Opening extract from

Listen to the Moon

Written by

Michael Morpurgo

Published by

HarperCollins Children's Books

First published in hardback in Great Britain by HarperCollins *Children's Books* 2014
HarperCollins *Children's Books* is a division of
HarperCollins*Publishers* Ltd
77-85 Fulham Palace Road, Hammersmith, London W6 8JB

Visit
www.michaelmorpurgo.com
for news, videos, competitions, author interviews and more

1

ISBN 978-0-00-794401-9

Printed and bound in England by
Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

To Begin

We all come from somewhere. But, in a way, I come from nowhere. Let me explain. My grandma simply came up out of the sea a long time ago, like a mermaid, except that she had two legs instead of a fish tail. She seemed to be about twelve years old at the time, but no one could tell; and that was because there was no clue as to who she was, nor where she came from. She was half starved, mad with fever and could speak only one word: "Lucy".

This is her story, as I later heard it told to me, by those who knew her best, by my grandpa, by other relations and friends, and, most importantly, by herself. Over the years I have pieced it all together as well as I could, using only the evidence of those who saw it with their own eyes, those who were there.

I want to thank the Museum of the Isles of Scilly for its help, for access to school logbooks and other sources, and especially the family of the late Dr Crow MD of St Mary's, for allowing me to quote from his journal. My family, and many others also, too numerous to mention – on the Scilly islands, in New York and elsewhere – have helped me greatly and patiently in my research, in piecing everything together.

You could say this story has been a lifelong fascination for me, an obsession almost. I have certainly been working on it, on and off, for most of my life. I simply could not get it out of my head, which in a way, I suppose, is not surprising. It is my grandma's story – much of it told, as you will discover, in her own words, as she dictated it to me. So, in that sense, it is my story too, my family's story.

Grandma made us who we are – with a little help from Grandpa, it should be said. I am who I am because of her, because of him. I have done what I've done, been who I've been, lived where I've lived, written what I've written, because of them. So I have written it for them, and also because it happens to be the most unlikely and unbelievable story I have ever heard.

Chapter One

Scilly Isles. May 1915

Be good fish, be nice fish

It was mackerel they were looking for that day, because it was Friday. Mary always liked to cook mackerel for their supper on Fridays, but Alfie and Jim, his father, both knew she wouldn't do it, and they wouldn't have it, unless they brought her back enough mackerel to make a proper meal for all four of them. Alfie and his father had prodigious appetites, which his mother loved both to grumble about and to satisfy.

"I swear the two of you got hollow legs," Mary would say in open admiration, as she watched them wolfing down their mackerel yet again – three of them each she

liked to put on their plates, if the catch had been good enough.

There was Uncle Billy to feed too. He lived in the boat shed on Green Bay on his own, because he liked it that way. It was just across the field from Veronica Farmhouse, where they lived, a stone's throw away. Mary would bring him his supper every evening, but, unlike Alfie, he would as like as not complain if it was mackerel again. "I like crab," he'd say. But then if Mary brought him crab it was, "Where's my mackerel?"

He could be contrary, could Uncle Billy. But then Uncle Billy was contrary in many ways. He was different from other people, different from anyone. As Mary often said, that was what made him special.

The fish were hard to find that morning. It helped keep spirits up in the boat to talk about supper, to think about it, about how Mary would cook the mackerel for them that evening: dipped in egg, rolled in oats, then seasoned with salt and pepper. She fried it always in butter. The smell of it would be wafting through the farmhouse and they'd be sitting down at the kitchen table, ready and

waiting, mouths watering, savouring the sound and smell of the fish sizzling in the pan.

"Course, after she finds out what you and me have gone and done, Alfie," Jim said, straining hard at the oars, "we could be on bread and water for a week. She will not be a happy woman, son, not happy at all. She'll have my guts for garters, yours too."

"We should go in closer to St Helen's, Father," Alfie said, his mind on the mackerel, not his mother's retribution. "There's fish there almost always, just off the beach. Caught half a dozen last time we were there, didn't we?"

"Don't like going near the place," Jim said. "Never have. But maybe you're right, maybe we should give it a go. Wish the wind would get up, and we could do a bit of sailing. All this rowing's half killing me. Here, Alfie. Your turn." They changed places.

As Alfie took up the oars, he found himself thinking of supper again, of the sound and the smell of frying mackerel, and then of how hard it was to remember smells and describe them, how sounds and sights were much easier

to recall somehow. Once the mackerel was on the plate in front of them, they always had to wait until grace was said. Father and he were inclined to say grace rather too hurriedly for his mother's liking. She took her time over it. For her, grace was a *meant* prayer, and different each mealtime, not simply a ritual to be rushed through. She would have liked a proper and respectful pause after the Amen, but Alfie and his father would be at their mackerel at once, like gannets. There would be strong, sweet tea and freshly baked bread to go with it, and bread-and-butter pudding, if they were lucky. It was always the feast of the week.

It was already late afternoon and Jim was very aware that they had precious little to show for nearly an entire day's fishing. Now that he wasn't rowing, the wind was already chilling him to the bone. He pulled his collar up. It was cold for May, more like March, Jim thought. He looked at his son bending rhythmically, easily, to the oars, and envied him his strength and suppleness, but at the same time took a father's pride in it too. He had

been that young once, that strong.

