Song of the Dolphin Boy



Illustrated by Peter Bailey

Elizabeth Laird

MACMILLAN CHILDREN'S BOOKS



First published 2018 by Macmillan Children's Books
an imprint of Pan Macmillan
20 New Wharf Road, London N1 9RR
Associated companies throughout the world
www.panmacmillan.com

ISBN 978-1-5098-2823-4

Text copyright © Elizabeth Laird 2018
Illustrations copyright © Peter Bailey 2018

The right of Elizabeth Laird and Peter Bailey to be identified as the author and illustrator of this work has been asserted by them in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means (electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise), without the prior written permission of the publisher.

Pan Macmillan does not have any control over, or any responsibility for, any author or third-party websites referred to in or on this book.

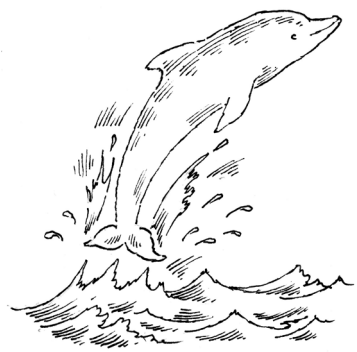
1 3 5 7 9 8 6 4 2

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Printed and bound by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon CR0 4YY

This book is sold subject to the condition that it shall not, by way of trade or otherwise, be lent, resold, hired out, or otherwise circulated without the publisher's prior consent in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition including this condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.

Chapter One



It all began at Dougie Lamb's eighth birthday party. It wasn't a big party. In fact there were only four other children at it, including Dougie's older sister, Kyla. Mrs Lamb, Dougie's mum, had been so excited about organizing her darling boy's party that she'd have invited a hundred and fifty children, if there'd been a hundred and fifty children to invite.

But Stromhead was a very small village in a far-off corner of Scotland, and there were only a few houses clustered round the harbour, along with a tiny school and a lighthouse up on the cliff top. And there weren't any other children from the village to ask. Except for Finn. But nobody ever invited Finn to anything.

Kyla and Mrs Lamb were both small, with loads of

smooth blonde hair, and they both liked everything to be pretty and perfect. 'Sweet' was their favourite word, followed by 'cute'. Kyla's dad called them 'my sugarplums'. He worked on the oil rigs out at sea and was often away from home. Dougie missed him dreadfully. Mr Lamb would never have given him a kitten jigsaw puzzle for his birthday, like Kyla had, which was *nearly* as bad as the little Prince Charming outfit from his mum. No, Dougie's dad gave him useful, interesting things, like sets of spanners, and a chain with a padlock and key. Dougie had adored them as soon as he'd seen them. This was a grown-up present; something useful. He could stop things from opening and tie things down. It made him feel in control. In fact, the padlock and chain were Dougie's favourite possessions of all time.

Kyla and Mrs Lamb had been fussing round all morning getting ready for the party, and at last the little gold clock on the mantelpiece in the sitting room struck a tinkly three chimes. It was time for the other children to arrive.

In fact, they were walking slowly up the road towards the Lambs' cottage, grumbling all the way.

'I never wanted to go to this stupid party, anyway,' Charlie groaned. He was short and stocky,

with a head as hard and round as a cannon-ball. 'Knowing Dougie's mum, it'll be all soft and stupid and babyish. And, anyway, my dad was going to take me out fishing in my own wee boat this afternoon.'

Amir grunted in sympathy.

'And I'd just got to the next level in my game,' he said with a sigh. 'Mum only lets me play on my computer on Saturday afternoons. I'll have to wait a whole week now!'

Amir shifted his glasses up his nose with one long slim finger. His forehead, under a heavy fringe of black hair, was creased in a frown. Jas looked at him sympathetically. Amir's mum, Mrs Faridah, was their class teacher, and very strict.

'Well,' she said, trying to be fair. 'At least there'll be a cake and everything. Anyway, Dougie can't help it that there aren't any other kids of his age around.'

Charlie scowled at her.

'Why do you have to be so stupid and *nice* all the time?'

She crossed her dark eyes, stuck her tongue out at him, pushed her thumbs into her ears and waggled the rest of her hands. Her freckled face looked so funny, framed by bouncing brown hair, that Amir burst out laughing, and even Charlie had to grin.

