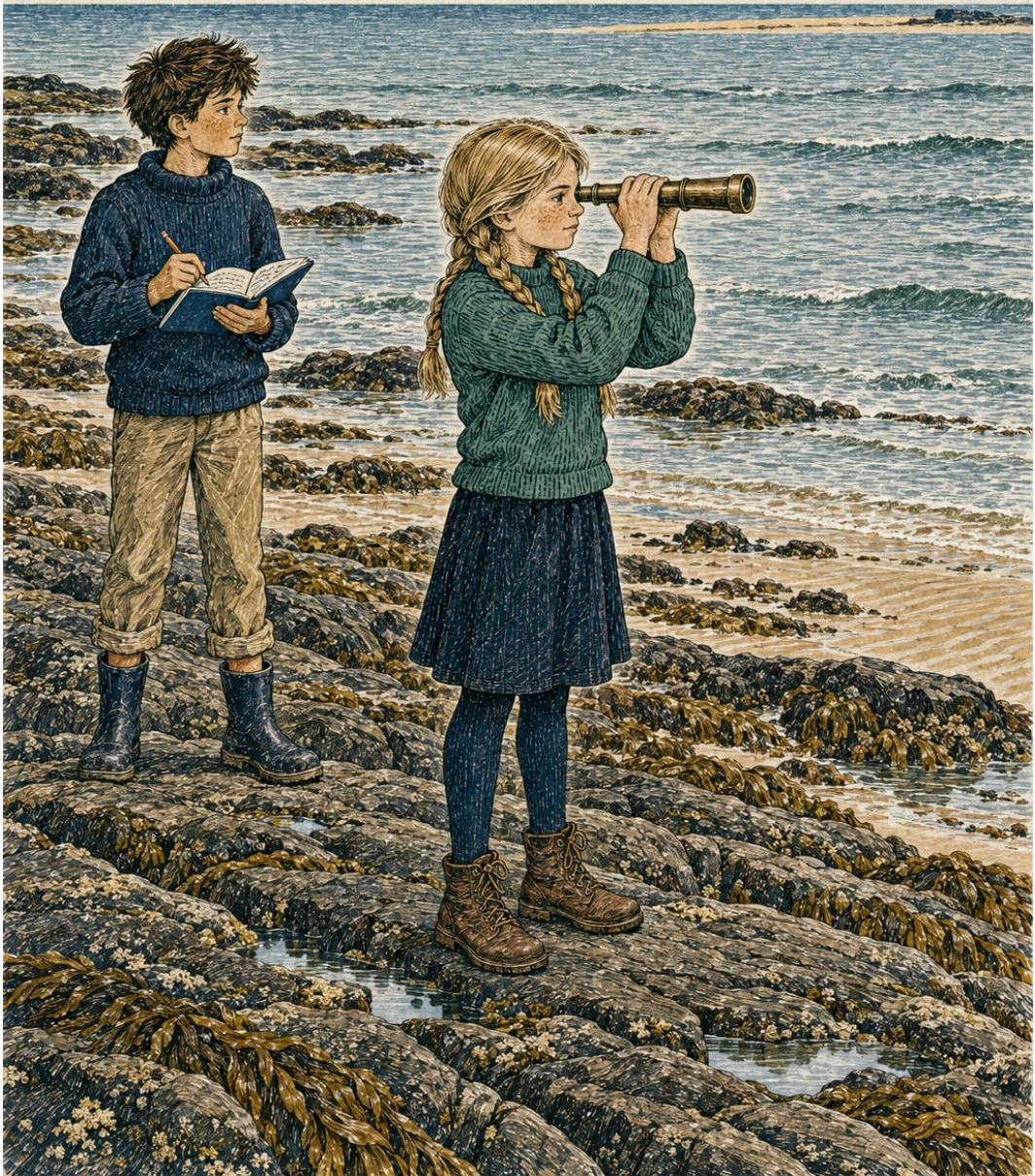
THE SEAL ON THE SANDBANK



Contents

About This Book 2
About the Story 3
Chapter 1: The Empty Water 4
Chapter 2: Three Days 10
Chapter 3: The Shelf of Logbooks 16
Chapter 4: Out on the Ebb 22
Chapter 5: The Story Comes Back 28
Chapter 6: Long Sand 34
Chapter 7: What You Do Not Do 40
Chapter 8: Miss Trelawny 46
Chapter 9: Lily Says It Out Loud 52
Chapter 10: Turn Round 58
Chapter 11: Saturday, Twelve Twenty-Five 64
Chapter 12: Number Forty-One 70
Copyright & License 76

About This Book

At a Glance

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

Edition

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Version	Date	Notes
1.0	July 2026	First edition.
1.1	August 2026	Language corrections
1.2	September 2026	Cover redrawn.

About the Story

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

Pearl the seal has come to Puffin Bay every day for four years. She takes the fish scraps at the quay. She follows the sailing boats like a dog. Then, the morning after the regatta, she is simply not there.

The village has a story for it. Ollie has a better one. Lily has an empty page in her tide notebook, and she starts writing nothing down, day after day, until the nothing turns into a pattern. Pearl is not going at a time. She is going at a water.

The trail leads out past Gull Rock to a sandbank that is only there at low tide — and to something on it that four children must not go near.

So who does get to go?

Chapter 1: The Empty Water

The regatta was over. The bay was quiet again.

Finn Penhale stood on the quay. The sun was still low. The water was flat and green. All the little boats sat still on it. The day before they had raced round Gull Rock in a good wind.

A long line of flags hung over Finn's head. Red, blue, yellow, green. All race day the wind had snapped at them. This morning they hung down wet and still.

"Ready?" called his father.

"Ready," said Finn.

Harry Penhale let the line down slowly. Finn caught the flags as they came. Lily stood beside him with the box. She took each flag out of his hand. She folded it. She laid it flat in the box. She made a neat pile. Lily did most things in neat piles.

"Two hundred and six," she said.

"Two hundred and six what?"

"Flags."

"You counted them all?" said Finn.

"Somebody has to," said Lily. "Or we lose one. Then next year there are only two hundred and five."

Behind them the quay was busy. Mr Nance was taking down his race numbers. Martha sat on a barrel. A heap of school rope lay across her knees. She coiled it, loop by loop. Her hands were black with old grease. She did not mind at all.

Ollie Trewin came along the wall. He had a paper bag.

"Buns," he said. "Mrs Chegwin had six left. Nobody wanted them. They were half price."

He took one out. He held it up to look at it.

He should not have held it up.

A shape came down out of the sun. It was grey and white. There was one hard beat of wings. Then the bun was gone. Biscuit sat up on the harbour lamp with it.

Ollie stared at his empty fingers.

“That gull waits for me,” he said. “He doesn’t wait for anyone else. He waits for me.”

“He’s got taste,” said Martha.

Finn laughed. He took a bun for himself. It was still warm in the middle. He ate it. Then he looked out at the harbour mouth.



Out there the water opened wide and grey. Past the mouth stood Gull Rock. Past Gull Rock was the end of the point. The white lighthouse stood on it. Under the lighthouse lay a small grey rowing boat. She was on her own new mooring.

Curlew II.

Finn could see her from here. She lay very neat on the still water. Her fresh blue name was too small to read. He knew every letter of it. He had helped to paint the rest of her too.

"Pascoe's watching us," said Lily.

"How do you know?"

"He always is."

That was true. Old Pascoe had watched this bay for forty years. He had a telescope in his window. He wrote down what he saw. Now the *Curlew II* lay under his window as well.

They filled the flag box. Harry carried it into the yard. The four of them sat down on the warm stone.

"Best regatta yet," said Ollie.

"You say that every year," said Martha.

"It's true every year."

Lily was not listening. She was looking at the water beside the slipway.

The slipway was the stone ramp. It ran down off the quay into the sea. Boats went up and down it on a trolley. At the bottom the water was dark and slow.

"She wasn't there," said Lily.

"Who wasn't?" said Finn.

"Pearl. At the prize table."

Nobody said anything for a moment.

Mr Nance always laid the prizes out. They went on a long table on the quay. There were cups on it. There was a plate of fish. The fish was scraps. Scraps are the ends and the bits nobody can sell. Every year the same thing happened. Somebody rang the bell. Everyone clapped. And a round grey head came up by the wall. Pearl always came for the scraps.

Not this year. Nobody had thrown her one. There had been nobody to throw them to.

"She'll have been out fishing," said Ollie.

"All day?" said Lily.

"Seals fish all day."

"She's never missed the scraps," said Lily. "Not once. I've watched four."

Finn stood up. He did not like to sit still. Not with a question in the air.

"Come on, then," he said.

They looked at the slipway first. At the bottom there was weed. There was one old bucket. Nothing else.

Then they walked out along the pontoon. The pontoon was the long floating walkway. It ran out to the sailing school. It moved a little under their boots. It always did that. The school's five dinghies lay tied along it. They were wet and quiet after the races.

Pearl liked the pontoon. She would come up between the boats. She would lie there with only her nose out.

Not today.

"Her rock," said Martha.

Pearl's rock lay under the far wall. The water was shallow there. It went warm at low tide. She used the rock most days after lunch. It was flat and brown and quite empty.

The four of them stood and looked at it.

"Right," said Ollie. "That's odd."

They went up to the shop.

Mrs Chegwin's shop stood at the top of the slip. It sold everything. Bread, string, sweets, buckets, boot laces, papers, jam. You could learn anything in that shop. You did not even need to ask. You only had to stand there long enough.

Mrs Chegwin was weighing potatoes. She took them two at a time. She dropped them into the pan of the scales. She watched the needle swing. She took one out. She put a smaller one in.

"Mrs Chegwin," said Lily. "Have you seen Pearl?"

The potatoes stopped.

"Now," said Mrs Chegwin. "That's a strange thing. I said the very same to Mr Nance." She wiped her hands on her apron. "No, my love. I have not. Not since Saturday."

"Saturday," said Lily.

"Saturday morning, off the end of the pontoon. She had her head up. I saw her there. I was putting the papers out." Mrs Chegwin dropped the last potato in the pan. "And I notice most things."

That was the truest sentence in the village.

