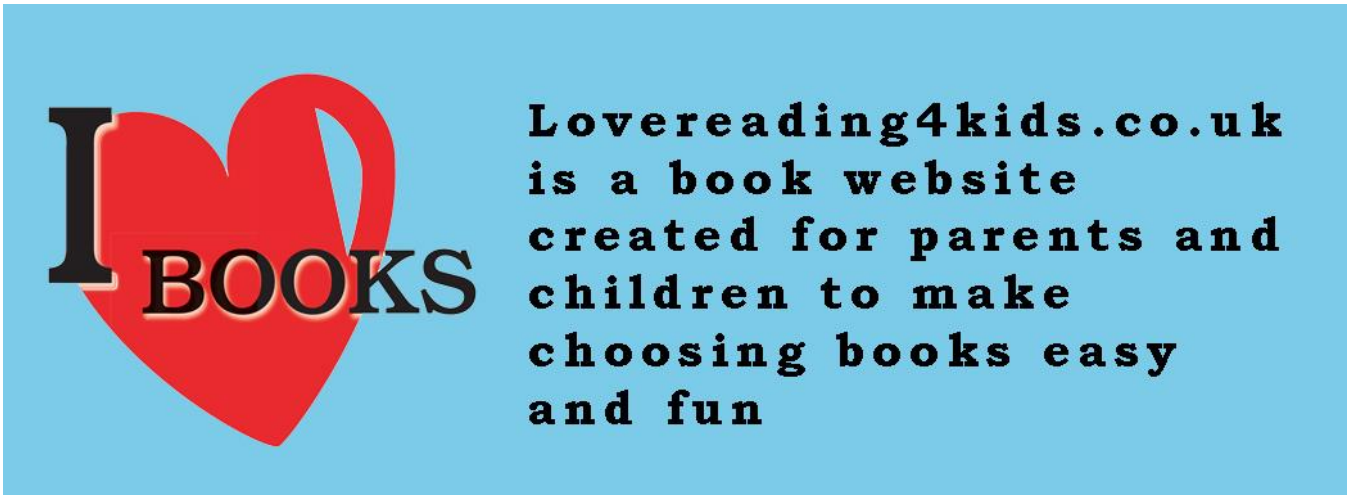

Opening extract from

The House of Hummingbird Island

Written by

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1

You don't usually see a horse like Baronet – or any horse at all – on the deck of a ship mid-Atlantic, unless, that is, you're travelling with someone like Idie Grace.

Baronet whinnied with joy for the salt spray on his muzzle, the sun on his back, and the ladies in the lounge chairs turned at his whinny, like leaves disturbed by a breeze. They lifted their glasses and murmured.

'*Heavens – a horse.*'

'*Has no one called the captain?*'

'*That's her – with it – look, it must be the Grace girl . . .*'

'*Has she no hat?*'

'*Is there no one in charge of her?*'

Idie thought of her governess and said to herself, *No, there is no one in charge of me, because when we reached the Bay of Biscay my governess declared she wouldn't come out of her cabin till the seas stopped shifting so.* Idie's smile surfaced, together with her sense of mischief, and she told Baronet, 'Now there's only Numbers, and he's

not used to small girls or horses, so you and I can do as we please. See, I've taken my hat off and shan't wear hats or stockings ever again.'

'*Her mother was a beauty, in spite of everything . . .*'

Idie paused. *Her mother was a beauty.* She held that close and repeated it in her head, *My mother was a beauty.* She'd write it in her book. She whispered to Baronet to stay very still and listen to what else the ladies said because Idie gathered the things she overheard and stored them like rare treasures in a special book.

'*That hair – just look at it. From her father's side of course . . .*'

Idie winced. Her hair was the wrong kind of hair. She knew that because Myles and Benedict and all the Pomeroy Graces had straight, sunshiny hair. Nevertheless she lifted her hatless head and stuck out her chin to show the ladies she didn't care what they whispered behind their fans.

