

WINDOW SIX



FEAR



Fear

I was desperately hoping that it wouldn't be too late.

Earlier in the year, my parents had told Aiden and me that they'd saved up enough to send us to an international summer camp in Sussex. Although I knew that Taka was going, I was feeling so anxious then about my grades at school and the super-competitive culture. So I'd told them that I didn't want to go.

I remember there was also this fear in me of being in a strange place and sharing a cabin with loads of other girls I'd never met. They'd probably laugh at my dumb phone, my ears or my plaits. And Aiden wouldn't go unless I went, so I felt terrible about that.

But now, I knew I had to go – even if I didn't want to. I needed to get away from everything and everyone and find some answers. The experience in the park had inspired me to feel a part of worlds so much bigger than mine. At the same time, it had made me feel very different from everyone else... like I didn't belong anywhere. 'The school weirdo' was what they called me behind my back.

I had to break free.

At breakfast on Monday morning, with Aiden reading his graphic novel and my parents on their second coffees, it seemed a good time to speak up.

"I've been thinking again about your offer... you know, for Aiden and me to go to summer camp? Well, I know it's very late now... but..."

I came to a complete stop. A rush of anxiety swept through my body like I'd been shoved under a cold shower. I couldn't believe what I was about to say. I gathered my courage.

"Well, what I mean is... I really do want to go to that international camp that you found. The one that Taka's going to. Please, can I go?"

Mum spluttered on her coffee, Dad dropped a spoonful of marmalade, while Aiden swung around abruptly on his chair with eyebrows raised. Not the reactions I was hoping for.

"Why have you changed your mind?" asked Mum, frowning.

"Well... I just need to go," I babbled. A twinge of worry resurfaced... of staying in an unknown place for three weeks with teens I might not get on with. I began to sweat. Why was I so afraid of the unknown?

Dad looked up. My answer surprised them... probably because it wasn't an answer at all. This was getting very awkward. I had to offer a better explanation.

"Well, the activities look interesting... I mean, very interesting. Especially the water sports and survival stuff. And Aiden is going to love it there!" I didn't have a clue what else to say. Thankfully, it was enough.

Mum smiled cautiously. "Okay, love. I'll phone the camp after breakfast and see if the registrations are closed or if there are still places. Do you want to go as well, Aiden?"

Aiden looked down, kicking his legs nervously back and forth. “I think so,” he muttered. I should have spoken with him first.

As it turned out, that very morning the camp had received two cancellations. Maia had spoken to me once about destiny, and even though it was a bit vague in my head, I thought to myself that this was destiny. I was going. It was on.

I was so excited to tell Taka that I phoned her straight after Mum had told me the news. She screamed with joy and then listed all the things that I needed to bring – including extra hairbands, a swimming costume, tinted lip gloss and insect-bite spray.

“Why the lip gloss?” I asked, a bit shocked.

“Well, I know you’re not into makeup, but you’d look great with it. I’ll help get you ready for camp. I’m going to get my hair done with carrot-orange highlights, although I’m worried they’ll scare my mum. She’ll think I’m getting ready for a Halloween party, not camp!

“Anyway, if you want, I can lend you my lip gloss. Try it out. I’ve got three different tints.”

“But... why...?”

“Well, you know, it makes you feel good... and think of all those guys from around the world!”

“But I’m not looking for a boyfriend.”

“Yes, you are.”

I didn’t answer. Taka laughed. She knew me well.

“Must go now. Too much happening here. Got a drum lesson in ten minutes. And my parents had another mad argument this morning. Mum says she needs some space. Whatever. Oh, I almost forgot... you might need to bring a compass and a torch for survival training.”

I grinned. This could be my big chance to practise what I’d been reading about in my survival books.



The next few weeks and months came and went with the usual mix of boredom, stresses and tensions at school. But my stardust experience, my big question, and Taka kept me from getting too depressed.

Taka's birthday adventure during the Easter holidays was definitely the main highlight. Her mum took us both to Kew Gardens, where we walked 18 metres off the ground along the Treetop Walkway, which has amazing views. From that height, it's like you can see what a tree sees.