Finn counted the days on his fingers. He did not like the answer. Saturday, Sunday, Monday. Today was Tuesday. Three days.

At supper Harry was not worried.

"Three days," he said. He passed Lily the bread. "Seals go where they please, love. That's rather the point of being a seal. There's a whole sea out there. She's not our seal. She's only a seal that likes us."

"She likes the scraps," said Finn.

"She likes the scraps," Harry agreed.

"But she came for four years," said Lily. "And now she doesn't."

Harry looked at her for a second. Then he cut more bread and said nothing. That was his way of saying he had heard it.

After supper Lily went out on her own.

She walked the harbour wall. She went from the shop to the far steps. She looked over the side the whole way. Then she came back down the other

side. She went out along the pontoon. She walked to the end and back. She passed the slipway. She passed the rock.

The sun went down behind the point. The water turned pink, then grey. A late boat came in with her engine knocking. Biscuit came along the wall behind her. He wanted to see if she had food.

Twice round. Nothing.

Lily sat down on the top step. She had her small blue notebook with her. She checked the tide in it every morning. Every page looked the same. The date first, then high water, then low water. It was all in her small square writing.

She turned to the last page.

She took her pencil. She drew a line down the middle. It went from top to bottom. Now she had two tall columns instead of one. At the top of the first column she wrote *Tide.*

Then she stopped.

She looked at the second column. At the top she wrote one word. She wrote it in careful capital letters.

PEARL.

Under it she put the date. Then she wrote: *Not seen. Not seen since Saturday.*

She looked out at the flat grey water. She sat there a long time. Then she shut the notebook and went in.

Chapter 2: Three Days

On Wednesday morning Lily was up first.

She sat on the top step with her notebook. She wrote the date. She wrote the tide. Low water at nine. High water later in the day.

Then she looked at the second column.

The harbour was grey and still. A fishing boat came in. Two gulls sat on the shed roof and said not a word. The water beside the slipway lay dark and flat.

Lily waited ten minutes. Then she wrote in the second column: *Not seen.*

That was the second empty row. The first one was Tuesday's.

Finn came out with his boots half on. "Well?"

"No."

"Right," said Finn. He looked at the water. He had that look on his face. It was the look he got before he did something.

By the middle of the morning the whole village knew.

That was how Puffin Bay worked. You told Mrs Chegwin one thing at nine. By ten it had gone up the hill. It went along the row of houses at the top. Then it came back down to the quay. And it came back a bit bigger each time.

They all had a reason for it.

Mr Nance said the harbour had been noisy all race week. Too many engines. A seal likes a quiet bay.

Ollie's father said the fish had moved out. Seals follow fish. That was all.

Mrs Chegwin said Pearl was getting old. Old things like to be alone.

"She's not old," said Lily. "She's the same as she was."

Ollie had the best reason of all.

He sat on the harbour wall. His legs hung over the side. He had a pasty in his hand. A pasty is a fat case of pastry. There is meat and potato inside

it. Ollie's father bought two each Thursday. Ollie was eating this one on a Wednesday. That showed how bad things were.

Two boys from the top of the hill had stopped to hear it. So had a man mending a net.

"Ireland," said Ollie.

"What?" said Finn.

"She's swum to Ireland." Ollie waved the pasty at the sea. "Out past Gull Rock and off north-west. Six days of swimming. She'll be up on a rock over there now. Looking back at us."

"Why would she do that?" said Martha.

"Seals do," said Ollie. "They go miles. Miles and miles."

"Who told you that?" said Lily. "Or did you make it up?"

Ollie put his hand on his chest. He looked hurt. He always looked hurt at that question. He was never hurt for long.

"It's the best story," he said. "It might be true."

"Those are not the same thing."

"Not," said Ollie, "in this village."

The man with the net laughed. The two boys went off up the hill with their heads close. Ollie drew breath for the good bit.

He never got to it.

There was a hard grey flash over his shoulder. Ollie's hand went light. Biscuit landed six feet away with the pasty in his beak.

Ollie did not even shout this time.

"That's my Thursday pasty," he said. "On a Wednesday."

Biscuit turned one round yellow eye on him. Then he went for the rest of it.

The next day Martha had a plan.

She was down at the old ferry boat before eight. The ferry boat was small and blue and very solid. Martha kept the engine alive. She used oil, a spanner and a lot of care. She had the cover off. Her head was inside the engine. That was where the others found her.

"We take her out," she said. "We start at Gull Rock. Then we go across and back. Across and back. All the way along the bay. We quarter it."

"Quarter it?" said Ollie.

"Cut it into pieces in your head," said Martha. "Then look at each piece. Properly. That's how you search."

Finn was in the boat before she had stopped.

"Ask Mum first," said Lily.

Finn stopped. He got out again. Asking was the rule. It had always been the rule. It had never once stopped them yet.

They found Sarah on the pontoon. She had a coil of rope over her arm. She heard them out. Martha talked. Ollie helped. Finn said nothing, and that was Finn saying a great deal.

Sarah did not say no at once. She turned and looked out at the bay.

"Look at it," she said.

They looked.

"Three miles across," said Sarah. "One tank of fuel in that boat. And a seal can be under all of it."

No one spoke.

"You cannot search water," said Sarah. "You can only search the top of it. And the top of it is where she isn't." She put the rope down. "The answer's no, Martha. Not for this."

Martha nodded slowly. She was not cross. She was working it out. She had checked the fuel that morning. She had counted the daylight too.

"Then what do people do?" she said.

"They watch," said Sarah. "And they wait. And they write down what they see."

Finn kicked a stone off the pontoon. It made a small hole in the harbour. The hole closed up again.

"Waiting isn't doing anything," he said.

"Isn't it?" said his mother.

That day's row was empty too.

Friday was the worst of the three. Nothing happened at all. Boats went out. Boats came in. Ollie went out with his father before it was light. He came back smelling of fish. Martha put the engine cover back on. The sun shone all day. It was a fine, kind, useless sort of day.

Lily wrote her fourth empty row on Friday evening.

Finn hung over her shoulder and read the page upside down. Four rows. Four dates. Four tides. And *Not seen* four times over.

"That's nothing," he said. "You've written down nothing four times."

"It's not nothing."

"There's nothing in it, Lily."

"There's nothing in it," said Lily, "and that is information."

Finn began to speak.

"If she was in the harbour every day, I'd know that," said Lily. "Now I know she is not in the harbour any day. That's not the same thing at all. It's a smaller sea than it was on Tuesday."

Finn shut his mouth again. He had a sister of eleven. She was nearly always right. It was very hard to live with.

"Row four," he said. "Row. Like rowing a boat?"

"It's the same word," said Lily. "A row is a line of things, one after the other."

"Then a rowing boat is full of rows."

"Two of them," said Lily. "You and me. Now go away."

They had supper late that evening. Harry came up from the yard with sawdust in his hair. He had been under a hull for hours. He had worked by lamp. He was in the good slow mood that came after a long job.

He asked about the search. Finn told him. Lily said nothing. She pushed her potato round her plate.

"Near enough a week," said Harry. "And no one has laid eyes on her."

"Nobody in the harbour," said Lily.

Harry stopped with his cup halfway up.

"Well now," he said. "That's the harbour."

He was not being clever. He was only thinking out loud. He mentioned it the way a person mentions the weather.

"There's one man in this bay who doesn't watch the harbour," he said. "He watches the water. Forty years of it, through that great brass telescope of his. If a grey head has gone near this coast, he has seen it."



He drank his tea.

Lily had put her fork down long before that.

Chapter 3: The Shelf of Logbooks

They made the cake on Saturday morning.

It was Lily's idea. It was Ollie's hands. It came out of the oven flat and heavy and brown. Ollie looked at it.

"It's a good cake," he said. "It's just short."

"It's fine," said Lily.

No one in the house thought the cake was a trick. It was only what you took up the point. Old Pascoe lived alone out there. He hardly ever came down. So people went up.

They went up after breakfast, all four of them. The path climbed past the chapel. Then it turned along the cliff. The gorse was dry and full of small birds. Below them the sea moved slow and blue. At the top stood the white lighthouse. Beside it stood the keeper's cottage with its one high window.

Biscuit came all the way. He flew ahead in short hops. He landed on posts. He watched the cake with a deep and hungry love.

"He knows," said Ollie. "He always knows."

Martha carried the plate high above her head for the last bit.

Old Pascoe opened the door before they knocked.

He was thin and grey. He stood very straight. He looked at the four of them. He looked at the cake. He did not smile.

"You'd better come in," he said.

That was Pascoe pleased. He had other faces for other things.

The room was the same as ever. Black stove, warm. Tin mugs on hooks. And by the window, up on its three legs, the great brass telescope. It pointed out at the water.

The walls were shelves. The shelves were books. There were hundreds of them, thin and hard. Each one had a year on its spine in white paint. Forty years of the sea, one book at a time.

Pascoe put the kettle on. He cut the cake. He ate a piece. He said nothing at all about it. From Pascoe that was a good report.

"Well?" he said.

"Pearl's gone," said Finn.

"I know."

They stopped.

"You know?"

"I've eyes," said Pascoe. "She came up the harbour twice a day. She hasn't done it for a week."

"You wrote it down," said Lily.

"I write everything down."

Lily took out her notebook. She put it on the table. She did not say a word. She opened it at the last page. Then she turned it round to face him.

Pascoe put his mug down. He looked at the page for a long time.

There was the tide column. There was the second column. PEARL stood at the top of it in careful letters. Then came the rows. And *Not seen*, five times over now.

"Who taught you that?" he said.

"You did."

"Hm," said Pascoe.

He got up. He came back with a pencil. He sat down beside her, not across from her. That was a different sort of sitting.

"It's a log," he said. "Not a diary. Say it."

"It's a log."

"A log is what you saw. A diary is what you thought about it. Keep the two apart and you'll be all right." He tapped the page. "Date first. Every time. Same shape every time."

"I do that."

"You do." He tapped again. "Now here's the bit you're missing."

He drew a thin line down the page. That made a third column. It was narrow, right at the edge.

"You've put the time," he said. "The time is not enough. Out here the time is the least of it. You put down the water as well."

Lily looked up.

"The water?"

