

the
OCEAN
AND the
BONES

GENEVIEVE CARVER



A Rock the Boat Book

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For Mum and Dad

THE BONES

"When you let something go, something new always finds you," says Grey Wethers, our Sunhealer, holding out her hand for the bones.

My hand hesitates on its way to hers, my grip tightening round the small hard lumps inside the bundle. The bones of ten fingers, jumbled together in a loose cloth bag. I know I must pass them over, but I don't *want* to be found by something new.

I want to keep those bones close, stashed away in their little nook in the earthen wall of the hut we share. To take them out sometimes and try to put them back together. To work out whose is whose.

Every time spring comes round and I turn four seasons older, I want to hold them up against the bones of my own fingers, one by one. I want to watch my hands grow closer in size to the hands they once belonged to.

I don't want to let go of the last bones of my mama and papa.

But I'm the Sunhealer's Shadow, and it's my task to give the offerings to the Sunhealer. Everyone's eyes are on us as we perform the ritual. We both wear long robes and have a blackstone pendant on a cord round our necks – mine a miniature version of the Sunhealer's. I release my grip on the bag and let my arms fall to my side. I gaze down at the river as it swooshes below the bank where we stand. Soon Mama and Papa's bones will be swept away by the water, and I'll never see them again.

I bow to Grey Wethers, then turn to face the line of kinfolk bringing their offerings. A mother's kneecap. A grandson's skull. A lifemate's shoulder blade. A father's toes. The bones of our Longdead. Some kept with us for generations, others buried and recovered again in living memory, like Mama and Papa's. We offer them to the Water Spirits to mark the passing of our leader, Winterbourne, who now lies in our Long Mound with the bones of our ancestors.

Other things are offered too. Clay bowls with zig-zags etched into the surface. A shell bracelet. A finely polished greenstone axe. I take each object in turn and pass it to Grey Wethers.

"Thank you, my Shadow," she says each time.

I bow to the Sunhealer, then step back into the huddle of kinfolk, next to my older sister Clava. Clava doesn't even turn to look at me, but our old grey dog, Monzie, nuzzles my side.

Belas, Winterbourne's lifemate, steps forward. Bound to her breast is their baby son Oakley. Come tomorrow, Belas will be our new leader. When she catches my eye, I quickly look away. One glance from Belas feels as though it might turn flesh and blood into stone.

Grey Wethers twists her yew staff in her palm. Then she kneels down to pick up a small basket by her side, which she offers to Belas. Belas plucks a clump of elderflower heads from the basket and shakes them over the river, sprinkling tiny white flowers into the current.

"Sickly stream, let this heal you," says Grey Wethers.

The elderflowers' fragrance holds sunlight and warmth, yet all spring the sky has been shadowed with cloud and the rains have poured down. The Water Spirits should have long since settled for the calm of summer, but storms have ruined our crops and damaged our huts. And then a great flood hit the valley, sweeping our leader off his feet and carrying him to his death.

"Water Spirits, you have taken Winterbourne from us," says Grey Wethers. "We offer you these gifts, so you may look more kindly on us."

We all watch the river as if it might reply. It looks sicker than ever, the banks still covered in silt and broken branches, a scummy brown foam bubbling at its edges like spit in the corner of its mouth.

Grey Wethers begins to chant. Her eyelids flicker as she enters the Waking Dream. Then she casts the offerings into the water.

I watch as Mama and Papa's finger bones leave the Sunhealer's hands. They fly through the air, pitter-pattering into the water like raindrops. They bob in the current for a moment, then they are gone.

Around me, kinfolk sway from side to side, following the Sunhealer's chants. I give Monzie's ears a stroke as I mouth along. His short grey fur is still as soft as a puppy's, despite his lumpy spine and creaky hips. With his eyes half closed he looks as though he's lost in memories too. I wonder if he remembers Mama and Papa.

Clava doesn't move, doesn't say a word. When she's in a good mood, my elder sister can make me feel as big and bright as the sun, but more and more often she makes me feel like a fleck of trampled mud.

