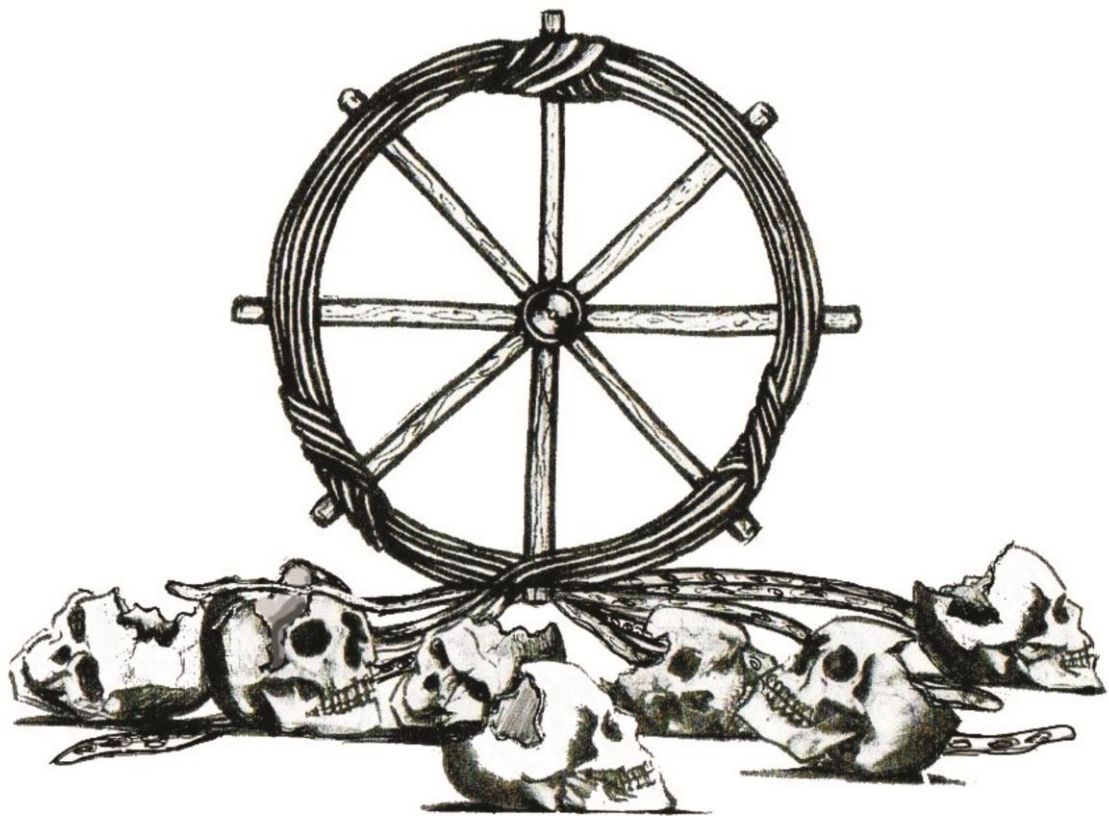


SAM AND THE SEA WITCH

By M.P. Ward

Dedication

*For
Sam, Louise, and Eleanor.
Special thanks to Emerantia
for believing in my work,
and to the power of magic,
where our imaginations know no bounds.*



Sam and The Sea Witch

Chapter One

The House on the Edge of the Rocks

Sam cringed; he wasn't expecting the damn window to creak so loudly and now wished he had tried to escape through the kitchen window like last night. The sudden noise had probably awakened his mother, who was about to leap from her bed and come rushing down the stairs at any second. His heart aflutter and holding his breath, Sam listened intently for a moment, eyes focused on the ceiling directly above, his ears straining for sounds.

In the lounge, black and grey shapes filled the room. The alcoves, the fireplace, the hearth, a country dresser, and the settee—everything was monotone, no colour anywhere, even with the curtain draped behind Sam's shoulder. In that intense moment, Sam imagined the door bursting open, his mum, big as an ogre, standing there in the doorway with her arms tightly crossed over her chest. He could almost see her now, anger and disappointment simultaneously emanating from every part of her being. Sam feared he would be caught in the embarrassing and awkward position he was frozen in. One foot sank into the cushion, and his knee pressed on top of the back of the chair's soft upholstery.

He leaned forward across the sill, fingers gripping tightly around the handle. He pushed the window ajar. Cool air passed across Sam's face like an ice maiden's salty, fresh breath.

