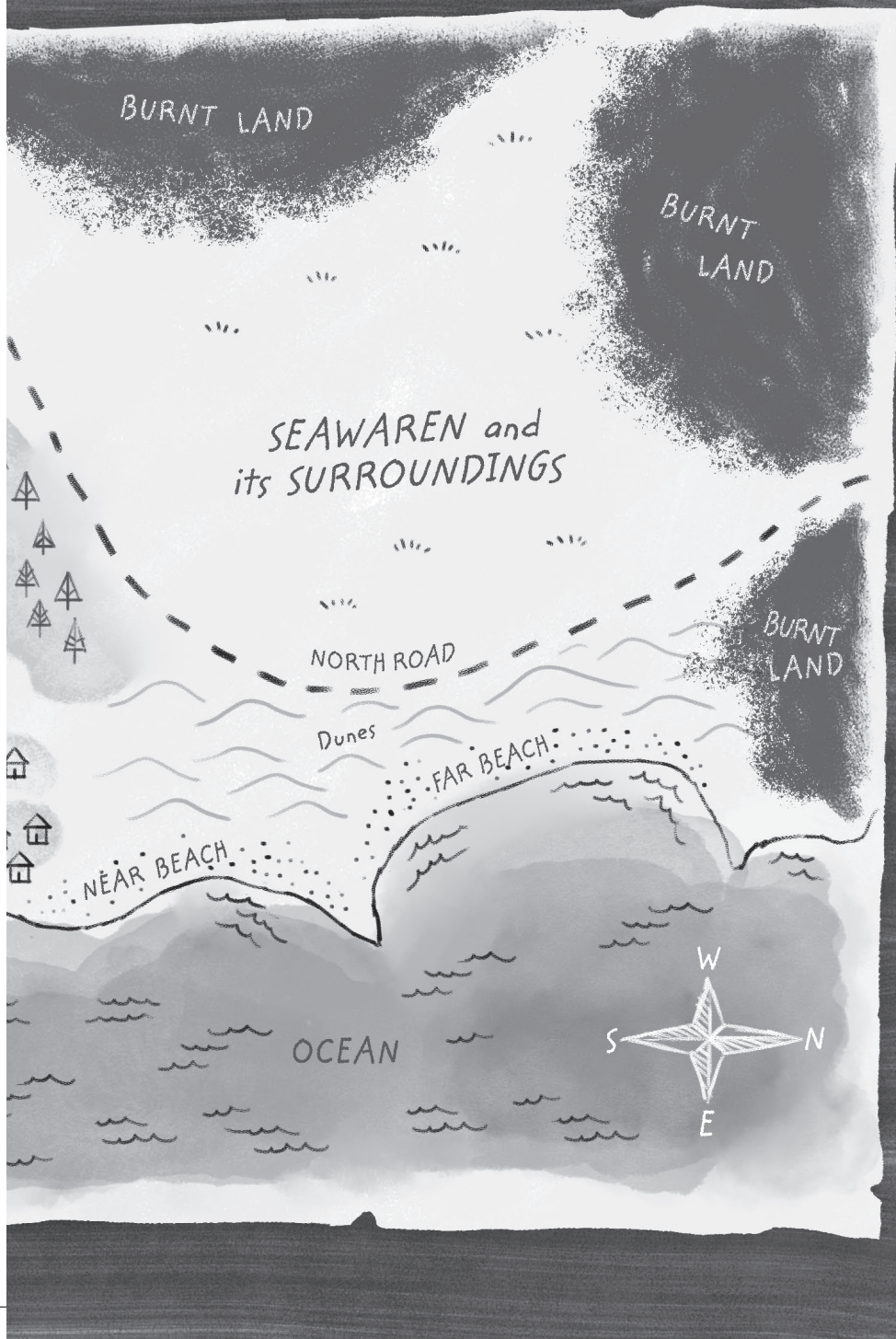
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For P









CHAPTER ONE

Sunny waited until her mother was asleep before she went back for the monster.

The light had long since faded to nothing. Her window was open, to allow the sounds of the village to drift through to her, and only in the last half-hour had the shufflings and murmured conversations retreated indoors, giving way to the distant rush-and-roll of the sea.

Sunny slid her legs off the bed and into an old pair of shoes. They were too small now and pinched at her toes as she pushed open her bedroom door, but the leather had gone so soft that they allowed her silence as she tiptoed over to the worm-lamp on the kitchen table.

The lamp was a small glass tank containing a couple

of fat glow-worms, each the length of Sunny's hand, whose back ends emitted gentle, green-tinged light. Most people viewed glow-worms as purely functional items – like saucepans, or socks. Treating them as pets was oddball behaviour; naming them, even more so.