Even if the sea is smooth and flat as a plate, it's tricky to manage a high-spirited horse on the deck of a ship. There were more obstacles, awnings and bulkheads and things, than Idie had counted on and she wondered what Baronet would make of them all, but he simply nuzzled her to tell her of his interest in the salt and the sea.

'You think I'm all right, Baronet, but other people think there's nothing right about me at all.' An arrowy

dart shot through her sunny mood. Despite all her questions, and without anything that amounted to an explanation, Lord Grace, known to all as Grancat and the only father Idie'd ever known, had sent her away from Pomeroy, off to a place so far away that there might be no going back. The only good that could come of leaving Pomeroy, Idie had told herself, was that she might find out about her mother.

'Come, Baronet, hurry.'

Baronet's nostrils flared in puzzlement at the lack of grass in evidence on the surface of an ocean. Idie tugged at his head rope. They must reach the prow before the flustered captaincy marched him back down to the stinking belly of the ship. Scandalized whispers ran from chair to chair. People were always watching; that was the problem. Well, now they had something to watch: a fine horse was stepping out to take the air on the deck of the *Majestic*.

'*Call the Captain! Someone* call *the Captain!*'

'*They sent for her, you know, to fetch her back.*'

'*No place for a young girl, that house, so large and remote.*'

'*I've heard it's haunted.*'

Haunted? Idie started. Haunted was not good. Haunted would in fact be a negative.

'*Well, it would be, after what happened there . . .*'

After what happened there? What *had* happened there? But Idie felt their eyes on her and tossed

her head and led Baronet on.

'*There's no other relative, of course, only her.*'

A tide of consternation and curiosity swept like a bow wave before their progress along the deck. A group of men in panama hats who were smoking and playing bridge raised their brows, a little more admiring, perhaps, than the women, and stared.

'*My word, look at that. A horse . . .*'

'*That's her . . . the Grace girl . . . you know – the one . . .*'

'*That animal is a beauty.*'

Idie wondered if it were a bad thing to be a beauty, but in Baronet's case she didn't suppose it was. Forced to stop by an inconvenient set of stairs that barred their way, she turned Baronet and led him to the deck rail. Baronet nuzzled her as if to say he knew her defiance was the angry, fragile issue of shock and pain.

'Look, Baronet, we're at sea and we don't know where we're going nor why.'

She bit her lip, remembering how Myles and she had huddled behind the plaid curtains of Grancat's study, listening as plans were made for her departure. Idie had become an eavesdropper, listening behind curtains and doors, concentrating with all her being on what was said.

'Only Miss Treble can be induced into accompanying the child, and she only on account of the money,' Grancat had said.

Treble, Idie's governess, was idle and cumbersome; a woman of no discernible age and no apparent purpose in life. Myles had sniggered at the notion of Treble being in charge of Idie, and Grancat had murmured, 'Treble, good God . . . heaven help the child. Webb, of course you must accompany the child and see her installed.'

Algernon Webb, known to the family as Numbers, was an accountant or lawyer or some useful combination of both, and he'd been at Pomeroy so long you could almost forget he was there at all. Idie peered between the curtains. Numbers appeared a little alarmed about accompanying Idie on such a voyage; his eyebrows having escaped so far up his forehead in shock at the idea that she began to worry they might never be able to come down again. On Myles's knee lay the Idie Book, in which Myles wrote the things they learned about her. So far he'd written:

1. *Idie is not the same as us.*
2. *But she has the same name [GRACE].*
3. *Grancat is mine and Benedict's father but not Idie's.*
4. *Someone just gave Idie to Grancat, like a kind of parcel.*
5. *Then [later, when Idie was bigger] a letter came telling Grancat she had to go back to where she came from at the start.*
6. *Grancat says it's because she is a lady of property*

now. We don't know if that's good or not.