He looked down at his hands, scarred, calloused and cracked as they were now, ingrained with years of fishing and years of farming his potatoes and his flowers. He baited the line again, his fingers working instinctively, automatically. He was thankful he could not feel them. They were numb to the cold and salt of seawater, numb to the wind. Some of those old cracks in his finger joints had opened up again and would otherwise be paining him dreadfully by now. It was good to be numb, he thought, and just as well. He was wondering why it was that his ears hurt, why they too hadn't gone numb? He wished they would.

Jim smiled inside himself as he remembered how the day had begun, at breakfast. It had been Alfie's idea in the first place. He didn't want to go to school. He wanted to come fishing instead. He'd tried this on before, often, and rarely with any success. It didn't stop him trying again. "Tell Mother you need me," Alfie had said, "that you can't do without me. She'll listen to you. I won't be no trouble, Father. Promise."

Jim knew he wouldn't be any trouble. The boy sailed a boat well, rowed strongly, knew the waters and fished with a will, with that wholehearted enthusiasm and confidence borne of youth, always so sure he would catch something. The fish seemed to like him too. It was noticeable that Jim often did better when Alfie was in the boat. With the fishing as disappointing as it had been recently in the waters around Scilly, Jim would go out fishing these days more in hope than expectation. Catches had been poor for all the fishermen in recent times, not just him. Anyway, Alfie would be company out there, good company. So he agreed to do what he could to persuade Mary to let Alfie miss school for a day, and come fishing with him.

But all pleading, all reasoning, proved to be quite useless, as Jim had warned Alfie it might be. Mary was adamant that Alfie had to go to school, that he'd missed far too much already, that he was always trying to find ways of not going. Any excuse would do: working out on the farm, or going fishing with his father. Enough was enough. When Mary insisted with that certain tone in her voice, Jim knew there was very little point in arguing,

that she was immovable. He persisted only because he wanted Alfie to know he really wanted him out there in the boat with him, and to demonstrate his solidarity. When Alfie saw the argument wasn't going his way, he joined in, trying anything he could think of that might change her mind.

"What does one day off school matter, Mother, one day?"

"We always catch more fish when there's the two of us."

"And anyway, out in an open boat it's always safer with two – I heard you say so."

"And I hate Beastly Beagley at school. Everyone knows he can't teach for toffee. He's a waste of space, and school's nothing but a waste of time."

"You let me stay home, Mother, and, after I've been fishing with Father, I'll come back and clean out the henhouse for you, and fetch back a cartload of seaweed to fertilise the lower field, whatever you want."

"What I want, Alfie, is for you to go to school," Mary said firmly. It was quite futile. She wasn't going to give in. There was nothing more to be said, nothing more to

be done. So Alfie had trudged off reluctantly to school with Mary's words ringing in his ears. "There's more to life than boats and fishing, Alfie! Never heard of a fish teaching anyone to read or write! And your writing ain't nothing to write home about neither, if you ask me!"

When he'd gone, she'd turned to Jim. "I'll need nine good mackerel for tea, Jimbo, don't forget," she said. "And wrap up warm. Spring it may be, but there was a keen wind out there when I went to feed the hens. That boy of yours forgot to do it again."

"He's always my boy when he forgets," said Jim, shrugging on his coat, and stepping into his boots.

"Where else do you think he gets it from?" she replied, buttoning up Jim's coat. She gave him his peck on the cheek and patted his shoulders as she always did, as he always liked her to do. "And by the way, Jimbo, I promised Uncle Billy a crab for tomorrow – you know how much he loves his crab. Nice one, mind. Not too big. Not too small. He don't like a crab all chewy and tough. He's very particular. Don't forget."

"I won't forget," Jim muttered under his breath as he went out of the door. "Nothing's good enough for big brother Billy, eh? You spoil that old pirate rotten, that's the truth of it."

"No more'n I spoil you, Jim Wheatcroft," she retorted.

"Anyway," Jim went on, "I'd have thought old and tough and chewy would have suited an old pirate like Long John Silver just perfect."

When it came to Uncle Billy, it was always this kind of good-natured banter between them. They had sometimes to share the humorous side of it. The truth of what had happened to Uncle Billy in his life was often too painful.

"Jim Wheatcroft!" she called after him. "That's my brother you're talking about, and don't you forget it. He ain't neither old nor chewy, just in a world of his own. He's not like the rest of us, and that's fine by me."

"Whatever you say, Marymoo, whatever you say," he replied, and, with a cheery flourish of his cap, went off down the field towards Green Bay, mimicking Uncle Billy's favourite ditty just loudly enough for her to hear: "Yo-ho-ho

and a bottle of rum! Yo-ho-ho and a bottle of rum!"

"Jim Wheatcroft, I heard that!" In response, Jim gave her another wave of his cap. "And you take care out there, Jimbo, you hear!" she shouted after him.

As he went down to the boat, Jim was marvelling at Mary's endless patience and constant devotion to her brother, but at the same time he felt more than a little vexed, as he always did, at how oblivious Uncle Billy seemed to be to all Mary had done for him, and was doing for him every day of her life. He could hear him now, singing away out on his boat in Green Bay, "the good ship *Hispaniola*", as Uncle Billy called it.

It hadn't been a 'good ship' at all, not to start with, just the remnants, the rotting hulk, of an old Cornish lugger, abandoned long ago on the beach on Green Bay. It was five years now since Mary had brought Uncle Billy home from the hospital and installed him in the boat shed. She had made a home for him up in the sail loft, and he'd been out there on Green Bay, just about every day since, whatever the weather, restoring that old lugger. It was she who had told him about the ship in the hospital, and, as

soon as she got him home, encouraged him to get back to boatbuilding, which he'd loved so much as a young man. She was convinced that what he needed above all, she'd told Jim, was to keep busy, use his hands, be the craftsman he once was again.

