

THE BOAT IN THE MIST



Contents

About This Book	2
Chapter 1: The Empty Boat	3
Chapter 2: The Name Nobody Knows	8
Chapter 3: Two Oars, One Boat	13
Chapter 4: The Man on the Point	18
Chapter 5: The Logbooks	23
Chapter 6: The Story Half Told	28
Chapter 7: Across the Bay	33
Chapter 8: The Carpenter of Selder Cove	38
Chapter 9: Letters Forty Years Late	43
Chapter 10: The Reply	48
Chapter 11: Ten Days	54
Chapter 12: The Regatta and the Rower	59

About This Book

At a Glance

- **Reading level:** English level A2 (CEFR)
- **Age:** 8+
- **Length:** 12 chapters · ±16,000 words

The Series

Puffin Bay is a small fishing village on the Cornish coast, where the Penhale family has run the boatyard and the little sailing school for three generations. Finn, Lily, Martha and Ollie know every tide, every boat and every story in the harbour — and when something strange drifts in with the fog, they are the first to go and look. The sea brings the adventure; the village brings the warmth.

This Book

One foggy morning, an old rowing boat drifts into Puffin Bay all on her own. No rower. No rope. And a name nobody knows: *Curlew*. Finn, Lily, Martha and Ollie want to find out where she came from. Under her seat they find a rusty tin, an oar that does not match, and a name painted over an older one. The clues lead across the bay to a hidden cove — and up to the lonely lighthouse keeper on the point, who knows far more than he will say. With tide tables, an old logbook, and a little courage, the four friends set out to bring a lost boat home. But whose boat is she — and what really happened on the night she rowed away?

Copyright & Licence

© 2026 Studio Safan (studiosafan.nl). All stories, characters and illustrations in this book are original.

This book is free, and it is meant to be shared: you may download it, print it, and pass it on to other families, schools and reading groups — as long as it stays free, unchanged and credited to Studio Safan. You may not sell this book, change it, or use it commercially.

Licence: Creative Commons BY-NC-ND 4.0 (creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0)

Chapter 1: The Empty Boat

Finn Penhale woke to a world made of white.

He knew it before he opened his eyes. He could hear it — or rather, he could not hear the sea. On a clear morning the waves talked to the stones all day long. This morning there was only a soft, thick quiet, the kind of quiet that fills your ears like cotton wool.

He pushed the window open and looked out.

Fog. Thick white fog lay over Puffin Bay like a blanket. It hid the harbour, the round pool of water where the boats slept behind the long stone wall. It hid the masts, the sheds, the far side of the water. Even Gull Rock, out at the harbour mouth, was gone, swallowed whole.

“Lily,” Finn called through the wall. “Come and look. You can’t see a thing.”

His sister was already up. She came in, dressed, with her small blue notebook in her hand. Lily checked the tide every single morning. She knew the tide tables the way other children knew songs.

She looked at the white air and nodded to herself.

“Low water was at ten past six,” she said. “So the tide is coming in now. In six hours the sea will be high against the quay.” She looked again. “The fog will lift when the sun gets onto it. An hour, maybe less.”

“You can’t even see the sun,” said Finn.

“It’s there,” said Lily.

They went downstairs. The Penhales lived above the boatyard, and the whole house smelled of sawdust and salt and old paint. Their father, Harry, ran the yard, as his father had before him. Their mother ran the little sailing school on the far pontoon. This early, though, the yard was still and grey, the tools asleep on their hooks.

Finn opened the big door and they stepped out onto the quay.

The quay was the long stone edge of the harbour, where the fishing boats tied up each night. This morning the boats sat still as sleeping animals, their

masts lost in the fog above them. The stone was cold and wet under the children's boots. Somewhere out in the white, a bell buoy rang, soft and slow.

A gull dropped out of the fog and landed on a post beside them. He put his head on one side and looked hard at Finn's pocket.

"No, Biscuit," said Finn. "I've got nothing for you."

Biscuit did not believe him. Biscuit never did.

Then Lily caught Finn's arm. "Finn. What's that?"

Something was moving on the water. Out near the harbour mouth, where the fog was beginning to thin, a dark shape came slowly in. It made no sound at all.

"A boat," said Finn.

"Whose?" said Lily.

They waited. The shape grew clearer. It was a small rowing boat, old and low in the water. And it was empty. Nobody sat at the oars. Nobody held a rope. The boat came in all on its own, turning a little this way and that, carried in by the tide.

"It's drifting," Lily said softly. "There's nobody in it. Nobody's rowing. The tide is just carrying it along."

An empty boat, drifting in through the fog. It came past the place where Gull Rock should be, and turned slowly toward the quay where they stood.



Then, right beside the boat, the water broke open. A round grey head came up, with big dark gentle eyes.

“Pearl,” said Finn, and for a second he grinned.

Pearl the seal lived in and around the harbour and followed the little sailing dinghies like a dog. Now she swam round and round the drifting boat, close and curious, as if she too wanted to know whose it was and why it had come.

“We need Dad,” said Lily.

They ran back across the quay. “Dad! Dad, there’s a boat! An empty one!”

Harry Penhale came out of the shed, wiping his hands on his apron. He was a broad, calm man, and not much in the world surprised him. But when he saw the little boat drifting alone in the fog, his eyebrows went up.

“Now where did you come from?” he said quietly.

He did not waste time. He slid the yard’s own dinghy down the slipway, stepped in, and rowed out with strong, even pulls on the oars. Finn badly wanted to go with him, but a small boat is best with one man in fog. So he

and Lily waited on the quay and watched their father go grey, then dim, then almost gone into the white.

Harry reached the empty boat. He caught her side, made a rope fast to her, and towed her slowly back. Pearl came all the way with them, her head bobbing in the grey water like a float.

They pulled the boat up snug against the quay.

Up close, she was older than she had first looked. Her wood was grey and soft with years, and green weed hung in strings from her side. Two long wooden oars lay across her — the oars you pull to make a rowing boat move through the water. One oar was older than the other, but nobody thought about that yet.

Harry ran his broad hand along her bow.

“She’s a good old boat,” he said. “Somebody built her well, a long time ago.” Then he frowned. “But I’ve never set eyes on her. Not in this harbour.”

That was a strange thing to hear. Harry had lived beside Puffin Bay all his life. So had his father, and his father before him. If a boat belonged here, a Penhale knew her name.

“There’s a name here,” said Lily. “On the front.”

On the bow, in faded blue paint, was one word. The letters were old and worn thin, but the children could still read them.

Curlew.

“Curlew,” said Finn. “That’s a bird. The brown one with the long curved beak, down on the mud at low tide.”

“I know what a curlew is,” said Lily. “But I don’t know *this* Curlew. Do you, Dad?”

Harry shook his head slowly. “No,” he said. “And that’s the odd part. I know every boat that’s rowed in this harbour for forty years. Every single one. But not this one.”

Lily was already climbing down into the boat. She went carefully. The old wood creaked under her boots.

“Lily —” her father began.

“I’m all right.” She knelt beside the seat, the wooden plank that lay across the middle, where a person would sit to row. Something had caught her eye. Pushed deep into the corner, under the seat where the wood met the side, was a small dark shape.

She reached in and pulled it out.

It was a tin — a little metal box, gone brown all over with rust. The lid was stuck fast, and would not turn.

“What is it?” Finn called down.

“A tin. An old one.” Lily pushed at the lid with both thumbs. It would not move at all. Harry took it, held it in his big hands, and gave it one firm twist. The lid came free with a small dry crack.

Inside, wrapped in a scrap of cloth, were two things.

The first was a small curved piece of metal, the sort that holds an oar in place against the side of a boat. Lily did not know what the second thing was at first.

It was paper. A corner of paper, folded up small and gone soft as cloth with age. She opened it out flat on her knee, very gently, so that it would not tear.

It was the corner of a chart — a sea map, with faint blue water and a thin brown line of coast. And there, right near the torn edge, someone had drawn a small cross in pencil. Just a cross. Nothing else. No word to say what it was or what it meant.

Lily looked up at Finn. Finn looked at his father.

“A cross,” said Lily quietly. “Somebody marked a place on the map. But where? And why?”

The fog was lifting now, sliding back off the water in long white ropes. But the little boat called *Curlew* kept her secret, and said nothing at all.

Chapter 2: The Name Nobody Knows

By that afternoon the fog was long gone. The sun was up, the sea was blue again, and the little boat sat on the slipway beside the boatyard, out of the water, resting on two old tyres. In the daylight she looked smaller and even older than she had in the fog. Her grey wood was dry now. The green weed hung stiff along her side.

Finn was walking round her for the third time when his cousin came down the hill with her toolbox.

Martha Penhale lived two doors along. She was thirteen, and she was afraid of nothing. She kept the old ferry motor alive, and there was nearly always oil on her hands. She set her toolbox down with a clang and looked the boat over the way she looked at a broken engine.

“So this is her,” said Martha. “The ghost boat.” She grinned. “Ollie’s already told half the village.”

As if to prove it, Ollie Trewin came round the corner of the shed at a run, eating a biscuit.

Ollie was the fisherman’s son. He knew every story in Puffin Bay, and he told most of them a little bigger than they really were.

“Is it true?” he said, with his mouth full. “A boat out of the fog, with no —”

He never finished. A grey shape dropped out of the sky, quick as a falling stone. Biscuit the gull snatched the biscuit clean out of Ollie’s hand and was gone, up onto the shed roof, before Ollie could even shut his mouth.

“Hey!” Ollie shouted. “That was mine!”

“That’s why we call him Biscuit,” said Finn.

Martha laughed. Even Lily, coming out with her notebook, smiled.

Ollie looked sadly at his empty hand — then forgot all about it and walked round the boat, touching her, frowning.

