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Prologue

Each night it is the same. I stand here on the shoreline, curling my toes into cool wet sand. Above, the moon is bright, bright white. It spills light, like a trail of milk upon the water. The dolphin is here again, her pearl-white body curving through the midnight sea. She twists and turns beyond the breaking waves, willing me to follow. But the ocean is vast and black, and I don't know what lies beyond this shore. So I just stand and watch her swim away.

Each night I have this dream. Each night the white dolphin waits for me. But where she goes, I am too afraid to follow.

Chapter 1

I rip another page from the book.

I tear it out, right out.

The paper is tissue thin and edged with gold. It flutters in my hand like a tiny bird, desperate to escape. I let it go and watch it fly up into the clear blue sky.

I rip out another, and another. The pages soar and tumble across cow scattered fields into the haze above the silver-blue sea.

'Oi, Kara!'

I look down. Jake's pink face is squinting up at me against the glare of sun. Ethan's standing next to him trying to find finger-holds in the granite blocks of the wall. He jumps to pull me off, but I pull my legs up out of reach.

The wall's too high.

Chapter 1

I'm safe up here.

'Kara-two-planks,' yells Jake. 'Teacher's looking for you.'

I run my finger along the rough leather binding of the book. It's heavy in my lap. The hard edges dig into my skin. I rip out another page and set it free, soaring upwards, skywards.

'You're in big trouble, Kara-two-planks,' shouts Jake. 'That Bible is school property. You'll be sent to hell for that.'

'She won't get there, though,' calls Ethan. 'She won't be able to read the signs.'

Jake laughs. 'Learnt to spell your name yet, Kara? K-a-r-a W-o-o-d. Kara-thick-as-two-planks-of-wood.'

I've heard all this before, a thousand times. I turn my back on them and look down to the footpath on the far side of the wall. It runs one way to the coast path along the cliffs, and the other, down steps tangled with nettles and bindweed to the harbour in the town below.

'What I want to know,' says Ethan, 'is Kara Wood as thick as her dad?'

'My mum says,' confides Jake, 'that Kara's dad lost his last job because he couldn't write his own name.'

Ethan sniggers.

I spin round and glare at them. 'Shut-up about my dad.'

But Jake's not finished. 'I heard your mum had to write his name for him. Isn't that right, Kara?'

My eyes burn hot with tears.

'Who writes his name for him now, Kara?'

I blink hard and turn back to the sea. The waves out there are tipped with white. I feel the hot sun on my face. I mustn't cry. I won't let them see me cry. If I ignore them they'll go away like they always do. The sea breeze is damp and salty. It catches the white cotton of my shirt and billows it out like a spinnaker sail. I close my eyes and imagine I am sailing across an endless sea, a wide blue ocean, with nothing else around me but the sun and wind and sky.

'Oi, Kara!'

Jake's still there.

'It's a shame about the Merry Mermaid,' he shouts.

If Jake knows about the Merry Mermaid, then everyone does.

I turn round to look at him.

A few other children from class are watching us from a distance. Chloe and Ella are both looking this way from under the deep shade of the horse-chestnut tree. Adam has stopped his game, his football clutched against his chest.

'Still,' Jake says, 'it never was much of a pub. It'll make a great holiday home for someone, a rich Londoner probably. I heard the food was terrible.'

Jake knows my dad works in the kitchens of the Merry

Mermaid. He knows he'll have no job and no money to live on when it closes at the end of the summer. Jake would love it if we had to move from Cornwall.

'Maybe your dad can come back and work for mine?' says Jake. 'Tell him we're dredging the bay for shellfish when the ban is lifted in ten days, time. Dad's even bought new gear to rake every corner of the seabed out there. He can't wait.'

I just glare at him.

Jake laughs. 'I'll ask him if you can come too.'

I tighten my grip on the Bible's hard leather binding.

Beyond, I see Mrs Cormack striding towards us. I could try and hide the book, but Jake and Ethan would tell her anyway.

'Have you seen the advert at the boatyard, Kara?' says Jake. He's looking at me now and grinning. Ethan's grinning too. They know something I don't. It's in Jake's voice and he's bursting to tell me.

Mrs Cormack's halfway across the playground. Her face is set and grim.

'The *Moana*'s up for sale,' Jake shouts out. He's jubilant now.

I scramble to my feet. 'Liar!'

It can't be true. I'm sure it can't.

But Jake is smug. He pulls his trump card. 'My dad's going to buy her and chop her up for firewood,' he shouts. 'Cos he says that's all she's good for.'

I hurl the book at him. The Bible's hard edge slams into Jake's nose and he drops like a stone, both hands clutched across his face.

Mrs Cormack is running now. 'Kara!'

I glance down at Jake, moaning in the dirt below me.

'Kara, come down, now!' Mrs Cormack yells.

But I turn away from them all and jump, leaving Jake Evans bleeding through his fat fingers, turning the dust-dry ground blood red.

Chapter 2

I run and run, down the nettled footpath, along cobbled lanes and back alleyways to the sea front. I have to find Dad.

I have to.

The town is busy, clogged with traffic and the sound of drills and diggers working on the new road into the horbour. Beyond the orange cones and construction fences sits the Merry Mermaid, her roof green with weathered thatch. The air is thick with the smell of beer and chips. The tables sprawled across the pavement are packed with people eating lunch in summer sunshine. The Merry Mermaid scowls down at them from her faded painted sign above the door. I slip through into the darkness and let my eyes adjust from the glare outside.