Inside an enormous glasshouse, we saw a giant, disgustingly stinky corpse flower and other huge sci-fi-like plants. We're both into insects and spent ages in The Hive installation, where you enter the magical world of bees. We even tried copying their waggle dance. If only people could communicate as efficiently as that!

The end of term and beginning of summer holidays finally arrived when I most needed them to. My fears about camp were gradually turning into excitement and expectation.

With some very rushed preparations and panicky moments, we were gearing up to go on August 5th, tomorrow! Oh no. That meant I was going to miss Maia's birthday on the 15th. Although we'd spoken about camp, we hadn't been in touch for a couple of weeks.

I reached for my phone, hoping she'd be in.

"Hello?"

"Maia. Hi. It's me."

"Great to hear you, Leah."

"How are you?"

"That's a big question! But in a nutshell, I'm in good spirits and enjoying my current work – training teachers and teenagers how to mediate and resolve conflicts at school."

“That sounds amazing. I’d love to hear more about it. But I’m calling as we’re off to camp tomorrow! And I’m so sorry that I won’t be around for your birthday. I haven’t even got you a present yet.”

“Oh, please don’t worry about that. But tell me, are you looking forward to going now?”

“Er... I was... until last night.”

“Why’s that?”

“Well, some stupid fears kept me awake, like... well, I’ve never been away from home on my own for so long. And although Taka and Aiden are coming, there’ll be teenagers from around the world and... will they think I’m too frumpy, weird, uncool? I know I need to get away from everything, but I’m not even sure why I’m going to camp. It’s just too...”

“Unknown?”

“Yes, that’s it.”

“Right. Mmm. I get it.

“You know, when I was eleven, my parents took me to Heathrow to board a long flight to Kathmandu on my own. I was going to stay with my uncle, aunt and cousins. My first plane journey ever was far less terrifying to me than the prospect of meeting family – I hadn’t seen them since we’d moved to London when I was five. It was all so unknown.

“But over the years, I’ve developed a love affair with the unknown. Because... well, imagine all there is to know about a galaxy or a sun, the human brain, an ecosystem, deep-sea creatures, lightning, viruses, conflict, healing, death... there is so much unknown, isn’t there?

“So I’ve discovered that the only way to get to know myself and this world better is to explore the unexplored, the unfamiliar, the unseen. To search and research. To discover and uncover. To dare to be curious. To find the questions which no one’s asked yet.”

“Are you saying that most of life is unknown?”

“Yes, I think so. A human, for example, is a complete mystery – almost. People can say they know themselves well, but do they appreciate the vast powers of their own mind, the function of their own instinct, the cause of their deepest fears or longings...”

“Right. Wow. Yes. Well, I wonder if I’ll get to know myself better at camp... what if I don’t like what I find?”

“You know yourself well enough to realise that you mean no harm. That’s a vital place to begin. And you can always learn so much about yourself from watching how you react in challenging situations with other people. I certainly do!

“So, enjoy the experience and expect the unexpected!”

I soaked up her words and came off the phone feeling much bolder about facing this great unknown – super-excited even! I texted Maia to thank her and promised that I’d find her a very special birthday gift when I got back from camp.

I continued packing and slipped in a postcard which Maia had sent me years ago of a vast cave in Spain – ‘Cuevas del Drach’ in Mallorca. It shows hundreds of these stalagmites towering up from the ground, and huge stalactites pointing down from the ceiling. Maia described discovering the meaning of beauty in that cave – it was like poetry.

I gazed out of my bedroom window, hugging Sisu as she purred so loudly that her whole body vibrated through mine. I closed my eyes. My question flashed up in my mind like a neon sign written across the sky.

It really was time to go.



We set off the next day under gloomy, dark-grey skies and driving rain. As we all crammed into the overloaded car, I began feeling

more depressed than anxious. I'd only discovered the night before that Taka wasn't able to come for the first two days of camp – she'd only said that it was 'family stuff'.

It was probably to do with her parents' possible separation. She rarely talked about that to anyone, but over the last month at school, she'd been slouching around and frowning a lot – not her usual bouncy self. Hopefully, she was soon going to enjoy being away from the stress.