“A boat with no owner,” he said. The owner of a boat is the person she belongs to. “Just drifts in out of the fog, all on her own.” His eyes were

shining now. “You know, my grandad told me a story once, about a boat that —”

“Ollie,” said Lily. “Do you know *this* boat?”

Ollie stopped.

He knew the owner of every boat in the harbour. He knew who had built each one, who sailed her, and who she was named for. Ask Ollie about a boat, and a story came back, whether you wanted one or not.

But he looked at the *Curlew*, and for once he said nothing.

“Well?” said Finn.

“I’m... thinking,” said Ollie.

“You don’t know her!” said Martha, delighted. “Ollie Trewin doesn’t know a boat!”

“I know all the boats,” said Ollie. “I just can’t — I can’t remember this one.” To remember something is to bring it back into your mind, and Ollie tried hard. He looked at the sky. He looked at the ground. Nothing came. “It’s like she was never here at all,” he said. And that annoyed him far more than losing his biscuit had.

Lily had climbed down beside the bow and was looking closely at the name.

“Curlew,” she read again. The letters were faded blue, worn thin by years of sun and salt. A letter is one of the little marks that make a word — a *c*, a *u*, an *r*. These letters were old and tired.

But something under them was strange.

Lily wet the tip of her finger and rubbed, very gently, next to the word. A little of the old paint came away like grey dust. And there, under the blue letters, very faint, were other letters. Different ones. The shadow of a name that had been painted there before.

“Look,” she said softly. “There was another name here first. Someone painted *Curlew* right on top of an older one.”

Finn leaned down. “What did it say before?”

"I can't tell." Lily rubbed once more, then made herself stop. "It's too worn. And I don't want to spoil her." She sat back on her heels. "But this boat had two names. Not one."

Martha wiped her hands on her overall. "So who painted her? And when?"

Nobody knew. And that was the whole trouble. Nobody knew a single thing about her.

"Mrs Chegwin will know," said Ollie, cheering up at once. "Mrs Chegwin knows everything."

That was very nearly true. Mrs Chegwin ran the harbour shop — the little shop that sold bread and rope and sweets and nails and almost everything else. She knew who was ill, and whose boat needed paint, and whose cat had had kittens, often before they knew it themselves.

The four of them went up to the shop. Biscuit followed along the rooftops, hoping for a second try.

"A boat called *Curlew*?" said Mrs Chegwin, leaning over the counter. She thought. She was quiet for a long moment, which was not like her at all. "No," she said at last. "No, I don't remember any *Curlew*. And I remember most things."

She did, too. The children stared at her.

"Are you sure?" said Ollie.

"Forty years I've stood behind this counter," said Mrs Chegwin, "and I never once heard that name." A little line came between her eyebrows, as if it bothered her as well. "But if she was ever a Puffin Bay boat, there's one place that will have her. Every boat that ties up in this harbour goes into the register, down at the harbour office. You go and ask Mr Nance."

The harbour office was a small stone building on the quay, with one window that looked out over the water. Mr Nance was the harbourmaster. It was his job to know which boat was where, and to write down every one that came and went.

He was an old man with white eyebrows and a slow, kind way of talking. When the children told him about the boat in the fog, he listened all the way to the end without once saying it was impossible.

“An empty boat. No owner. And a name nobody knows,” he said. “Well. Let’s see what the book has to say.”

The register was a big, heavy book, bound in dark cloth, its pages soft at the corners from years of turning. In it, every boat in Puffin Bay was written down: her name, her owner, and the year she first came to the harbour. Line after line, page after page, going back and back through time.

“This is how a harbour remembers,” said Mr Nance, laying it open on the table. “A village forgets. People come, people go. But the register keeps it all safe.” He turned a page with one finger. “Name, owner, year. That is all it takes. Do it every time, and no boat is ever truly lost.”



He let them look. Lily turned the pages slowly and carefully. The children read the names as they went — good boat names, some they knew, most they did not: *Morning Star*. *Gannet*. *Little Jane*. *Speedwell*. But no *Curlew*.

“How far back does it go?” asked Finn.

“Further back than you have been alive,” said Mr Nance. “Try the eighties. If she came in out of the blue, she came in a good long while ago.”

So Lily went back, and back, through the years. 1990. 1988. 1986. The paper grew older and browner under her hands. Then she turned to the page for 1985 — and stopped.

The page had a stain on it.

A stain is a dark mark that spoils something, the sort you get when water spills on paper and dries. Long ago, water had crept into the book, and this one page had drunk it up. Half of it was brown and blotted, and the writing there had run away into a grey cloud. Whole lines could not be read at all.

But near the top, one name had not quite gone. The first letters were lost inside the stain. Only the end of the word came through — clear as anything.

...lew II.

Lily put her finger gently under it. For a moment nobody spoke at all.

“Curlew,” Finn breathed. “*Curlew the second.*”

Chapter 3: Two Oars, One Boat

The next morning Lily checked the tide before breakfast, the way she always did. Low water at seven, and the sea already creeping back up the slipway. She wrote it in her little blue notebook and went down to the yard.

The *Curlew* was where they had left her, up on the two old tyres. In the early light she looked tired and dirty. Green weed still hung from her sides. Grey mud had dried hard along her bottom.

Harry Penhale came out of the shed, wiping his hands on a rag.

“If you want to know a boat,” he said, “clean her. You learn more with a brush than you do with your eyes.” He nodded at the little boat. “Go on, then. Properly, mind. No splashing about.”

So they cleaned her. And it was real work.

First Finn scraped. He took a flat wooden scraper and worked the dried weed off her side, a little at a time, careful not to dig into the soft old wood. The weed came away in long grey strips and dropped on the slipway.

Then Martha filled two buckets at the tap. Lily and Ollie took stiff brushes and scrubbed — down the planks, into every corner, along the seat and under the seat. The water in the buckets ran black at first, then brown, then at last a little clearer.

“She smells of the sea,” said Ollie, scrubbing hard. “The very bottom of the sea.”

“That’s forty years down there,” said Finn.

They washed her down with clean water and let her dry in the sun. And slowly, plank by plank, the old boat began to look like a boat again. The grey wood turned pale gold in the places where the dirt came off. Even her worn blue name looked a little brighter.

Biscuit the gull sat on the shed roof and watched them work. When Ollie set his half-eaten apple on the wall so he could scrub with both hands, the gull dropped like a stone, took it, and was gone before Ollie could open his mouth.

“Every time!” said Ollie, staring at his empty hand. “*Every time.*”

Last of all came the oars.

They had been lying along the inside of the boat this whole while. Lily lifted them out, one in each hand, to wash them — and stopped.

She held them up, side by side.

“These two don’t match,” she said.

To match is to be a pair — two things the same as each other, made to go together. But these two oars were not a pair at all. One was old and grey and worn thin, like the boat herself. The other was newer. Its wood was harder and darker, less worn away by the water.

“So one broke,” said Martha, “and somebody put a new one in. That happens.”

“Maybe,” said Lily. But she was already turning the newer oar over in her hands. She rubbed the dirt off the top of it with her thumb.

There was a mark in the wood.

Not painted on — pressed in, deep, the way you press a shape into soft ground so it stays. A stamp. A stamp is a mark pushed hard into wood or paper, so that it will not wash off and will not wear away.

Lily read it out slowly.

“P.B.,” she said. “And then a number. Three.” She looked up. “P.B. three.”

“P.B.,” said Finn. “Puffin Bay?”

“I’ve seen that before.” Martha frowned hard. “Somewhere. I know I have.”

For once it was Ollie who got there first.

“The sailing school,” he said. “Your mum’s boats. They’ve all got that on the oars, every one.”

They ran up along the harbour to the sailing-school pontoon, the oar carried between them like something out of a treasure chest.

Sarah Penhale was laying out lifejackets for the afternoon class. She took the oar, turned it over — and her face changed.

“Where did you get this?”

“It was in the *Curlew*,” said Lily. “It doesn’t match the other one.”

Sarah ran her thumb over the stamp, just as Lily had. “This is one of ours. We stamp every oar and every boat. P.B. for Puffin Bay, and then a number, so nothing ever gets lost, or borrowed and never brought back.” She frowned down the pontoon. “But all our boats are here. Nothing’s missing.”

“Are you sure?” said Ollie.

“Of course I’m —” Sarah stopped herself. Then she said, in a different voice, “Well. Let’s count.”

They went along the line of little sailing boats tied up at the pontoon. Sarah put her hand on each one and read its number out loud.

“One. Two.” She stepped along the boards. “Four. Five. Six.” She reached the end of the line and stood very still.

To count is to go through the numbers — one, two, three, four — to find out how many things there are. Sarah had counted only five boats. But the last number she read was six.

“Say them again,” said Lily quietly.

“One, two, four, five, six.” Sarah looked back down the line, and this time everyone heard it. “There’s no three. I’ve counted these boats a hundred times and I never once — five boats, and the numbers run all the way up to six.” She shook her head slowly. “One of them is missing. Number three. A missing thing is one that should be here, and isn’t.” She was quiet a moment. “There used to be six boats. Somewhere, long ago, this school lost one.”

“And her oar,” said Finn, “ended up in the *Curlew*.”

Nobody spoke for a moment. The water slapped softly under the pontoon.

“When?” asked Lily. “When did the school have six boats?”

“Before my time,” said Sarah. “Your grandmother ran the school in those days. But it’s all written down — every summer, every boat, every child who ever learned to sail here. The old logbooks are up in the loft.” She glanced back at the big shed by the yard. “Nobody’s opened them in years.”

The loft was the space up under the roof of the shed, over the workbenches, reached by a wooden ladder that Finn didn’t quite trust. It was dark up there, and warm, and thick with dust. Old rope hung from nails. Folded sails lay in heaps. When Finn’s head came up through the hole in the floor, a spider ran off across the boards.