Everyone, including Jim, had thought it was an impossible task, that out there in all weathers the lugger had deteriorated too much, was too far gone, and that anyway 'Silly Billy', as they called him all over the island, couldn't possibly do it. Only Mary insisted he could. And soon enough everyone could see that she had been right. When it came to boatbuilding, Silly Billy – whatever you thought of him – knew well enough what he was doing. Day by day over the years, the old lugger in Green Bay was becoming young again, and sleek and beautiful.

She lay there at anchor as Jim walked to the fishing boat that morning, resplendent in green paint, 'Hispaniola' painted black on her side. She may not yet be finished, but the fine and elegant lines of her hull were evident now to anyone walking along Green Bay. And now with the main mast up, that Uncle Billy had raised only a few weeks

before, she was looking almost complete. With no help from anyone – Uncle Billy liked to be on his own, work on his own – he had brought her back to life. Uncle Billy may be odd – that was the general view; a bit "mazed in the head", they usually called him – but with the work he had done on that old lugger over the years, plain now for everyone to see, he had gained the respect of the whole island. He was still 'Silly Billy' though, because they all knew where he'd been, where he'd come from, because of how he was.

Walking across the sand on Green Bay, Jim could see Uncle Billy up on deck. He was running the black and white skull and crossbones flag up the mast, as he always had done every morning since the mast had gone up. He had on the Long John Silver hat that Mary had made for him, and he was singing. Uncle Billy had his ups and downs, his good days and his bad days. This morning he had the hat on and he was singing, so this must be a good day, which, Jim knew, would make life much easier for Mary. Uncle Billy could be a cantankerous old goat when he was in one of his black moods. And for some reason

Jim had never understood, when he was like that, he was always nastier to Mary than anyone. Yet she was the one who had saved him, brought him home, and the person he loved most in the world.

It was because Jim was so busy admiring the *Hispaniola*, so preoccupied thinking about Uncle Billy, that he had not noticed until now that Alfie was out there, clambering about on *Penguin*, the family's fishing boat, making her ready. He was untying her from the buoy, then rowing her in towards him over the shallows.

"What d'you think you're up to, Alfie?" Jim protested, looking over his shoulder nervously. "If your mother sees you—"

"I know, Father, she'll have my guts for garters – whatever that means," Alfie said, with a smile and a shrug. "I missed the school boat. Real shame. You were there, you saw it go without me. Right, Father?"

Jim was unable to conceal his delight. "You are a very wicked boy, Alfie Wheatcroft," he said, climbing into the boat. "Don't know where you get it from. We'd better come back with plenty of good fish then, hadn't we? Or

my life, and yours, won't be worth living."

Out at sea, an hour or so later, they were fishing off Foreman's Island. It had been a hard row for Alfie against the current all the way along Pentle Bay, and Jim could see he needed a rest. He took the oars from him and rowed over to check his lobster pots. Between them, they hauled up three good-sized crabs from the pots off Foreman's Island – so, a crab for Uncle Billy, and two to sell – and there was a squid in one of the pots, which would do nicely for bait. And Alfie managed to catch a couple of pollock as well.

"Good for fishcakes," Jim grumbled, "and not much else. Your mother don't like pollock. We can't come home with nothing but pollock. We got to find some mackerel."

"St Helen's," Alfie said, reaching for the oars, and starting to row again. "They'll be there, dozens of them, Father, waiting for us, you'll see."

It was a flat calm now, hardly a ripple on the sea, and the tide took them quickly towards St Helen's. Wary of rocks, they came in with great care, Alfie rowing gently

towards the shore, towards the only sandy beach on the island. Jim dropped anchor. This was where they had caught their mackerel, only a few weeks before, a dozen or more, and big fish too, all of them inside a few minutes. Maybe they'd get lucky again.

Both of them knew they would have to get lucky. Mackerel were like that. You could be out fishing all day right above them, and the line would come up empty every time. Or they'd be down there, begging to be caught, it seemed, and then they'd jump right on to your hooks and come up shining and silver and wriggling on the line. Jim remembered how delighted Mary had been with them before, when they came home with their great catch, and showed her, how she'd given them both the best of hugs, and told them there weren't two other fishermen in the world like them.

Jim dropped his line into the sea. "Come on, fish," he said. "Have a little nibble, have a little bite. Be good fish, be nice fish, and then Marymoo will give us more hugs, and tonight we'll have the best supper of our lives. Come on, fish. What are you waiting for? I'm not going

away till I get you, lots of you."

"They're down there," said Alfie, peering into the water on the other side of the boat. "I can see them. Bet I catch one before you do, Father."

It was a long while later that Alfie first heard it. Neither had caught a fish, nor even felt a suggestion of a bite. Both were silent, and deep in concentration. Alfie was sitting there, hunched over the line, gazing intently down into the clear blue-green of the sea below, the fronds of weed waving mockingly up at him. That was when he heard something calling. The sound seemed at once strange to him, out of place somehow, not right. Alfie looked up from his fishing. It came from the island, a hundred yards or so away, from somewhere near the shore, a soft cry, a whimpering. A seal pup perhaps. But it was more human than that.

Chapter Two

A place of lost souls

"You hear that, Father?" Alfie said.