"High, low, going out, coming in. Put it in each entry. Things happen on this coast at a water. The clock is for people. The sea has never once looked at a clock."

He wrote one word at the top of the narrow column. He used small hard capitals.

WATER.

"And if you don't know?" said Lily.

"Then you write *not known*, and you write it honest. A log with a guess in it is worth nothing. And you write the empty days too. The day you can't be bothered —"

"— is the day the one thing happens," said Lily.

Pascoe almost looked pleased. He put the pencil down.

"You'll do," he said.

Then he stood up. He turned the glass round on its legs, out towards Gull Rock.

"Right," he said. "Sit there. Both eyes open. Don't hold your breath, you'll shake."

Lily sat.

Behind her, Pascoe pulled four books off the shelf. He put them on the table. He laid the first one open.

"Your seal," he said. "She's in here. She's in all of them."

Ollie leaned over. The pages were full of small writing. Line after line, year after year.

Seal, harbour mouth. Seal on slipway. Seal after school boats, 4 out. Over and over. Month after month. Four years of a grey head in the same small stretch of water.

"She's on nearly every page," said Martha.

"She lives here," said Pascoe. "Or she did."

"So where's she gone?" said Finn. He was over by the door. He had been there since they came in. "That's all we want. Where."

"I don't know where," said Pascoe.

"Then —"

"I know something better than where," said the old man. "I know that a seal doesn't stop for nothing."

Nobody spoke.

"Forty years I've watched them," said Pascoe. "They do the same things. Day in, day out. Same as we do. When one stops coming to people, she has not gone off people. She has started going to a place."

Finn stood very still.

"A place," he said.

"Find out what she goes to," said Pascoe. "Then you'll know where she is. Not the other way round."

Lily was not listening. Lily was at the glass.

The glass brought the far water in close. It made it shake a little. She could see the weed lifting on Gull Rock. Two black shags stood on the low ledge with their wings out. Past the rock the tide ran out in a small dark line. At the end of the line it turned white for a yard.

She sat there for two hours.

She watched the tide fall. She watched the rock grow taller. Ollie brought her tea. She forgot to drink it. Biscuit got a piece of cake off the window sill. Ollie's shout went round the room and out over the cliff.

Martha and Finn went outside. Pascoe read his old books at the table. He read slowly. He traced each line with one finger.



Twice Lily thought she had her. Both times it was a gull.

Then, at ten past eleven, the water broke.

It was well out, past Gull Rock. It was at the edge of what the glass would hold. A round grey head came up. It was there. It was gone. It came up again, further out.

Lily did not shout. She did not move off the eyepiece. She said, in a very ordinary voice:

"Pascoe. Grey head. Off Gull Rock. Going out."

The old man was there in three steps. He looked. He took his time over it.

"That's her," he said.

"You're sure?"

"I'm sure."

Then Lily sat back and opened her notebook. For the first time in six days she had a line to put in it. She wrote the date. She wrote the time: *11.10.* Then she wrote the water in the new column at the edge. She wrote it in Pascoe's hard little capitals.

Low water at Puffin Bay that day was half past eleven. So the sea had been going out all morning. The going-out tide has a name of its own. It is the ebb.

So she wrote: *Last of the ebb.*

Then she read her own line back. It gave her a feeling she could not have put into words.

One line was not a pattern. One line was one line.

But she had a column for it now.

Chapter 4: Out on the Ebb

The chapel bell went at half past ten on Sunday. The village walked up the hill for it, the way it always did.

Pascoe did not. Pascoe never came down. The village had long ago stopped asking him.

So Pascoe was the one at the glass at noon.

The four of them got up to the point after lunch. Pascoe sat in his chair by the window. He did not say hello. He held out a small slip of paper.

Lily took it.

12.00. Grey head. Off Gull Rock. Going out. — J.P.

She read it twice. Then she got out her book. She copied the line in. Date. Time. Then the narrow column at the edge.

She had to look up the water for that. Her tide table was in the back of the book. A tide table is a page of numbers. It tells you when the sea will be high. It tells you when it will be low. It does that for each day of the year. Lily knew hers the way other people know a song.

Low water at Puffin Bay on Sunday: twenty past twelve.

So at noon the tide had been nearly out. Nearly out, and still going.

Last of the ebb, she wrote.

Two sightings. Both of them said the same thing.

"Right," said Martha. "We do this properly. Two glasses, two places."

The plan came out of Martha in a minute flat. It was a good one. Pascoe had the point, the way he always had. So the four of them would take the harbour wall. It was lower down and further along, and it looked out at Gull Rock from the other side. Two pairs of eyes on the same water from two places. Pascoe had a spare glass in a wooden box under the bench. It was smaller and older. One leg was mended with copper wire. He looked at it for a moment.

"Bring it back dry," he said.

That was yes.

Monday was long.

Watching is not exciting. No one puts that in a story. You sit with your back against warm stone. You keep your eyes on grey water. Nothing happens. Then nothing happens again.

Ollie brought the tea in an old kit-bag and complained for two hours.

"My legs have gone," he said. "Both of them. And I've drunk all the tea."

"You've drunk all my tea," said Martha.

"That's what I said."

Finn was worse. Finn did not complain. Finn just could not sit still. He got up. He walked to the end of the wall. He came back. He picked at the weed between the stones. He stared out to sea like a man waiting for a late bus.



"We could take a boat out," he said. "Just to the rock."

"No," said Lily.

"I didn't ask you."

"You were going to ask Mum," said Lily. "And Mum will say no. So I've saved you the walk."

At a quarter to one the water broke off Gull Rock.

Finn saw her. He saw her first. He got such a shock that he nearly dropped the glass in the harbour.

"There! There, there — grey head, going out, past the rock —"

Lily had the notebook open before he finished.

Time: 12.45. Water: the tide table said low at ten past one. So it was the last of the ebb again.

Three sightings now. Three days.

That evening Lily laid the three of them out on the kitchen table.

Saturday. 11.10. Out. Last of the ebb. Sunday. 12.00. Out. Last of the ebb. Monday. 12.45. Out. Last of the ebb.

Finn looked at them over her shoulder and made a face.

"Well, that's no good," he said.

"Why not?"

"Look at the times. Ten past eleven. Then twelve. Then a quarter to one. They're all over the place." He tapped the page. "If she went out at eleven each day, that would be something. That would be a habit. This is just a seal swimming about."

"They are not all over the place."

"Lily. They are three numbers, and no two are the same."

"Yes," said Lily. "And each one is fifty minutes after the one before."

Finn stopped.

He looked at the page again. Eleven ten. Twelve. Twelve forty-five. He did the sums in his head. Fifty minutes. Then fifty minutes again. He did not like it at all.

"So?" he said. "So she's late every day. Seals aren't clocks."

"No," said Lily. "But the sea is."

She turned the book round. She pushed her tide table across to him.

"Look at the tides. Low water Saturday, half past eleven. Sunday, twenty past twelve. Monday, ten past one." She put her finger on each one. "Fifty minutes later. Every day. That is what the tide does. It is what it has always done."

Finn looked from one column to the other.

The sightings did not line up with the clock. They piled up all over the day. The empty rows had piled up as well. They made no sense at all. But he laid them beside that other column. Then they went into place, one by one, like nails into holes.

"Oh," said Finn.

They had supper late that night. Harry had a rudder to finish first. He came up with sawdust on his arms. He sat down and put his hands together, and they all did, and he said the short grace he said every night. Then he passed the plates round.

Nobody mentioned Ireland. Lily ate about four peas.

Harry watched her do it.

"Go on then," he said. "You've had a face on you since you came in."

"It's the times," said Lily.

"What about them?"

And there it was: a quiet question at her own table, and everybody waiting, and nobody talking over the top of her. Lily put her fork down.

"We all keep asking when she goes," she said. "Half past eleven. Twelve. A quarter to one. Then we say it doesn't fit. And we go and look for another time." She looked up. "She isn't going at a time. She's going at a water."

No one said a word.

"Every day she goes out on the last of the ebb," said Lily. "The clock moves. The water doesn't. Same seal. Same thing. Same tide, three days running. It's the clock that's the wrong way round, not her."

Harry sat back.

"Say that again," he said. "The middle bit."

"She isn't going at a time. She's going at a water."

"That," said Harry, "is the most sensible sentence anybody has said in this kitchen for a month." He looked at Sarah. "Your daughter."

"Our daughter," said Sarah. "And she's right."

Finn opened his mouth to say that he had helped. Then he shut it again. He had not.

There was a knock at the door.

It was Ollie. He was out of breath. He had run down the hill and along the quay. He had one hand in his pocket.

"Sorry. Sorry. I forgot. I took the glass back up to Pascoe and he gave me this, and I put it in my coat, and I've had my coat on ever since —"

He held out a slip of paper, folded twice, gone soft in his pocket.

Lily opened it.

It was Pascoe's hand: small, hard, straight up and down. He had stayed at his own glass all afternoon. Pascoe always went on watching.

13.05. Off Gull Rock. Out. Low water. Fish in her mouth.

Lily read it. Then she read it again.

"What?" said Finn. "What is it? Is it her?"

"It's her." Lily's voice had gone odd. "She was carrying a fish."

"Well, she's a seal. Seals catch fish."

"Finn." Lily put the slip down flat on the table so they could all see it. "She was going *out*."

The kitchen went quiet.

They had all seen a seal with a fish. A seal catches a fish out at sea. She brings it in. She eats it in the harbour, on her own rock, in the sun.

Pearl had been swimming away from home with her supper in her mouth.

That was the wrong way round.

Chapter 5: The Story Comes Back

Tuesday was market day.

Once a week the vans came down the hill. They came early. They put up their stalls along the quay. There was a fish stall. There was a bread stall. There was a stall of eggs and beans. It had small hard apples too. And there was a man who sharpened knives.

By nine the quay was full of people. All of Puffin Bay came out on market day. They all stopped to talk. Nothing much got done before eleven.

Biscuit loved market day. No bird has ever loved a thing so much.

He sat on the shed roof. He waited. Then he came down over the fish stall in one long drop. He took a whole mackerel. He had it off the end of the tray.

"OLLIE TREWIN!"

"It wasn't me!" said Ollie, from six feet away.

