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opening extract from

Ingo

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CHAPTER ONE

You'll find the mermaid of Zennor inside Zennor Church, if you know where to look. She's carved from old, hard, dark wood. The church is dark, too, so you have to bend down to see her clearly. You can trace the shape of her tail with your finger.

Someone slashed across her with a knife a long time ago. A sharp, angry knife. I touched the slash mark very gently, so I wouldn't hurt the mermaid any more.

"Why did they do that to her, Dad? Why did they hurt her?"

"I don't know, Sapphy. People do cruel things sometimes, when they're angry."

And then Dad told me the mermaid's story. I was only little, but I remember every word.

"The Zennor mermaid fell in love with a human," said Dad, "but she was a Mer creature and so she couldn't come to live with him up in the dry air. It would have killed her. But she couldn't forget him, and she couldn't live without him. She couldn't even sleep for thinking about him. All she wanted was to be with him."

"Would she have died in the air?" I asked.

"Yes. Mer people can't live away from the water. Anyway, the man couldn't forget her either. The sight of the mermaid burned in his mind, day and night. And the mermaid felt just the same. When the tide was high, she would swim up into the cove, then up the stream, as close as she could to the church, to hear him singing in the choir."

"I thought it was mermaids that sang, Dad."

"In this story it was the man who sang. In the end the mermaid swam up the stream one last time and he couldn't bear to see her go. He swam away with her, and he was never seen again. He became one of the Mer people."

"What was his name, Dad?"

"Mathew Trewhella," said Dad, looking down at me.

"But Dad, that's your name! How come he's got the same name as you?"

"It's just by chance, Sapphy. It all happened hundreds of years ago. You know how the same names keep on going in Cornwall."

"What was the mermaid called, Dad?"

"She was called Morveren. People said she was the Mer King's daughter, but I don't believe that's true."

"Why not?"

"Because the Mer don't have kings."

Dad sounded so sure about this that I didn't ask him how he knew. When you're little, you think your mum and dad know everything. I wasn't surprised that Dad knew so much about the Mer.

I stroked the wooden mermaid again, and wished I could see her in real life, swimming up the stream with her beautiful shining tail. And then another thought hit me.

"But Dad, what about all the people the man left behind? What about his family?"

"He never saw them again," said Dad.

"Not even his mum or his dad?"

"No. None of them. He belonged to the Mer."

I tried to imagine what it would be like never to see Dad again, or Mum. The thought was enough to make my heart beat fast with terror. I couldn't live without them, I knew I couldn't.

I looked up at Dad. His face looked faraway and a bit unhappy. I didn't like it. I wanted to bring him back to me, now.

"Can't catch me!" I shouted, and I ran off clattering up the stone aisle of the church to the door. The door was heavy and the fastening was stiff but I wrestled it open.

"You can't catch me!" I yelled back over my shoulder, and I ran out through the porch, down the stone steps and into the sunshine of the lane. I heard the church door bang and there was Dad, leaping down the steps after me. The faraway look had gone from his face.

"Look out, Sapphy, I'm coming to get you!"



That was a long time ago. Dad never talked about the Mer again, and nor did I. But the story lodged deep inside my mind like an underwater rock that can tear a ship open in bad weather. I wished I'd never seen the Zennor mermaid. She was beautiful, but she scared me.



It's Midsummer Eve now, and when it gets dark they'll light the Midsummer Fire on Carrack Down. We go up there every Midsummer Eve. I love it when they throw the wreath of flowers into the flames, and the wreath flares up so that for a few seconds you watch flowers made out of fire. The bonfire blazes and everyone drinks and dances and laughs and talks. Midsummer Night is so short that dawn arrives before the party's over.

Dad's up there now, helping build the fire. They pile furze and brushwood until the bonfire stands taller than me or Conor. Conor's my brother; he's two years older than me.

"Come on, Saph! I'm going on up to see how big the bonfire is now."

I run after Conor. This is how it usually is. Conor ahead, and me hurrying behind, trying to keep up with him.

"Wait for me, Con!"



We wait for the sun to set and for the crowd to gather, and then it's time to light the Midsummer Fire. The first star shines out. Geoff Treyarnon thrusts his flaming torch into the dry heart of the bonfire. The fire blazes up and everyone links hands and begins to dance around it, faster and faster. The flames leap higher than the people and we have to jump back.

Conor and I join the ring around the fire. Mum and Dad dance too, holding hands. It makes me so happy to see them like this, dancing and smiling at each other. If only it was always like this. No quarrels, no loud voices...

The flames jump higher and higher and everyone yells and laughs. Conor drinks a bottle of ginger beer, but I don't like the taste. I wrap myself in a rug and sit and watch until the flames blur into red and orange and gold. My eyes sting and I shut them, just for a minute. The fire melts into velvety blackness. There are stars in the blackness and I want to count them one by one, but they're dancing too fast...