"Just gulls, Alfie," Jim replied. And, sure enough, there was a young seagull on the beach, scurrying along after its mother, neck outstretched, mewing, begging to be fed. But Alfie realised soon enough that wasn't at all the sound that he had heard. He knew gulls better than any other bird, but he had never before heard a young gull cry like that. The crying he had heard was different, not like a bird at all, not like a seal pup either. It was true that gulls were known to be good mimics – not as good as crows, but good enough. Alfie was perplexed, and

distracted now entirely from his fishing. The two gulls, mother and fledgling, lifted off the beach and flew away, the young bird still pestering to be fed, leaving the beach deserted behind them, but not silent. There it was again, the same sound.

"Not gulls, Father. Can't be," he said. "Something else. Listen!"

It came from somewhere beyond the shoreline altogether, from the direction of the old Pest House, or from the great rock in the middle of the island. Alfie was quite sure by now that no gull, however clever a mimic, could possibly cry like that. And then it came to him. A child! A child cries like that! Gulls didn't cough, and Alfie could hear quite clearly now the sound of coughing.

"There's someone there, Father!" he whispered. "On the island."

"I hear it," Jim said. "I hear it all right, but it don't seem hardly possible. Can't see no one there, nothing but gulls. There's hundreds of them, and all watching us. Like I told you, Alfie, I don't like this place, never did." He paused to listen again. "Can't hear nothing now. Ears

playing tricks on us, that's what it was. Got to be. Can't be no one there anyway. I didn't see no boat anchored off shore as we came in, and there's nowhere else you can land on St Helen's, except right here on this beach. This is an uninhabited island, deserted. No one's lived here for years, for centuries."

As Jim scanned the island for any sign of life – footprints on the sand, the telltale smoke of a fire perhaps – all the stories about St Helen's came back to him. He remembered landing there before, a few times. He had walked the length and breadth of it. It was no more than half a mile from end to end, a few hundred yards across the middle, an island of bracken and brambles and heather, a shoreline of great grey boulders and pebbles, with that one spit of steep, shelving sand, and the great rock he remembered so well rearing up behind the Pest House. The Pest House itself had long since fallen into ruin, roof and windows gaping, walls crumbling. But the chimney was still standing.

Jim had gone there first as a small boy, with his father, collecting driftwood for the fire, piling it up on the beach

to bring home, or scouring the beach for cowrie shells, 'guinea money' as they called it. He'd climbed the rock once with his father, dared himself then to climb it again on his own, got to the top, but had been scolded for it by his father, and told never to do it again without him.

Jim had never really liked the place even as a small boy, had never felt at ease there. St Helen's had seemed to him even then an abandoned place, a place of lost souls, of ghosts. There was something dark and sad about the island, and he'd thought that long before he'd ever been told the stories. Over the years he had learnt about its grim history bit by bit, how once long ago it had been a holy island, where monks, seeking solitary, contemplative lives, had lived out their years. The ruins of their chapel were still there. And there was, he knew, a holy well just beyond the Pest House – his mother had told him that much. He'd gone looking for it once with her in among the bracken and the brambles, but they had never found it.

But it was the story of the Pest House itself, why it had been built, and how it had been used, that had always troubled him most – so much so that he had never told

Alfie about it. *There are some stories*, he thought, *too terrible to pass on*. In years gone by, in the days of the great sailing ships, St Helen's had once been a quarantine island. To prevent the spread of disease, any sailor or passenger on board, who had fallen sick, with yellow fever or typhoid, or some other infectious illness, was put off on St Helen's, to recover if they could, but much more likely to live out their last wretched days in the Pest House. The sick and dying had simply been left there in isolation, abandoned, and with little hope of survival. All his life Jim had been horrified at the thought of it. Ever since he'd been told about that Pest House, he had thought of St Helen's as a shameful place, an island of suffering and death, to be avoided if at all possible.

Quite definitely now, and there could no longer be any doubt about it, Jim was hearing the sound of a child crying. Alfie was sure of it too. Neither said a word. The same unspoken thought occurred to both of them then. They had heard tales of ghosts living on St Helen's – everyone had. Scilly was full of ghost stories. There were the ghosts on Samson Island, the ghost of King Arthur

out on the Eastern Isles, and everywhere, all over the islands, there were stories of the spirits of stranded sailors, pirates, drowned sailors. Stories, they told themselves, just stories.

Coughing interrupted the whimpering. This was no ghost. There was someone on the island, a child, a child wailing, whimpering, and still coughing too. It was a cry for help they could not ignore. As they hauled in their lines, in a great hurry now, Alfie found there were three mackerel dangling on his hooks. He hadn't even felt they were there. But the fish didn't matter any more. Jim pulled up the anchor, and Alfie rowed hard for the shore. A few strong pulls and they felt the boat beaching. They leapt over the side into the shallows and hauled the boat up higher on to the sand.

Standing on the beach, they listened once again for the sound of the child. For some reason, they found themselves talking in whispers. All they could hear was the sea lapping softly behind them and the piping of a pair of oystercatchers that were flying off low and fast, their wingtips skimming the sea.

"Can't hear nothing, can you?" Jim said. "Can't see nothing neither." He was beginning to wonder now if he had imagined the whole thing, if his hearing had deceived him. But the real truth, and Jim knew it, was that he did not want to venture any further. At that moment he was all for getting the boat back into the water, and rowing home. But Alfie was already running up the beach towards the dunes. Jim thought of calling him back, but he didn't want to shout. He couldn't let his son go on alone. He took off his jacket and laid it over his catch in the bottom of the boat, to hide their fish from any sharp-eyed, marauding gulls, and then, reluctantly, followed where Alfie had gone, up over the dunes, towards the Pest House.

