

The wind is howling around the edges of our coastal cottage this afternoon. I boost the heater and turn to my baby sister again. I must stop calling her that. Three years old isn't really a baby anymore.

She's on her knees before me on the thick rug, holding out blue safety scissors. 'Another one?' she insists.

I sigh. Of all possible activities to fill our wet afternoon stuck in this poky holiday house. Not colouring, not puzzles, not watching Peppa Pig, but collage. Boats, specifically.

Must be thanks to Dad and the new sailing dinghy he went to pick up at lunchtime. Yes, even in this weather. Although it was barely drizzling when he left. Nothing holds him back when he's got a new project. I lost count of all the photos he showed me. Yes Dad. Nice sail. Whatever.

'Make boat.' Stella pouts in response to my slowness.

'Make boat what?' I prompt.

'Make boat, Emmy,' she says.

'What other word do you need to say?'

She tilts her head to one side. 'Make boat on waves?'

She's obsessed. Good old Dad with his great ideas for a weekend getaway. Where is he anyway? Surely three hours is enough time to moor a little boat like that.

'Please,' I say. 'The word I want is please.'

'Okay Emmy,' she says. 'Make boat peez.'

I carefully cut a triangle sail, trapezium base, and pole-shaped mast, handing them to Stella.

She dabs them with glue. Her tongue poking from the corner of her mouth, she adjusts them on the blue background. A blue wavy line defines the sea, and then she proudly props it up with the twelve other boat pictures completed this afternoon. Boy does Dad owe me one.

'Honestly Stella.' I glance up as a new burst of rain lashes the window. 'Let's do something else. At least a different picture.'

'Okay.' She hands me brown paper. 'Now squircle.'

'Squircle? What do you mean? A square or a circle?'

'Squircle! Like clock.'

‘All right, all right. I’ll do a circle.’ I cut it out and pass it to her. She pastes two triangles onto another boat shape and adds the ‘squircle’ beside it.

‘What’s that Stell?’ I ask. ‘A buoy?’

‘Is man,’ she says.

‘A man?’ My eyebrows lift.

‘Man head,’ she explains.

‘Is he going for a swim?’

Stella waves a hand towards the window. ‘No swim! Too wavy dumb-dumb. Too many wind.’

‘So what’s he doing?’ I’m intrigued.

‘Going bye-byes,’ she says matter-of-factly.

‘What?’

‘Bye-bye Daddy.’ She waves at the picture.

‘Stella, that isn’t funny,’ I snap. Cold creeps down my spine. ‘Don’t talk silly like that.’

‘Not silly.’ She pouts.

There’s a rap at the door.

I jump out of my skin.

Standing on the doorstep are two police officers in wet weather gear. My heart begins to yammer.

‘Are you Emma?’ says the big one.

I nod. The yammer rises in my throat.

‘Can we come in?’ says the lady, with a kind smile. She introduces them both. I forget their names instantly.

I beckon them in, and gesture to the sofa. I pile up the pictures and park myself on a chair, pulling Stella to my knee.

The kind cop glances at the big one. ‘Can we talk to your mother?’ she asks gently.

I shake my head. ‘We don’t have one.’ Which is pretty much true.

They establish there is no adult relative in easy reach. They exchange a glance.

‘It’s about your father,’ says the big cop. ‘Did he recently purchase a new sailboat? A little moppet?’

‘Uh-huh. Yes.’ I squeeze Stella tight. She squirms.

The big guy holds out his phone. ‘You see, we found this boat. We think it may belong to your dad.’

Stella slips from my knee.

I lean over to inspect the photo. The blood drains from my face. I’d recognise that yellow sail and orange keel anywhere. Even tipped over in water.

‘He said he’d only pay for and moor it today. Why would he take it out in weather like this?’ Typically thoughtless. And he tells *me* off for behaving like a teenager. At least I *am* actually thirteen!

Stella returns to her collage obsession.

Gently, they explain where it was found - off the point. The coastguard won’t go out until the weather calms a bit.

In the background Stella continues cutting and gluing.

‘Hallo Daddy!’ she says. My head snaps up. The cops glance at one another, mouths open. Stella can have that effect.

I look at her picture. She’s drawn brown stumps. They could be pylons. There’s a squashed brown rectangle above it. And a jaggedy ‘squircle’ is dabbed on below.

I frown.

‘Oh Daddy *did* go big swim.’ Her voice is high in surprise.

Biting my lip, I hover. This is going to sound so stupid. But I do it anyway. I explain to the police what Stella’s been doing this afternoon.

‘It sounds crazy,’ I say. ‘But... would you please check the wharf?’

Big cop turns a laugh into a cough. ‘That’s a big swim in this weather.’

But the nice one goes out to the car. The radio crackles.

She returns. ‘Come on then.’

We grab shoes, jackets, and the cottage key and follow them out. I perch on the backseat with Stella.

‘Nice mans,’ she chats. ‘We find Daddy.’

The police car pulls into the wharf car park behind the coastguard ute. Two figures in yellow are running to the ladder. There's a shout.

Wind and rain buffet us as we struggle from the car. I grip Stella's hand tight.

Thanks to Stella we're there when Dad is dragged from the water. We're there as they get him to shelter, under the eaves. We're there when Dad spews water and opens his eyes.

'Sorry, Em,' he rasps. He looks up at the coastguards. 'Thank you.'

'Thank Stella,' I say, a shiver running up my spine as I hug her. How did she know?