7. *Grancat says that Blood is THICKER than Water. We don't know what that means, but the result of it is that Idie has to go to a small and faraway place called Hummingbird Island.*

Myles's brow furrowed as he pencilled a new entry:

8. *It is in the WEST INDIES and they are dangerous and only Treble will go to them them because she is greedy for the money. You have to pay someone a good deal to go to them because they are awash with brigands and bandits.*
9. *Idie won't ever come back because the Indies are so far away.*

Round tears crawled down his grubby, freckled cheeks. Myles made fatter tears than anyone else. Grancat said that was because Myles's heart was so much bigger than other people's. Myles was slow and thoughtful and life came less easily to him that it did to Benedict, who was quick and reckless, but Benedict was mostly too busy and grown-up to want to play with Idie.

10. *We won't be allowed to visit her because the Indies are hellish hot and only pirates live there.*

Idie crept away. She had her own book. Across the

cover she'd written 'My Mother', and this book was the only secret she ever kept from Myles and Benedict. Alone in the attic, Idie opened it and reread the first entries:

I don't belong at Pomeroy because my hair is the wrong colour.

Myles said he doesn't think I ever had a mother, but I do because all children have mothers.

Then he said my mother didn't love me and that's why she sent me away.

Grancat said she DID love me and that's why she sent me away, because sometimes it is kinder to do that.

First my father died [a long time ago] and now my mother is dead too.

Idie took up her pencil and added:

My mother lived in the West Indies so now I have to go to her house.

I have no other relative except for my Pomeroy cousins.

Then she'd put that book down and taken up another, *The Flora and Fauna of the Indies*, and pored over the coloured plates in it.

2

'*Trescientos escudos.* On-ly *trescientos.*'

A large bird, a white and lemon-yellow parakeet, was held high above the heads of the crowd on the dock.

'I'll have him.'

The young girl with the mane of dark hair slipped between the trousered legs and pastel skirts of the crowd. Numbers followed in her slipstream, dabbing his face with a handkerchief and apologizing at least twice to everyone he passed.

'Miss Grace! Miss Grace!'

'On-ly trescientos *escudos.* Ve-rrry fine . . . ve-rrry good . . . very handsome . . . ve-rrry clever . . . ve-rrry booot-ti-ful.'

'I want him – I'll have him,' Idie told the man, breathless.

The hawker eyed the fine embroidery of Idie's collar.

'*Trescientos escudos.*'

'Yes, yes, I want him.'

'Ve-rrry clever. Name of poet: Homer. H-O-M-E-R. Famous poet. Bird of the ambassador of Brazil.'

There were cockatoos and parakeets and lorikeets and all sorts on the dock in the Azores, but Idie supposed that they hadn't all belonged to ambassadors.

'Miss Grace –' pleaded Numbers – 'do wait, Miss Grace.'

'*Trescientos escudos*,' insisted the hawker.

'I have three hundred escudos,' said Idie, loud and determined.

The parakeet dipped his head and inspected Idie sideways.

'*Trescientos escudos* –'

'Miss Grace, I do not think – where is Miss Treble? Should we not consult Miss Treble on the matter? I am sure—' petitioned Numbers.

'Miss Treble has counted herself out of the equation by choosing to remain in her cabin, where the whisky is to hand. She says whisky is medicinal in a case of seasickness,' responded Idie in a loud voice, adding, 'Besides, she says the Azores are NOT SAFE, that no one she knows has disembarked there and returned alive.'

'Oh dear. Oh dear.' Numbers cast about. 'Well, you see, about the parrot, Miss Grace, you must be moderate, be prudent, Miss Grace. Moderation and prudence . . .' Numbers glanced nervously at the large bird and dabbed his face and said, 'They live

a very long time, you know . . .'

Homer moved his head with the spasmodic twitch common to all birds and his crest oscillated like the ornamentation of an oriental emperor. He fastened a resolute eye on Numbers and plumped out his nape, then his breast and finally, when, like a soufflé, he'd quite doubled in size, he said, '*TRESCIENTOS ESCUDOS*.'

Numbers stepped back in alarm, but Idie squealed with delight.

'You SEE, he TALKS.'

'Ve-rrry fine bird, talking bird, *senhorita*, ve-rrry clever bird. Name, Homer. *Trescientos escudos*.'