“Careful,” said Sarah from below. “Mind the low beam.”

Martha went up after him with the torch. Lily and Ollie came last. They pushed past the coils of rope, and there, in the far corner, was a great pile of sailcloth — the heavy, stiff cloth that sails are made from, folded and folded again and left to keep the dust off whatever lay beneath.

Martha lifted a corner of it. Her hand knocked against something hard.

“There’s a box,” she said.



It was a wooden box, grey with dust. Inside lay the old school logbooks, one for each run of years, their covers soft and their pages brown at the edges.

Lily lifted out the oldest one and opened it across her knees. Summer after summer, in careful old handwriting: the lessons, the weather, the names of the boats and the children. She turned the pages slowly. *1983. 1984.*

Then that page came to an end. And the next one began: *1986.*

Lily turned back. Then forward. Then back again, more slowly.

A whole year was gone. Not torn out — simply not there, as if that summer had never been sailed at all.

“Nineteen eighty-five,” she whispered. The same year as the stained page in the harbour register. “A whole summer. Missing.”

Chapter 4: The Man on the Point

The morning after the missing summer, Sarah took them out to row.

“You have been staring at oars for two days,” she said. “It is time you learned to use them.”

She put them in the school’s little blue dinghy, two at a time, and stood on the pontoon calling out.

“Sit up. Feet braced. Both blades in the water together. Now — pull. And lift. Pull. And lift.”

Finn pulled too hard and too fast, the way he did most things. One oar skipped off the top of the water and threw a sheet of spray straight over Lily.

“Slow down,” said Sarah. “Rowing is not about being strong. It is about doing it together.”

Lily rowed the way she checked the tide — neat, even, no fuss. Soon the dinghy was sliding across the harbour in a straight line. Biscuit came down and rode on the bow, wings folded, as if he had ordered a boat of his very own.

They were still rowing when Mrs Chegwin came hurrying down the quay in her apron, waving one arm.

“Sarah! Have you seen Old Pascoe this week?”

“Not for a good few days,” Sarah called back.

“Not once in the shop.” Mrs Chegwin shook her head. “Not for his bread, not for his tea. Eight days now, and it isn’t like him. I think the old man’s been poorly, all shut up alone with nobody to cook him a hot meal.”

Sarah brought the dinghy in and tied it off. “Right,” she said. “Come up to the house, all of you.”

In the kitchen she filled a big pot with soup, pressed the lid down tight, and wrapped a fresh loaf of bread in a cloth. She stood the pot and the loaf together in a basket.

“Take this up to the point,” she said. “And mind your manners. He doesn’t get many visitors, and he won’t know what to do with four of you at once.”

The point was the long arm of land that reached out from the village into the sea. Right at the very end of it stood the lighthouse.

They walked up the path with the basket between them, Martha and Finn carrying a handle each. The path climbed past the little chapel where the whole village squeezed in together on Sunday mornings. Lily looked at its worn stone step and thought how Old Pascoe never came down, not even for that. He lived out at the far end of everything, on his own.

Biscuit followed them the whole way up, gliding from post to post, sure that the warm smell of the bread had been made entirely for him. When Ollie stopped to shift the basket, the gull dropped, snatched the bun out of Ollie’s own coat pocket, and was gone over the cliff before Ollie had finished shouting.

“That was my second breakfast!” said Ollie.

The lighthouse grew as they climbed — tall and white, taller than the chapel, taller than anything. Its light turned all by itself now, night after night, warning the boats off Gull Rock.

“Somebody used to live up here,” said Finn. “To look after it. To climb the stairs every evening and light the big lamp and keep it burning till morning. That was the keeper.” He looked up at the white tower. “Old Pascoe was the last keeper of all. Before the light learned to mind itself.”

At the foot of the lighthouse stood a low stone cottage. Finn knocked.

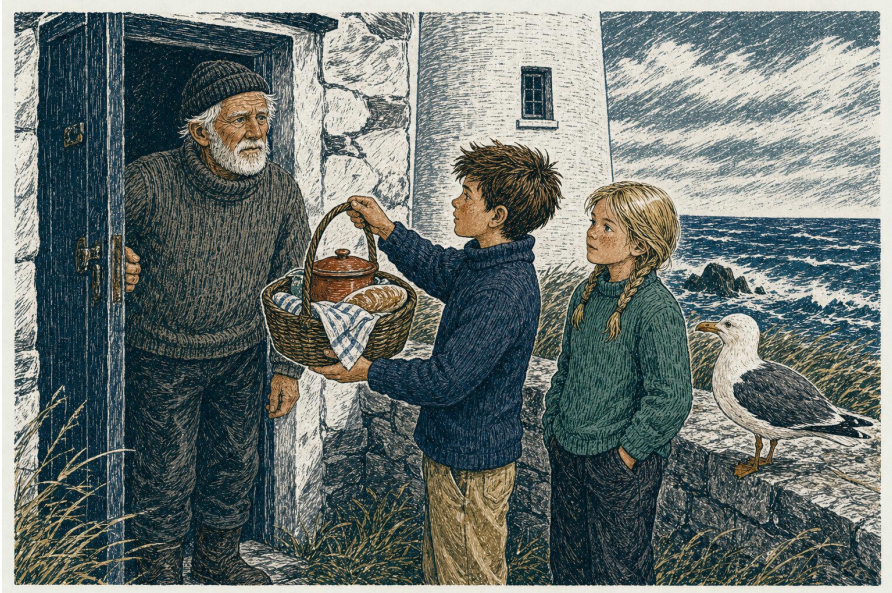
A voice came through the door, low and rough. “Who’s there?”

It was a gruff voice — short and hard, the sort that sounds cross even when it isn’t.

The door opened. An old man stood there, lean and straight, with white hair under a dark cap and pale eyes that seemed to look far past them, out to the water. “Well? What do you want?”

Finn held up the basket. “Mum sent soup,” he said. “And bread. She heard you’d been poorly.”

Old Pascoe looked at the four of them. He looked at the basket. It was a long moment.



“Well,” he said at last, and stepped back. “Don’t stand there letting the heat out.”

Inside, the little room was warm from a black stove. And everywhere Lily looked, there was something to look at.

By the window stood a telescope on three thin legs — a long brass tube you put to your eye to bring far-off things up close. It pointed straight out to sea, as if it had been waiting there a long time.

And the walls — Lily stopped still. The walls were covered in shelves, and every shelf was full of notebooks. Rows and rows of them, small and neat, each with a year written down its spine. Lily kept a notebook herself, a little blue one for the tides. But she had only the one. Old Pascoe had hundreds.

The old man lifted the lid off the soup pot and breathed in the steam, and for just a moment his hard face went soft as bread.

“Sit, then,” he said, gruff again. He poured four cups of tea in old enamel mugs without asking whether they wanted it.

Ollie could never stay quiet for long. He looked round the little room, at the telescope and the tower beyond the window, and his eyes went bright.

“My gran told me stories about this place,” he said. “She said, one night, in the biggest storm anyone ever saw, the keeper stayed awake for three whole nights without sleeping. The waves came right over the top of the lighthouse. He tied himself to the rail so the wind couldn’t take him, and he kept that lamp burning the whole time, and he saved a hundred ships in one night. A hundred!”

But Lily was not watching Ollie. She was watching Old Pascoe.

The old man’s face had gone still. Not cross, not pleased — just still, the way the sea goes flat and grey before the weather turns. He had been that keeper, or he had known him. And whatever the true story was, Lily could see plainly that it was not the one Ollie was telling.

“A hundred ships,” said Pascoe at last, dry as a stone. “In a bay with room for six.” He drank his tea and did not say what the true number had been.

Ollie was not put off for long. “A funny thing happened this week, though,” he went on. “An old rowing boat came drifting in out of the fog. No rower, no rope. The *Curlew*, she’s called. And nobody in the whole village knows whose she is.”

The room went quiet.

Old Pascoe did not answer. His eyes moved to the telescope by the window. He got up, slowly, and turned the brass tube a little way on its legs, and looked out through it at the grey water, and said nothing at all.

After that he would talk about the soup, and the weather, and the price of bread. But he would not talk about boats.

When the mugs were empty, Sarah's rule about manners sent them to their feet. Finn set the wrapped loaf on the table where the old man could reach it.

"Thank you for the tea," said Lily.

Old Pascoe grunted, which seemed to be his way of saying you're welcome. To their surprise he came to the door to see them off, standing on the step with the wind pulling at his white hair.

They had just turned down the path when he spoke. Not to them. Not to anyone. Just quietly, to himself, looking out over the water toward the harbour mouth.

"So she came back after all."

Lily heard it. The others, ahead of her, did not.

She looked back — but the old keeper had already shut the door.

Chapter 5: The Logbooks

That night Lily could not stop thinking about it.

She lay in bed above the boatyard and heard the six words over and over. *So she came back after all.* Old Pascoe had said them to nobody, out on his step, looking down at the harbour mouth. He knew something about the old rowing boat. She was sure of it.

At breakfast she told the others.

“He said *what?*” Finn put down his spoon.

“*So she came back after all.*” Lily said it slowly. “As if he had been waiting for her. As if he knew her before we ever found her name.”

“Then we go back up,” said Finn at once. “Today. We ask him straight out.”

Martha shook her head. “You can’t knock on a man’s door and shout *tell us about the boat.* He shut up like a shell last time. He’ll only do it again.”

“He won’t talk if we push,” Ollie agreed, for once. “My gran says the harder you pull on a knot, the tighter it goes.”

They were still arguing when Sarah came in with a basket of washing.

“You four have long faces for a sunny morning,” she said. “What is it?”

They told her all of it. That Pascoe had said a strange thing on his step. That they wanted to go up again, but had no good reason to.