Grey Wethers comes out of her Waking Dream and raises her staff. Everyone falls silent. "Still, we must be careful," she says, sending her gaze up to the sky. "The wind tells me that another storm is coming."

I follow the old woman's stare towards where land and sky meet. The clouds are tinged with pink and the air is still. It doesn't feel like a storm is coming, but Grey Wethers can hear things in the wind that nobody else can.

I take one final look at the rushing river that swallowed up the last pieces of my mama and papa. Then I walk with the other kinfolk back along the river path to the cluster of earthen huts that we call home.



Chalk Howe nestles at the foot of the Rolling Hills, on the edge of the grasslands that stretch all the way to the sea. The huts of the dwelling-place are scattered around our common yard, always busy with folk cooking, chatting, knapping flint, making twine or grinding grain. Tonight we gather in the yard and feast on smoked pigmeat with garlic leaf and honey. The elders drink dandelion wine, while the youngsters slurp raspberry juice. Monzie and the other dogs sniff about the beaten earth for scraps or gnaw on bones. Grey Wethers, Clava and I sit among the kinfolk, tearing into strips of meat.

"I'm proud of you, Little Meg," says Grey Wethers. "That was no easy task."

I shrug. "It was all-fine."

Grey Wethers twists her blackstone pendant in her fingers. "At least your mama and papa will have their whole hands now. They've probably been missing those, up in the Evernight."

I wish she would stop talking about it. I gulp down the last of my pigmeat and throw the gristle to Monzie. He gobbles it down in one eager bite.

"Clava," says Grey Wethers, laying her hand on my sister's arm, "why don't you go and fetch Meg another hunk of meat?"

Clava wrenches her arm away. "So now it's beneath the *Sunhealer's Shadow* to fetch her own food?"

Grey Wethers sighs. "Clava—" But before she can say anything else, my sister has upped and left.

Grey Wethers gives me a weary smile. "You'll make a fine Sunhealer one day, Little Meg."

I look away. *If only she knew.*

I follow Clava across the yard and fetch some more food from the spread laid out on a smoothed tree trunk. Nearby, some of the youngers are playing Stone and Pebbles. A big round stone rests a few paces away from the starting line. The youngers take it in turns to slide their pebbles as close as they can to the stone.

"Want to play?" calls a voice

It's Wayland, Clava's hunting partner. He flicks his long curls over his shoulder as he grins at my sister.

Clava shrugs. "One game perhaps."

It's Wayland's turn. His pebble whizzes right up to the stone and he throws a fist into the air in celebration. Cheers rise up from the crowd. Clava shrugs again, pretending not to care.

"Are you playing, Little Meg?" Wayland calls over his shoulder, as if he's only just remembered that I'm there.

I stand there, motionless. I want to join them, but ever since I became Sunhealer's Shadow, I've felt separate from the other youngsters. About to cast his pebble is Kennet. We were born on the same day, and on that day he lost his mama and his twin sister in the birth. He used to say I was like the third twin and we called ourselves *the triplets*, even though we were only two. But when we both turned ten summers old I started my training with Grey Wethers. And from that day on he's wanted nothing to do with me.

Kennet glares at me as I stand there awkwardly, watching them at their game. Then he throws his stone. It flies towards my ankles, nowhere near the target, and I have to leap out of the way before it hits me. I scowl and turn away, back to Grey Wethers and Monzie. Old and tired as they both may be, I know I can always rely on them.



It's late by the time I lay down in the straw inside the cosy hut where Grey Wethers, Clava and I sleep. Monzie curls up at my feet. The Sunhealer's words of warning ring in my ears. *Another storm is coming.*

I'm almost drifting off when the wind begins to moan. A draught slips in under the cowhide covering the doorway. Thunder rumbles into my ears like a distant drumroll as rain sweeps into Chalk Howe, battering our dwelling-place yet again.

Under the blankets, I feel for the calfskin pouch I always keep round my waist. From inside I take a tiny bundle – two hard lumps wrapped in a strip of cloth. I press the bundle tightly to my chest. I know I shouldn't have kept them, but I hope that Mama and Papa won't miss two little finger bones up in the Evernight.