A chill came over Alfie as he stood on top of the dunes, looking up at the Pest House, and he knew it wasn't only the cold. Gulls, hundreds of them, the island's silent sentinels, were watching him from rocks everywhere, from the walls of the Pest House, from the chimney, from the sky above. After a while, Jim was at his side, and breathless.

Alfie called out. "Anyone here?" There came no answer.

"Who's there?"

Nothing.

A pair of gulls dived on them then, screeching and wheeling away, first one then another. The rest glared at them darkly. The message was unmistakable. You are not welcome here. Get off our island.

"There's no one here, Alfie," Jim whispered. "Let's go home."

"But we heard someone, Father," Alfie said. "I know we did."

Becoming more fearful now with every passing moment, it was Jim who called out this time. His whole instinct was to turn away, get to the boat fast and go from this place at once. But at the same time he needed to persuade himself that there was no child on the island, that Alfie was wrong, that they must have been imagining the whole thing. They both called out now, echoing one another.

Closer, and quite unmistakable, came the same whimpering as before, but more muffled, stifled. There could be no doubt about it. It was the voice of a child,

a child who was terrified, and it was coming from inside the Pest House.

Jim's first thought was that it had to be some local child who had gone out fishing maybe and had some sort of accident, lost an oar perhaps, or fallen overboard. It wasn't so long ago, after all, that he had rescued a young lad from the water after the boy had got into trouble out in a boat in Tresco Channel. He'd tripped and gone overboard, and was being swept out to sea by the current. This one had been washed up on St Helen's – there was no other explanation he could think of. But if any child had been missing then surely he'd have heard about it. The alarm would have been raised all over the islands. Everyone would have been out looking. He couldn't understand it.

Alfie had already gone on ahead of him up the track towards the Pest House, calling out to whoever was in there, softly, as reassuringly as he could. "Hello. S'only me. Alfie, Alfie Wheatcroft. I got my father with me. You all right, are you?" There was no reply. Both of them stopped outside the doorway, uncertain now as to what to say or do.

"We're from Bryher," Jim went on. "You know us, don't you? I'm Alfie's father. What you doing over here? Tipped yourself out of a boat, did you? Easily done. Easily done. You must be half frozed. We'll have you out of here in a jiffy, get you back home, cup of nice warm tea, tatty cake, and a hot bath. That'll shiver the cold out of you, won't it?"

As Alfie stepped tentatively through the doorway into the ruins of the Pest House, the whimpering stopped. There was no sign of anyone inside, nothing but bracken and brambles. At the far end of the building, in under the chimney, there was a fireplace, covered in dried bracken, a thick carpet of it, almost as if someone had been making a bed.

A sudden bird flew up out of a niche in the wall, an explosion of fluttering that set Alfie's heart pounding. He pushed his way through the thick undergrowth that had long since made the ruins their own, brambles tearing at his shirt and trousers as he passed. Jim held back at the doorway. "No one here, Alfie," he whispered. "You can see there isn't."

But Alfie was pointing into the corner of the fireplace, and waving his hand at his father to be quiet.

"Don't you worry none," Alfie said, treading softly as he went, and slowly. "We'll have you out of here and home before you know it. We got our boat. Won't hurt you none, promise. S'all right, honest. You can come out now."

He had seen a face, a bone-white face, peering through the bracken, a child, a girl, hollow-cheeked, and with dark lank hair down to her shoulders. She was cowering there in the corner of the building, her fist in her mouth, her eyes staring up at him, wide with terror. She had a grey blanket round her shoulders. Her face was tear-stained, and she was shaking uncontrollably.

Alfie crouched down where he was, keeping his distance – he did not want to alarm her. He did not recognise her. If she had been from the islands, he would have known her for certain – he knew all the children on Scilly, everyone did, whichever island they came from. "Hello?" he said. "You got a name then, have you?" She shrank from him, breathing hard, coughing again now, and shivering under

her blanket. "I'm Alfie. You needn't be afeared of me, girl." She was staring at Jim now, breathing hard. "That's Father. He won't hurt you any more'n I will. You hungry, are you? You been here long? You got a terrible cough on you. Where d'you come from then? How d'you get here, girl?" She said nothing, simply crouched there, frozen in her fear, her eyes darting wildly from Jim to Alfie, from Alfie to Jim. Alfie reached out slowly, and touched her blanket. "It's wet through," he said.

Her bare feet were covered in sand and mud, and what little he could see of her dress was nothing but tatters and rags. There were empty limpet shells scattered all about her feet, and a few broken eggshells, gulls' eggs they were. "We got mackerel for tea back home," he went on. "Mother does it beautiful, rolled in egg and oats, and we got bread-and-butter pudding for afters too. You'll like it. We got our boat down on the beach. You want to come with us?" He inched his way towards her, holding out his hand. "Can you walk, girl?"

She sprang up then like a frightened fawn, leapt past him and was stumbling through the bracken towards the

doorway. She must have tripped because she suddenly disappeared into the undergrowth. Jim found her moments later, lying face down, unconscious. He turned her over. She was bleeding profusely from her forehead. He leaned over her. There were scratches and cuts all over her legs. One ankle was swollen and bruised. She wasn't breathing. Alfie was there on his knees beside her.

"Is she dead, Father?" he breathed. "Is she dead?" Jim felt her neck. He could feel no pulse. With panic rising in his chest, he remembered then how Alfie had fallen once down on to rocks when he was little, how he'd run all the way home with Alfie in his arms, quite sure he must be dead. He remembered how calm Mary had been, how she had taken charge at once, laid Alfie out on the kitchen table, put her ear to his mouth and felt his breath on her skin. He did the same now, put his ear to the girl's mouth, felt the warm breath, and knew there was life in her yet. He had to get her home fast. Mary would know what to do with her.