Sarah folded a towel and thought. “You’ve a fine reason, if you use your heads,” she said. “The man shared his last drop of tea with four children he had never met. And you’ve never said a proper thank-you.” She smiled. “Bake him a cake. Take it up this afternoon. A thank-you is never an excuse. It’s only good manners.”

So that is what they did.

The cake was mostly Martha’s doing. She read out the recipe like a set of engine instructions while Lily weighed the flour and Finn beat the eggs far too hard and got half of them on the wall. It came out of the oven brown

and a little crooked, but it smelled wonderful. They turned it onto a plate, wrapped it in a clean cloth, and set off up the point.

Biscuit smelled it before they were past the chapel. He flew rings round their heads the whole way up, screaming, quite sure that a whole cake had been baked for a hungry gull. Ollie held the plate high over his head like a trophy and would not put it down for a second.

Pascoe opened his door before they knocked.

“You again,” he said. But he did not sound cross. The soup had done him good. There was more colour in his face now, and he stood up straighter. When Ollie held out the cake, still warm in its cloth, the old man went quite still.

“For the tea,” said Lily. “To say thank you.”

“Nobody’s baked me a cake in twenty years,” said Pascoe. He took it as carefully as if it might break. “Well. Come in out of the wind.”

Inside, the little room was just as before — the black stove, the enamel mugs, the walls and walls of notebooks. While Pascoe cut the cake, Lily stood in front of the shelves and read the years off the spines. 1974. 1975. 1976. They went on and on.

“What do you write in them all?” she asked.

Pascoe passed the cake round. “Boats,” he said.

“Boats?”

“Every boat that came into this bay, or went out of it, for forty years.” He nodded at the telescope by the window. “I sat there with that glass, and I watched the water, and I wrote down what I saw. That’s a logbook. A log is a book you keep day by day — what the weather did, what the sea did, which boats came and went.”

He took one down and opened it. Inside was line after line after line, all in small, neat writing. Each line had a date, a time, and a name.

“Every line is one entry,” he said. “One thing that happened. Name of the boat. In or out. Time of day. Weather.” He ran a hard finger down the page. “Forty years of them.”

Lily looked at the little blue notebook in her own pocket, where she wrote the tide every morning. One notebook. Pascoe had hundreds.

“I keep one too,” she said quietly. “But only the tides.”

For the first time, Old Pascoe looked at her properly — really looked, the way he looked at the sea. “Do you now,” he said.

He sat her down at the table with the open book between them, and showed her, entry by entry, how it was done. Always the date first, he said. Always the time, and always written the same way, so that ten years on you still knew exactly what you had meant. Short words. No guessing. If you were not sure of a name, you wrote *not known*, and you did not pretend to know.



“A log takes patience,” he told her. “You write it every single day. Even the empty days, when nothing comes and nothing goes. *Especially* those days.”

He tapped the page. "Because the day you can't be bothered is the day the one thing happens that you'll wish you had written down."

Lily nodded slowly. She thought that was the truest thing anyone had ever told her about a notebook. And she saw that being patient was not the same as being slow. It was a way of being careful.

Finn, though, had run right out of patience.

"The *Curlew*," he burst out. "The boat, the fog — the year on the register was 1985. Could we look? Please? Could we find 1985?"

Pascoe was quiet for a long moment. Then he pointed to a high shelf. "Third from the end."

But finding it was not quick at all. The notebooks had stood on those shelves for forty years, and somewhere along the way the years had slipped out of order. They had to search shelf by shelf, reading spines, while the light in the window turned slowly from white to gold. Ollie found 1983. Martha found 1988. Finn wanted to pull the whole shelf down at once, but Pascoe would not have his books thrown about, and made them search one at a time, patiently, putting each book back before they took out the next.

The sun was low over the water, and evening coming on, when Lily said, "Here."

She had it: a plain grey notebook with **1985** written down the spine.

They opened it on the table under the lamp. Page after page of entries, all in that same small hand. Boats in. Boats out. Fine weather and storms. They read down through the spring and into the summer, turning the pages slowly, searching every line for one name.

And there, near the bottom of a page late in the year, Lily's finger stopped.

Curlew II. Out. One aboard. Evening. Fog.

"One aboard," Lily whispered. "One person in the boat. Going out. In the evening, in the fog." She looked up. "That's her. That's the night."

Nobody spoke. Ollie leaned in close. Finn held his breath.

Then Lily turned the page, to find the entry where the *Curlew II* came home again.

It was not there.

She turned another page. And another. Boats came and went, day after day, all in Pascoe's neat hand — but not one of them was the *Curlew II*. She had gone out into the fog that evening, one aboard.

And in all of Old Pascoe's forty years of watching, she had never once come back in.

Chapter 6: The Story Half Told

For a long moment nobody in the little room said a word.

Old Pascoe looked down at the open page — at his own neat writing, at the boat that had gone out one evening and never come back. His face had gone very still. Lily thought he looked, all at once, much older than before.

“You knew her,” she said softly. “You knew the *Curlew II*. Didn’t you?”

Pascoe closed the logbook. He closed it slowly, with both hands, the way you shut a door you would rather not open again.

“It’s late,” he said. “You should be getting down before dark.”

And that was all. He carried the book back to its shelf and turned to the window, to the telescope and the grey evening sea. He did not look cross. He looked like a man who had gone somewhere far away inside himself, where nobody could follow.

Finn opened his mouth. Lily caught his sleeve and gave the smallest shake of her head.

So they did not ask. They said thank you for the cake — as if *he* had given it to *them* — and let themselves out into the cool air.

They walked down the point without talking. Even Ollie was quiet. Biscuit sat on the wall and watched them go, for once with nothing to steal and nothing to say.

“There’s a sad thing in that story,” said Martha at last. “You can feel it.”

“Then we don’t drag it out of him,” said Finn — which was a surprising thing for Finn to say. “My mum would call that bad manners.”

Lily nodded. Some knots, Ollie’s gran had told them, only pull tighter the harder you tug. Maybe some stories were the same.

But a story with a hole in it is a hard thing to leave alone.

Ollie could not leave it. That evening he sat in his gran’s warm kitchen while she mended a net, and he asked her — not about the boat, but about the old keeper on the point.

“Pascoe?” His gran’s needle did not stop. “He’s been up on that point longer than I’ve been alive, near enough. Kept the light through every gale God sent. A hard man to know. But he wasn’t always up there on his own, you know.”

“He wasn’t?”

“No. In the old days there were two of them. Pascoe, and a young assistant — the lad who helped him work the light and kept him company through the long nights. Carey, his name was. John Carey.”

Ollie sat very still, the way you do when a story is starting to come.

“Best of friends, those two,” his gran went on. “Then one autumn — oh, it must be forty years back now — they had a quarrel. A bad falling-out. I never did hear what it was about. Some small thing, most likely, the way it is with friends. And the very next day young Carey packed his bag, took the ferry to the mainland, and never came back to Puffin Bay. Just like that.” She shook her head. “It broke the old man’s heart, I always thought. He’s been quiet ever since.”

“Gran,” Ollie whispered. “What year? What autumn?”

“Ooh.” She thought. “Eighty-five, it would have been. The same year Mrs Penhale lost a boat off the school and shut up early. A bad autumn all round.”

Ollie nearly knocked his chair over getting up.

By the time he had told it all the next morning, standing by the *Curlew* on the slipway, the others were as still as he had been.

They put it together piece by piece, the way Lily fitted a chart to a coastline.

“Eighty-five,” said Lily. “The year the school lost a boat. The year Pascoe wrote *Curlew II, out, one aboard, evening, fog* — and never wrote her home again.”

“And the same autumn his friend Carey left,” said Martha.

“One aboard,” said Finn slowly. “One person. Rowing out in the fog, in the evening...”

“On the very night he left the village,” Ollie finished.

They looked at one another. The pieces fitted like a chart to a shore.

“Carey took the boat,” said Lily. “He borrowed the school’s dinghy — number three — to cross the bay to the ferry the night he went away. The fog came down. And—”

She stopped. That was where the story broke, and none of them wanted to say the next word.

So that evening they told Harry and Sarah everything.

Harry said grace, and then, over the soup, he listened all the way to the end, buttering his bread slowly. When they had finished he shook his head.

“He didn’t drown, your John Carey,” he said. “Don’t carry *that* home with you. I heard this story from my own mother.”

Lily let out a breath she had not known she was holding.

“My mother ran the sailing school in those days — your gran.” Harry nodded at Finn and Lily. “Eighty-five. I was younger than you are now, but I remember that fog like yesterday. Carey borrowed a school boat that night — asked no one, just took her, in too much of a hurry to be gone. He rowed off into the mist, and the whole harbour was sick with worry. Then three days later a letter came from up the coast. He was safe and sorry for the fright, off to make a new life across the water. He’d beached the boat somewhere and walked on to the ferry.”

“But the boat?” said Lily.

“Never came home. My mother searched for weeks. In the end she gave it up. She was that upset — losing a boat on her watch, and the two friends falling out — that she closed the school early that year and never even wrote up the summer log. She couldn’t bring herself to.”

Lily and Finn looked at each other. The missing summer in the logbook. That was why.

“And the harbour register?” Lily asked. “The 1985 page is all stained. We thought—”

Harry actually laughed. “You thought there was some dark reason in it?” He shook his head. “Old Nance copied those worn-out registers into fresh books, oh, twenty years ago now. Sat at his desk with a mug of tea and knocked the whole lot over the open page. That stain is nothing but spilt tea, my love. Not every mark is a mystery.”

Then Sarah said, gently, “And Pascoe never forgave himself. He always felt he had driven his friend away — that if they had not quarrelled, John would never have taken a boat out in the fog at all. He has carried the blame for forty years. That’s why he can’t talk about her.”

The kitchen went quiet. Biscuit tapped once on the window, hopeful, and was ignored.