"It's your gull!"

"He is not my gull," said Ollie. "He follows me. That's not the same thing at all."

Biscuit ate the mackerel up on the harbour lamp. He had his head right up. He did it in full view of the quay. It took him four seconds.

That was the good part of the morning.

The other part began at the vegetable stall.

Mr Roskilly ran it. He came down each Tuesday. His farm was up the valley. He liked a chat more than he liked selling beans. He was weighing apples for Ollie's mother. Then he looked up.

"Here," he said. "You'll know about this, boy. The seal."

Ollie went still.

"Gone to Ireland," said the farmer. He put the apples in the bag. "Swum the whole way. Six days. My sister's neighbour had it off someone who knows."

"Someone who knows," said Ollie.

"That's right." He nodded, pleased with it. "Better than a seal just going off, isn't it? That's a proper story, that is."

It was a proper story. Ollie knew just how proper it was. He had made it up on the harbour wall. Last week. With a pasty in his hand.

He did not say a word. He carried the apples home.

Then he went and stood outside Mrs Chegwin's shop.

There were five people inside. For that shop it was a crowd. Mrs Chegwin was cutting bread. Two women stood at the counter. They were talking about the seal. One of them said Ireland. The other said she had heard that too.

Ollie could have walked home. It was a nice enough story. It was hurting no one.

But Lily had a small blue book. It held six pages of dates and tides. She got up before it was light to write them. And every single line in it was true.

He went in.

"It was me," said Ollie.

Everyone turned round.

"The Ireland story. I made it up. Last week, on the wall." His ears had gone red. He kept going anyway. "There isn't a sister's neighbour. There isn't anyone who knows. There's just me. I said a thing that sounded good."

No one said a word. At the back of the shop a fridge hummed.

Making it up had taken four seconds. Taking it apart took much longer.

Mrs Chegwin put down her bread knife.

"Well," she said. "Now."

Ollie waited for it.

"In nineteen eighty-one," said Mrs Chegwin, "I told this village a thing. I said the fish van had gone off the road. It had not. It had a flat tyre. Half the village drove out to look. There was nothing to see but Bert and his jack."

She picked the knife back up. “It took me a fortnight to say so. This one has said it in a week. He has said it in front of people, too. That’s better than I did.”

One of the women laughed. Not at Ollie. It was a good laugh. Ollie found he could breathe again.



“So where has the seal gone, then?” said the other woman.

“We don’t know yet,” said Ollie.

“That’s a poor sort of answer.”

“It’s the true one,” said Ollie. “But we’re getting there. And when we do, I’ll tell you the whole thing. You’ll like it better. That one will have really happened.”

He walked home feeling strange and light.

That week was the best week the log ever had.

The pattern held. It held every single day.

Wednesday: out past Gull Rock at half past two. Last of the ebb. Swimming north-west. Thursday: out at twenty past three. Same line. Friday: out at ten past four. Same line.

And now they had the other half of it. They had four pairs of eyes. They had two glasses. They had nothing better to do. So they saw her come back.

She came back on the flood. The flood is the tide coming in. After low water the sea fills the bay again. Hour after hour. In the end it stands high against the quay. Pearl came in on it every time. She came three or four hours after she went out.

And she came back with nothing in her mouth.

Out with a fish. Back with nothing.

"She's taking it to a place," said Martha. That was Saturday, with her chin on the wall. "She takes a fish out. She comes home empty."

"Seals don't do that," said Finn.

"This one does," said Lily.

On Sunday the ebb ran late into the evening and nobody was on the wall for it. On Monday the tide came round. That is what tides do. They slide later and later. Then the day's other low water catches up and takes over. Monday's ebb came early, in grey flat light. Lily wrote her line at ten to seven. She had her coat on over her pyjamas.

Same rock. Same turn. Same line. The sightings lined up with the tide every time.

Nine sightings.

Later that day Martha said, "Come on." She took them into the yard office.

The office was a small room. It was at the end of the shed. It held the kettle and the bills. It smelled of oil. Above it was the sail loft. Sails are mended up there. On the wall was the big chart of the bay. It had hung there since Harry's father's time. It showed the whole bay in pale blue and white. Puffin Bay lay at the bottom. The open sea lay at the top. Every rock was on it. Every depth was marked in tiny black numbers.

Martha took Lily's book. She got a pencil and a long metal ruler.

"Right," she said. "Where does she pass the rock?"

"Just north of it," said Lily. "Every time. About a boat's length off."

"And then?"

"North-west. Straight. She doesn't wander."

Martha put the ruler on the chart. She lined it up with the harbour mouth. Then she lined it up with Gull Rock. She held it there with her thumb.

Then she traced a line along it in pencil. Out past the rock. Into the blue.

"That's her line," said Martha.

They all leaned in.

"Carry it on," said Ollie.

Martha carried it on. The pencil went two more inches across the chart. It ran out towards the open water at the top. They were all watching the sea end of it —

— and the pencil stopped.

It had run into something. There was a long pale shape on the chart. It lay out beyond Gull Rock. It was drawn with a dotted line. On a chart that means *this is only here sometimes.* The shape was thin and curved. It had a name along it in small letters.

Long Sand.

"That's a sandbank," said Martha slowly.

"That's Long Sand," said Ollie. "Nobody goes to Long Sand. There's nothing on it. Most of the time it isn't even there. It's under water. It only comes up near low tide. Two hours either side. Then it's gone again."

Lily was already looking at her own book. She had it open at the narrow column at the edge. The one Pascoe had made her draw.

Every line in it said the same three words.

Last of the ebb.

Two hours either side of low water. That was the only time the sand was there at all.

That was the only time Pearl went.

Chapter 6: Long Sand

Martha had traced the line in pencil. They took the chart off the wall. They carried it to Sarah that same evening.

That was how it was done. You did not go and then tell. You told first. Then you went. Or you did not go.

Sarah put her tea down. She looked at the pencil line. She looked at Lily's book. She read all fourteen rows of it. For a long time she said nothing.

"Show me the tide," she said.

Lily showed her. Low water Tuesday, twenty-five to nine in the morning.

"Show me again."

Lily showed her again. That was the house rule. Anybody could read a tide table wrong once. Nobody read one wrong twice.

"Right," said Sarah. She sat back. "We'll go and look."

Finn made a noise like a kettle.

"Tomorrow," said Sarah. "In the safety boat. With me. And I'll give you the rules now. Then no one has to hear them out there."

She held up one finger.

"Lifejackets on before we leave the pontoon. Not in the boat. On."

Two fingers.

"We leave the plan with Mr Nance. Where we're going, when we're back."

Three fingers.

"And the turn-back rule. If I say we turn back, we turn back. No one argues. No one sulks. The sea does not care how far you have come."

"Yes," said Martha.

"Yes," said Lily.

"Yes," said Ollie.

Finn took a second longer. But he said it.

Next morning they were on the pontoon at ten past seven.

The safety boat was the school's biggest boat. She was wide and heavy and slow. On the back she had a small outboard engine. Martha loved that engine. Nothing turned this boat over. That was rather the point of her.

Ollie brought the tea. Martha brought her spanner. Lily brought the notebook and the tide table. She brought a pencil sharpened at both ends. Finn brought nothing. Finn was ready first.

They walked up to the harbour office with the plan.

Mr Nance had the window open and the kettle on. He wrote it all in his book. He used his slow round hand. The boat. The five names. Out at seven fifteen, back by ten.

"Long Sand," he said. He said it slowly. It was the name of a place he had not thought about for years. "Nothing out there but sand and weed. Mind the tide on it. It comes up round the back of you."

"We're not going on it," said Sarah. "We're going to lie off it."

"Ah," said Mr Nance. He put his pen down. "Then you'll see something."

They went out on the last of the ebb.

The engine made its small flat noise. The harbour slid past. The slipway. The fish sheds. The wall with the weed on it. Then the harbour mouth opened out. The water changed. It went longer and slower and grey-green.

Gull Rock came up on their left and went by. Biscuit sat on the bow the whole way. He kept his feet apart and looked ahead. The trip was clearly his idea.

Then Ollie stood up.

"There," he said.

Long Sand was in front of them. The sandbank was out of the water.

Lily had thought it would be small. It was not small. It was a low pale island. The island only shows at low water. It was long and thin and a little curved. It lay out in the open water with sea on both sides. The sand was wet and shining. At the edges it ran off into shallow water. It went so slowly that you could not say where the sand stopped and the sea began.

At the far end the sand rose into rock. It made a low dark shelf. The top was flat. Weed hung off the front of it.

"That's a ledge," said Martha.

"Yes," said Sarah.

And behind the ledge the rock split. There was a gap in it. It was narrow and dark and green. It was no wider than a boat.

"What's behind that?" said Finn.

"Wren Cove," said Sarah. "The sand is dry two hours either side of low water. There's a little cove behind the rock. You can only see into it from the water. And only at low tide."

"Have you been in?"

"Never," said Sarah. "Nobody has. There's nothing in there and no reason to go."

Sarah took the engine out of gear. They were about two hundred yards off the sand.

The boat slowed. She came round with her nose to the tide. She sat there, lifting and dropping very gently. That is what *lying off* means. You do not land. You do not go closer. You hold your place and you watch.

"This is where we stop," said Sarah.

"We can't see anything from here," said Finn.

"We can see everything from here." Sarah handed him the wooden box. "That's what the glass is for."

Finn got the spare glass out. He put it up. And Long Sand came right into the boat with him. Every ridge of wet sand. Every strand of weed on the ledge. It was so close that he pulled his head back.

"Oh," he said.

"Yes," said Sarah. "Oh."

They took it in turns. Martha, then Lily, then Ollie, then Finn again. The rule was five minutes each and no arguing. The rule mostly worked.

They watched the sand for forty minutes. Nothing happened at all.

Then Lily said, "Wait."

She did not take the glass off her eye.

"Coming past the rock," she said. "Off to the left. Going out."

Everyone turned.

They did not need the glass for it. Not this time. A round grey head came up out of the water. It was about fifty yards off, on the sea side of the boat. It was moving north-west in a straight line. And there was something silver held across its mouth.

It was Pearl. Lily knew the shape of that head. She knew it as well as her own front door.