In the back seat, I glanced across at Aiden, who seemed quite relaxed. But I suddenly woke up to the fact that I was going to need to look after him as well as myself. My stomach knotted and a cold quiver slid down my spine.

Then I remembered what Uncle Jake had said when I refused to go out on a rowing boat with him once on a gusty day – I thought we might drown. "Come on, Leah. I was the rowing team captain at uni. Relax. It's all about balance." He taught me different rowing techniques, but what I really learnt was how to be more centred in myself and let my instincts guide me.

I relaxed. If Aiden got bullied again, I knew exactly what I was going to do before calling my parents; go through the Code of Five with him first. I'd tucked the card in my backpack.

There were still another two hours of driving, so I leaned back and took out my latest book. It was the true story of a seriously ill boy my age, who'd been miraculously healed through a special diet, exercise... and angels, so his family said. Angels? I was getting to the part where the boy begins to describe in detail the angels he saw, when Dad banged the dashboard and exclaimed, "I'm no longer lost! We'll be there in ten."

The rain was only drizzling when we finally arrived at the end of a narrow dirt road, with rolling open fields on either side. There was no gate, just a big old sign with fading green letters saying,

‘Welcome to Bridgewell Camp’. It didn’t look welcoming at all, and I noticed that I was clenching my teeth as we drove into the camp. Aiden was looking down sheepishly at the floor.

We got out at the car park right opposite the main entrance. This was it. The first time away from home for three whole weeks for the two of us. I tried to look grown-up and tough, but I was blinking back the tears. Mum was all smiles at first, but Dad got so emotional he could barely speak. Aiden still had his head bowed.

“Remember, you’re here to enjoy a unique experience,” Mum said, not managing to hide the worry lines creasing up all over her forehead.

Dad stepped in. “Be careful and... well, I hope that you make one or two good friends. Remember, everything that’s on the outside of a person is not necessarily what’s going on inside.”

I was not up for a philosophical conversation, but I did want to understand this.

“What does that mean?”

“It means that people can have an identity and appearance on the outside, which may be deceptive. They can hide their intention behind words – remember, we spoke about it. You’re very trusting, Leah. That’s good. Just don’t get fooled by people’s expressions and fine talk.”

I knew what Dad meant, and I wasn’t sure if I was going to be able to trust anyone.

We quickly hugged each other. I was probably going to miss them much more than I’d admit.

Suddenly, this big old wooden door swung open and two adults, who looked as if they were in charge, strode over to meet us with their broad smiles and crushing handshakes. Wearing bright-orange, crisply ironed shirts, with ‘Bridgewell Camp’ neatly

embroidered across the top pocket, they could have passed for high street store managers.

“Welcome! You’re Leah, aren’t you? I recognise your pigtails from the photo!” I didn’t like that. They were not pigtails. They were my own style of snake braids.

“And you must be Leah’s brother, Aiden. My name’s Emilia, and with Kamlesh here, we are the Bridgewell Camp team leaders. We’ll take you straight to your cabins so you can settle in.”

I couldn’t believe that they didn’t invite my parents to at least see the cabins, but Emilia just shook their hands and said, “Nothing to worry about. They’re not going to want to come home! See you at Presentation Day in three weeks. Bye.”

We all hugged again, and Mum and Dad left swiftly like they’d been dismissed. Despite Emilia’s bluntness, I felt a warmth from her and Kamlesh, which made me relax more.

Emilia began leading me over to my cabin, which I was going to share with seven other girls, while Kamlesh walked off with Aiden in the other direction towards his cabin. Turning around to wave at me, he now looked transformed and beaming with excitement – he’d already told me in the car his plans for every one of the camp activities.

Emilia was quick to pick up on my anxiety, and reassured me that our cabins were only about 400 metres from each other – that wasn’t much, but it seemed too far away.

“When will I see Aiden again?” I asked sharply.

“Soon, Leah. Don’t worry,” said Emilia, softly. “Everyone’s meeting in the main hall in an hour to set up and prepare for dinner. You can each sign up when you get there and choose what job you’d like to do.”

I started coughing as soon as I entered the cabin. It smelled damp and dusty, and there were cobwebs around the window

frames. My bunk bed was on top, and I'd never slept up high. I don't mind roughing it a bit... but this cabin was gross!