“Forty years,” said Finn. “Thinking it was his fault.”

The next morning Martha could not settle. While the others were still talking it over, she went down to the slipway on her own, knelt by the old boat, and did what Martha always did with a puzzle. She used her hands.

She ran her fingers along the hull — the whole curved bottom and sides of the boat, from bow to stern. And she frowned.

Most of the grey wood was soft and worn, just as you would expect of a boat lost for forty years. But here, low down near the keel, the wood was different. Someone had cut out the rotten pieces and let in fresh timber — clean, pale, sound. A proper repair. She found another, and another: neat patches, well made, the mending of somebody who knew boats.

Martha sat back on her heels. She knew old work from new the way she knew a rusted bolt from a bright one. These repairs were not forty years old. They were not even four. They were recent — done not long ago at all.



She got up slowly and went to find the others.

“This boat didn’t spend forty years rotting on a beach,” she said, wiping her hands down her overalls. “Somebody has been looking after her. Mending her. For years.” She looked from face to face. “And I want to know who.”

Chapter 7: Across the Bay

For the rest of that day, one question followed the four of them everywhere.

If someone had been mending the *Curlew* all these years, then someone had been keeping her somewhere. But where? Where does a lost boat hide for forty years?

“She didn’t fix herself,” said Martha, wiping her hands at supper time.

Lily said nothing. She was thinking about the tin.

The next morning, before the others were even down, she was at the chart table in the corner of the shed. In her hand she had the folded corner of chart from the rusty tin — the one they had found under the seat on the very first day. On it was a single pencil cross, close to the torn edge, and no writing at all.

Above the table hung the big chart of the whole bay. Lily loved that chart. Every rock, every mark of deep and shallow water, every name along the coast.

She laid the little torn corner against the big one and slid it slowly along the paper, matching line to line, the way you fit one piece of a puzzle to the next.

Finn found her there. “Any good?”

“Wait,” said Lily.

The coast on the scrap had a curl in it — a small round bite out of the land. Lily moved it along the chart... and there. The shapes matched. The curl on the scrap sat exactly over a curl on the big chart, across the water, on the far side of the bay.

And there someone long ago had printed a name in tiny letters.

Selder Cove.

“A cove,” Lily breathed. A cove was a little bay, no bigger than a yard, cut into the cliffs. “The cross marks Selder Cove. Right across the water from us.”

By the time the porridge was on the table, all four of them were leaning over the chart.

“I’ve never once been to Selder Cove,” said Ollie — and it clearly hurt him to say it, because Ollie had been almost everywhere. “There’s no road to it. Cliffs all round the back.”

“Then you go by water,” said Finn. His eyes had lit up. “We row across.”

But Lily was frowning at the mouth of the cove, where a line of little crosses marked rocks.

“Not any time we like,” she said, and tapped them. “Look. The way into Selder Cove is one narrow gap, and it’s full of rock. Most of the day the sea covers the rocks and the waves break right across the gap. You’d never row in. You’d be smashed to pieces.”

“So we never get in,” said Finn.

“We get in at low tide,” said Lily.

She said it as if it were the simplest thing in the world. “Twice a day the sea goes out — that’s low tide — and the water drops right down. At low tide those rocks stand up bare, and there’s a lane of clear water you can row through. But only then. And you have to be out again before the sea comes back up.”

Finn looked at his little sister the way he always did when she pulled an answer out of the air. “How do you *know* all this?”

Lily only shrugged and reached for her tide notebook.

They told Sarah at once — Sarah, who ran the sailing school and had the last word on who went on the water, and when.

She did not say yes straight away. She never did.

“Show me your tide,” she said.

Lily opened the little blue book. “Low water is at half past ten. The sea’s going out already. By ten it’ll be low enough to get through the gap. It stays low about an hour. Then it turns and comes back.”

Sarah read the numbers over Lily's shoulder and worked the sum again herself. That was the rule of the house: check the tide, then check it twice.

"So," she said at last. "You'd have one hour inside that cove. Not one minute more." She looked at each of them in turn. "If we do this, we do it properly. This is no little row round the harbour. This is a proper expedition — right across open water and back, against the clock."

An expedition needs packing, and Sarah packed them by the book.

Four lifejackets, buckled and checked. A bottle of water and a flask of hot tea. A whistle for Finn, who would row up in the bow. Lily slid the chart into a plastic bag so the sea couldn't touch it.

"Where are you going?" said Sarah.

"Selder Cove," they chorused.

"When are you back?"

"Before the tide turns. Half past eleven at the very latest."

"And if the wind gets up, or the fog rolls down?"

"We turn round," said Finn — and this time he did not roll his eyes. He had learned that much.

Sarah nodded slowly. "I'll be teaching on the near pontoon all morning. I can see the whole bay from there, and you will stay where I can see you." She tucked one last thing under the seat — the small first-aid tin. "Off you go, then. And mind those rocks."

The morning was calm and grey and kind. Just the weather for it.

They took the school's steadiest dinghy. Finn and Lily rowed; Martha sat in the stern with the chart open on her knees; Ollie kept a look-out from the bow and, for once, held his tongue.

The harbour slid away behind them. Ahead, the far cliffs came slowly closer. Halfway across, a smooth grey head lifted out of the water beside the boat — Pearl the seal, come to see them off.

"She always knows when something's happening," said Ollie.

Biscuit knew too. The gull dropped out of the sky, thumped down on the bow, and before Ollie could shut his hand, snatched the whole biscuit clean out of it and flapped away.

“Every single time,” said Ollie sadly.

Selder Cove opened up in front of them just as Lily had promised. The tide was right out now. The rocks at the mouth stood black and bare and dripping, and between them ran a lane of quiet green water, just wide enough for one small boat.

“Slow,” said Lily. “Feel your way in.”

They shipped their oars and eased through, one careful pull at a time. The cliffs closed round them. And all at once they were inside Selder Cove.



It was a hidden, silent place — a curve of grey sand, cliffs on every side, the open sea shut out behind the rocks. And there on the sand, above the line of the tide, stood a building.

“A boathouse,” said Martha softly.

It was a long, low wooden shed, grey with years, built so a boat could run straight down the sand to the water. A boathouse — the kind of place where you keep a boat safe out of the weather.

And its big doors were not shut. They stood a little way open — ajar — just wide enough for a person to slip through.

They pulled the dinghy up the sand and stood looking at those half-open doors.

“Hello?” called Finn. His voice sounded very small against the cliffs. Nobody answered.

Martha was already walking up the beach. She laid her hand on the door and pushed it gently. It swung inward with a long, low creak.

Inside it was dim and cool, and it smelt of wood and tar and the sea. Their eyes took a moment to see. Then, one by one, they did.

On the far wall, hung neat on two wooden pegs, was an oar.

Lily crossed to it and turned the handle to the light. Cut deep into the wood was a stamp she knew by heart.

P.B. 3.

“It’s the twin,” she whispered. “The other oar. The pair to the one on the *Curlew*.”

But Finn was looking down, at the floor beneath a work bench. He crouched. On the boards lay a soft heap of wood shavings — pale, curling ribbons of wood, the kind that peel away under a sharp tool when someone is shaping a piece by hand.

He picked one up and rolled it in his fingers. It was clean and pale. He could still smell the fresh-cut wood on it.

“These aren’t old,” he said slowly. He looked up. The others looked back at him, and nobody moved.

“Somebody has been working in here,” said Martha. “And not long ago at all.”

Chapter 8: The Carpenter of Selder Cove

Nobody moved. The pale shavings lay curled on the floor, and the whole boathouse smelt of fresh-cut wood.

“If somebody has been working here,” Finn said quietly, “then somebody might come back.”

He was right.

From outside, across the still water of the cove, came a sound. Slow and steady. *Dip... pull. Dip... pull.* The sound of oars.

They hurried to the doors and looked out. A small boat was coming in through the gap in the rocks — the same narrow lane they had rowed through themselves. An old man sat in it, rowing gently, feeling his way past the black rocks the way you feel your way down a dark stair at night.

He beached his boat on the sand beside their own. That is what you do when there is no quay: you run the boat straight up onto the beach, so she sits safe and dry while the sea goes out. The old man did it without a splash and without a word, as if he had done it ten thousand times.

Then he saw the four of them, and stopped.

For a moment nobody spoke. The children stood in the doorway of a boathouse that was not theirs, and the old man stood on the sand and looked at them with pale, surprised eyes.

He was tall and a little bent, with white hair and big, careful hands. There was sawdust on his sleeve.

“Well,” he said at last. His voice was rusty, like a gate that is not often opened. “I don’t get visitors.”

“We’re sorry,” said Lily quickly. “The doors were open. We didn’t touch anything.”

Even Ollie, who always had something to say, said nothing at all.

The old man looked from face to face. Then, slowly, something in him softened.

“No harm done,” he said. “You came at low tide. Clever. There’s no other way in.” He nodded at the long grey shed behind them. “This is my place. I’m Voss. I’m a carpenter — I work with wood. Boats, doors, oars, whatever wants mending.”

“You mend boats *here*?” said Martha, and you could hear that she liked the idea very much.

“In winter the farms along the shore send me their boats,” said Mr Voss. “There’s no room for them up at the farms, and the winter weather would ruin them. So I keep them here, dry and safe, till spring.” He half smiled. “Forty years I’ve done it. Nobody comes. Just me and the tide and the gulls.”

As if it had heard, Biscuit dropped out of the grey sky and landed on the ridge of the boathouse roof. Mr Voss looked up at the gull and did not seem at all surprised.

Finn took a breath. This was it.

“Mr Voss,” he said, “we came because of a boat. An old grey rowing boat drifted into our harbour a few days ago, right across the bay. Nobody knew her. Her name is *Curlew*.” He pointed to the oar on the wall. “And that oar is the pair to one we found in her.”