And Pearl did not stop.

She did not turn. She did not roll on her back. She did not come and look at the boat. She did not blow at them. For four years she had followed every boat in Puffin Bay. She did not follow this one.

She went past them the way she would pass a rock.

"She didn't even look," said Ollie quietly.

There was something in his voice. Nobody teased him for it.

Pearl swam the length of Long Sand. She went right along the outside of it. Then she came round the far end. Then she went in behind the ledge. She went into the narrow dark gap. And she was gone.

The water closed. The sand lay pale and empty in the sun.

Nobody said anything for a moment.

"Right," said Sarah at last. "Half past eight. The tide turns at twenty-five to nine. I want to be off this bank before the flood makes. Ten more minutes."

Ollie had the glass.

Nine of the ten minutes went by. Lily wrote up her entry. Date, time, water, and then: *into the gap behind the ledge*. Martha checked the fuel. Finn watched the gap and said nothing.

Then Pearl came out again.

She came out of the gap and turned for home. She swam low in the water, in no hurry at all.

"There she is," said Martha. "Empty mouth. Same as always."

But Ollie did not answer.

He had the glass on the ledge. Not on Pearl. He was very still. He stayed very still. He stayed still so long that one by one they all turned round and looked at him.



"Ollie?" said Lily.

"Ollie," said Sarah. "What have you got?"

Ollie's voice came out flat and careful. It was not his voice at all.

"There's another one," he said. "On the ledge. Inside the cove."

He did not move the glass.

"There's a second seal in there," said Ollie. "And it's small."

Chapter 7: What You Do Not Do

They were back at the pontoon at five to ten.

No one ran up the quay yelling. Sarah would not have it. She made them tie up properly first. Lifejackets off and hung on their pegs. Fenders down. Engine cover on.

“Now,” she said. “The office.”

So it all went to the grown-ups first. In the right order. Before it went to anyone else.

Mr Nance heard the whole thing on his feet.

Ollie told it. Ollie tells things well. And for once he put in nothing that had not happened. Lily laid her book on the desk. She opened it flat. “That’s information, that is,” said Mr Nance. Martha put the chart down beside it. The pencil line was still on it.

Mr Nance heard it to the end. He always did that. He never once said that a thing could not be so.

“A small one,” he said. “How small?”

“Small,” said Ollie. “Half of her. Less.”

“Colour?”

Ollie thought about it. “Grey. Sort of thin. It had its head up.”

“On the ledge, not in the water.”

“On the ledge.”

“Right,” said Mr Nance. He sat down. “Then that’s a pup.”

The word landed in the middle of the room.

“A pup,” said Finn.

“A young one. A baby seal.” Mr Nance rubbed a hand over his white hair. “Pups are born round this coast at the end of the summer and on into the winter. There always are some. Most of them nobody ever sees.” He tapped

Lily's book. "And a seal that carries a fish out is the wrong way round. Not if she's taking it to somebody."

And then the room got busy. They all had a plan.

Ollie got in first. "We could take it fish. Pearl brings it one fish at a time. Four of us could take it a whole bucket."

"We take the ferry boat in tonight," said Martha. "I can get her through that gap. It's narrow. It's deep, though. I've been through worse in the creek."

"We go now," said Finn. "Right now. We know where it is."

"No," said Sarah. "No. And no."

She did not raise her voice at all. That made it worse.

"That's the same answer three times," said Finn.

"Same answer. It's the same question." Sarah sat on the edge of the desk. "All three of you want to go near that cove. And nothing we do near that cove leaves that seal better off."

"But —"

"Listen. Then argue. That's the deal."

So they sat and heard them out. Mr Nance and Sarah gave them the rules, one at a time. Neither of them made it sound like a telling-off.

"One," said Sarah. "You do not approach a seal. Not on the water. Not on the sand. Not on a rock. Going closer to look is approaching. Drifting closer is approaching too. You keep your distance. You use the glass."

"Why?" said Ollie. He really wanted to know. He was not being rude.

"A seal that sees you has to make up her mind about you," said Mr Nance. "That costs her. She'll go off the rock into the water. She'll stop resting. She'll stop feeding her pup. You will never see the harm you did. It's there all the same."

"Two," said Sarah. "You do not touch a pup. Ever. Not to help it. Not to move it. Not to see if it's warm."

"What if it's stuck?"

"You still don't touch it. You tell a grown-up who is trained. They are trained for it. We are not."

"Three," said Mr Nance, and this was the one nobody had thought of. "A pup on its own is not always a pup in trouble."

They all looked at him.

"A mother seal leaves her pup," he said. "That's normal. That's how it works. She goes off and feeds. Then she comes back. A pup on its own might be a pup in trouble. Or it might be a pup having a very ordinary day. From the outside the two look just the same."

"So how do you know?" said Lily.

"You don't," said Mr Nance. "That's the point. A person who has seen two hundred of them knows. I have seen a dozen. You have seen one." He spread his hands. "So we don't decide. We ring the people who do."

"And the fish?" said Ollie. He had gone rather quiet. "Why not the fish?"

"Then it's your seal," said Sarah. "Feed a wild animal and it starts going to people. It comes into harbours. It comes up to boats. It waits at slipways for a hand with a fish in it." She stopped. "You know a seal that does that."

Ollie's face changed.

"Pearl," he said.

"Pearl," said Sarah. "Pearl has been lucky. Pearl is ours. I'm not saying a word against her. But we should not have started it, all those years ago. And we are not starting it again with a thin pup on a rock in a cove."

Nobody had an answer to that.

Finn had stood by the window with his arms folded. He had stood there the whole time. He was going over it, point by point. He was looking for the hole. He was good at finding holes.

"There isn't one, is there," he said at last.

"Isn't one what?"

"A way round it. I've been looking."

"No," said Sarah. "There isn't."

"So we just wait."

"You wait," said his mother. "Waiting is the job today. It's a horrible job. It's still the job."

Mr Nance was already turning the pages at the back of his book. There was a list back there in the same slow round hand. The lifeboat. The vet at St Erth. The coastguard. And half a page of numbers. He had written them down over thirty years, for a day like this one.

He picked up the telephone on the desk. It was an old black one. It had a dial you turned with your finger. He rang a number up the coast.

It rang. Biscuit came in through the open window. He took Ollie's cheese sandwich off the corner of the desk. Then he went out again with it.

Nobody laughed. Ollie did not even turn round. That was how the room was that morning.

"Nance here," he said. "Harbourmaster, Puffin Bay." Then he told it. He told it the way Ollie had, in order, with nothing added. Sightings. Tides. A grey seal going out on the ebb with a fish. Wren Cove. A pup on the ledge.

Then he stopped talking. He held the phone to his ear for a long time.

"Yes," he said. "No. No, we haven't. No, they didn't. They lay off at two hundred yards and used a glass." A pause. "Yes. I'll tell them that."

Another pause.

"Tomorrow, then. Low water's twenty-five past nine." He wrote it down. "Trelawny. Right you are."

He put the phone down and looked round at them.



"She's coming tomorrow," he said. "Miss Trelawny. She's a volunteer. She does this for the seal rescue people up the coast. Her own time, her own van, for nothing. She's the one who decides. Not me."

"Good," said Sarah.

"She said one other thing." Mr Nance turned his pen over in his fingers. "She said to tell you that lying off and using a glass was exactly right. She said she wished more people did it."

Finn looked at the floor. His ears had gone slightly red.

"And she asked me a thing," said Mr Nance, "and I could not answer it. It matters more than all the rest, she says. The rest comes after it."

"Asked you what?" said Martha.

Mr Nance looked at them over the top of his glasses.

"How long has it been there?"

Silence.

Not one of them could answer it. They had first seen that pup an hour ago. Through a glass with a mended leg.

Then, in the quiet, there was a small dry sound.

It was Lily, opening her book.

Chapter 8: Miss Trelawny

Miss Trelawny came at half past seven in the morning.

She came in an old green van. It had mud up the sides. She parked at the top of the slip. She got out. She looked at the sky first. Then at the water. Then at the people.

She was about fifty. She had short grey hair and a wide brown face. She wore a long coat. It kept the rain out. Her rubber boots came up to her knees. Over her shoulder hung a canvas bag. Heavy canvas. It goes stiff with salt and lasts thirty years.

She did not say how lovely it was to be by the sea. She did not say how much she loved seals.

She said: "Who keeps the log?"

Everybody looked at Lily.

Lily went red and held out the book. Miss Trelawny took it. She opened it. She read it there on the slipway, on her feet. The wind turned the pages for her.

She read it for ten minutes. Nobody dared speak.

"Sixteen days of rows," she said at last. "Nine days with a sighting on them. Ten sightings. Times and tides both. And *not known* where you didn't know." She looked up. "Do you know what I get, most times?"

"No," said Lily.

"I get 'a good bit'." She closed the book and gave it back. "A man rings me up. He says there's been a seal there a good bit. That's my lot. This book is worth a whole day of my looking. Well done."

Lily did not say a word. Her ears were bright pink.



They went out in the safety boat at ten to nine.

Sarah drove. Miss Trelawny sat on the middle seat. She kept the canvas bag between her boots. She did not talk. She had her own glass in the bag. It was short and fat, and better than Pascoe's. She set it up on a little stand.

Low water was at twenty-five past nine.

The island came up out of the sea in front of them. It was pale and shining.

Sarah took the engine out of gear at two hundred yards.

"Closer?" she said.

"No," said Miss Trelawny. "Here."

"You don't want to go in and look properly?" said Finn.

Miss Trelawny put her eye to the glass.

"I am looking properly," she said. "From here I can count its ribs. It has no idea I am here. In there I would learn nothing new. And it would go off the

rock." She turned a small wheel on the side of the glass. "Sit down. And don't all stand in one place. You'll rock the boat."

Then she watched for an hour.

An hour is a very long time in a boat. Ollie fell asleep. Martha did not, but only just. Biscuit came out from the harbour. He sat on the bow for twenty minutes. Then he went home again.

Miss Trelawny hardly moved the whole time. Now and then she said a number out loud. She wrote it in a small wet book. Twice she said "hm".

At half past ten she sat back and rubbed her eye.