"Yeah, it's not five-star," said a short, freckled, ginger-haired girl who was unpacking. She must've noticed me turning my nose up as I sniffed around the cabin.

"My name's Skye. I'm from Aberdeen. This is my sister, Isla."

Their rounded faces, pixie-bob haircuts and funky clothes seemed to be... well, almost exactly the same!

"Yup, we're identical twins," Skye grinned.

"My name's Leah. I'm from North London. It's great to meet you both."

"You look a bit worried," said Isla, with genuine concern.

"Oh, it's just that I'm not keen on sleeping on the top bunk and..."

"Don't worry. We both love top bunks, don't we, Skye? It means we can look down on everyone!" They both laughed and Isla lobbed her backpack up on my assigned bed. "You take my bed, Leah. You'll be under Skye. She's fine, except when she snores!"

I could have hugged the twins, and I left the cabin with a warm glow of relief.

When I arrived at the main hall, I was pleased to see on the notice board outside that Aiden had already signed up to help set up the chairs and tables.

I signed up for peeling potatoes, took a deep breath and walked through the big doors into the main hall, where loud music was thumping away and lights were glaring. Young people of all ages, shapes and sizes were buzzing and darting around excitedly, with different languages whizzing past my ears. I did recognise some Spanish! It was like a youth circus had arrived in town and I started to get excited too.

One of the youth leaders, Sarah, led me to a big kitchen at the side, where about a dozen others were busily washing, chopping

and frying up. She pointed to a huge pile of potatoes where a girl who looked a bit older than me was already happily peeling away at the sink. We were about the same height, and I instantly liked her sleek and straight black hair, with a single braid to the side.

“Hi, my name’s Leah. What’s yours?”

“My name is Natsuki. I am from Kyoto, in Japan.”

I knew that Japan was in the East, somewhere on the other side of the planet, but I wasn’t exactly sure where. I had learnt a lot about the famous Mount Fuji, though, from a project I did on mountains of national pride.

“You must have had a long flight, Natsuki.”

“Yes. Fifteen hours. No stopping.”

“Did you travel on your own?”

“Yes, alone.”

“Wow. That’s brave.”

“My parents want me to speak good English and meet young people from many countries.”

“Your English is amazing. I wish I could say something in Japanese.”

“You could learn ‘hai’! It means ‘yes.’”

“Hai! Sounds nice. You must show me how to write it in Japanese.”

“Sure. Later I will show you.”

“Are you into astrology?”

“I am a Scorpio.”

“Wow. So is my uncle – he’s really smart and honest. I’m a Libra.”

We had a speedy chat about our signs, our favourite movies, the teachers we love, the bullies we can’t stand and braiding, ponytails and double buns – she knew the names of almost every style! It was such a fun way to spend 45 minutes peeling potatoes. Natsuki was kind, and so fearless to have travelled thousands of miles away from home on her own – the first time she’d ever been outside Japan.

With dinner ready, food queues moving quickly and people swarming out to tables, Natsuki and I sat down with the twins, a girl called Raya from Mumbai and a tall boy from South Africa with great jokes and a long name. “Just call me Jabu,” he grinned.

We each shared how nervous and excited we were and what activities we wanted to do – Jabu had a hilarious story about each sport that was mentioned. Taka would have loved his jokes.

That first night swept past like a noisy blur, and it was fun. Natsuki and I staggered back late towards the cabins, exhausted. Fortunately, we were sharing the same one, but I still wasn’t looking forward to sleeping there. My anxiety returned as I breathed in the damp and mould.

All the other girls were sound asleep. As Natsuki climbed into bed on the other side of the cabin, she gave me a little wave. “Sleep with peace, Leah.” I felt her warmth pass across the room.

Then I realised that even though I’d seen Aiden, I hadn’t checked on how he was, or even if he’d found his way back to his cabin after dinner. Maybe he’d got lost or something, and Mum and Dad would hold me responsible.

As I quietly wriggled into my bed, trying not to wake up Skye, I realised that I was way too tired to worry about anything or anyone anymore. I gripped my pillow and prayed that I’d be able to fall asleep quickly. Tomorrow was going to be a big day.