The old man went very still.

He walked past them into the dim boathouse and laid his big hand on the oar, gently, the way you might touch an old friend.

“So she’s home,” he said softly. “After all this time.”

Then he told them.

“It was forty years ago, near enough. A night of thick fog — you couldn’t see your own hand in front of you. I woke in the morning, came down to the beach, and there was a boat on my sand that had never been there before. A little grey rowing boat. No rope, no owner, nobody near.”

“Somebody had beached her in the night,” said Lily.

“Beached her and gone,” said Mr Voss, nodding. “Run her up the sand and walked away. There’s a path behind the cove, up over the hill. It comes out

by the ferry — the boat that carries folk across the water to the far side. Whoever left her must have climbed that path in the dark and caught the morning ferry, and never come back.”

“Did you look for him?” asked Ollie.

“Course I did.” The old man sat down slowly on the work bench. “I asked all along this shore. I asked the ferryman. I asked at every farm. Nobody knew a grey boat called *Curlew*. Nobody wanted her.” He spread his careful hands. “And there she sat. A good boat. A *sound* boat — good strong wood, not a rotten plank in her, only wanting a little care.”

“So you kept her,” said Martha.

“I couldn’t let her rot,” said Mr Voss simply. “A carpenter can’t stand and watch good wood die. So I mended her, year by year — a new plank here, a fresh nail there.”

Martha’s eyes went wide. “The new wood in her hull,” she said. “I found it. Pale timber, let in clean and neat. That was *you*.”

The old man dipped his head, pleased and shy at once. “Neat as I could make it,” he said. “And once every spring I put her in the water and rowed her round the cove, just the once, to keep her alive.” He looked at the empty pegs where a second oar should hang. “Then last week the big storm came. Worst in years. The sea got up in the night and took her mooring — snapped the very rope that held her — and carried her clean out of the cove and away.”

“And the tide brought her home,” said Lily.

For a long moment the old carpenter said nothing. Outside, in the gap between the rocks, the water had already begun, very slowly, to turn. Lily glanced at it. They did not have long.

“There’s one more thing,” said Mr Voss at last, “before you go.”

He got up, went to a high shelf at the back of the boathouse, and lifted something down with both hands. He blew the dust off it and set it on the bench in front of them.

It was a wooden box — small, dark, made by hand, the corners cut neat and tight.



“He left this in the boat, whoever he was,” said Mr Voss. “It was under the seat the morning I found her. I’ve kept it dry all these years.” He ran a finger over the lid. “There’s writing on it. Read it.”

They leaned in together. Cut into the wood, in careful, old-fashioned letters, were the words:

For whoever finds her. I always hoped she would row home one day.

“I found her,” said Mr Voss quietly. “But there were letters inside, and they weren’t written to me. So I never opened them. It’s not right to read another man’s letters.” He looked up. “Forty years I’ve asked, up and down this shore. I never once found the man they belong to.”

He lifted the lid.

Inside lay a small bundle of letters, tied with string, gone yellow with age. On the top one, in faded ink, was a single name.

The four children read it together, and every one of them went cold and still.
The name on the letters was *Pascoe*.

Chapter 9: Letters Forty Years Late

They rowed home fast.

The wooden box sat on the floor of the dinghy between Lily's feet, and nobody said much. Behind them, Mr Voss stood on his sand and lifted one big hand. They lifted theirs back. Then the gap in the rocks closed behind them, and the open bay opened ahead.

"Tide's turning," said Lily. She did not need to say it twice. Finn pulled hard on the oars. Martha took the other pair, and the two of them rowed together, the way Sarah had taught them, so the boat ran straight and quick across the grey water.

Pearl came with them for a while, her round head bobbing beside the boat. Then she dived and was gone.

Lily kept one eye on the shore and one on the time. In an hour the gap behind them would be too shallow to row. But they were out, and clear, and heading home with the tide still under them. That was what mattered. You get out in good time, or you do not get out at all.

Sarah was waiting on the pontoon, exactly where she said she would be. She counted four heads and let out a breath.

"Right on time," she said. "Good. Now — what did you find?"

They told her. All of it, over each other, until she held up a hand and made them tell it in order. Then Finn lifted the wooden box out of the boat and set it on the pontoon, and Sarah went quiet.

She read the words cut into the lid. *For whoever finds her. I always hoped she would row home one day.*

"And the letters?" she asked.

"Still inside," said Lily. "We didn't open them." She looked down at the box. "They're not ours to read. They've got a name on them. Pascoe."

Sarah looked at her niece and nephew and their two friends for a long moment.

“No,” she said softly. “They’re not ours. Mr Voss was right to leave them shut, and so were you.” She rested her hand on the lid. “These belong to one man in the whole world. And you four know exactly where he lives.”

Nobody hurried after that. The box was not heavy, but it *felt* heavy, the way a thing can feel heavy when it matters. They took turns to carry it up the steep path to the point, past the chapel, up to where the wind always blew. Every time one of them took it, they held it a little more carefully than the last.

Pascoe opened the door before they knocked. He had seen them coming — he saw everything, from that window of his.

“You again,” he said. But his gruff voice was not unkind.

Finn held out the box.

“This was in the *Curlew II*,” he said. “A carpenter across the bay kept her safe for forty years. He kept this too. He never opened it, because it wasn’t his.” Finn swallowed. “It’s got your name on it, Mr Pascoe.”

The old man looked at the box for a long time before he took it. When he did, his big hands were not quite steady. He read the lid. He turned it over. And when he opened it and saw the letters inside, still tied with their old string, something moved across his face that the children had never seen there before.

He knew that writing. Anyone could see he knew it.

“Where did you children learn,” he said, very low, “to bring an old man a thing like this?” He did not seem to want an answer. He stepped back into the warm little room. “Wait outside. Please. I’ll not be long.”

He shut the door.

So they waited.

They sat on the low stone wall by the door, out of the wind, and they waited. It is a hard thing to wait outside a shut door when you want very much to know what is happening behind it. Ollie, who could never sit still, threw little stones at nothing. Martha watched the sea. Lily watched the window.

Biscuit came and waited with them, which for Biscuit meant marching up and down the wall and eyeing Ollie's pockets. When nothing came out of them, the gull gave a cross little cry and sat down, as if he too were waiting for the news.

The minutes went slowly. Once, through the window, they saw Pascoe sit down in his chair by the telescope. Once they saw him lift a page close to his face and hold it there. After that Lily made herself look at the sea instead, because some things are private, even through a window.



At last the door opened.

“Come in,” said Pascoe. “Come in out of that wind.”

His eyes were red, and he did not pretend they were not. The letters lay open on the table, each one lifted out of its envelope, spread in the lamplight like leaves.

“He wrote to me,” Pascoe said. “John. That night. Look — one, two, three, four, five of them. He wrote it again and again.” He touched the pile with one finger. “Every one says the same thing, a little different each time. He

was sorry. He said sorry for the hard words we threw at each other. He said the quarrel was his fault as much as mine.” The old man shook his head slowly. “Forty years I told myself I drove him into the fog. And all that while, these were shut in a box across the water, telling me he blamed himself just the same.”

Nobody spoke.

“He wasn’t lost, you children,” Pascoe went on. “He beached the boat, walked the hill path in the dark, caught the morning ferry. He was off to build a new life over there — boats, he said, always boats. He loved a good boat more than anyone I ever knew.” He half smiled, and it hurt to see. “He even wrote his address at the top, plain as day, so I could answer him. So I could say sorry too, or just say one kind word. All I had to do was write back.”

He was quiet for a moment.

“And I never did,” he said. “I never knew how to be the first one to say it. Neither did he — so he wrote it all down and never sent it, and I’ve read it forty years too late.”

Lily thought of the small pencilled cross on the chart corner, the one from the rusted tin.

“Selder Cove,” she said. “He chose it himself, didn’t he?”

Pascoe found one letter and turned it to the lamp. “He did. Marked it on his own chart corner that same evening, before he ever set out. ‘The quiet cove across the bay,’ he calls it here. He knew he could run her up on that sand and reach the ferry from there.” He looked up at Lily. “That little cross you found — he made it himself.”

For a moment the only sound was the wind and the far-off sea.

Then Pascoe looked at the long rows of notebooks on his wall, the ones with a year on every spine, and something in him seemed to settle.

“I’ve said some hard things up here on my own,” he said quietly, half to the window and half to Someone else. “About that night. Tonight I think I’ll just say thank you. She came home. That’s more than I ever asked for.”

He got up. He reached down the newest of the telescope logbooks — the one that had not been opened in a long, long time — and turned the pages until he came to the first empty one. He took his pen. And in his neat, careful hand, the first new line in more years than the children had been alive, he wrote:

Curlew II. In. Home.

He closed the book. Then he turned to the four of them, and for the first time all afternoon, the old keeper’s eyes had a spark in them.

“Now,” said Pascoe. “It’s a long way to the far side of the water. But it’s not too far for a letter, and it is never too late to reply.” He looked from face to face. “So tell me — do you children know how to write a letter?”

Chapter 10: The Reply

They wrote the letter the next afternoon.

It was harder than they had thought. A letter at school was easy — *Dear Sir, thank you for the trip to the lighthouse, from Class Four.* But this was a real letter, to a real person, forty years late.

They sat around Pascoe's table, the one by the window with the telescope. Pascoe had found a clean sheet of paper and a good pen. Then he sat and looked at the empty page for a long time.

"I've watched every boat in this bay for forty years," he said at last. "I can tell you the day and the hour that each one came in. But I do not know how to start this."