Sunny grabbed the loop at the top of Bulby and Radiance's tank, and slipped a thin sheet of black fabric over it, so that only one side was uncovered. Using this feeble, ghostly light, she made her way out of the house and on to the dark, silent, bitingly cold street.

The lack of moon lent the darkness a thick, impenetrable quality that Sunny tried to pretend was not freaking her out. Quickly and quietly, she set off on the same path she had walked with her friends that morning, before everything had changed.

'Even the rooster isn't awake yet, Taran,' grumbled Dev, pulling a jumper over his bleary, sleep-addled face. 'This is barbaric.'

'You were the one who suggested going to Far Beach,' muttered Taran, casting a glance over her shoulder to make sure nobody was listening – which, being still tucked up in bed in their own homes, they weren't. 'You said that's where the meatiest crabs are. Right?'

Dev sighed. 'Right.'

'Then we have to leave early, so nobody realizes how far we've been. Right?'

'Right,' said Dev again, though this time he waited until Taran had turned away and twisted his mouth into a nagging impersonation.

Sunny grinned. She took a deep, salt-tanged breath and shook her shoulders loose. 'I like it when nobody's up,' she said brightly, looking about the sleeping village in a wide-eyed, dreamy way that had been described by more than one villager on more than one occasion as 'creepy'. 'It's like a ghost village.'

When she looked back, everyone was staring at her.

'What?'

'Never mind,' said Taran briskly, before anyone could respond. 'Let's get going.'

It was freezing now, spring not quite having shaken off the wintery nights. Sunny wished she had brought an extra jumper, but the thought was no more than a passing flutter in her mind, which was churning with the risk she was taking.

Leaving the village alone was not allowed at the best of times. Doing so at night was so dangerous that she was in

with a strong chance of becoming a cautionary tale. She could stumble blindly into Burnt Land and toast her lungs from the inside, get eaten by wolves, or simply trip, break her ankle and never be found. All of these had happened to foolish children of the past.

And none of that took the monster into account.

Sunny shook these thoughts out of her head. No point worrying about the consequences now – she was out, it was happening, and she would see it through.

She held the worm-lamp close to the ground as she reached the North Road, so that she could watch her footing on the Olden tarmac, riddled with cracks and potholes so long untended that they were like miniature jungles. When the road began to curve away from the sea, she held up the lamp, looking for the pale golden path that cut through the dunes.

Not two minutes later, she heard the monster shriek.

The strange, high-pitched keening reached them on the wind.

Everyone stopped. Dev's hand shot out to clutch Sunny's elbow, jostling the bag of crabs.

'What was that?' asked Nea, with affected nonchalance.

'Was it a wolf?' whispered Dev, squeezing Sunny so tightly she flinched.

'Can't have been,' said Taran. 'The wolves were spotted heading north last week.'

'A seagull?'

'What kind of demon seagull wails like that?!'

'Shh, there it is again!'

Sunny froze, heart thudding in her chest.

It was definitely still here, then, which meant it must still be stuck. The handle of the worm-lamp was slippery in her sweaty hand. She rearranged her fingers to grip it more tightly and kept moving, up the slope of the dune, where that morning they had been able to see the sun glinting off the ocean, and down the other side. She knew she was close when she heard a sudden, angry hissing.

She stopped, not wanting to stumble into it by accident. Taking a deep breath, she pulled the black fabric off the worm-lamp and raised it up, casting the glow another couple of metres.

And there was the monster.

It had to be young, because it was only the size of a large dog, and the sleek, grey-blue fur of its long, lithe body was mottled with darker spots and circles. All the same, there was no questioning what it was. Four webbed

paws, a long tail ending in a flat, sail-like plate, with two enormous things – Sunny did not know whether they were ears, or decorative crests – sprouting from the back of its skull, blue-tinged and scali-er-looking than the rest of it. It had a short, blunt muzzle sprouting hundreds of long whiskers, huge nostrils and a wide mouth, currently baring small but very sharp teeth. Its black eyes were fixed on Sunny and it was motionless, watching her with unreadable intent.

Its left forefoot was caught in a rabbit snare, the ankle bloodied and swollen, wire cutting deeply into the flesh.

'Everyone else is seeing this, right?' asked Nea, her voice so loud in the shocked silence that the other three flinched.

'Yes,' said Dev faintly. 'It's . . .'

'I think it's hurt,' murmured Sunny, her heart aching for the injured creature, in spite of what it was. Without thinking, she took a step forward.

Immediately, three pairs of hands snatched at her.

'Stop!'

'Are you kidding?!'

'Sunny, don't go near it!' shrieked Taran. Then, more quietly, 'I can't believe I have to tell you that.'

Sunny moved very slowly. She lowered the worm-lamp on to the sand, throwing the hollow they occupied into shadow. Still, she could make out the monster, its trapped leg stretched out as it tried to back away, hissing with pain.