'Miss Grace, it'll be awkward, do you not think, very awkward, to have a parrot . . . ?'

'*Parakeet.* And he will talk to me. NO ONE ELSE talks to me . . .' Idie spoke loudly. The crowd grew silent; heads turned. Sweat broke out on Numbers's brow. 'YOU never talk to me and Miss Treble is too inconvenienced by the mild swell that occurred THREE days ago in the Bay of Biscay to leave her cabin.' Idie noted with satisfaction that Numbers was foraging in a pocket in a flustered sort of way and she continued triumphantly, her voice rising. 'So, in the absence of any other companionable companion, and because whisky isn't quite so medicinal as Miss Treble thinks, Homer will step into the breach and talk to me.'

'*Ve-rrry clever bird.*'

Homer dipped his head in receipt of the compliment, then began to edge his way, claw over claw, towards Idie. He placed one large, many-jointed claw on the bare skin of her arm, inclined his head a fraction to her and said, 'YOUR EXCELLENCY.'

A smile burst over Idie's face.

Homer curled the segments of his claws around her small arm. He shuffled and bustled and waggled his rear quarters, then waggled and bustled again till his rump had billowed like a cloud. When he was quite sure he was looking his most magnificent and was installed in the most commodious manner possible, his tail feathers lifted again and settled over Idie's arm, like the gown of a dowager over a throne she has no intention of relinquishing.

With the great bird on her small arm, Idie turned. The crowd parted for them, then closed and clustered after them, watching and whispering and shutting out the hapless Numbers.

With the acquisition of Homer, Idie's spirits rallied and she realized the point of having money of her own. However, Homer proved a disappointing companion on that lonely journey, because he took a dim view of sea voyages, dropping his head beneath his wing and refusing to talk for a long while.

Numbers and Treble kept to their cabins and Idie wondered that she should have been sent to the end

of the world in the charge of two such un-seaworthy grown-ups.

One night after dining alone with a despondent sherbet crested parakeet, she wrapped a cardigan around herself and slipped out of her cabin. She paused at Treble's door, wondering whether her governess had grown accustomed to seas that shifted. The door was ajar and Idie heard Numbers talking in a hushed tone.

'I never know what's coming next, what mood or prank will take her. I cannot talk to her. I have no wife nor child, and I fear lack of practice ties my tongue, Miss Treble.' Idie peeked through the gap in the door. Treble was running a plump finger through her ringlets. Numbers, however, was evidently not the sort of man to notice the fetching gestures women might make, thought Idie, because he wrung his hands and ploughed on, 'She's resorted to a parrot, God help her, for her own amusement and to mock me. She's precocious, but she knows nothing of the world, wasn't received by neighbours, rarely went beyond the bounds of the park at Pomeroy. They've told her nothing. She doesn't know where she's going nor why, and like a wounded thing she snarls and holds her head high and I – anything I tell her would only wound her more deeply.'

You WILL tell me, said Idie to herself. *Whatever there is to know, I must know it.*

'Mr Webb, don't worry yourself. That child requires EXPERIENCED MANAGEMENT. Leave everything in my hands. When the sea's calm, I'll be quite myself and I'll *tame* the child.'

Idie snorted. *Tame the child? Well, Treble might find that Miss Idie Grace CANNOT be tamed.*

Numbers answered. 'I am most grateful to you, Miss Treble. I wish you goodnight and a speedy recovery.'

Idie made a dash past the cabin for the stairs.

There was a dance on the quarterdeck. A band was playing waltzes under the awning, couples dancing by lamplight. Idie stood behind a post and watched, her eyes travelling from one woman to another, resting on their dresses, their faces, their hair, wondering what sort of clothes her own mother had worn, and then why it was that her mother had lived in a house that had ghosts in it, and why she had sent her daughter away, and why she, Idie, was told nothing about anything. Idie never so much as glanced at the men. Grancat wasn't Idie's father, but he dwarfed all other men and was all the father she'd ever wanted.