"Right," she said. "Here's my assessment. All of it, in order. Then you can ask."

That is what an assessment is. A person who knows says what she thinks. Out loud. With the reasons. And everyone hears the same thing.

"One. It's a pup. It's alive. It's dry. So it has been out of the water a fair time." She held up a finger. "Two. It is thin. Not slim. Thin. I can see the shape of its neck. I should not be able to see that. That pup has not eaten enough for days and days."

"Three. Its mother is not there. I have watched for an hour. It was the best hour of the day. No other seal has come near that cove." She looked at Lily. "Your book says the same for sixteen days. That is better than my hour."

"Four. The grey one is bringing it fish. Your log has her doing it two days running. And I have just watched her do it myself." She put her hands on her knees. "I have never seen a seal do that. Not once, and I have watched a great many seals. I can't tell you why she does it. It is a kind thing. It is not enough."

"Why isn't it enough?" said Ollie. His voice was odd.

"One fish at a time isn't a mother," she said. "It has kept that pup alive. It cannot make it well. Left there, that pup gets thinner, not fatter."

Nobody said anything.

"Five," she said. "And five is the one that matters. Look at where it's lying."

They looked. They did not need a glass for it. The dark line of the ledge lay at the back of the sand.

"It's on a ledge," said Martha.

"It's on a ledge," said Miss Trelawny. "About a foot above today's high water. That is fine. Today."

She turned round to Sarah.

"You've got springs at the weekend."

"Saturday's the big one," said Sarah.

"Springs are the big tides," she told the children. "You get them twice a month. Low water goes lower than usual. High water goes higher. A spring high tide will come over that ledge." She let that sit for a second. "A strong seal swims off and doesn't care. A thin one has been lying there for a fortnight. It might not get clear in time. I am not going to find out the hard way."

"So what happens?" said Finn.

"It comes out," she said. "It goes in the back of my van. Then up to the centre. The centre is a place up the coast. It has pens and clean water and fish. It has people who do this all day. The pup gets fed up there for a few months. Then it goes back in the sea somewhere quiet."

"And that works?"

"Often," she said. "Not always. I'm not going to tell you always."

Finn nodded slowly. He had liked no grown-up answer all week. He liked that one.

"Then let's go and get it," he said.

"Ah," she said. "Yes. Now we come to the hard part."

She lifted her chin at Long Sand.

"How do I get in there?"

They all looked at the gap behind the ledge. Narrow. Dark. Green.

"That's the only way in," said Sarah.

"That's the only way in," she agreed. "No path down the cliff. No beach at the back. So I go in by boat, through that gap. And that gap is only passable near low water."

Passable was a new word for Ollie. He worked it out from the shape of it. You can pass through it. You can get through.

"At low water there's a foot or two in the gap," she said. "You can row through. At half tide it's a wall of rock. There's white water on it. So I need low water. And I need it in daylight. I am not doing this in the dark. Neither is anyone else."

Sarah had already reached for the tide table. So had Lily. Lily got there first.

She ran her finger down the week. Then she stopped.

"Today's gone," she said. "Tomorrow is low water at quarter past ten. That's not low enough. The tides are still making up to springs." Her finger moved on. "Friday. And Saturday. Those are the two big ones. And they both fall in the middle of the day."

"Then it's Friday," said Miss Trelawny. "And Saturday, if Friday goes wrong."

They turned the boat for home.

Harry was on the pontoon when they came alongside. He had the mooring line in his hand. And it was Harry who spoiled it.

"You'll have heard the forecast," he said.

"No," said Sarah.

The forecast is what the weather is going to do next. Harry heard it on the radio at ten to six every morning. His father had too.

"There's a swell coming," said Harry. "Off the Atlantic. Not much wind with it. You'd hardly notice it in here." He nodded out past Gull Rock. "But it'll come round the point on Friday morning."

Miss Trelawny stood very still in the boat. She had the canvas bag in her hand.

"Friday," she said.

Chapter 9: Lily Says It Out Loud

They made the plan on Thursday, in the harbour office.

There were four adults in that little room. All four had a thing to say.

Mr Nance had the week's tide table on the wall board. Miss Trelawny had her notes and her canvas bag. Harry had a pencil behind his ear. Sarah stood with her back to the door. Her arms were folded. She was the one who said who went on the water. And who did not.

The four children sat on the bench under the window. They kept out of it.

It went on like that for a good twenty minutes.

"Eleven o'clock, then. Low water five past."

"You'd want to be in there before that, not after."

"We can't tow the punt out. She's too heavy."

"Then what are we rowing? Not the safety boat. You'll never turn her in that gap."

"The forecast says the swell comes on Friday morning. It might be nothing. It might be a foot."

"A foot of swell in a gap that size isn't a foot."

"Then we look at it and we decide there."

Four voices. All of them sensible. All of them at once.

Lily had her book open on her knees.

She had known it for a whole minute now. The plan was built on the wrong number.

She said: "The tide's different out there."

No one heard her.

They were not being rude. Mr Nance was reading the wall. Harry was drawing the shape of the gap. He drew it on the back of an envelope. Sarah

and the volunteer were both on the swell. The room was full of grown-up voices. A grown-up voice fills a room. It fills it the way water fills a bucket.

Lily looked at her page.

Seventeen days of rows. Every one of them true. And two of them with a note in the margin. Nobody had ever asked her about those. The numbers lined up.

She went hot behind the ears. She stood up.

Then she said it again. Loudly. Saying a thing aloud is hard. It is harder in a room full of adults.

"The tide out at Long Sand is *half an hour later than in here*."

The office went quiet.

They all turned round. Four adults. Three children. All of them looking at her. It was very nearly enough to sit her back down.

She did not sit back down.



"Say that again, Lily," said Miss Trelawny.

"Your tide table is for the harbour," said Lily. "That board is the harbour. It's Puffin Bay, inside the wall. And it's right." She held out the book. "But Wren Cove isn't in here. It's round the far side of the point. And the water out there runs late. Half an hour late. Every time."

"How do you know?" said Harry. It was a real question.

"I wrote it down."

She put the book flat on the desk. They could all see the page.

"Tuesday. Low water in here was twenty-five to nine. I had my watch on. Out at Long Sand the sand went on rising. It stopped at five past nine." She put her finger on the margin. "It didn't fit. So I wrote it down."

She turned the page.

"Wednesday. Low water in here, half past nine, near enough. Out there the sand stopped at five to ten." She looked up. "Thirty minutes. Both days. I didn't think it mattered. Then you said eleven o'clock."

Mr Nance took his glasses off. He put them on again.

"She's right," he said slowly. "She's quite right. It always has run late round the point." He looked at the board. "My father had a saying. The point holds the tide back half an hour. I have not thought of it in forty years. And I put that table up myself."

"It's a good table," said Lily quickly. "It's just a table for in here."

Miss Trelawny picked up the book. She read both margins. Her assessment was on the desk beside her notes.

"Then all we have said this past hour is out," she said. "Half an hour out."

"Yes," said Lily.

"Late or early?"

"Late. The cove's low water comes after the harbour's." Lily had the figures ready. She had done them twice already. All of them had been talking over

her head. "Tomorrow the harbour is five past eleven. Add half an hour. Saturday the harbour is five to twelve. Add half an hour to that as well."

Miss Trelawny sat down on the corner of the desk.

"Now say what that does to us," she said. "Go on. You know."

Lily took a breath.

"You said we'd go in at five past eleven. That's half an hour too soon. The water isn't ready then. The ebb would still be running out through the gap." She stopped. "It would push us back. It would throw us about in the narrow bit. It is only passable at the cove's low water. Not the harbour's."

No one said a word for a moment.

"Well," said Sarah.

"Rewrite it," said Miss Trelawny. "All of it. Round her numbers. And if it's wrong on the day, we call it off."

So they did.

She wrote Lily's figures on the paper. Harry turned it over. They started again. It took eleven minutes this time, not twenty. And no one talked over anyone.

The plan came out like this.

Three boats. The old ferry boat goes out first. She holds well off Long Sand. Martha is on the engine, standing by. *Standing by* means ready, and doing nothing. It is one of the hardest jobs on the water. Then the safety boat, outside the gap. Sarah at the tiller. And one small rowing boat to go in.

"We haven't got a small boat light enough," said Harry. "Not the punt. She's a barge."

There was a pause.

Every head in that room went to the same boat. All at the same moment.

She lay on a mooring under the lighthouse. Grey and sound. Her name freshly painted on her bow.

"That's Pascoe's to say," said Mr Nance.

Ollie was out of the door before anyone could ask him.

He came back twenty minutes later, out of breath. He had a slip of paper folded twice.

She was in and out of Selder Cove for forty years. She knows about bad gaps. Take her. — J.P.

"Right," said Harry, and blew his nose rather hard.

Then the jobs.

Harry rows the *Curlew II* in through the gap. Miss Trelawny sits in the bow. Her canvas bag goes between her feet. Finn and Ollie stay in the safety boat. They hold her off the rock. They keep her steady, and they keep her *there*. Lily keeps the times. A watch. The tide. And a written line for all of it.

Mr Nance stays ashore. He keeps the plan, the telephone and the harbour book.

Tomorrow was the first attempt. Then Sarah went round the room. She made each one say their own job aloud.

"Why?" said Finn.

"In the morning your ears won't work right," said his mother. "No one's do. So we do the talking now."

On Friday morning they were on the harbour wall at ten past six.

It was not light yet. It was the grey before it. The air was soft and still. There was no wind at all. The harbour water lay as flat as a table.

That was the trouble.

You could hear it.

Not loud. Nothing to be scared of. A long slow breathing sound. It came from far out past Gull Rock. It came and went about every twelve seconds. It had not been in Puffin Bay the day before.

The swell had come round the point early.

Finn stood on the wall with his hands in his pockets. He said nothing for a long time.

"That's in the gap," he said at last.

"Yes," said Harry. "That'll be in the gap."

Chapter 10: Turn Round

Miss Trelawny stood on the harbour wall. She listened to the sea for ten minutes.

Then she said, "We'll go and look at it."

"We're still going?" said Ollie.

"We're going to look," she said. "Looking is free. If the gap is wrong, we come home. Then we do it tomorrow. That's what tomorrow is for."