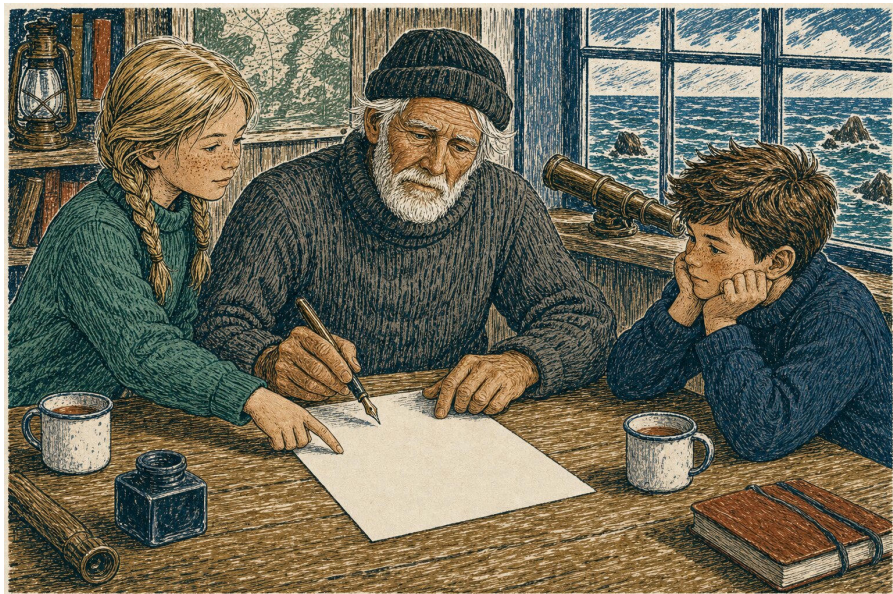
"You start with the place," said Lily. "And the date. Up in the corner."

She had the neatest hand, so Pascoe let her begin. She wrote *Puffin Bay* in the top corner, and under it the date, the way you should.

"Now the person," said Ollie. "*Dear* somebody."

Pascoe took the pen back. His hand was not quite steady. But he wrote two words, and they were the two hardest words of all.

Dear John.



After that it came slowly, one line at a time. Sometimes Pascoe said the words out loud first, and the children helped him make them shorter and truer. Sometimes he just wrote, and they stayed quiet and let him. Outside on the windowsill, Biscuit watched, as if even a gull knew this was not a moment to steal anything.

When it was done, Pascoe read it back to them, low and slow.

Puffin Bay 12 June

Dear John,

I am forty years too late. I know that. But a wise friend told me it is never too late to say a thing, so I am saying it now.

I am sorry for the words I threw at you that night. They were hard words, and they were wrong. You were the best friend I ever had, and I let you row off angry into the fog, and I have not forgiven myself since.

Your letters came home last week, in your old boat. A good man across the bay kept her safe all these years. I have read every one. You said

sorry to me a hundred times over. I never once said it back. So here it is, John. I am sorry too.

Come home if you can. The kettle is on.

Your old friend,

Under those last words he signed his name. Then he folded the paper, and the little room was quiet. It was a short letter. But short letters can be the heaviest ones of all.

The next day they carried it down to the harbour to put it in the post.

Mrs Chegwin's shop had the only postbox in Puffin Bay, red and round on top, by the shop door. Sarah bought a stamp. Finn licked it and stuck it on, straight in the corner. And Biscuit made a dash at a bag of crisps on the shelf and shot back out of the door, Mrs Chegwin's broom two steps behind him.

Then Lily held the letter over the slot and looked round at them all.

"Ready?" she said.

"Post it," said Finn. "Go on."

She let it go. It fell in with a small, soft sound, and that was that. The letter was in the post now, out of their hands and on its way across the water — off to find a man not one of them had ever met.

"And now," said Ollie, "we wait."

He said it as if waiting were the easy part. It was not.

The weeks went by the way harbour weeks always do.

Every morning Lily checked the tide in her little blue notebook. High water, low water, the times sliding a bit later each day. The mornings grew warm. School finished for the summer. And down on the quay, slowly, the regatta began to come near.

You could feel it coming. Mr Nance put up the posters outside the harbour office. Boats came out of the sheds to be scrubbed and painted. People talked about the races — the rowing race, the sailing race, and the veterans' parade, when the oldest boats in the bay went out together in one long, proud line.

And every day, Finn asked at the shop.

"Anything for the point? Anything for Mr Pascoe?"

And every day Mrs Chegwin shook her head. "Not yet, my love. These things take time. Over the water and back again — that's a long way for a bit of paper."

Up on the point, Pascoe waited too. Lily saw him sometimes at his window — not watching the sea for once, but watching the road, the way the postman came. He never asked. But they all knew.

Sunday came, and the chapel bell up on the hill, and then another week. Still no reply.

Then, on a bright morning ten days before the regatta, it came.

They were working in the yard when they heard her.

"Sarah! *Sarah!*"

Mrs Chegwin was not a woman who ran. But there she was, hurrying up the quay as fast as she could go, one hand on her hat, the other waving a white envelope over her head.

"It's come!" she called. "From over the water! Look at the stamp — it's *come!*"

Everyone stopped. Finn dropped his brush. Martha wiped her hands down her front. And the four of them ran to meet her, with Sarah close behind and Biscuit swooping above them.

The envelope was thin and worn, and the writing on the front was old and shaky. But it was addressed to *Mr Pascoe, Puffin Bay*. And up in the corner sat the answer they had waited three weeks for — the reply, at last.

"We can't open it," said Lily at once. "It's his."

“No,” said Sarah, smiling. “But we can carry it up the point faster than we’ve ever carried anything in our lives.”

They ran most of the way up.

Pascoe opened his door before they reached it. He looked at the envelope in Finn’s hand, and at the shaky old writing on the front, and for a second he had to hold the doorframe.

“Read it to me,” he said. “My hands — I can’t. You read it, girl.” He meant Lily. So Lily opened it carefully, and there in the doorway, with the wind off the sea, she read the reply out loud.

Dear old friend,

Your letter reached me on a wet Tuesday and turned it into the best day of my whole year.

I am an old man now, and I do not travel far these days. My legs and my doctor both say so.

But I have a grandson. His name is Joe, and he is mad about the sea, exactly the way you and I were. He has a good little boat of his own, and he says he will bring me across the water himself, and no arguing.

So we are coming, the two of us, for the regatta. Keep the kettle on. And keep a place on the water for the old Curlew II — I should dearly love to see her one more time.

Your friend, always, John

For a moment Pascoe could not say a word. Then he laughed — a short, surprised, wonderful laugh, the first the children had ever heard from him.

“He’s coming,” he said. “The old fool is coming home. And bringing his grandson.”

Everyone started talking at once. A grandson! A boat! The regatta! Ollie was already deciding where they would all stand on the quay.

But it was Finn who went quiet first. He had turned to look down the slope, past the cottage, to where the *Curlew II* stood on her trailer in the yard below. Grey. Bare. Her blue name almost worn away.

“He wants to see her,” Finn said slowly. “He wrote it right there. *Keep a place on the water for the old Curlew II.*”

“So?” said Ollie.

“So look at her.” Finn pointed down the hill. “She’s home. But she’s not ready. Mr Voss kept her sound, but she’s not seaworthy — not properly. Not safe and smart and fit to carry an old man out on the sea. And she’s as grey as an old sock.” He turned to the others, and his eyes were bright. “If John Carey is coming all this way to see his boat again, she can’t just float. She has to *shine*. She has to be the finest boat in the whole parade.”

Nobody argued. It was true, and they all knew it.

Then Lily, who counted everything, said the one thing that made all their hearts drop.

“The regatta is in ten days,” she said quietly. “Ten days to make her seaworthy. Ten days to make her shine.”

Ten days. And she was grey to her very bones.

Chapter 11: Ten Days

They started the very next morning.

Harry lifted the *Curlew II* off her trailer and set her up on two wooden trestles in the middle of the yard, so they could reach all the way round her. In the morning light she looked worse than ever. Grey wood. Green weed on her sides. Her blue name almost gone.

“Ten days,” said Harry. He walked round her slowly, one hand on her hull. “It can be done. But only if we all work, and work well. A boat like this is not made new in a day.”

Then he told them the plan.

“First we sand her,” he said. “We rub off all the old grey, right down to the good wood underneath. Then we caulk her — we press soft cotton into the gaps between her boards, so the sea can’t get in. Then, last of all, we paint her. Coat after coat, until she shines.”

“Sand, caulk, paint,” said Ollie. “Sounds easy when you say it fast.”

“Try saying it slow,” said Martha, “with a hundred sanding blocks.”

They began with the sanding.

Harry gave each of them a block of wood with sandpaper wrapped round it, and showed them how. Long strokes. Always the same way as the grain of the wood. Never round and round.

It was slow work. You had to sand and sand and sand, and at first nothing seemed to change. Then, little by little, under all that grey, a warm pale wood began to show. Finn found that he liked it. Every stroke gave back a little more of the real boat.

Biscuit sat on the shed roof and watched. When Ollie set his bun down on the trestle to sand a hard corner, the gull dropped like a stone, took the bun, and was gone before anyone could shout.

“That bird,” said Ollie, “is going to be in my story too.”

Because Ollie had a job of his own, on top of the sanding.

He was collecting the story. The *true* one.

For years Ollie had told the tale of Old Pascoe his own way, with a hundred ships and a mighty storm. But now he knew what had really happened — the quarrel, the fog, the lost boat, the letters forty years late — and it was better than anything he had ever made up. So he asked, and he wrote it down. He asked his gran about the two young keepers. He asked Pascoe, gently, about the night John Carey rowed off. He would ask Mr Voss too, when he came.

“At the regatta,” he said, “I’m going to tell everyone how she really came home. Every bit of it true. And nobody will believe it, because it’s better than my made-up ones.”

Word went round the village fast, the way words do in Puffin Bay.

By the second day, they were not working alone.