"You get to the boat, Alfie," he said. "Quick. I'll bring her."

He picked her up, and ran out of the Pest House, along the path to the dunes. She was light and limp and damp in his arms. He could feel she was little more than skin and bones. By the time he got there, Alfie had the boat in the water. He was standing in the shallows, holding it. "You get in, son," Jim said. "You look after her. I'll row." They wrapped her in Jim's coat, and laid her down with her head on Alfie's lap. "Hold her close," Jim told him. "We got to keep her warm as best we can." He pushed off then, leaping into the boat, and gathering the oars almost in one movement.

Jim rowed like a man possessed out into the swell of the open ocean past the lighthouse on Round Island, and at long last into the calm of Tresco Channel. Every few moments as he rowed, he'd glance down at the girl as she lay there in Alfie's arms, her head bleeding, her eyes closed. Jim could see no life in her. She was sleeping as if she would never wake.

Alfie talked to her all the time; he hardly stopped. Holding her tight to him as the boat reared and rolled through the waves, he kept calling to her, willing her to

wake up and open her eyes, telling her it wouldn't be long now, that she'd be all right. And sometimes Jim would join in too, whenever he could find the breath to do so, begging her to live, pleading with her, yelling at her even. "Wake up, girl! For Chrissake, wake up! Don't you dare go and die on us, you hear. Don't you dare!"

Chapter Three

Just like a mermaid

All the while, as Jim pulled for dear life, straining his every sinew with each stroke, the girl lay there, lifeless, in the boat, her head cradled on Alfie's lap, as pale as death. He didn't want to keep asking Alfie how she was, if she was still alive, because he could tell how anxious and upset his son already was. Jim longed to stop rowing, just for a moment, to see for himself if she was still breathing, but he knew he had to keep going, to get the girl back to Bryher, and to Mary, as fast as he could. Mary would know what to do, he told himself. Mary would save her.

Never had it taken so long to row up Tresco Channel, Alfie thought. He was quite sure by now that the girl must be dead, so much so that he could hardly bring himself to look at her. Close to tears all the time, he did not trust himself to speak. He kept catching his father's eye, then looking away fast. He could not tell him how cold she was in his arms, how still, that she was gone.

Wind and current and exhaustion were slowing Jim all the way. As he rowed into Green Bay, he was yelling for help with what little breath he had left. Dozens of islanders were hurrying along the beach, Mary among them, along with a gaggle of excited children, back from school by now, running along behind. Only Peg, the island's workhorse, seemed unconcerned at their arrival, intent as she was on browsing the dunes.

As Jim brought the boat in to the shore, everyone came wading out through the shallows to meet them, to haul the boat in. Before Jim had time even to ship his oars, Mary had taken the girl from Alfie's arms, and was carrying her up the beach. Alfie stayed to help his father out of the boat. He seemed unsteady on his feet, so Alfie

held on to his arm for a few moments. Stumbling out of the water, he fell on his hands and knees on the wet sand, all his strength spent, his chest heaving to catch his breath. His head was spinning, his shoulders on fire. There was no part of him that was not aching.

Further up the beach Mary had laid the girl down on dry sand, and was kneeling over her. She was calling to them. "Who is she, Jimbo?" Mary was asking him. "Who is she? Where d'you find her?"

All Jim could do was shake his head. He couldn't speak a word. A crowd was gathering by now, pushing and shoving to get a closer look, all of them full of questions. Mary waved everyone back. "Give her some air, for goodness' sake. Child needs to breathe. She's half dead, can't you see? Get back! And someone send to St Mary's for Dr Crow. Quick about it now! We'll get her home, warm her up in front of the stove." She touched the girl's face with the back of her hand, felt her neck. "She's shivering somethin' terrible. She's got a fever on her. We'll use the cart. Someone fetch Peg, hitch her up and hurry up about it."

Jim and Alfie found a way through the crowd. Just at that moment the girl's eyes opened. She looked up in bewilderment at all the faces staring down at her. She was trying to sit up, trying to say something. Mary bent closer. "What is it, dear? What is it?"

It was only a whisper, and very few heard it. But Mary did, Alfie did. "Lucy," said the girl. Then, as Mary laid her down again, her eyes closed and she lost consciousness once more.

They rushed her home to Veronica Farm in the cart, with Alfie leading Peg, and Mary riding in the back, holding the girl in her arms. Half the island was following along behind, it seemed, in spite of Mary telling them again and again that there was nothing they could do, and they should all go home. No one did. "Can you hurry that horse on, Alfie?" she said.

"She won't go no faster, Mother," Alfie told her. "You know Peg."

"And I know you too, Alfie Wheatcroft," she went on, with a certain tone in her voice. "Had a nice day at school, did you?" Alfie didn't know what to say, so he said

nothing. For a while, neither of them spoke. "Father tells me it was you that found her," Mary began.

"S'pose," Alfie replied.

"Well then, when all's said and done, I reckon it was a good thing you were there. Say no more about it, shall we? Now trot that horse on, whether she likes it or no."

"Yes, Mother," Alfie replied, both relieved and contrite.