The three of them, along with Kyla and Dougie, had known each other almost since they were born, and Jas had learned years ago that it was pointless to rise to Charlie's bait.

They were almost at the Lambs' cottage when Amir hissed, 'Watch out! There's Finn!'

Finn, the only other person in their tiny class in the village's little school, was walking along the road in front of them with his hands thrust deep into his pockets, his shoulders hunched unhappily. He had also known the other children all his life, but they had always avoided him. There was just something about Finn – the way his pale brown hair was slicked so smoothly back from his forehead, perhaps, or the sad aura of loneliness that clung to him – that made the other children feel uneasy.

Charlie was actually enraged by him, but then Charlie was like a firework anyway. Just the sight of Finn was enough to set him off into a massive shower of sparks.

'He's not going to the party too, is he?' he spluttered. 'That's it. I'm going home.'

But before he could turn round, Finn had slouched on past the Lambs' cottage and disappeared round a bend in the road. Amir and Jas watched him go,

feeling guilty and relieved at the same time. Then Jas led the way up to the Lambs' front door and pressed the bell. Kyla rushed to open it before the chimes had even died away, and the three guests went reluctantly inside.

There was a bit too much of everything in the Lambs' house. The cushions on the flowery sofa were too soft, the door chimes were too musical, the bow round the neck of Buttons (the kitten) was too baby-blue, and there were too many frills on the curtains.

Nobody realized that Finn, who had seen the three children on their way to the party, had eventually doubled back to see what was going on. He was standing outside in the garden, glaring into the living room, and shredding Mrs Lamb's prize roses one by one to leave a scatter of pink petals on the grass.

'They never let me in on *anything*,' Finn muttered to himself. 'They're all mean and horrible, and I wouldn't be friends with them even if they asked me.'

He knew, though, that the last bit wasn't true. Finn longed to have friends more than anything else in the world. He didn't particularly want to be a computer genius, like Amir, work in a pet shop,

like Kyla, or be a footballer, like Charlie. He didn't want to be a mechanic, like Dougie, or even the prime minister, like Jasmine. He only wanted to be a friend.

Curiosity had brought him back to spy on the party, which Dougie had been going on about for weeks. Finn had known that it might feel like torture to look in from the outside, but he hadn't been able to resist.



As he watched, though, a slow smile spread over his face. The party wasn't going well at all. In fact, it was awful.

Mrs Lamb's idea of a children's party had got stuck

somewhere around the year when Dougie was four. The children were being forced to endure Pass the Parcel, Simon Says and The Farmer's in his Den. Finn nearly laughed out loud at the sight of Charlie, whose temper was about to boil over anyway and who hated being kept indoors, pretending to be the farmer's horse. He looked like a tiger about to spring.

He'll bite someone in a minute, with a bit of luck, Finn thought bitterly. *I really hope he does. I hope he freaks out and breaks something. I hope he smashes the place up.*

Amir, who was dying to get home to his computer game and had been chewing his lip with frustration, was now yawning till his jaw ached, while Jasmine kept looking at the cuckoo clock on the wall. She was obviously wondering why the hands were going round so slowly. Even Dougie, the birthday boy himself, was looking more and more anxious. Only Kyla seemed to be enjoying herself. She had given up joining in with the games and was playing with Buttons the cat.

'Teatime!' sang out Dougie's mum, whisking away the cloth that had been hiding everything laid out on the table.

Finn's mouth had widened into a broad grin as he'd watched the party fall apart, but the sight of the tea spread out on the table wiped it off his face. He would have given anything to have piled up a plate with all the treats that Mrs Lamb had prepared. He looked them over longingly. There were little sandwiches cut into triangles, butterfly cookies, cupcakes with mounds of icing on top, and mini sausage rolls. His mouth watered so much, he had to swallow. He was just about to turn away, unable to torture himself any longer, when he heard Dougie's mum say, 'Why don't you save some for your friend Finn? What a pity he couldn't come.' Then she went out into the kitchen to fetch another plate of biscuits.

Charlie stared at Dougie, disgusted.

'You invited *Finn*?'

Dougie laughed nervously. He was nearly three years younger than Charlie and looked up to him with a mixture of fear and admiration.