A few seconds passed, but his Mum had still not stirred. Maybe she hadn't heard anything after all. Straining, he straddled the sill with one leg out and pulled the rest of his body through the lounge window. The darkness of the garden and the late night cold surrounded him. His skin felt prickly everywhere, as though he had just walked into the freezer aisle at Tweedies Supermarket with the lights off. Sam decided he couldn't really go out on the boat dressed as he was. It was far too cold at this time of night.

'Hey, are you out here, Johnny?' Sam whispered under his breath into the thick darkness.

There was a sudden rustling sound, and Johnny stepped out of the bushes by the house. His thin gangly, black shape loomed against the dark purple sky.

'I'm over here,' he whispered back, shaking a bit of bush from his leg.

'Good on ya mate, I didn't think you'd be coming; I'm well surprised.'

Sam slowly eased the window shut. Soft, damp splinters of rotted wood and once white paint transferred simply by a mere touch to his fingers. He rubbed them away between his thumb and index finger, and almost immediately the flakes disintegrated into the dark by his feet. He shook his head in deep concern.

'Look at this, Johnny; the whole ruddy house is falling apart.'

Sam was expecting him to agree, but Johnny wasn't interested in the state of the house—he had other issues.

'Why? What do you mean,' he demanded angrily. 'I told you I'd be coming, didn't I?'

Sam honestly believed his friend didn't have the balls for what they were about to do, and he could see Johnny knew that was exactly what Sam meant.

Sam put his arm across Johnny's shoulders shaking him back and forth.

‘Chill out, J., I thought you might have fallen asleep. That’s all. We’ve never been out this late, not two nights on the run; you must be exhausted. I know I am.’

‘Yeah, well,’ he said, staring hard into Sam’s eyes, ‘I am a little tired.’ Then a wide smile spread across his face. ‘But if last night’s anything to go by, it’s going to be great.’

The raid on the Piermont Pie Factory rushed back into Sam’s mind. He had unleashed a smash and grab and was nearly caught in the back of Arthur Von Strictum’s pie van.

Johnny took a long deep breath through his nose. Grinning, Sam watched him pretending to smell those pies from the previous night.

‘It was good, wasn’t it?’ Sam said, patting Johnny on the back while they laughed.

Strangely and equally as fast, Johnny’s face straightened, and his eyes fell to the ground.

Sensing his fear and apprehension, Sam tried to distract him. ‘Come on, mate, let’s get the gear.’

They walked around the outside of the house toward the old, wooden shed. It was brown and decrepit, but the old building seemed determined to remain upright. It practically balanced on two stilts, held together with spider’s webs and rotten planks, angled and un-nailed. Sam didn’t care. He entered the shed nearly every day for his bike and other things that weren’t allowed in the house. It never even crossed his mind that it might actually fall down around his ears.

Inside the shed, dark grey and black shapes hung on nails. There was a curled-up hosepipe, several pots, and a pan, a couple of fold up chairs, and a camping lantern, a lawn mower, and hedge trimmers. Some gardening tools were standing upright on the

dirty floor. At the far end of the shed, and to Sam's left, was an old tatty cupboard where his mum kept the rabbit food and hay.

Sam lifted two rods and a dirty, old, khaki-green bag from the ground in the farthest, darkest corner.

'Here, put this on,' he said, offering Johnny one of the two black and red nylon coats which were hanging on nails behind the door. 'I'm cold, and it'll be even colder out there on the sea.'

Johnny took the coat without uttering a word and slipped the garment on. He fastened the zip, looked up, and started to laugh.

'What's up with you?' asked Sam.

'Boy, you need to look at yourself,' replied Johnny, staring at Sam's grey, moon reflected shape, which was clearly visible in the shed doorway. 'You're not going to wear that are you?'

'Yes...why what's wrong with it?'

Sam looked down at the long coat. The arms of the garment extended past his knees, and his hands disappeared completely beneath the fabric. The body of the coat extended so low, if it were any longer, it would be impossible for Sam to walk without tripping over it.

'What's wrong with it?' asked Johnny, falling about and almost tripping over his feet. 'It's your dad's; that's what's wrong with it.'

'Well it's okay, init? You've got mine, and he won't know. Anyway, I don't care what it looks like. It's warm like a sleeping bag. In fact, it's too warm to wear whilst we're just standing around here yakking.'

‘But, Sam, it’s only ten ‘o clock. What if we bump into Billy and some of the other kids from school when we get down into the town? They’ll tear you apart looking like that.’

Johnny’s eyes were open wide with what appeared to be genuine concern.