'You OK, Kara?' Ted is polishing a glass in his hand, turning its rim round and round with a cloth.

'I'm fine,' I say. 'Where's Dad?'

'He took the day off,' he says. He holds the glass up to the light, inspecting it for smudges. 'Is everything all right, Kara? He didn't seem himself today.'

I look around, as if I expect Dad still to be here.

Ted puts the glass down and leans on the bar towards me. 'You sure you're OK?'

'Yes,' I say, 'I'm fine.'

I back out of the pub. The sun is bright. It glares off the whitewashed houses. I start running away from the harbour and up the hill to the new estate on the other side of town. A stitch stabs into my side, but I keep running past front gardens and driveways, past scraps of green with paddling pools and tricycles and on to the end house, where a caravan sits on bricks upon the grass.

I slow down and push open the front gate. Aunt Bev is hanging overalls and oilskins on a washing line strung between the garage and the caravan. Uncle Tom must be back from sea.

Aunt Bev pulls back the legs of the overalls to look at me and rests her hand on her swollen belly. She holds two wooden clothes-pegs in her teeth. They stick out like warthog tusks.

Chapter 2

I try the handle of the caravan door. Flakes of red rust crumble from the door frame, but the door is locked. 'Where's Dad?' I say.

Aunt Bev takes the pegs out of her mouth. 'You should be at school,' she says.

I hammer on the caravan door.

'Your dad went out,' she says.

I try the door again.

'I said he went *out*.' Aunt Bev pegs a pair of trousers to the line. She doesn't take her eyes off me.

I duck under the line and try to dash past into the kitchen, but she puts her hand across the door.

'You in trouble, Kara?' she says.

'Forgotten something, Auntie Bev,' I say. 'That's all.'

'Well, be quick,' she says. 'Uncle Tom's asleep. Don't wake him.' She lifts a hand from the doorway, and lets me pass.

I feel her watching me climb the stairs and slip into the room I share with Daisy. Daisy's sitting on her bed among her dolls, reading Teddy-cat one of her fairy books. She stuffs something behind her back as I come in. I hear it rustle in her hand. A tell-tale marshmallow lies upon her princess-pink duvet.

'You're off school,' I say. 'You're meant to be ill.'

Daisy's mouth is full. She looks at the open door and then at me.

I smile. 'Don't worry. I won't tell.'

A blob of sticky dribble slides down her chin. 'I feel sick now,' she says.

'I'm not surprised,' I say. I wipe the sugar dust from the bed and sit down beside her. 'Daisy, have you seen my dad?'

Daisy nods. 'Uncle Jim's gone fishing,' she says. 'He took his sea rods, them long ones.' Her hair bounces as she nods. It's light and frizzy, a sign the good weather's set to stay. I've seen it go tight and curly before the storms blow in.

'How long ago?'

'Not long,' she says. 'Just after Mum had her coffee.'

'Thanks, Daisy.' I reach under my camp bed for my swimming bag, mask and flippers. Daisy's toys are scattered on my bed. A pink marshmallow is pressed into my pillow. I can't complain, really. It's her room after all. And they'll need my space when the baby comes.

'Are you going with him?' Daisy says.

I nod. 'Please don't tell.'

Daisy draws her fingers across her heart and presses them against her lips.

I change into T-shirt and shorts, and it's not until I hear a car door slam and voices on the drive outside that I realize

a car has pulled up outside the house. Jake's dad's big black pickup is parked across the drive. I back away from the window. I don't want Jake's dad to see me here.

I hear him talking to Aunt Bev in the kitchen.

'Jim's not up there, Dougie.' Aunt Bev's voice is high and tight. 'I'll get him to call when he gets back.'

'It's his girl I want to see.'

'Kara?' Aunt Bev says. I hear her hesitate and stumble on the words. 'She's at school.'

Through the crack in the bedroom door, I see Aunt Bev below me in the hallway. She's blocking the doorway to the kitchen. The back of her neck is bright scarlet and she twists a tea towel round and round her hands.

Dougie Evans leans his hand on the door frame. 'I know she's up there, Bev.'

Aunt Bev takes a step back. Her voice is quiet, almost a whisper. 'What d'you want with her?'

'Just a word, that's all.'

'What's she done?'

Dougie Evans is in the hallway now, at the foot of the stairs, his sea boots on Aunt Bev's clean carpet. 'She broke Jake's nose, that's what she's done.'

I close the door and press myself against it.

Feet sound on the stairs, loud and heavy.

Daisy stares wide-eyed at me, the duvet pulled up around her chin. 'He's coming up,' she whispers.

I push the camp bed up against the door and cross the room to the window. The garage roof below is flat, but it's still a long way down.

'Kara!' It's Aunt Bev calling now. Her voice is sing-song, almost casual, but I can hear the tremor in it. 'Dougie Evans wants to see you.'

I throw my bag down to the garden and swing my legs out of the window.

Knuckles rap against the door. It flies open and jams against the camp bed.

Dougie shouts through the gap. 'Kara, let us in.'

'Go,' mouths Daisy.

I drop onto the roof, twisting as I land. From there I jump down to soft grass. I turn and see Dougie Evans leaning red-faced from the window. But he can't stop me now.

No one can.

I grab my bag and run.