'Mum made me write the invitation, but I didn't give it to him, honestly, Charlie.'

Finn's fists tightened.

One day, I'm going to sort Charlie out. I'm going to . . . he thought, but he stopped, unable to think of anything bad enough to do to his tormentor. Then

he saw Jas's face. She was frowning at Dougie, as if she thought he'd been mean.

She's the only one who's worth anything, Finn told himself grudgingly.

Dougie, realizing that his party was going wrong, was desperately counting on the big moment that would put everything right.

'Wait till you see my cake,' he babbled. 'Mum made it herself. It's a special shape. It's going to be a surprise. I think it's going to be a dinosaur.'

'Yeah, a pretty little dino-baby with a bow round its neck,' sneered Charlie.

'I bet it'll be lovely, Dougie,' Jas said kindly.

'I don't care what it looks like as long as it's chocolate,' said Amir.

Jas turned to say something to him, and was suddenly facing the window. Finn ducked down quickly behind the rose bush, out of sight.

When at last Mrs Lamb brought the cake out of the kitchen and placed it carefully down in the middle of the table, Finn nearly laughed out loud. It wasn't a dinosaur, and it wasn't even chocolate. It was in the shape of a cat, with the eyes made of sparkly silver balls, and a blue bow tied round its neck.

Dougie's face went red.

'Mum!' he wailed. 'It's *pink*!'

Charlie snorted. Amir sniggered. Jasmine bit her lip, feeling sorry for Dougie. Kyla clapped her hands.

'It's lovely, Mum,' she said. 'Can I have the tail?'

Finn couldn't remember the last time he'd had a piece of cake. He wanted to burst in through the window, grab the whole thing, and run off with it. Instead, he watched as the candles were lit and Dougie blew them out. His mouth watered all over again as Mrs Lamb cut the cake and handed out the pieces. He knew he ought to go, before he started to feel too lonely, but he couldn't tear himself away.

When the cake was half demolished, and everyone's mouth was sticky with pink icing, Charlie said loudly, 'Can we go now? My dad'll have brought the boat in. He needs me to help unload the lobster pots.'

'Not yet, dear,' cooed Dougie's mum. 'I've had a sweet idea. Now here's a piece of coloured paper and a felt tip each. I want every one of you to write some birthday wishes to Dougie. Then we'll tie them to the balloons and let them go up into the sky where the birds can read them and send Dougie birthday messages too.'

'Mum, no! *Mum!*' wailed Dougie.

'I wouldn't want a bird's message landing on my head, birthday message or no birthday message,' said Charlie.

The others burst out laughing.

'Specially not a great big seagull's,' said Amir.

'No need to be *crude*, boys. I'm sure you can think of something lovely to write,' said Mrs Lamb, frowning.

'What, you mean like "Dougie you are a sweet, cute, ducky wee baa-lamb, coochie-coo"?' Charlie whispered to Jasmine.

She dug him in the ribs, trying not to laugh.

'How do you spell "gorgeous"?' said Amir, winking at Jas.

Dougie looked as if he was going to be sick.

A few minutes later, Finn had to dash out quickly through the garden gate as the children burst out of the house like champagne fizzing out of a bottle. He scrambled up the hill above the village, ignoring the gorse that scratched his legs, and watched as a clutch of brightly coloured balloons were lifted by the breeze out of the hands of the children.

With their strings trailing behind them, they floated up and away, skimming the chimneys of the

old fishermen's cottages, sailing over the roof of the school, where Mrs Faridah, Amir's mother, was writing reports, above the village shop where Mrs Lamb worked during the week. They glided past the tall white tower of the lighthouse, where Professor Jamieson, Jasmine's father, was writing busily at his desk, and across the harbour, where Charlie's dad was unloading his lobster pots. Then they drifted out to sea, sinking lower as the air hissed out of them, until they landed on the choppy water and bobbed up and down like brightly coloured flowers.

For some reason, the sight of them made Finn shudder. Reluctantly, he made his way home to the tumbledown cottage along the cliff top where he lived with his dad. He didn't look back as he walked up the hill, but if he had, he'd have seen Mrs Lamb standing in her garden looking down in puzzlement at the mass of torn rose petals all over her neatly mown lawn.