WINDOW SEVEN



GROWING CONFIDENCE



Growing Confidence

My alarm was beeping, and the sun was streaming through the open window. “Meeting in the main hall before breakfast!” someone yelled. I leapt out of bed, astonished to discover that I’d fallen asleep the previous night with my clothes on – first time ever.

Most of our cabin had already left, including the twins, but Natsuki was kindly waiting for me. So, after a quick shower, I dressed up in my new strappy black top, denim shorts and white trainers, and we jogged over to the main hall.

Despite her confident look yesterday, Natsuki seemed a bit on edge now. But then so was I. It felt like we were hanging onto each other, unwilling to admit we were feeling shy and awkward. I was frustrated that my confidence was so up and down.

The hall was packed and we were obviously late, because apart from a few empty chairs, everyone was already sitting and waiting for Emilia and Kamlesh to start. Embarrassed, we snuck into the back row and, as I sat down, I noticed Aiden two rows in front. He was on the edge of his seat and already chatting loudly with

a boy next to him. He gave me a thumbs up and I winked, breathing out a long sigh of relief.

“Well, good morning everyone, and a very warm welcome to Bridgewell Camp. We hope you slept well, and we’re so happy to see you here together,” said Emilia, with an angelic smile.

I scanned faces around the room. It made me relax a bit to see a few other stressed-out teenagers like me, with the kind of fearful looks you get in a doctor’s waiting room. I guess I was trying to spot those who looked like I was feeling... but actually, most people seemed totally thrilled to be there.

Emilia continued enthusiastically. “We are very pleased to see so many people from around the world. There are 53 of you here from all parts of the UK, and 37 who’ve travelled from Kenya, South Africa, Germany, India, Spain, Ireland, Japan, New Zealand, the USA, China, Egypt and Denmark.”

Emilia then asked if people from each country wanted to stand up in turn. As each person or group rose to their feet, an unusual surge of joy fountained up inside of me. How exciting to see such a range of nationalities all together in one hall. A recognition of unity, one world. Did we have the same hopes and dreams, or the same big questions?

Meeting people around my age, from so many different cultures I knew little about, made my heart glow. Was I beginning to fall in love with the unknown, like Maia? Now that thought made me chuckle.

“Thank you for coming all this way to join us,” Emilia continued. “And now I’d like to introduce our international team of experienced youth leaders.” One by one, they shared with us their enthusiasm about being at camp and described their background, favourite hobbies and the activities they’d be leading. It was gripping.

“You can always find at least one youth leader here in the main hall if you need to ask anything. And now Kamlesh wants to go through some practical things with you.”

He rattled through a long list of very boring things to be mindful of. The only thing that scared me was his warning about not using matches in the wood cabins. That made sense, but how was I going to sleep tonight worrying about whether someone would sneak over and set fire to our cabin? Then I realised how ridiculous and stupid that sounded – but possible!

Thankfully, Kamlesh’s list came to an end and Emilia stood up again, still beaming.

“Now, I’m sure that you’ve read through all the amazing activities which you can do over the next three weeks, and you may have already chosen the ones you’d like to do.

“However, why not consider doing something you’ve never done before? Because we’re hoping that during camp, you’ll not only experience great teamwork and adventures and make some good friends, but that you’ll also be able to build confidence in your ability to do things you’ve never even tried.”

‘Wow,’ I thought. ‘Is that why I’ve come here? To grow confidence and try out things I’ve never done before? But how, what? And will it help me answer my burning question?’

Emilia’s tone of voice was friendly and hopeful... much like Maia’s. I relaxed back in my chair and was starting to feel a bit more at home now, in myself that is... which was a really strange thought to have. At home in myself? Well, yes, I think so.

Emilia pointed to a list on the whiteboard.

“Here’s the complete range of fantastic activities you can choose from in the first two weeks of camp, A to Z: from archery through to visiting a small zoo not far away. You can choose to do two different activities each day.”

I whispered excitedly to Natsuki, “Let’s go white-water rafting and rock climbing together,” and she nodded keenly.