Sunny took a deep breath, puffing up her cheeks. 'What am I doing?' she muttered, partly to herself and partly to the monster, which stiffened at the sound of her voice. 'This is the maddest thing I have ever done. And anyone in Seawaren would tell you that that is . . . quite something.'

She lowered herself on to the sand, thinking that perhaps she would look like less of a threat if she wasn't towering over the monster. Given that it was still trapped, in pain and probably assuming it was about to be killed, this made no difference. It snarled as Sunny crawled closer, lips curled back over its teeth.

Sunny had been able to make a snare since she was seven. The village rarely used land animals for food – even if it looked safe, there was no guarantee it hadn't eaten something poisoned, and while many wild animals had evolved to withstand some poison in their diet, humans had not. Even so, desperate times did occasionally call for desperate measures, and it was a simple skill for children to master.

The monster squirmed as far away from Sunny as it could get, letting out a howl of pain when it jerked on the snared foot. She could see the release catch, digging in above the monster's ankle. It wouldn't be difficult to open it, but she would have to put her hands well within biting range.

'What do you mean, "What are we going to do?" We're going to leave, right now, and pretend this never happened!' said Taran firmly.

'What? No! It's trapped – if we leave it, it'll die.'

'So?'

'So that's horrible! We can release the snare –'

'It'll eat us!' squealed Dev.

'Come on, it's way too small –'

'Look how angry it is. If you put your hand near that snare, it'll get bitten off!'

'Of course it's angry – we nearly cut off its leg!'

'We didn't –'

'Stop it, all of you! You're being ridiculous, Sunny, it's a monster.' Taran's fingertips dug into Sunny's elbow, her expression desperately serious. 'How many times do you have to learn this lesson?! They are dangerous. What if it's poisonous? How do you know that one bite won't kill you?'

These words echoed loudly in Sunny's memory as she looked into the monster's fathomless eyes. She tried to make her face stern.

'Are you going to bite me? Because I'm going to have to touch the snare to release it, and if you bite me, then I won't let you out.' She hesitated. 'OK, I'll still try, but I'll be very upset. So no biting. All right?'

The monster stared. It had gone still at the sound of her voice, black eyes fixed on her face. It didn't really look any less bite-y than it had a minute ago.

'OK,' she murmured, shuffling closer. The monster twitched, but otherwise just watched. Sunny's pulse thrummed. 'Remember, no biting.'

Holding her breath, Sunny reached out, very slowly, keeping her hands in the monster's line of sight, until they were only centimetres away. Then, overwhelmed by imaginings of sharp teeth piercing her hand, she tried to close the distance in a last, sudden rush.

The monster lunged.

'Aaaghh!'

Sunny snatched her fingers back in the nick of time and the monster's jaws snapped shut on nothing but air.



'Please,' said Sunny, looking pleadingly at her friends. 'Look at it – it's only a baby. We can't just leave it to die.'

Nea, whose face was the least stony, turned to Taran. 'We could tell someone? I've never heard of a monster being found on the beach before.'

'No,' said Taran impatiently. 'If we tell anyone about this, they'll know we were at Far Beach. You and I might lose our apprenticeships, and those two are still in trouble from the last time Sunny was crazy!'

'Don't call me that,' snapped Sunny, but no one listened.

'We have to leave. Sunny –' Taran's tone took on the quality of someone explaining to a toddler why they shouldn't touch the fire – 'we have to get back before anyone realizes where we've been. Someone else will find it and . . . deal with it. Eventually.'

Sunny stared at Taran, then Dev, then Nea – who looked away guiltily. But she could not see even the smallest crack in their resolve.

'Come on, Sunny,' said Dev, reaching for her arm.

Sunny's friends guided her away, so sure of themselves where she was so doubtful. But she did not look back.

They might realize what she was planning.

'Look,' said Sunny. 'Do you want me to help you, or not?' She glared at the monster, who returned it with snarling interest.

She slumped back and passed a hand over her forehead, sweaty despite the chill. 'Should have brought something to distract it . . .' she muttered, reaching into her trouser pockets. She rummaged among gloves, a dusty bandana, shards of sea-glass and a shell in the shape of a frog, before finally pulling out an old, forgotten stick of dried fish. It was coated in a layer of pocket-fluff and she had no idea how long it had been there. Ordinarily, even a lifetime of being drilled in the importance of not wasting food would not have stopped her throwing it into the dunes for the seagulls.

But the monster perked up. Its eyes flicked to the stick of dried fish and brightened.

'Ahh.' Sunny grinned. 'Hungry, are we?' She twisted off a piece and held it out to the monster. Its head jerked back as her arm extended, though its eyes were fixed on the fish. After a moment, Sunny let it fall on to the sand and sat back, waiting.