So the first attempt went out. It went out properly.

Martha took the ferry boat out first, at half past nine. She stood off Long Sand. Sarah came next in the safety boat. Finn, Ollie and Lily were aboard. Behind them, on a long rope, came the *Curlew II*. She rode light and easy. Harry and Miss Trelawny sat in her.

They all had a lifejacket on. They had all said their job aloud the day before. In a warm room. With nobody shouting.

Out past Gull Rock the swell came to meet them. It came in long slow lines.

In open water it was nothing much to look at. Long low hills of water, wide apart and slow. The safety boat went up one side. Then down the other. It was almost nice.

"It's not even rough," said Ollie.

"It isn't rough out here," said Sarah. "That's not where it goes wrong."

She was right. You could see it as soon as Long Sand came up.

The water was shallow out there. It ran shallow all along the outside of the bank. Out there each hill of swell stood up. It turned white and fell over. On Tuesday the edge of that sand had been quiet. Today a white line ran down it. Over and over. Every twelve seconds.

Nobody said anything for a while.

"There it is," said Lily.

The pup was on the ledge. They could see it from a long way off. It had not moved. The glass brought it in close. A small grey shape. Up out of the water. In the same place.

"Good," said Miss Trelawny, across the water. "Then we're in time."

They waited for the tide.

That hour was the hardest any of them had ever spent. Low water in the harbour was five past eleven. At the cove it came half an hour after that. Lily sat with her watch on her knee. She read the time out every ten minutes.

"Eleven o'clock."

"Ten past."

"Twenty past."

Biscuit came out from the harbour. He sat on the bow of the ferry boat. He made small rude noises at them all.

"Half past."

Miss Trelawny stood up in the *Curlew II*.

"Right," she said. "Cast off the tow."

Harry let the rope go. He put the oars in the water. He turned the little grey boat round.

Sarah brought the safety boat up close to the gap. She held her there. Finn was in the bow. Ollie was in the stern. Their job was to keep her exactly where she was. And off the rock. That took both of them, all the time.

Martha closed up in the ferry boat. A hundred feet off, standing by.

From the bow Finn could see in. He could see straight into the gap.

At the mouth it looked all right. The water was green and moving. The rock walls went up on both sides. Wet and dark, and higher than a house.

Harry rowed her in.

She went in three boat-lengths, quietly. All was well. And then all was not.

The first thing was the noise. Inside the rock the sound changed. It came off both walls at once. It doubled itself. It was not a small sound any more.

Then the swell came in behind them.

The little boat went up. She went up fast. Much faster than out in the open. In there the water had nowhere to spread. She came up level with the weed line. That was high on the wall. Then she dropped. The drop was worse than the lift. She came down hard. Her stern swung at the ledge.

Harry caught it with one oar. He was very fast. He was very calm.

The next one came in twelve seconds later. This time the water in the gap did not stay green. White water came up all round her.

Finn watched it. His mouth went dry.

He knew that water. He had seen it every winter of his life. He knew what it did. It stands on the outside of Gull Rock. Nobody takes a boat in there. It is the water that is full of air. You cannot row in it. You cannot steer in it. It does what it likes with you.

White where it ought to be green.

Twelve seconds. That was all it had taken. Twelve seconds to stop being a good idea.

In the bow of the *Curlew II* the volunteer turned her head to call it off.

And Finn got there first.

"WE TURN ROUND!"

It came out of him at the top of his voice. It went across thirty feet of water. He had not known he had a voice like that.

"DAD! TURN ROUND!"

Harry did not even look up. He put his weight on one oar. He backed the other. The *Curlew II* came round in her own length. He pulled her out of that gap. Five long strokes.

The green water took her. The noise fell away. She was outside. The attempt was called off.

Nobody cheered. Nobody said well done.

Miss Trelawny sat down in the bow. She said it quite clearly. "Yes. Agreed."

That was all.

They took the tow again. They turned for home.

It was a silent trip. Not a cross silence. Just silence. Ollie did not tell a single story. Lily wrote her entry. Then she held the book on her knees. She did not look at it. Sarah steered and said nothing at all.

Martha brought the ferry boat up alongside. She came in for the run home. She was close enough to talk. Nobody talked.

And that was when Martha saw it.

She had been sure all week. Quite sure. She could have taken the ferry boat in through that gap. She had said so twice. She had believed it right up to one moment. That was when the noise changed inside the rock.

Now she looked across at the safety boat. She watched Ollie in the stern.

Ollie had a hand flat on the side of the boat. Each time the swell came under them he pressed down. He let his knees go soft. Then he looked forward at Finn. He wanted to see what Finn was doing.

Martha knew that hand. It was her hand. She did that.

Ollie was not copying the sea. Ollie was copying *her*.

She thought about that the whole way home. It was not a nice thought. It was one of the most useful ones she ever had.

Lily's figures had been right to the minute. They came in past the slipway at half past one.

Nobody had been hurt. Nothing had gone wrong. Nothing had broken and nothing had been lost.

And nothing at all had been done.

The pup was still on the ledge. The tide was making. In the morning it would all have to be done again. They would all have to be brave again. And this time there was no third day.

That is a very hard sort of afternoon. It is much harder than a bad one.

Finn tied the *Curlew II* up at the quay steps. He would not look at anybody.

He had wanted to go for a fortnight. He had argued about it. He had sulked about it. He had lain awake about it. And in the end they went. And the one who stopped it was him.

He felt about the size of a limpet. Limpets are very small.

Miss Trelawny came along the quay. She had the canvas bag on her shoulder. She stopped beside him. She took out a pen.

Then she wrote on the back of her own hand. Big black letters. It would still be there in the morning.

12.25.

"Tomorrow's time," she said. "Cove, not harbour."

Finn nodded at the stones.

Miss Trelawny put the pen away.

"That," she said, "was good seamanship."

Finn looked up.



"It didn't feel like it, did it?"

"No," said Finn.

"No," said Miss Trelawny. "It never does. That's the whole trouble with it."

Chapter 11: Saturday, Twelve Twenty-Five

Finn woke at five. He lay still and listened.

Nothing.

He got up. He put his head out of the window. The harbour was dark and soft and empty. And there was no sound at all. Nothing from out past Gull Rock.

The swell had gone through in the night. Swells do that. They come. They run past. Then they go away up the coast. After that they are someone else's problem.

Finn got dressed in about ninety seconds.

Harry had the forecast on at ten to six. He heard the whole thing out. Then he turned it off.

"Flat," he said. "Flat all day."

Flat water is water with nothing in it. No swell. No chop. No white. It sits there and lets you work.

They went out at half past ten.

It was the same as Friday. It was nothing like Friday. Same three boats. Same jobs, said aloud the day before. Same rope, same lifejackets, same tin of tea.

But Gull Rock stood still in the water. Its shadow lay under it. And when Long Sand came up, the edge of it was quiet.

Not a white line anywhere. Nobody would have to call it off today.

"Look at that," said Ollie.

"Don't say anything," said Martha. "You'll break it."

The pup was on the ledge. Miss Trelawny found it with her glass. She watched it for a minute. Then she put the glass down.

"Still there," she said. "Right. Now we wait. And we go by the girl's figures."

Lily sat with her watch on her knee.

"Twelve o'clock."

"Ten past."

"Twenty past."

Up on the point, a mile away, something flashed. One small bright light. It came from the window of the keeper's cottage. It was the sun on the front of a brass telescope.

"He's got us," said Lily.

"He'll have had us since we left the pontoon," said Harry.

"Twelve twenty-five," said Lily.

It all went very quiet.

Miss Trelawny stood up in the *Curlew II*. She looked into the gap.

The rock walls were the same. The weed on them was the same. But the water between them was green from side to side. It lay there. It moved about an inch. It did nothing else at all.

"That," she said, "is what it ought to look like."

She sat down in the bow.

"Right, Mr Penhale. In you go."

Their own jobs were the boring ones. They had known that since Thursday.

Sarah held the safety boat outside the gap. Finn and Ollie kept the boat there. They kept her off the rock. One on each side, hands flat on the wood. Lily kept the times. She wrote a line each time a thing happened. Her writing was smaller and neater than usual.

And all three of them had one more job.

Say nothing.

"Not a word from any of you," Miss Trelawny had said on the pontoon. "Not a shout. Not a cheer. Nothing. That pup will be picked up by an animal it is afraid of. Every noise makes that worse. You can be as pleased as you like. Be pleased quietly."

Ollie had nodded.

Ollie had to be quiet for eleven minutes. It was the hardest thing he had ever done.

He nearly managed it, too.

Biscuit came out from the harbour halfway through. He landed on the safety boat's bow. Right by Finn's hand. He looked round for food. His head was on one side. Ollie made the smallest noise he could think of. It was a sort of hiss. Then he waved his arm.

Biscuit went. He was not pleased, but he went.

Inside the gap, Harry rowed her through. Nine strokes.

Wren Cove opened out in front of them.

It was small. That was the first thing. A curve of grey sand no bigger than the boatyard. Dark cliff round the back of it. And quiet. Really quiet. It was the way a room goes quiet when someone shuts a door.

And on the ledge, at the near end, lay the pup.

It lifted its head and looked at the boat.

She put up her hand and Harry stopped rowing. He held the boat there. One oar, tiny movements. He stayed six or eight feet off the rock. He did not touch the ledge at all.

She had the canvas bag open on her knees.

She did not talk to the pup. She did not put her hand out to it. She waited three whole minutes. She watched which way it was facing. Then she went over the side of the boat. Down onto the wet rock. One movement.

Two steps. Down. Both arms round it. Bag over.

It was done before the pup had finished deciding what to do.

It had taken about four seconds. It looked like nothing at all. That is what two hundred of them looks like.

She came back over the side. The bag was against her chest. She sat down. She put it between her feet. She laid one hand flat on the top of it. "All right," she said. "Home, please."

Harry turned the boat.

Outside, the three of them saw the *Curlew II* come back out. She came through the gap. The volunteer sat in the bow. There was a canvas bag in her arms. The bag moved.

Lily wrote *12.36. Out. Pup aboard.* Her hand shook. It came out badly. It is still like that in the book.