Emilia then mentioned something I’d completely forgotten about. “During Week Three, you’ll get an opportunity to work in small teams on a special creative project: writing and acting in a play, composing music with a band, choreographing a dance, making original pottery or ceramics, designing an app, producing a short film, building a website or creating a science project. Each team will then stage a performance or demonstration for families, friends, youth leaders and everyone at camp for the last day... the big Presentation Day.”

As Emilia had been speaking, a growing volume of excited chatter had been breaking out. Everyone was eagerly asking everyone else which project they were going to choose for Week Three, and probably making on-the-spot decisions about who they wanted to be in a team with.

One project caught me by surprise. Producing a short film. That wasn’t something I’d ever thought of doing... no experience, either. It made me wonder.

Emilia then told us that after breakfast we were going to have a tour of the whole campsite together, followed by an afternoon for all kinds of sports activities.



The tour around the buildings and grounds, with a swarm of 90 of us struggling to keep up with ten youth leaders, was like herding squirrels all scampering off in different directions... great fun and so noisy you had to shout to be heard.

But the nearby forest was peaceful. It was like a larger version of the wood in Trent Park where I’d had my extraordinary journey soaring to the stars... an experience which had strangely brought

me here. I wandered off for a few minutes on my own and nearly got lost. But it gave me some very interesting ideas for Project Week.

Back at the main hall, it was time to choose our sport for the afternoon. I love football, especially playing in goal, even though I'm not that good or tall enough. What excites me is leaping into the air, punching balls, diving dangerously and getting muddy. I've even saved two penalties – more by luck than skill!

Although he's a brainbox, Aiden also loves football and he immediately chose that. His favourite position is in defence and because most boys only want to be strikers and score lots of goals, he often gets picked to play in teams. He becomes a different person on the pitch and goes flying in fearlessly with sliding tackles, even from behind.

I was going to join him, but my hand shot up when Camille, one of the youth leaders, mentioned hockey. I'd never held a hockey stick before or played the game, and I reckoned it would be exciting to give it a go... a little sports adventure into the unknown.

So that afternoon, I joined a team of mainly older teenagers, as we rushed out onto the hockey field and began swirling our sticks around as if we were having a sword fight. Some players were a lot bigger than me, but I had the same size stick and I was going to use it.

The hockey game was a total mess, with most of us madly charging around after this one hard ball – I only touched it twice in an hour of playing. But I loved the feel and the cracking, echoing sound of whacking it right up the pitch somewhere... anywhere!

After the game, as I was walking back to the cabin on my own, I had this exhilarating feeling pouring through me, like standing by Torc Waterfall near where we used to live.

Then a phrase appeared that my mum used sometimes when she got an intuition: "Some good news is on its way. I can feel it

in my waters.” Well, I know that our bodies are made up of about 60% water, and in my waters, this fresh feeling came bubbling up that a big change was about to happen soon. Good or bad, I had no idea.



The next morning warmed up quickly and I couldn't wait. I'd put my name down for a day's foraging and survival course with Kamlesh, who marched a dozen of us straight out into the forest. I didn't know that there were so many things you could actually eat to survive. We picked and ate delicious blackberries, wild strawberries, mint, and even dandelions!

We boiled water from a stream for nearly ten minutes to purify it, poured it into a tin teapot with some wild chamomile, and had afternoon tea together in the middle of the forest – unfortunately without scones. The tea tasted awful, but Kamlesh assured us that it had some 'excellent antioxidants' in it – whatever they were, they certainly didn't make the tea taste any better.

Afterwards, we gathered around as he demonstrated the basics of building a lean-to shelter. He got some of us preparing the ground between two trees and checking the wind direction, while the rest of us went off to scout around for materials: a long, sturdy branch for the ridgepole, bare branches and heaps of bracken and moss. Then, using these materials, plus rope, a tarpaulin and Kamlesh's big hands, we put together a frame that eventually became a strong shelter. We all huddled together underneath it like a bunch of mischievous elves. It was so cool.

After dinner, with torches in hand, Kamlesh led us back into the night-time forest to check out our lean-to shelter... which now looked like a Hobbit hole! In the middle of a big clearing nearby, we sat around a large camping lantern and became like wide-eyed

children clustered around the storyteller, as Kamlesh charmed us with his incredible survival stories.