An hour or so after everyone reached the farmhouse, Jim and Alfie with all the men and boys were still gathered in the garden outside, waiting for news; while as many of the women as could were crowded into the farmhouse kitchen – much to Mary's irritation, which she did not trouble to hide. They were full of loud advice, which Mary was doing her best to ignore. She simply busied herself getting the child into some dry clothes, rubbing her down, and making her as warm and comfortable as she could in front of the stove. Out in the garden, with Alfie at his side, Jim had recovered enough by now and was busy answering everyone's questions about how he and Alfie had discovered the girl on St Helen's. They all wanted to know more, but there was little to tell, and,

once he had told it, there was nothing more to say. He could only repeat it. But still the questions came.

Dr Crow finally arrived from St Mary's, took one look at the crowd of people gathered outside the house, and at once took control. Standing at the farmhouse door, pipe in hand as usual, he declared: "This is not a circus, and I'm not a clown. I'm the doctor and I've come to see a patient. Now be off with the lot of you, else I'll get ugly."

Unkempt and bedraggled as he always was, a vestige of cabbage left lingering in his beard after his lunch – he wasn't nicknamed Dr Scarecrow for nothing – Dr Crow was much loved and respected throughout the islands. There was hardly anyone who hadn't had good cause to be grateful to Dr Crow at some time or another. For years, he had been wise counsellor and kindly comforter to the islanders. He only had to come into a house for everyone to feel at once reassured. But he was also a little feared. No one argued with Dr Crow. Most of the men walked off with hardly a murmur, and the women in the kitchen might have grumbled about it as they left, but they all went in the end. "Here, hold my pipe, lad," the doctor

said to Alfie, as he came into the house, "but don't you go puffing on it, you hear me. Now where's the patient?"

Lucy was sitting in Jim's chair by the stove, swathed in blankets, wide-eyed with alarm and shivering violently.

"She's called Lucy, Doctor," Mary told him. "That's all we know about her, all she said, just her name. I can't seem to get her warm, Doctor. Tried everything. Can't stop her shivering."

The doctor bent down at once, lifted the girl's feet and put them right up against the stove. "In my experience, Mrs Wheatcroft, we get warm from the feet up," he said. "We'll soon have her right. Nasty ankle she's got. Sprained, by the look of it."

"I tried to give her some hot milk and honey," Mary went on, "but she wouldn't take none."

"You did well to try, but it's water she needs most I think, lots of water," the doctor said, taking his stethoscope out of his bag, and then folding the blankets down from round her neck a little to examine her. The girl at once pulled the blankets up to her chin again, and broke into a sudden fit of coughing that wracked her whole body.

"Easy, girl," the doctor said. "Lucy, isn't it? No one's going to hurt you." He reached out, more slowly this time, and felt her forehead. He took her wrist and felt her pulse. "Well, she's got a burning fever on her, that's for sure," he said, "and that's not good. I wouldn't be surprised if some of these cuts on her legs are infected. They've been there some time, by the look of them." He turned to Jim then. "It was you that found her, Mr Wheatcroft, so they tell me. And on St Helen's, wasn't it? Horrible place."

"Alfie and me, Doctor," Jim replied.

"What was she doing over there?" the doctor went on. "All on her own, was she, when you found her? That right?"

"Think so," Jim replied. "We didn't see no one else. But, to be honest, we didn't have much time to look. Never gave it a thought, not then. I thought about it after though, that she might not have been alone, I mean. So I sent Cousin Dave off in his boat and told him to have a good look around the island, just to be sure. He'll be back soon. He shouldn't be long now, I reckon."

"Out fishing were you, Mr Wheatcroft?"

"Mackerel," said Jim.

"She's a good enough size for mackerel," the doctor went on, smiling for just a moment, "that's for sure. Catch of the year, I'd say. But it's a very good thing you found her when you did. This is a very poorly girl, Mrs Wheatcroft, dehydrated, feverish. It doesn't look to me as if she's eaten properly in days, weeks maybe. Half starved, she is."

He was feeling the girl's neck with both hands, lifting her chin and then peering into her throat. He leaned her forward, tapped her on the back, then put the stethoscope to her chest and listened for a while to her breathing. "A lot of congestion in her lungs, which is not what I like to hear," he declared. "Weak as a kitten. And that cough of hers is down on her chest, where it shouldn't be. It's pneumonia I'm worried about most. You keep her warm, just like you are, Mrs Wheatcroft. Keep those cuts and scratches clean. Warm vegetable broth, hot Bovril, maybe some bread. Not too much at first, mind. A little food and often, that's the best way. Sweet tea is always good too, if she'll take it. And, as I said, plenty of water. She's got to drink. We have to get that fever down, and quickly. I don't

like this shivering, not one bit. We get rid of the shivering, the cough'll go soon enough too."

He leaned closer to her. "You be a good girl now, Lucy, eat and drink all you can. You've got a second name, have you, girl?" Lucy stared up at him, silently, vacantly. "Not much to say for yourself, eh? Where'd you come from, Lucy? Everyone comes from somewhere."

"She don't seem to speak much, Doctor – just her name," said Mary.

"Came up out of the sea, I heard," the doctor went on, lifting her eyelids one by one, "like a mermaid, eh? Well I never." He reached out and lifted up the bottom of the blanket, uncovering her knees. He crossed her legs, then tapped her knees, one after the other. He seemed satisfied. "Don't you worry, Mrs Wheatcroft, once she's better, she'll speak soon enough, and we'll all know more. She's in deep shock, in my opinion. But I'm here to tell you that I am quite sure she can't be a mermaid – because she's got legs. Scratched they might be, but she's got two of them. Look!" They all smiled at that. "That's better. We have to be cheerful around her, you know. It'll make her

feel better; cheerfulness always does. But now comes the question: who's going to look after her? And what about when she gets better? So far as we can tell, it's not as if she belongs to anyone, does she?"

