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Opening extract from

The Sound of Whales

Written by

Kerr Thomson

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Chicken House
2 Palmer Street
Frome, Somerset BA11 1DS
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www.doublecluck.com

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CHAPTER 1

Walls of black water rose on either side of the boat as it dropped through a crack in the sea. In the wheelhouse Fraser Dunbar clung to an old wooden chart table and waited for those walls to collapse and send him to the bottom.

The windows rattled and the wind roared through the open doorway. The door banged hard on its hinges. He couldn't close it from where he stood, dared not move in case he slipped straight through the opening and out into the night.

Ben McCaig glanced at him from behind the wheel.

'How are you doing?' he shouted above the wind.

'Fine,' Fraser lied. He had never been out at sea in a storm before. It was thrilling to begin with, but now it was just scary. No one in their right mind would go out in this

kind of sea, in this kind of weather, yet Ben was whooping like it was a fairground ride.

'Are you going to be sick again?' he yelled.

Fraser shook his head. 'There's nothing left to puke.'

Ben laughed and spun the wheel.

'My dad's going to kill me,' Fraser shouted.

'Not if this storm kills you first!'

It was a definite possibility and only now did Fraser remember his father's fierce words that very afternoon: 'You must not, under any circumstances, get on that boat again. McCaig is downright reckless and that boat should have been scrapped.'

He'd ignored that advice, had told himself that he was fourteen and didn't take orders from anyone, not even his dad. Now it was both annoying and astonishing that perhaps his father knew best after all. As the boat plunged deeper into the dark sea and his stomach turned to mush he suddenly remembered the list his dad had taken great pleasure in sharing: the top five reasons why people drowned.

Number 5: *water sports accident*. That didn't apply.

Number 4: *alcohol consumption*. Good, he hadn't touched a drop.

Number 3: *Inability to swim*. No problem, he could swim just fine.

Number 2: *Failure to wear life preserver*. Fraser looked behind him at the ancient life jackets hanging on the wheelhouse wall. He could grab one if needed, but if Ben

wasn't wearing a life jacket then neither was he.

Number 1: *Water conditions exceed swimming ability*. He swallowed hard as he looked out at the ferocious ocean. He wasn't *that* good a swimmer. Nobody was.

The walls of water were closing in, the little boat was about to be swallowed whole; Fraser let out a cry and hoped that Ben hadn't heard. Then at the last moment the boat rose, grabbing an edge of the swell and riding it slowly, casually almost, out of the watery canyon. Despite its peeling paint and shabby deck, an old island lobster boat like this was built for these wild seas off the northwest of Scotland.

Maybe they were not about to sink after all, Fraser thought. It had seemed certain for a moment there.

With one hand still on the wheel and his legs splayed for balance, Ben reached behind him and grabbed the banging door, pushing it shut and securing the catch. Fraser wiped a hand across his face, tasting salty water.

Ben patted the wheel. 'This old piece of junk might just get us home.' He peered through the window. 'The harbour's around here somewhere.'

The slow swish of a solitary wiper was fighting to keep the wheelhouse window clear. Fraser could see no sign of the lights of Skulavaig.

And then he remembered why they were here in the first place, sailing so late at night. 'Where are the whales?'

Ben rubbed his stubbly chin. 'They will have dived to deeper water . . . I hope. It'll be a bit daft if we miss the

harbour and hit a whale.' The grin was gone, there was no more whooping. Whales were Ben's life.

It was already a bit daft, Fraser thought, to go sailing into the night with clouds building and the wind picking up, but being with Dr Ben McCaig, professor of marine biology at Aberdeen University, was beyond cool. He'd even given Fraser a job title for the summer: Seasonal Voluntary Assistant Researcher, which really meant 'general dogsbody', but that was OK. It was enough that Ben let him come along and it was something to do over the summer holidays. The island of Nin was not the most exciting of places at the best of times and these were not the best of times on his little island.

Ben pulled back on the throttle and the throb of the engine died, the boat pitching hard. 'I can't see a thing,' he said. 'I'll have to step outside to see where we are.'

He lunged out of the door and Fraser staggered after him, with a glance at the unused life jackets. They stood with their backs against the wheelhouse and were pummelled by the wind and rain. The sea was a dark, heaving mass, broken only by the white flash of a breaking wave. It was impossible to tell where the water ended and the land began, but they could see the tops of the cliffs, black against the grey tumbling clouds.

With growing panic Fraser scanned the coastline, working along from the cliffs to get his bearings. Twice he wiped eyes that stung from the spray. As his eyes refocused, he saw a dot of light further up the coast. It was too far out

to be on land.

'Another boat,' Fraser said to Ben, but when he looked again he couldn't find the light.

He turned his head and saw the faint glow of other lights emerging from the darkness. It was Skulavaig.

'Over there,' he shouted, pointing.

'Aye, I see them,' Ben said. 'We're a half-mile too far north. Five more minutes sailing on the same heading and we would have hit the cliffs.' He turned for the wheelhouse. 'Let's get home.'

Fraser breathed a sigh of relief as deep as the ocean. The wind and the waves and the rocks would have to gang up some other night and try to sink their little boat. He looked again for the other vessel that was sailing for the open ocean. There was no sign of it.

He was stepping into the safety of the wheelhouse when he heard the cry. It was hard to hear anything above the roar of the wind and for a moment he thought he had imagined it. But it came again and this time he recognized a word.

'Help!'

Fraser lurched across the deck, held on to the rail with both hands as he leant out over the water. It came again, louder this time, clearer.

'Help me!'

There was someone in the water.

'Did you hear that?' he shouted at the wheelhouse.

'Hear what?'

'A cry for help.'

Ben leant out, cocked an ear for a few seconds, then frowned and shook his head. 'Just the wind playing tricks.'

Fraser *had* heard something, he was certain of it. He focused his ears towards the ocean and listened. The wind roared and the sea boomed and the engine beneath his feet clunked back to life as Ben pushed forward on the throttle. He could hear nothing else.

He scanned the ocean but the water was black and turbulent, it was impossible to fix his gaze on any one spot, but towards the cliffs there *was* . . . something. A hand, an arm maybe? And was that a head, or just a breaking whitecap? Fraser shouted back at the wheelhouse but Ben couldn't hear. That other light, it had to be another boat. Had it lost one of its crew? Had it *sunk*?

He staggered back to the wheelhouse, pulled himself through the door.

'There's someone in the water,' he said breathlessly, urgently.

'You're imagining it, Fraze,' said Ben. He was concentrating now, making sure they got back to harbour.

'I saw something.'

'Aye, the waves.'

'I saw an arm.'

Ben fixed him with a troubled look. 'You're certain?'

Fraser hesitated. Was he certain? Was it not just a breaking wave? His confidence began to fade the more he thought about it.

Ben saw the uncertainty. 'In the dark your eyes play tricks.'

But not your ears as well. 'I heard a cry.'

'The wind.'

'No. A voice. We have to turn around.'

'We're almost at the harbour. We're getting out of this storm before we go under.'

'But the person in the water . . . '

'There's no one there, Fraser.'

'There is.'

'I'll chase whales in the dark but I'm not chasing ghosts.'

Fraser wanted to argue but he saw Ben's narrow eyes and firm mouth and knew it was useless. He peered through the glass of the wheelhouse at the stormy night. Maybe he was wrong. Maybe he *had* imagined it. But he couldn't stop thinking there was someone out there among the waves, crying for help and disappearing under the black water.