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Seagulls

'GO on, I dare you.' The beady eye of the seagull twinkled at Connie from on top of the lifebuoy.

'But, Scark, I can't!' Connie whispered back, scuffing her trainers on a coil of blue rope on the quayside. 'What if someone sees?'

Scark cocked his head and opened his yellow beak in silent mockery of her cowardice. Connie glanced furtively over her shoulder. She really wanted to do it. No one was watching her. She was just another young girl spending her holidays hanging out by the marina. There was no one close enough to see that she was set apart from others by her mismatched eyes, one green, one brown, and by the fact that she talked to seagulls. The

fishermen were too busy washing down their decks to notice the girl with ripped jeans and a mop of black hair. The parties of tourists by the coach park had eyes only for the straw hats and seashell mementoes in the gift shops. Nobody seemed to care that something extraordinary was about to happen a stone's throw away.

'OK, I'll do it!' Connie said, giving in to her desire. 'Bet I'll beat you this time.'

Taking a crust from her pocket, she threw a few crumbs into the air as practice runs. Scark flapped from his perch and caught them easily. Play begun, other herring gulls circled out of the sky and landed on the harbour wall, a row of eager spectators. White heads bobbed impatiently, waiting for the real fun to begin.

'Here goes!' called Connie to them. 'It's me against you lot. If one crumb falls to the ground, I win.'

The seagulls screamed their approval and flapped into the sky. Connie threw a handful of crusts high. Birds mobbed them from all sides, effortlessly plucking them from the air. Scark gave an ear-splitting mew.

'So, I can't catch you out that easily?' laughed Connie. She threw the bread faster and faster, spinning on her heels in an attempt to confuse her opponents. Gulls darted nimbly left and right,

splitting their flock, spinning on the wing, diving, anticipating every feint, every low trick she could devise to outwit them. The billowing cloud of birds swarmed around her, responding to the movements of her body as if she was a conductor and they her orchestra, becoming an extension of her mood and music. She swirled them around her like a vast cloak, wrapping herself in their delight in showing off their skill on the wing. A power flowed from her to the birds: it seemed to them almost as if she had shed her human skin and become flight itself, the heart of the flock. The seagulls shrieked with joy, urging her to fly with them out to sea and join them in their raucous colonies on the ledges of the cliffs and rock stacks. The mass of birds formed into the shape of two vast wings extending from her fingertips. She felt that if she just tried a little harder, she too would lift from the earth and fly, but her feet could not quite leave the ground. Taking the last piece of crust in her fist, Connie threw it high into the sky.

'Catch!' she cried.

The seagulls zoomed upwards like Spitfires in a dogfight, vying with each other for the prize. With a beat of his broad, grey wings, Scark snatched the morsel from under the beak of a small white female and returned to the lifebuoy, ach-aching triumphantly.

'Hey, that wasn't very polite of you,' Connie scolded him affectionately, 'stealing it from her like that! Whatever am I teaching you?'

Scark bobbed his head in indignation, telling her with a puff of his wings that a mere chick—for so he considered her—could teach him nothing.

'I s'pose not,' Connie conceded. Sitting down on the cobbles beside him, she suddenly felt deflated. The other gulls drifted away on the breeze to seek new sport by the rubbish bins and fishing boats. 'I know I've got a lot to learn. I just wish I didn't have to go to school to do it. I hate school. I just know it's going to be a disaster.'

Scark shook his head sceptically.

'I haven't survived more than a term or two at my other schools. Something always happens: foxes start following me around, or mice invade the classroom, and it soon becomes pretty clear that it's all my fault. Why should it be any different in Hescombe? I don't stand a chance. At the other schools, it was only me that people found strange; here, there's my aunt as well.'

Connie threw a stone listlessly into the harbour. It plopped out of sight, leaving worried wrinkles to disturb the seaweed and the litter collected by the seawall. When her parents had moved abroad recently, they had considered sending Connie to

boarding school but in the end decided that, in view of her terrible record in the classroom, she would be safer with a relative, even if that meant Mr Lionheart's strange sister, Evelyn. Boarding school had sounded grim, but now that she had met her aunt she wondered if it would not have been a better choice. Who else had an aunt who wailed mournfully from her bedroom window at five in the morning and disappeared for hours running on the moors dressed in a long black ragged cloak? As Connie had swiftly realized, Evelyn was strange, not to mention scary, but, unlike her niece, she did not wish to hide her oddness.

The tide was at its height. The multicoloured boats bobbed eagerly on their moorings, ropes ringing against masts, summoning their owners to set sail. Connie stood up and brushed down the seat of her jeans, which were damp from the fish-slick cobbles.

'OK, Scark, it's time to go. See you tomorrow.'

The seagull fluttered his wings once and shook his beak at her in farewell. She watched with admiration as he launched himself gracefully off the lifebuoy, heading out to the wave-flecked sea.

'Good fishing!' she called, her voice whipped away like an autumn leaf scuttling before the wind.

She wished she could go home with him far away from the humans who found her so odd.