Mary did not hesitate. "We will, of course," she said. "Won't we, Jimbo? All right with you, Alfie?"

Alfie didn't say anything. He was hardly listening. He could not take his eyes off the girl. He was so relieved she was alive. He was wondering now who this strange little creature was, how she got herself on to St Helen's in the first place, and how she had managed to survive over there all on her own.

"She's got to belong to someone, Mary," said Jim. "Every child's got a mother or father somewhere. They'll be missing her."

"But who is she?" Alfie asked.

"She's called Lucy," said Mary, "and that's all we need to know for the moment. As I see it, God has brought her to us, up out of the ocean, sent you and Father over to St Helen's to find her. So we look after her for as long as she needs us. She'll be one of us, for as long as she

has to be, till her mother or father comes to fetch her home. Meanwhile *this* is her home. You'll have a sister for a while, Alfie, and your father and me, we'll have a daughter. Always wanted one of them, didn't we, Jimbo? Never quite managed it till now, did we? We'll nurse her back to health, Doctor, feed her up, put some colour in her cheeks." She brushed away the hair from the girl's forehead. "And then we'll see. You'll be all right with us, dear. Never fear."

The doctor left soon afterwards, saying he'd be back in a week or so to see how Lucy was getting along, telling Mary very firmly that if the fever got worse she was to send for him at once. He took his pipe back off Alfie before he left. "Horrible habit, my lad," he said. "Don't you ever smoke, hear me? Bad for your health. Nasty habit. Else you'll have the doctor calling round all the time, and you don't want that, do you?"

He hadn't been gone more than an hour or two before they had their next visitor. Big Dave Bishop, Cousin Dave, was at the door, and knocking loudly. "Uncle Jim! You in there, Uncle Jim?" He didn't wait for an answer. He burst

in, filling the room with his bulk, his voice loud with excitement. He was cradling an untidy-looking bundle in both arms. "I been over there, Uncle Jim, to St Helen's, just like you told me," he said. "No one else there, not so far as I could see. I went all over. Lots of oystercatchers, and gulls, and a seal or two on the rocks. Didn't find no one else. But I did find this." It was a blanket, a grey, sodden-looking blanket. And then he unfolded it. "There was this too, Uncle Jim. Just lying there in the corner of the Pest House, it was. S'one of they teddy bears, isn't it? Hers, isn't it? Got to be."

Mary took it from him. Like the blanket, it too was bedraggled and wet through, with a soiled pink ribbon round its neck, and one eye was missing. It was smiling, Alfie noticed.

Suddenly Lucy was sitting upright and reaching out for it. "Yours, is it, Lucy dear?" Mary said. The girl grabbed it from her, clutching it fiercely to herself, as if she'd never let it go.

"Hers all right then," Jim said. "No doubt about that."

"And there's something else an' all," Cousin Dave

said. "This here blanket, it's got some funny foreign-like writing on it, like it's a name sewed on, or something." He held it up to show them. "I don't do reading, Uncle Jim. What's it say?"

Jim spelt the name out loud, then tried to pronounce it. "Wil… helm. Wilhelm. That's the Kaiser's name, in't it? I'm sure it is. Sounds like William. Kaiser Bill – he's called that, isn't he?"

"The Kaiser!" said Cousin Dave. "Then it's German, isn't it? Got to be. And if it's German then that's where that girl comes from then, isn't it? Stands to reason, don't it? She's one of them. She's a lousy Hun. Could be the Kaiser's ruddy daughter."

"Don't talk soft, Cousin David," Mary said, pulling the blanket away from him. "And I don't care who she is, whether she comes from Timbuktu. We're all God's children, wherever we come from, whatever we're called, whichever language we speak. And don't you never forget it."

She walked right up to him then, and, looking him right in the eye, she spoke very softly. "You listen to me,

Cousin David. I don't want you never saying anything about the name on this blanket. You hear me? Not a word. You know what it's like these days, with all this tittle-tattle about German spies, and all that. Nothing but poisonous nonsense. This gets around, and people will start talking. Not a word. We keep it in the family, right? You promise, promise me faithfully now."

Cousin Dave looked away, first at Jim then at Alfie, hoping for some help. He was clearly nervous. He didn't seem to know quite where to look, nor what to say. Mary reached up and took his face firmly in her hands, forcing him to look at her. "Promise me? Faithfully?" she said again.

It took Cousin Dave a while to reply. "All right, Aunty Mary," he said at last. "I shan't say nothing about it. Promise. Cross my heart and hope to die."

But Jim didn't trust him. Everyone knew that after a drink or two Big Dave Bishop would say almost anything. "We won't say a word, will we, Cousin David?" said Jim, and with just enough menace in his tone that Cousin Dave would understand that he really meant it. "You

went over to St Helen's and you found the teddy bear, and you found the blanket, just an ordinary grey blanket. That's all you say, like your Aunty Mary told you. And you don't want to upset your Aunty Mary, do you? Cos if she's upset, then I'm upset. And I get nasty when I'm upset, don't I? And you don't want that, right?"

"S'pose," Cousin Dave replied, shamefaced.

All this time Alfie had been staring at Lucy. "I never saw anyone who was German before," he said. "No wonder she don't say nothing. She can't speak English. And she can't understand a word we say, can she? Not if she's German, she can't."

But, as he was speaking, Lucy looked up at him, and held his eyes just for a moment. But it was long enough for Alfie to know for certain that she had understood something – maybe not every word he had said, but something.