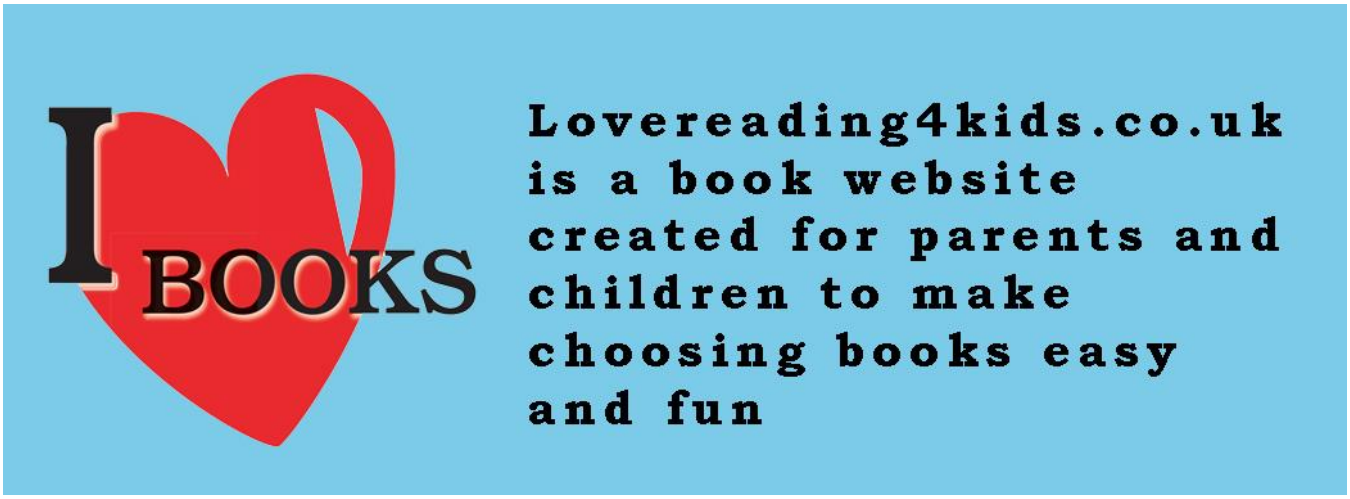


Opening extract from

The Seal's Fate

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BILLY BOY

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CHAPTER 1

Buddies

The baby seal looked at Bobby Parrish with round black eyes. Cute if you liked that sort of thing. If you were a girl maybe, with posters of Manga ponies on her walls. Boys didn't do cute. Boys caught fish and gutted them and fed their innards to the gulls. Boys killed things because that was how life was, and you'd better be ready for it when school was

over. Bobby knew that when Saint Brendan's doors closed behind him for the last time he would strip off his uniform, put on some oilskins and take his berth on his dad's boat, *The Lady Irene*.

Still, the seal was cute. Bobby could admit that much to himself, as long as no one was around. He was careful not to think it too loud, in case one of his friends was telepathic. The animal's black nose quivered and white sunspots spread across its back like a mane. Cute. But, like Dad said, it was vermin.

Bobby crawled a couple of feet closer, careful not to startle the seal. Limestone crags pressed



into his stomach, and rock-pool slime destroyed his jeans. It didn't matter. A working man had to be able to ignore discomfort to get the job done.

The seal watched him. It was not afraid.

Quite the opposite – it seemed pleased at the prospect of company. It arched its back and slapped its flippers on the slick rock. Bobby slapped the rocks himself, to try to get a bit of rapport going with the seal. It seemed to do the trick. The seal stretched its tiny head forward, and coughed three short barks.

'We're friends now,' Bobby thought. 'Buddies. I bet this seal thinks we're going to spend the summer swimming around the bay, fighting crime.'

"Well, old buddy," Bobby told the seal, out loud. "Sorry to disappoint you, but your future is not going to be quite so rosy."

Bobby reached behind him and wrapped his fingers around the handle of the club.