I must have fallen asleep. Suddenly Dad's here, swooping down out of the night to pick me up.

"All right, Sapphy? Hold on tight now and I'll carry you down the hill."

I'm too big to be carried, but it's Midsummer Night and Dad says that's the one night when all the rules can be broken. He picks me up, still wrapped in the rug with my feet poking out. I look back over his shoulder. The fire

has flattened down into a heap of red ash. People are still sitting around it drinking, but the dancing's over.

The path that leads down to our cottage is rough and steep, but Dad won't let me drop. My dad is strong. He takes his boat out in most weathers and he can swim more than three miles. He has a medal for life-saving.

Mum and Conor are walking ahead of us on the path down. They're talking, but I can't hear the words. I put my arms round Dad's neck and hold on tight, partly because the path is rough and partly because I love him. His strength makes me feel so safe.

Dad begins to sing. He sings *O Peggy Gordon* and his voice rises up loud and sweet into the summer night.

I wish I was away in Ingo
Far across the briny sea,
Sailing over deepest waters...

I love it when Dad sings. He has a great voice and people used to say that he should be in the church choir, but Dad only laughs at that.

"I'd rather sing in the open air," he says. It's true that when he's working in our garden people lean against our wall to listen to him. Dad likes singing in the pub as well.

Mum, Dad, me and Conor. All of us going home safe on a summer night.

I always think that our family is made up of two halves. There is Conor and Mum, who are calm and

sensible and always do what they say they're going to do. And there's me and Dad. We flare up like the Midsummer Bonfire, lose our tempers and say things we should never say. Sometimes we don't know what we're going to do until we've done it. And I sometimes tell lies when I need to, which Conor never does. Conor tells you the truth straight out. You just have to get used to it.

But it doesn't matter that we're a family of two halves, as long as we stick together.

We come to the steepest part of the path, and Dad has to put me down. Westward over the sea there is still a bit of light, like the ghost of a sunset or maybe the ghost of the moon rising. The sea stretches out dark in the distance. I'm glad that Dad's stopped here, because I love to watch the sea.

Dad has stopped singing too. He stands there still and silent, staring way out to sea. He looks as if he's searching for something. A boat maybe. But there won't be any boats out tonight. Not on Midsummer Night.

Even though Dad's standing next to me, I feel as if he's forgotten me. He's far away.

"Dad," I say at last. I feel uneasy. "Dad?" But Dad doesn't answer. I'm tired and cold now and my legs are shivery. I just want to be at home, all four of us safe inside our cottage, with the door shut. I want to be in bed, falling into sleep.

"Dad, let's catch up with Mum and Conor. They're way ahead of us. *Da–ad—*"

But Dad holds up his hand. "Hush," he says. "Listen."

I listen. I hear an owl hunting. I hear the deep noise of the sea, like breathing. On a calm night you have to listen for it, but it's there all the time. You would only hear silence if the world ended and the sea stopped moving. As soon as this thought comes into my mind the uneasy feeling gets stronger. I don't like this. I'm afraid.

"Listen," says Dad again. The way he says it makes my skin prickle all over with fear.

"What, Dad?" I say sharply. "What are you listening to?"

"Can't you hear it?"

"*What?*"

But Dad still won't answer. He stares out to sea a little longer and then he shakes himself as if he needs to wake up.

"Time to go, Sapphy."

It's too dark for me to see Dad's face clearly, but his voice is normal again. He swings me back up into his arms. "Let's be getting you home."

By the time we reach our cottage, Mum has already sent Conor upstairs to bed.

"Go on up now, Sapphy," says Dad. He stretches and yawns, but his eyes are brilliant and wide awake. I notice that he's left the door ajar, as if he's planning to go back outside. The front door to our cottage comes straight into our living room, and then you go through the back to the kitchen. Mum's in the kitchen, clattering plates.

"I'm away down to the shore," Dad calls to her. "I can't settle to sleep yet."

Mum emerges from the kitchen, blinking with tiredness.

"What? At this time of night?"

"It's a wonderful night," says Dad. "The longest day and the shortest night. Think of it, Jennie, we won't get another night like this for a whole year."

"You'll break your neck on the rocks one of these nights," says Mum.

But we all know he won't. Dad knows his way too well.



This is how you get down to our cove. The track runs by our cottage. You follow it to the end, and then there's a path where bracken and brambles and foxgloves grow up so high that you wouldn't find the way unless you knew it. Push them aside, and there's the path. When I was little I used to pretend it was magic. You go down the path, and suddenly you come out on to a grassy shelf above the cove. You might think you're nearly there, but you're not, not at all. You have to scramble over the lip of the cliff and then climb down over a jumble of huge black rocks.