He then showed us how to navigate with a compass, tie knots and do basic first aid. I was gripped and soaked up every detail. At last, the pictures and diagrams from my survival books were coming to life.

“Now let’s try to make a fire without matches, using a piece of steel, a flintstone, and tinder. Watch this!” he cried out, as he gripped the steel tightly and scratched it along the flintstone. Sparks flew everywhere, but not onto the little bed of tinder below.

“Sorry, I do this all the time, but it’s different when you’re teaching it,” he said, beginning to sweat a little. There was a lot of sniggering going on.

“Okay, you try it then,” he huffed, handing the tools to a boy who was laughing the loudest. The boy scraped away furiously, but with few sparks and no fire. Eventually, Kamlesh let a few of us have a go in turn. After a screechy few minutes of rapid swiping, Isla was the first to set fire to the tinder, but it blew straight out. So, with a trick from my survival book in mind, I had a go. The tinder exploded first time into a little ball of light and everyone cheered.

We soon had a glowing bonfire and began to tell stories and sing a few songs. It was a bit cheesy at first, but when Sean, one of the Irish boys at camp, sang a couple of folk songs... well, I think I entered dreamland.

His silver, rope-chain necklace hung neatly over his yellow T-shirt, which stretched tightly across his chest. He had longish dark-brown hair, with a wavy fringe that swept over his olive-green eyes whenever he swayed his head to the tune. His distant look brought memories of the stars and I... well, he was... okay, I really liked him.

We found an old Irish song we both adored singing – ‘Whiskey in the Jar’ – except he knew every verse compared to my two. Most everyone joined in with the chorus, though. And as I listened to him take over the singing from verse three, I realised that I’d been singing this song with my mum since I was five and I didn’t have a clue what it was about. Most astonishing for me was to hear Killarney mentioned in the last verse!

*“And if anyone can aid me ‘tis my brother in the army,
If I can find his station in Cork or Killarney...”*

Sean’s raw energy and husky voice brought this tale of robbery and betrayal to life, especially when he sang directly to me. I was breathless in those moments and my heart was somersaulting out of control. On the last chorus, he looked at me with a cheeky grin spread across his lips, which set the skin on my face and arms tingling with an electricity I’d never felt before.

Was he feeling anything? What did that cheeky grin mean? Was he really singing to me? Wow! I totally hadn’t expected this to happen on day two. Taka was going to want to hear every detail about this, and more.

Before I knew it, I was strolling back to the cabins, side by side with Sean!

“So, where are you from?” he asked, turning his head ever so slightly towards me.

“I grew up near the lakes of Killarney. And you?”

“Donegal. So, we’re both Irish!”

“Yes. Although we moved to London when I was only six. I’ve never been to Donegal.”

“My whole family live there and most of us sing in pubs on weekends – like the Clannad family used to do. You know, you’ve got a beautiful voice for Irish folk songs.”

“Well, I used to sing a lot with my mum,” I said, trying not to blush.

“I once went hiking with a mate around Killarney. I love the hills and waterfalls there, and the history.”

“I love that too,” I gushed, realising I was coming across as too keen. My attempt at not blushing had now failed, but at least it was dark.

“I also love camping out in the hills near Donegal. The skies there are so clear and when I stargaze with my little telescope, I can sometimes see the clouds of stars in the Milky Way. It’s awesome.”

“I love that too,” I replied, too quickly, realising that I’d also repeated myself.

Although it was a chilly night, I could feel myself beginning to sweat. Sean’s dazzling eyes had drawn me in, like the deep waters of Lough Leane... full of hidden stories. My words dried in my mouth before any more could come out.

As he said goodbye, he brushed my arm and hand lightly with his fingertips before walking away. It sent shivers of delight through me. I wasn’t sure what it all meant, but I assumed Sean was being deliberate. Taka would know for sure.

When I got back to my cabin, I peeked around the door and saw that everyone, including Natsuki, was fast asleep. My head was still buzzing away, though, so I sat down outside on the steps. I couldn’t stop thinking about Sean and that touch. I started sifting through every word that he’d said. I couldn’t remember my responses, except that they were mostly silly, repetitive and obvious.