Mr Nance came down from the harbour office with sandpaper and two tins of paint from his store. Mrs Chegwin sent buns and a big pot of tea, and would take not one penny for them. A fisherman lent his best brushes. A neighbour carried over a wooden plane. Nobody was asked. Nobody wanted paying. They just came, and rolled up their sleeves, and set to work on an old grey boat that was not theirs.

“That’s how it is here,” Sarah told the children, pouring the tea. “A boat like this belongs to the whole harbour, really. When a thing matters, folk give what they have. Time. Hands. A pot of tea. It’s a gift. You don’t put a price on a gift.”

Then came the caulking, and that was Harry’s own careful work.

He knelt by the boat with a coil of soft cotton and a special tool, and pressed the cotton deep into each seam — each long gap between the boards. He let Finn try one seam, then checked it twice.

“Miss a gap,” Harry said, “and the sea finds it. The sea always finds it. Do it right, and she’ll be dry as a Sunday hat.”

Martha, meanwhile, had taken charge of the fittings — all the metal parts of the boat. The rowlocks the oars sat in. The little cleats you tied a rope to. The rings and hooks and screws. She lifted each one off, cleaned forty years of rust from it, and rubbed it until it shone. Then she screwed each fitting back exactly where it belonged.

“A boat’s not just wood,” she said, oil on her hands and a grin on her face. “It’s all these little bits too. And every one has to work.”

And every day, down the steep path from the point, came Old Pascoe.

That surprised the whole village more than anything. For years Pascoe had stayed up top, alone with his telescope. He never came down — not even for chapel. But now, every single morning, there he was, walking slowly down the hill to the yard, to be near the boat.

His old hands were not steady enough to sand or caulk. But he had something better. He knew the *Curlew II*. He knew where every fitting had once gone, before she was lost. He sat on an upturned box and told them, and Martha put each one back just as he said.

“There,” he told her, pointing. “The cleat sat there. A little higher. John always said it was too low.” He stopped, and looked at the boat a long moment. “Forty years,” he said quietly, “and I still know her.”

On the fifth day, a small boat rowed in across the bay.

It was Mr Voss, come all the way from Selder Cove, his big careful hands on the oars. He tied up at the quay, climbed out, and walked to the yard without a word. He and Pascoe looked at each other for a long moment. Two old men. One boat, loved by them both.

“You kept her sound,” said Pascoe at last. “Forty years. I never even knew.”

“Couldn’t let good wood die,” said Voss, in his rusty voice. “That’s all.”

“And I’ll thank you for it,” said Pascoe, “the rest of my days.”

Then the two of them bent over the boat together, one on each side, and worked side by side all afternoon, and hardly needed to speak at all. Ollie watched them and wrote it down. *That, he thought, is the best part of the whole story.*



At last came the painting.

First a coat of pale undercoat, to feed the dry wood. They let it dry, then sanded it smooth again, then painted a second coat over the top. The boat began to change before their eyes — no longer grey and sad, but clean and smooth and new.

Pascoe himself had brought the last tin: a small pot of the right blue. The exact blue of her name. And when the paint was dry, Lily, who had the neatest hand of them all, took a fine brush and painted the two words back onto the bow, letter by letter, slow and careful.

Curlew II.

Fresh and bright and blue.

On the evening before the regatta, they set the last brush down and stepped back.

She was ready.

The old grey boat was gone. In her place stood a boat that shone — smooth wood below, fresh blue above, every fitting bright, her name clear and new on the bow. Pascoe put a hand on her gunwale and did not say anything at all, which said everything.

“She’s ready,” said Finn. “Ten days, and she’s ready. Tomorrow she rows in the parade.”

“Tomorrow,” said Ollie, “I tell the whole true story.”

They stood together in the last of the light, tired and happy and proud, and looked at what their hands had made.

Then Lily lifted her head, and looked out to sea, and went still.

Out past Gull Rock, low over the grey water, something was moving toward the harbour. Soft. White. Silent.

Fog.

It came in slow at first, then faster, curling round the point and rolling in over the quay, thicker and thicker, until the lighthouse itself was gone and they could hardly see the boat in front of them.

Thick as the night she left.

And tomorrow, John Carey was coming home across that very water.

Chapter 12: The Regatta and the Rower

Finn woke early and ran to the window.

For a moment his heart dropped. Fog. Still fog, grey against the glass.

But then he looked again. The fog was moving. Thinning. And as the sun came up over the hill, it turned the mist to gold – soft and warm and bright – and lifted it off the water, curl by curl.

By the time he reached the quay, the last of it was gone. The harbour lay clear and shining. The lighthouse stood white on the point. It was going to be a perfect day.

“See?” said Lily, beside him with her little blue notebook. “High water at eleven. Light wind. The fog always lifts by morning.”

“Not always so kindly,” said Finn.

The night the *Curlew II* left, the fog had come down and kept a boat and a friendship for forty years. This morning it had only kissed the water and gone. Same bay. Same mist. But this time it gave something back.

The regatta filled the harbour.

Little flags hung from every mast – small triangles of red and yellow and blue. Boats crowded the quay, more than Finn had ever seen. Mrs Chegwin sold buns and lemonade from a table. Mr Nance stood on a box with a list, calling out the races. The whole village was there, and half the next village too.

And down at the end of the pontoon, freshly painted, her blue name shining, sat the *Curlew II* – ready for the veterans’ parade, when the oldest boats in the bay would go out slowly, one by one, for everyone to see.

But first, they were waiting for the ferry.

At ten o’clock the ferry came round the point.

Old Pascoe stood at the very end of the quay, alone, his cap in his hands. He had come down from the point again — but this time not for the boat. This time for a man.

The ferry bumped against the quay. A boy jumped off first, quick and eager, a rope over his shoulder. That was Joe — Carey's grandson, mad about the sea, just as the letter had said. He turned and held out his hand.

And then, slow and careful, an old man stepped down onto the quay.

He was small and bent, with white hair and bright eyes, and he stopped when he saw who was waiting for him.

Nobody spoke. The whole quay went quiet.

The two old men looked at each other for a long, long moment. Forty years stood between them — a quarrel, a fog, a boat lost, a box of letters never sent.

Then John Carey put out his hand.

And Old Pascoe took it.

That was all. One handshake. No big speech, no tears — just two old friends holding on, hand in hand, longer than any handshake Finn had ever seen. Forty years, put right in the space of a breath.

"You came back," said Pascoe at last.

"I always meant to," said Carey. "I just took my time."

Then Joe saw the boat.

He walked straight down the pontoon, and when he reached her he stopped and stared. "Grandad," he called, his voice shaking a little. "Grandad, come and see."

Carey came slowly down the pontoon on Pascoe's arm. And when he saw the *Curlew II* — clean and smooth, her blue name fresh on the bow, the very boat he had rowed off into the fog all those years ago — he laid one hand on her gunwale, just as Pascoe had done, and could not say a word.

“She rowed home,” said Pascoe softly. “Just like your box said. She rowed home.”

The veterans’ parade was the heart of the regatta.

One by one the old boats went out, slow and proud, round the harbour for everyone to see. And last of all, best of all, came the *Curlew II*.

But she did not go alone.

At her oars sat two old men — John Carey and Old Pascoe, side by side, one oar each, rowing together the way they had rowed together fifty years before. They were slow. They were not very neat. But they pulled in time, stroke for stroke, and the whole harbour stood up and cheered.



Pearl the seal came too. She swam alongside the boat like an escort, her grey head bobbing, turning circles round the oars as if she were showing them the way.

And on the very front of the boat, up on the bow, stood Biscuit the gull — wings folded, chest out, riding along like a figurehead carved on the front

of a ship. He had almost certainly come for the buns. But he looked, just then, exactly as if he had come for the parade.

“Look at that bird,” laughed Ollie. “He thinks the whole thing is for him.”

When the boats were in, Mr Nance called for quiet, and it was time for the story.

Ollie climbed up on the box.

For years he had told the tale of Old Pascoe his own way, with a hundred ships and a mighty storm. But not today. Today he told it true — every word of it — and it was the best thing he had ever told.

He told them about the two young keepers who were the best of friends. About the quarrel, and the fog, and the empty boat. About forty years of silence, and a carpenter across the bay who could not let good wood die. About a rusted tin, and a chart corner, and letters written but never sent. About a boat that came drifting home out of the mist, all on her own, to bring two old friends back together.

Nobody made a sound. When he finished, the whole harbour clapped and clapped.

“See,” said Ollie, climbing down, red and happy. “Better than a hundred ships. And every bit of it true.”

Then Mr Nance made one more announcement.

The *Curlew II*, he said, would have a home now. A mooring of her own, in the calm water right below the lighthouse — a fixed place to tie up and stay. She would live in Puffin Bay, where everyone could see her, for as long as there was a harbour at all.

“Below the light,” said Pascoe, and his eyes were bright. “Where I can keep an eye on her from my window. That’s the right place for her.”

Carey nodded slowly. “The right place,” he said. “Home.”

Finn looked at the two old men, and at the shining boat, and at Joe grinning beside her, and thought that he had never seen a better ending to anything.

At the prize table, Mrs Chegwin laid out the winners' cups in a bright row, ready to be given out. And beside the table, as she did every year, she set down a bucket of fish scraps from the day's boats — for Pearl.

Everyone knew the way of it. The moment those scraps came out, Pearl would push her grey nose up out of the water by the quay steps, waiting for her share. It was as much a part of the regatta as the cups themselves.

But today the scraps sat out, and the harbour water stayed still.

No grey head. No dark eyes. No Pearl.

Lily walked to the edge of the quay and looked down at the empty water. She had been so sure Pearl would come. Pearl came for the fish scraps every single year — and she had swum beside the parade only an hour ago.

Lily frowned.

“Where,” she said quietly, to nobody at all, “has Pearl gone?”