The wind grew fierce and the waves tall. The lamps were put out, the couples crept below deck, but Idie lingered. The hull was gleaming beneath the water as if lit by a lantern. Idie crept along the deck rail and saw how the wake had turned to a ribbon of fire and how the waves broke about the boat in luminous starry showers. Floating lights gleamed on the water

and were gone, and the fishes were grown silvery as if lit with a light of their own.

'It's the salt that makes light when the ship meets a rough sea.'

Idie turned, surprised for she'd not noticed anyone else still about on that part of the deck.

A tall, dark-skinned man approached and said, 'It is not safe. Come, miss, I take you back inside.' His voice was slow and sing-song and strange to her, but Idie considered him and concluded he had the kind of uprightness about him that was desirable in an adult. 'You are going home.'

It was part question, part statement. She scowled, cross that he, like everyone else, knew about her, and said through her teeth, 'It's NOT home.'

'Miss Grace, it is a fine place.'

He knew her name too.

'It is good you are going home,' he repeated.

'Pomeroy is my HOME,' said Idie sullenly.

'That house is tall and grey and –' he paused, searching for the right word – 'big and cross and frownin' at the world.'

Idie started. He knew Pomeroy. It was him – the man who'd come with the letter for Grancat, the letter that said she had to leave, the one that had changed everything and meant that nothing would ever be the same again.

'Your home, Miss Grace, Bathsheba –'

'Bathsheba,' breathed Idie.

'It is white and low and the sun always there like she shining only for it, and it lying there, just smiling back at the world.'

Idie considered the notion of smiling houses and frowning houses and conceded that there might be an advantage to a house that smiled, but not if it were troubled by ghosts, so she asked, 'Why do they say it's haunted?'

He shook his head. 'It is a fine place, with creeks and gullies and hummingbirds . . .'

Creeks and gullies and hummingbirds. Idie considered these. Well, of course there would be hummingbirds, and hummingbirds would be a positive, but he hadn't mentioned monkeys, so she asked, 'Are there monkeys?'

He smiled. 'Plenty of monkeys, plenty of mongooses . . . Oh yes, miss, it is a fine, fine place. You needed there, Miss Grace. Is good you goin' home.'

The ship lurched and plummeted into the valley of a wave, flinging Idie against him. He caught her and led her back to the lower-deck stairs and paused there, and she asked, 'Does it have ghosts?'

'Ghosts everywhere, for those that look.' He smiled, yet his tone was serious. 'Don't you go lookin' for them, Miss Grace; don't you go searching.'

She looked at his face, remembering how he'd stopped under the turkey oak to shelter from the rain

and stretched a hand over the railing to the horses huddled there. It was perhaps because of that, because he was the kind of man who talked to horses in the rain, that Idie asked, very quietly, 'My mother . . . Did you *know* her?'

He looked then right into her eyes and nodded. Idie's heart turned over,

'Tell me – what was she like?'

'Your mother she planted the trees, she fill all the inside and the outside with flowers –'

'And . . . ?' Idie's voice was barely audible.

'She was strong and kind and capable and all the things a mother needs to be.'

The door to the lower deck opened and Numbers stood before them. He started with shock and said, 'Ah, Miss Grace, there you are, and Nelson, I see –'

Idie saw he was alarmed to find her with the man called Nelson, and the mischief in her bobbed like a cork to the surface and she said, 'Yes, here I am. And I have been having a MOST interesting conversation with Nelson.'

'Good night, Miss Grace, Sir,' said Nelson, and slipped away.

The wind roared, the waves grew tall as trees, the captain cursed, women screamed, plates smashed. Treble wept, prayed and vomited.

'We're going to a fine place,' Idie told Homer

to console him, 'with gullies and monkeys and hummingbirds.' In her book she wrote:

My mother was a BEAUTY.
I am going to her house.
It is white and smiling.
It is called Bathsheba, which is a very nice name for a house.
She filled it with flowers.
She was strong and kind and capable and all the things a mother needs to be.

Those words were, for a long time after, a light to live by, a little fire at which to warm her hands.