Nobody made a sound.

And then the water broke, twenty feet from the safety boat.

Pearl came up.

She had come off the sand at the far end. She had swum round the outside. Now she was right there, between the two boats. Her head was up and the water ran off her.



Nobody moved. Nobody spoke. Nobody put a hand out.

She swam a slow circle round both boats. Then she swam another one.

She came so close to Ollie that he could see her whiskers. Whiskers are the long stiff white hairs on a seal's face. They stand out in a bunch on each side. There was water beading on them. He could see the black shine of her eye. He had known this animal four years. He had never once been this close.

She looked at the bag in the woman's arms for a long moment.

Then she rolled over. She went down. She did not come up again on that side.

They watched the water all the way back to Gull Rock. She did not follow.

"Is she all right?" said Ollie at last.

"That's exactly right," said Miss Trelawny. "She's done her bit. She's kept that pup going for a fortnight on her own. Now she can go back to being a seal."

At the slipway there were about thirty people. They stood about. They made out they had come for other things. Mrs Chegwin had shut the shop. Mr Nance had the harbour book open on the wall.

Nobody cheered. Word had gone round.

Miss Trelawny carried the bag up the slip. She had both arms round it. In the back of the green van stood a box. It was lined with a blanket. She put the bag in and shut the door quietly.

Then she came back down. She took a small white card out of her pocket.

There was a telephone number on it. Under that was a number on its own.

41.

"That's the pup," she said. "Every one that comes in gets a number. They get it the day they come in. From today that's what it is. Number forty-one."

"Not a name?" said Ollie.

"Not from me," said Miss Trelawny. "You can call it whatever you like. The centre will call it forty-one."

She gave the card to Lily. Lily looked at it. Then she held it out to Ollie. Ollie shook his head and pushed it back.

"You keep it," he said. "It's your book that got us there."

"It'll be released when it's fit," said Miss Trelawny. "We'll ring you. In a few weeks. Either way."

Finn frowned. "What does that mean, either way?"

Miss Trelawny picked up her canvas bag. She looked at him. She did not soften it.

"It means we tell you if it goes well," she said. "And we tell you if it doesn't. Either way is not always the good way."

Chapter 12: Number Forty-One

After that, nothing happened for three weeks.

That is how it goes in a village. The big day comes and goes. Then they all go back to work.

The yard started its autumn jobs. Boats came out of the water one by one. Harry and Finn scraped the weed off them. Then they painted them. The shed smelled of paint and cold air.

School started again. Martha grew half an inch. Ollie got a new coat and hated it. Lily wrote her tide every morning. The same as always. She left the second column empty. She did not stop.

Then, on a Tuesday, Pearl came back.

Lily saw her first. She was on the pontoon after school. She was coiling a rope. Something moved between the school dinghies. A round grey head came up. It came up between boat four and boat five. The water ran off it. It looked at her.

Lily sat down very slowly on the wet boards.

"Hello," she said.

Pearl blew a small blow. Then she lay there without a movement. Nose out. Eyes half shut. Quite at home. She lay close. Lily could count her whiskers.

She had come back with nothing to say for herself. A month away. A cove, a ledge, a fortnight of fish carried out on the ebb. And here she was, in the same old spot.

Lily had a paper bag in her coat pocket. Fish scraps.

She had bought them that morning without thinking. She had done it a hundred times.

She got them out. She held them.

Then she sat there a long minute. A bag of fish in her hand. And she thought about a room in the harbour office. And her mother saying *we should not have started it.*

Lily put the bag back in her pocket.

"Sorry," she said. "Not any more."

Pearl waited a bit. Perhaps it was a joke. Then she rolled over. She went off between the moorings. She came up again by her own rock. She lay in the last of the sun.

She was still coming to the harbour. She was not coming to a hand.

Lily thought that was probably the right way round.

The card came on the Friday.

It came in a brown envelope. The centre's name was on it. It said *Miss L. Penhale, The Boatyard, Puffin Bay*. Lily read that four times. Then she opened it.

Inside was a card. The writing was small and square, like her voice.

Pup 41. Doing well. Feeding on his own now. Nine kilos on in three weeks. He eats more than any of them. He will be released in the spring, off the north coast. Twice the weight he came in at. We will tell you the day.

He is a nuisance and he bites the buckets. That is a very good sign.

Finn read it over Lily's shoulder. He read it about a hundred times.

"Nine kilos," he said. "Nine."

At the centre they call that a release.

"That's the good way," said Lily.

"Yes," said Finn. "It is."

They had the harbour supper the next Saturday.

It was not for the seal. It was the ordinary end-of-season supper. The village has one every year. Long tables down the middle of the quay. Everyone's pies. Mrs Chegwin's saffron cake. Tea in the big brown pot. Lamps along the wall.

It turned into a supper about the seal anyway. That was Ollie's doing. He stood up.

Ollie Trewin had told this village a great many tales. A hundred ships in a bay with room for six. A seal that swam to Ireland.

This one was different. They could all tell inside a minute.

Ollie left the boring bits in. The boring bits were the true ones.

He told them about six days of nothing at all. He told them about the empty rows in Lily's book. Four in one week. Every one of them saying *not seen.* Finn had called that nothing. Lily had called it information.

He told them about the fifty minutes. He told them about the pencil line on the chart. The one in the yard office.

Then he told them about the Ireland story. Right out. He did not come out of it well.

He told them what you do not do to a seal. All three rules, in order.

And then he told them about the Friday.

He did not skip it. He did not make it shorter. He told them how far they got. Three boat-lengths. He told them about the noise off both walls. And the white water. And Finn shouting turn round. And the silent trip home, with nothing done at all.

"That was the best bit," said Ollie.

Someone at the back said, "That doesn't sound best to me."

"No," said Ollie. "It doesn't. That's why it is."

Then they noticed the old man. He was at the end of the table.

Old Pascoe had come down off the point.

He had walked down the cliff path. He had a book under his arm. He had sat at the far end for an hour, saying nothing.

He put the logbook on the table. He opened it.

"I had the glass on the lot of it," he said. "Every day."

The village leaned in.

He read his own lines out. His voice was flat and dry. *Grey seal, out, fish. Grey seal, in, empty.* Day after day. Weeks of it, in small hard capitals.

He read the Friday. *Small boat into the gap. Out again. Sea working. Right thing done.*

Then he turned to the Saturday. He stopped. He looked at Lily over the page.

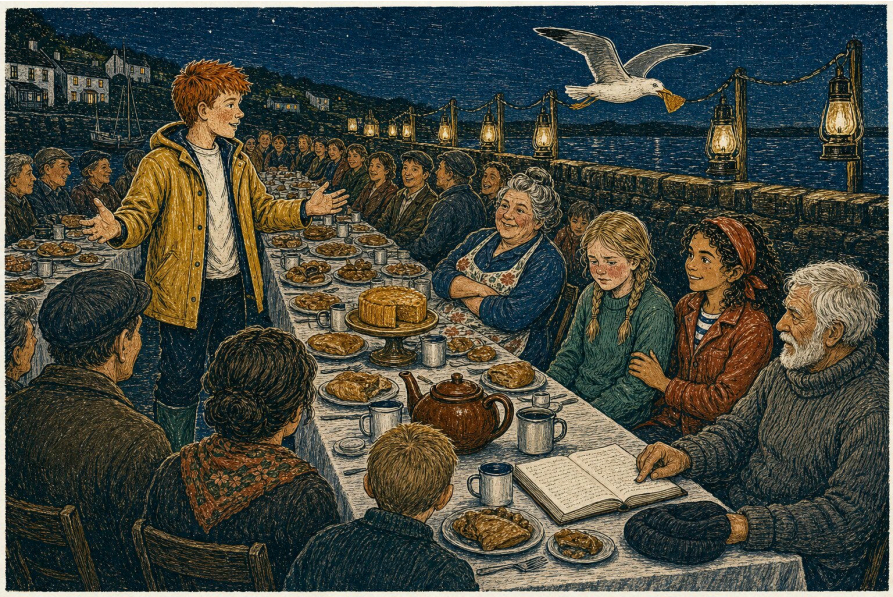
"Then I've got this one," he said. "It's not mine. I copied it off a girl in my own kitchen."

And he read it out to the whole quay.

She isn't going at a time. She's going at a water.

Lily went very red indeed. Martha had to hold her arm. It kept her in her seat.

Then Biscuit came down the whole table at head height. He took the last of the saffron cake. Off Ollie's plate. He left with it.



The quay laughed. The supper went on. It went on late.

Afterwards Finn and Lily walked Old Pascoe home. They went with him to the bottom of the point path.

It was cold. The tide was high and quiet. You could hear it moving along the wall. Out at the end of the point the light came round. Every seven seconds. It always had.

Pascoe stopped and looked at the water. He always did that.

"Forty years I've written that sea down," he said. "Twice a day, near enough. In and out. In and out. Always on time."

He put his hands in his pockets.

"I've never once thought it ran itself."

That was all he said about it. He said goodnight. He went up the path. They watched his lamp go up the hill.

On the Monday Harry put the card in a frame.

He made the frame himself. The frame is still there. He used a bit of oak off the bench. He did it properly. Then he hung it on the wall of the yard office. It went beside the big chart. The pencil line was still on there.

The card sat in the middle. Its telephone number. And its 41.

"There," said Harry. "Tuppence."

"He's called Tuppence," said Ollie, "and he is *not* called forty-one."

"He's called both," said Lily. "That's allowed."

And that was when Mr Nance came in. He had his hat in his hand. He had a worried sort of face.

"Harry," he said. "The regatta flag."

Every autumn that flag went up to the sailmaker. It had done so for a hundred years. He looked it over. He mended it. Every autumn it came back. The rest of the year it lived in the wooden chest. That stands in the harbour office, under the counter.

"What about it?" said Harry.

"It's not in the chest," said Mr Nance.

Harry put down his hammer.

"Then the sailmaker has it early."

"That's the thing," said Mr Nance.

He looked up at the row of dark windows above the yard. Up there is the long room over the sheds. It is the sail loft. Sails are cut and mended in it.

"The loft's been shut a fortnight," he said. "And there's been no light in it."

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