‘We won’t. It’s pretty unlikely, and most of them will be in bed by now, and if we do, I’ll just ride past. They won’t bother me.’

Johnny still seemed reluctant, but Sam couldn’t understand why.

Is he trying to protect me, or is he looking for any excuse not to go out in The Sea Witch?

Sam, however, was very determined it had to be tonight. Johnny’s grandfather’s story was still reeling inside him along with the important significance of the fiftieth anniversary, on September fifth—today. A rush of excitement dizzied Sam’s head, and a warm glow started to surface, flushing his cheeks.

A sea witch. Imagine seeing a real sea witch, and even better, imagine capturing one. Sam didn’t dare mention any of it to Johnny in case it unnerved him. However, Sam was struggling to remain calm and composed; the excitement was becoming all too much.

Sam gazed up at the cold, clear sky, dotted with stars. They looked like white diamonds pressed into a black, velvet blanket. *Mum and Dad could do with a few of those.*

There was hardly any breeze coming over the edge of the cliff from the sea toward the house, only sea sounds—eerie whisperings and ghosts singing on the shore in the distance. For a time, Sam was distracted, as if he were in a dream, but now he became

acutely aware of the reason why he was here. The cold crept into his bones and emphasized the fact the two of them were alone in the dead of night.

‘Right. We’ve got what we need; let’s go,’ Sam told Johnny.

Sam threw the tackle bag over his shoulder and grabbed the rods firmly in one hand. Then he climbed onto his bike.

Before long they were on the quayside by the steps, leading down to where *The Sea Witch* bobbed steadily upon the waves. Sam dropped his bike without hesitation. He couldn’t wait to get to her. Johnny wavered anxiously, legs still astride his bike with the chipped blue paint, and his face clearly fear-filled. His friend stared down repulsively at the little boat. There she was: ochre brown, eighteen feet long, six feet wide, and two feet above the water. Around her, four similar boats floated gently up and down, moving as if they were alive. They were like dogs outside the shops waiting for their owners. The five boats were all tied to one large, metal ring by long, dirty, frayed ropes.

Slowly, one of the boats turned, moved by the tide until her aft came into Sam’s view. He spotted her nameplate immediately, two feet long with ornate green letters that read *The Sea Witch*.

Then Johnny dithered. ‘She looks very small, Sam, don’t you think? She doesn’t normally look that small, not in the daylight anyway,’ he said. Johnny stared down at her, his face tense and emaciated with fear.

‘I’ve changed my mind,’ he said, determination in his voice. ‘I’m not going. I’ve decided.’ Then his lip started quivering, and it was obvious to Sam that Johnny was thinking about his grandfather’s warning: *Don’t go out in the Sea Witch!*

‘You know there could be something in it. Maybe there is a sea witch out there waiting to snatch some young kid into the sea.’

‘No, no, that’s just silly talk,’ Sam reassured him.

Johnny started to shake his head slowly from side to side, and then he looked up.

‘No, it’s not. Grandpa said so. I’m not going.’

‘Well, that’s it then,’ replied Sam, lowering his head, his voice stifled. He sat on the step, defeated, before he looked up to where Johnny was standing, still astride his bike.

‘Come on, Johnny; you know it’s nonsense,’ Sam whined. ‘Even kids our age know the difference between what’s real and what’s not, don’t we?’ Sam was questioning the possibility of two answers, but he expected Johnny would realise there could only be one that was rational.

‘Alright, we’ve sat through some scary films,’ he moaned, applying a little more pressure. ‘Scared ourselves half to death, had a laugh, but we know it’s not real, don’t we?’

Johnny nodded at Sam. He seemed to agree, and his face was beginning to relax. His eyes lowered to the floor at the top of the steps and looked like he was trying to hide his embarrassment behind a stupid grin.

‘I suppose I must sound a bit thick, being afraid of a story like that, but Grandpa sounded so sure about what he was saying.’

‘Yes, but did you really believe it...seriously?’ Then Sam smiled at him. ‘You know I like your granddad, don’t you? But he’s old, and memories fade; things do get confused for older people.’

‘Well, I’m not sure. I did at the time, but it does seem a little farfetched now.’

‘A little farfetched? It’s more than that. It’s farther than most of the horror films we’ve watched on a Saturday night. It’s laughable. Keep it real, mate,’ Sam told him.

Johnny climbed from his bike, dropped it on the floor, and descended the steps to sit next to Sam.

‘I know what you’re saying, but is it worth taking the risk? We could go out tomorrow night instead, or we can use another boat.’