Only when she turned from the sea did she notice the old man, long white hair streaked with ginger at the temples, half-hidden in a shelter ten metres away, equipped with a motorbike helmet, a thermos flask, binoculars, and a folded newspaper. By his side lay a pair of scarlet ear protectors, the sort worn by construction workers who use pneumatic drills, but there was not a piece of heavy machinery in sight and nor did he look anything like a builder. Had he been watching her all this time? Embarrassment flooded Connie in a hot wave: she hated to think that anyone had seen her playing with her friends. It always spelt trouble. People in Hescombe would soon be whispering that she was weird as they had in London. Mortified, Connie did not wait to return the warm smile he gave her when she met his gaze. She ran off, threading through a party of tourists boarding their coach, and pelted as fast as she could down the High Street in the direction of her aunt's house.

Dashing past the gaudy shops spilling plastic buckets, spades, and carousels of postcards onto the pavement, Connie collided with a group of people gathered outside the Anchor Tavern.

'Sorry!' she said, jumping back from an elderly lady, only to ricochet into a sturdily-built man in

wellington boots. He caught Connie before she could fall and set her on her feet.

'Careful,' the man said. 'You'll do yourself an injury if you carry on like that.'

Connie's murmured apologies died on her lips as she stood pinned to the spot in the circle of people. They stopped talking and looked at her with polite concern. Connie hesitated, unable and unwilling to leave the group. She had caught an echo from them of what she had felt when playing with the seagulls. This was where she should be. The place was rightfully hers.

'Something the matter?' asked the man with a frown.

'No, no, sorry,' Connie said, shaking herself out of her paralysis. She was being stupid. Of course she shouldn't stand there all day. She didn't know any of these people—she had no business interrupting them like this. Their expressions told her they had not felt anything special as she stood there, other than entertaining vague doubts about her sanity. She backed off hurriedly. Yet, after running a few paces down the street, she could not help glancing behind her, feeling called back to the gathering of people. She was wrong: no one was looking at her, let alone calling her. They had all gathered around the elderly lady who was handing out scarlet ear protectors from her shopping bag.

Connie turned and ran all the way to her new home, Number Five Shaker Row, eager to be alone with her thoughts about what had just happened. Her aunt's house was the last of a terrace of fishermen's cottages that clung to the bottom of the cliff, seeking protection from the ocean that beat hungrily at their front-steps. Number Five shrank back from the waves, drawing itself taller and thinner than its neighbours, like the last person to enter a cupboard in a game of sardines. The house seemed to anticipate that the waves would at any moment rip the cupboard door open and that Number Five would be the first to tumble out.

Madame Cresson, her aunt's rather superior marmalade cat, was stalking down the path, tail purposefully erect. She miaowed when she saw Connie, who paused briefly to greet her before clattering into the kitchen to hang up her jacket. She stopped dead. There on the spindly umbrella-stand by the back door lay a pair of scarlet ear protectors. What was going on? Her first thought was that she should run straight back out again and keep on running until she had left all these strange people behind, especially her aunt. Then she changed her mind. Surely, as she had no real choice but to stay here, it would do no harm to find out more about Evelyn Lionheart and her odd goings-on? Perhaps the ear protectors

themselves might give her a clue? She glanced over her shoulder to check she was alone and then picked up the headset to study it at close quarters. A small silver bird was stamped on both earpieces. She put them over her ears experimentally, and shut out all sounds so effectively that she did not hear the footsteps until somebody tapped her on the shoulder. Startled, she ripped them off.

'You know what they say about curiosity and the cat, don't you?' a voice asked smoothly—but with the smoothness of thin ice. Tall but light-footed, and dressed as usual in black, Evelyn Lionheart stood over her, her face ghostly white against her long brown hair. Madame Cresson padded in through the cat flap and wound round Evelyn's ankles, greeting her mistress.

'Er . . . no—what do they say?' Connie asked awkwardly, her heart pounding.

'That curiosity killed the cat,' said Evelyn lightly, taking the ear protectors from her to hang them back on the stand.

Madame Cresson yowled in protest, offended by this talk of death, and defected to Connie. She arched her back as she rubbed herself against Connie's jeans, seeking comfort from her special friend.

Connie stroked the cat's head. 'I'm sorry. I was just . . . It's just that I saw some other people in

town with them today. I thought it a bit strange,' she ended lamely, thinking she must say something to excuse herself.

'Did you?' Her aunt's green eyes flicked to Connie's face with a shrewd expression, her silver-hoop earrings twinkling in the light from a small window in the back door.

'What are they for?' Connie ventured, blinking hard to shake off the mesmerizing effect of the glinting rings.

'That is none of your business,' said Evelyn, keeping her gimlet-gaze fixed on her niece.

Connie felt anger bubble up inside her, but it was almost immediately burst by a prick of fear when her aunt added, 'Forget you ever saw them.' Evelyn was so mercurial: at one moment full of wild laughter and enthusiasm, the next showing some alarming sparks of menace and temper. Connie did not know what Evelyn really thought about having her niece dumped on her. From the reception she had received so far she suspected that her aunt felt resentful and annoyed, and that only a sense of duty to the family had persuaded her to undertake the charge. Yet there seemed to be something else too—something Connie could not quite put her finger on. It did not help that, though they shared the same house, Evelyn shut herself away from Connie, keeping conversations

to a minimum and inviting no confidences. Refusing to explain the ear protectors was all part of this behaviour and Connie was beginning to resent it. She wished that her parents had found a more sympathetic guardian for her, someone who at the very least would welcome her into their home. But she dared push the question of the ear protectors no further. The matter was dropped and the next time Connie passed the umbrella-stand, the headset had gone.