However, as soon as I crept back into the darkened cabin, my mood changed completely. I became filled with dreams and pictures of myself teaching children foraging skills. There I was, surviving bravely against all odds, showing everybody how to build a shelter and find edible plants, as they followed me with

eyes full of admiration. But was I really just dreaming about how I could impress Sean... or everyone at camp?

Being popular felt good, even in my imagination. But did I really want to be popular? On my last birthday, I made up my mind that I wasn't going to play the social media game of 'likes' and 'followers' and happy-clappy photos posing at concerts. I decided that this wasn't me.

Then an image of Sean singing appeared, and I drifted off into a deep sleep.



I woke up half an hour before my alarm went off. I knew Taka was due to arrive very early at camp and couldn't wait to tell her everything and ask for her advice... although I knew she'd give it to me anyway.

When I breezed into the main hall for breakfast, I was amazed to see her already queuing for food. I ran up behind and tapped her on the shoulder. "Leah!" she shouted at the top of her voice, even before she'd turned around. A lot of curious faces swivelled in our direction, as they watched us both in a flurry of hugs and outbursts of squawky laughter.

"Let's go to that table in the corner – it's the least messy!" I said, grabbing Taka's arm. We gulped down our food in the few spaces between endless catch-up chatter and jokes.

At one point mid-sentence, I instinctively looked up and glimpsed Natsuki eating away in the opposite corner. Curiously, she looked up at exactly the same time and almost knocked over her table as she crossed the room towards us.

Natsuki knew that this was Taka from my previous description of the carrot-orange streaks in her curly, chestnut-brown hair. And when Taka stood up, they both hugged like they'd been friends

forever. We then shared with her many of the fun experiences from the last couple of days: from foraging, hockey and disgusting cups of tea, to an archery session where Natsuki had stunned the teacher by getting five bullseyes. I didn't mention Sean – that was for later.

Taka didn't explain why she'd missed the first two days, but she was her usual bubbly self, so maybe things weren't as bad with her parents' separation as she'd feared. I decided not to ask about it. I knew she'd share those things if she wanted to.

"My cabin doesn't sound as bad as yours," Taka told us. "But there's this girl, Anja, who's already ignored me. Her makeup routine this morning took forever... although she failed the catwalk supermodel test when she fell over squeezing into her tight shorts."

"Ha! Sounds hilarious. Although... well, I'm starting to feel a bit intimidated by a few girls I've seen around who are acting like they're at a fashion show, not a summer camp," I said, thinking out loud.

"Who cares?" said Taka, shrugging her shoulders. Natsuki shrugged along and gave a dramatic swish of her long black hair while pouting her lips, as we all burst out laughing.

"Oh, and I know all about Project Week," winked Taka, changing the subject. "I'm going to join the band. They'd better be ready for me. I don't want pop, hip-hop, jazz, classical or any of that stuff. It's rock or nothing!" I thought that maybe I should warn the other musicians.

Although I was disappointed that we wouldn't be in the same group, I absolutely knew that she was going to choose the band as her project. She's a talented drummer and has her own kit at the back of her parents' garage. She practises for hours on weekends and has such a natural sense of rhythm. And although I play a bit

of flute and guitar, I didn't think I'd be nearly good enough to join a band. Anyway, I had other plans.

Natsuki told us she'd make a last-minute decision about her choice of project, and Aiden had already told me that he was going to join the science group.

I gave Natsuki and Taka strict instructions to look out for Aiden, although he'd quickly made friends with some boys from Wales who were as clever at science and maths as him. They stuck together for most of the activities, choosing to do a lot of indoor tech and science experiments – a good excuse for getting hours of video game time, I guessed.



With Taka now at camp and my friendship with Natsuki, I was so looking forward to each new day. For the three of us, it was outdoor adventures all the way. We became inseparable, and my anxieties steadily faded into the background.

I could feel my confidence growing; a confidence to just be myself and worry less about what everyone else was thinking or doing. And this gave me a curious idea.

I love growing things from seeds, especially herbs, tomatoes, lettuce and sunflowers. Learning how to prepare the soil, watering, checking the weather and watching the first green shoots sprout up make me so happy.

So, was it possible to seed confidence in someone? Was I watching a seed of confidence grow and flower in myself?