Evidently, the monster could only resist its hunger for so long. After a minute of huffy silence, it sprang forward and gobbled the fish down with a single snap of its teeth.

Sunny grinned again. 'Thought so. Would you like another piece?' She held out another chunk. At the same time, she tried to shift forward without the monster noticing, which entirely failed – it lurched away and hissed.

'Oh, come on,' said Sunny. 'Don't sulk. Here, have some more.'

This time, she threw the fish a little further, forcing the monster to turn its head to see where it landed.

After a long hesitation, the monster turned, sniffing for the fish. Sunny's heart thumped, and she tried to move quickly but smoothly. She reached for the snare, catching hold of the wire which fastened it to a wooden stake driven deep into the ground, and with her other hand fumbled for the release clasp. As she grabbed for it, clumsy in her haste, her fingers brushed the monster's leg.

It was like an explosion went off in her head.

A flood of emotion that was not hers swept through her: shrivelling fear; pain so severe it was hard to think through; dread of an immensity that Sunny herself had never experienced; an aching longing to go home. At the same time, her head was filled with pictures she did not understand, things she had never seen. Most of it was a rushing blur, impossible to process in the instant it burst into her mind. The only image she could pick out clearly was of *herself*; a gangly, freckled girl curled up in the

worm-lamp's shadows, dark hair escaping from a scruffy ponytail, the gap in her teeth exposed as her jaw hung slack, brown eyes glazed as if daydreaming.

Sunny tumbled backwards and sprawled on the sand, her whole body trembling.

'W-what was that?' she gasped, staring at the monster.

Unlike her, the monster – who she was now somehow sure was a 'he' – had gone so still that he could have been a statue. His eyes were so big and black they looked like the ocean itself.

'Was that . . . Everything I just saw, was that . . . you?'

Sunny barely understood her own question, but she could not imagine any other explanation for what had just happened, and she was not lacking in imagination. She wanted to test the idea – put the words out into the world and see how unlikely they sounded.

Pretty unlikely.

'So . . . if I got a flash of what was in *your* head . . .' she said slowly, never taking her gaze from the still-unmoving monster. 'Then . . . did you see what was in mine?'

This unsettling thought prompted a rare moment of introspection in Sunny – what *had* been in her head? Nothing too bad, surely? She had been concentrating on the snare, and she supposed she had been a little excited, and scared, obviously, but at least her intentions were –

She paused.

‘So, if I touch you again – if that’s OK – and *think* really hard about how I just want to help . . . would you understand? Or would you try to bite me again?’

The monster did not so much as twitch.

She sighed. ‘OK, fine. But *please* don’t.’

Sunny closed her eyes, remembered that there was a monster within pouncing distance, and hastily opened them again. She focused on how much she wanted to help him; she was just trying to free him from the snare; she meant no harm. Holding the intention as clearly as she could in her vivid but unruly imagination, she reached forward again.

Her fingers moved through the air a millimetre at a time, her face scrunched up in trepidation. Involuntarily, her brain spat out a thousand versions of what might happen next; everything from the monster tripling in size and swallowing her whole, to pulling her through a portal into another world.

In fact, the monster did not move. Then, when Sunny’s hand was barely a whisker away, he craned his neck just enough to close the remaining distance.

The tip of Sunny’s finger brushed the monster’s cool nose.

Ready for it this time, the onslaught of a foreign



mind was gentler. Rather than a whirlpool, it was a river, carrying Sunny through cloudy, swirling feelings and unfamiliar images, but without the risk of drowning her. Mostly, she sensed hesitation, uncertainty tinged with fear, and she understood the monster to be asking her:

What do you want?

She tried to project her intentions, picturing the clasp on the snare and imagining herself releasing it. Then she pulled away and sat back on her heels, absent-mindedly wiping a little sliminess from her fingertips on to her trousers. Her heart was still hammering, but she was not afraid any more. She felt oddly detached, so incredible was what she had just discovered. It was too big to process, so mind-blowing that she didn't dare focus on it, for fear her brain would actually explode.

'Did that work? Did you understand? Can I . . .'

The monster's expression was unreadable. Then, incredibly, he hobbled closer and held out his snared paw.

Sunny's jaw fell open. Had she just had a conversation with a monster? An actual conversation? With a non-human creature that understood her? Understood with a clarity that – as far as Sunny could tell – was no inferior to her own? There had been nothing simple or primitive about the mind she had just touched.

After a moment, the monster wiggled his leg slightly,

as if to remind her that he was waiting.

‘Right! Sorry . . .’

In seconds she had slipped the snare off his leg. He let out a pained mew.

Excitement bubbling up, Sunny reached for him again, her head bursting with all the wonders she might discover . . .

And the monster spun round and took off into the dunes, like a bolt fired from a crossbow.