The rocks are slippery with weed. Sometimes you have to stretch yourself down for the next foothold. Sometimes you have to jump. Sometimes you fall. Conor and I have both got scars on our legs from falling on the rocks.

Down and down, and then you can squeeze between the two boulders that guard the way to the cove. It's damp and dank in the shadow of the boulders, and it smells of fish and weed. Conor and I find long-legged spider crabs there, and lengths of rope, and fish skeletons, and pieces of driftwood.

After you pass through the boulders there are more rocks to climb across. But you can see the beach now. You're nearly there.

The beach. Our beach, made of flat, white sand. The best beach in the world.

You jump down on to it. You're there! But the beach only exists at mid to low tide. At high tide it disappears completely, and the whole cove is full of the sea.

But when the beach is there, you can swim, climb on the rocks and dive, picnic and sunbathe, make a fire of driftwood and cook on it, explore the rock pools, watch the gulls screaming round their nests... Conor and I go there nearly every day in summer, when the tide's right.

Sometimes we explore the caves at the back of our beach. They're all dark and slimy, and they echo when you call. *Hello... lo... lo... Can you hear me... hear me... hear me...*

The air's clammy, and there's a sound of water dripping. You can't tell where it's coming from. You can wriggle your way down narrow passages, but not too far in case you get stuck and the tide comes in and drowns you. Imagine being stuck in a slimy tunnel of rock while

the cold sea curls round your toes and then your legs, and you know all the time what's going to happen, no matter how much you struggle.

"Keep a sharp lookout when you're in those caves," Dad always tells us. "Don't forget the time. The tide comes in fast, and you could get cut off."

You have to watch the tide. When the water reaches a black rock that me and Conor call the Time Rock, it's time to go. Back over the sand, scramble over the stones, squeeze between the boulders and then up the rocks, as fast as you can. No good thinking you can swim for safety. If you tried to swim around the headland you'd be caught by the rip and carried away.

Dad keeps his boat on the other side of the rocks, where it's deep water. When the weather's bad the waves could smash the boat against the rocks, so Dad has a winch to haul the *Peggy Gordon* up above the tide line. Dad's always out in the *Peggy Gordon*, fishing or checking the crab pots, or else taking photographs. He takes photos and changes the images on his computer and he writes text on them; then they get framed and he sells them to tourists.

So when Dad says he is going down to the cove, there's no reason to worry. Dad would never break his neck on those rocks, and it will be dawn before long. I used to be scared when he was out in his boat and the weather turned bad, but he always came home safe. He knows every wrinkle of the coast. *I know every pool of salt*

water and every creature in it, he says, and it doesn't sound like boasting, because it's the truth.

But tonight, Mum's worried.

"Don't go, Mathew," she says. "It's much too late. Let's get to bed."

"Why don't you come with me?" he answers. I can tell he really wants her to come. "Why don't you leave these children for once and come with me?"

He says 'these children' as if it's strangers he's talking about, not me and Conor. As if I'm not even in the room. I hate it. I feel cold again, and scared.

"How can I leave Sapphire in the middle of the night?" asks Mum.

"What's going to happen? You'll be all right, won't you, Sapphy, if me and Mum take a walk together down to the cove? Conor's only upstairs."

I look at Mum, then back to Dad.

"Yes," I say, in a voice that means no. Mum's got to understand that I mean no...

"She's too young," says Mum. "It's all right, Sapphy, don't look so scared. I'm not leaving you."

Dad flashes with anger. "Are we never going to have a life of our own again?" he asks fiercely. "They're not babies any more. Come down to the sea with me, Jennie."

But Mum shakes her head. I feel guilty now as well as scared. I hate it when Dad's angry, and it's my fault this time.

"I'll go on my own then," says Dad. His face is hard. He turns away. "Don't bother to wait up for me, Jennie."

"Mathew!" says Mum, but the door swings wide and Dad's vanished into the night. The door bangs.

"Go on up to bed now, Sapphy," says Mum, in a tired, quiet voice.

I go up to bed. There are two bedrooms in our cottage. Mum and Dad sleep in one, and I sleep in the other. Conor has the best deal of all. There's a ladder up from my bedroom that goes into the loft, where Conor sleeps. Dad made him a window in one end. When Conor wants to be alone he can pull up the ladder and no one can get him.



I get undressed, thinking sleepily about the bonfire, and about Mum and Dad arguing, then I put it all out of my mind. I roll into bed and snuggle down deep under the duvet and sleep comes up over me like a tide.

I don't know anything yet.

I don't know that this is the last night of me and Conor, Mum and Dad, all safe together. I don't know that the two halves of my family are starting to rip apart while I sleep.

But I dream about the mermaid of Zennor. I dream that I'm tracing the deep knife cut that slashes across her body. I'm trying to rub it out, so that the mermaid will be whole and well again. I dream that she opens her wooden eyes and smiles at me.