It sounded like the final blow to Sam. He had tried everything, but Johnny kept returning to the same ejective point. He had been right about Johnny all along, and it made him very angry. *Johnny has no balls. He might have come out in the dark, but all he’s doing is stopping me from catching the damn witch.*

Rage surged through Sam, heating his body and making his hands shake.

‘And where’s the fun in that?’ he bit at Johnny aggressively. ‘If you take the adventure out of the adventure, then we might as well just stay in bed. Not bother doing anything, not bother going anywhere.’ Rejection and disappointment stifled his voice. ‘You know, Johnny, I think you might believe this nonsense after all.’ Sam was no longer bothered if he hurt his feelings.

‘I’m not... Sam, I’m not,’ Johnny insisted.

‘Look, your granddad told you not to go out in *The Sea Witch*, not tonight. It was a great story, which is all the more reason we have to use that boat. He also said there’s a great big hole in the bay, the witch’s lair. Do you know how ridiculous that sounds? Even so, it would be good fun finding out. So let’s stop messing around and get out there. Let’s prove the old man wrong and maybe catch one or two fish as well.’

‘But what if there is? What if there is?’ Johnny trembled.

Sam was engulfed by frustration.

‘Then I’ll throw myself at it, and you can tell everyone I saved you from the sea witch. I’ll be a hero,’ Sam told him.

‘A dead hero.’

Sam smiled again. He couldn’t help it; he always smiled when he was unnerved by something. The amount of times that inappropriate smiling got Sam into trouble at school were numerous, but this time a cold tingle flowed down Sam’s spine.

‘Brrrr, I think someone’s just walked over my grave.’ He shivered.

Sam started to descend the wet, moonlit steps toward the sea, hoping Johnny would follow him. He did, and the two of them stood for a moment, watching the sea lap against the step just below their black shoes.

‘Get in, and I’ll pass you the rods,’ Sam urged.

Sam was still feeling anxious about Johnny changing his mind again. Then Johnny got in holding the rods.

Sam could hardly believe it. *Thank God for that.*

Sam hadn’t thought his friend was going to get in the boat. He surely didn’t want to sit in the dark, in the middle of the bay, alone for the whole night. In fact, Sam could hardly believe Johnny actually summoned up the courage. Secretly, he revelled in his powers of persuasion. It was as though the first part of the mission had already been accomplished, hopefully the hardest.

‘Now we’ve got to get out of the harbour without being seen,’ Sam whispered to the front of the boat, where Johnny sat.

The mission was on. Johnny untied the blue, frayed rope, and Sam stepped onto the moving floor of the little boat before *The Sea Witch* started to float slowly away from the side.

Suddenly, there were noises from across the water. Laughing and jeering as four dark figures stepped out of Black Jim’s. Arms gestured wildly, supporting drunken,

wavering bodies. The noise subsided as they moved further away into the distance, still singing. More people came rolling out of the Pirates Inn and Blue Dogs, a few doors along. High-spirited voices and echoing laughter carried across the water.

‘Throwing out time already,’ Sam said, observing the scene.

‘I guess it’s eleven o’clock, then. We’d better get moving if we want to catch the high tide,’ replied Johnny.

Sam wasn’t concerned about that because the hull of *The Sea Witch* was so high in the water, she could sail out on any tide.

Perhaps Johnny is thinking about catching a few fish? Must be I suppose, otherwise, like me, he wouldn’t be concerned with which way the tide was going.

Sam tugged on the cord, and the little outboard engine immediately roared into life.

‘Pull in the rope quickly,’ Sam ordered in a whisper.

He did and then settled, unspeaking, onto a seat near the front of the boat. The harbour wall loomed over him, tall and dark. Sam could just make out the shapes of the big blocks of harbour stone, which made up the wall. Attached to it, kelp, seaweed, barnacles, and winkles covered it at eye level and below.

She was free from her mooring and about to set off away from the quay.

‘Hey, you boys!’ a deep strong voice shouted down from above them.

Sam gasped and started. Instantly, he gazed up the wall where the black silhouette of a large, bulky man stared down at them. His mind raced wildly, and his mouth involuntary opened, and for a second, he thought he was about to scream.

‘Old Whiley,’ Sam breathed down the length of the boat to Johnny, horrified. *Is it Old Whiley? I’m not sure now, but who else would come here at this time of the night shouting down at us like that?*

Sam wanted desperately to escape, to turn the throttle, and flee from whoever was on the top step.

Then there were rushed shuffling sounds, and the voice shouted to them again but not angrily this time, more anxious, even frightened. ‘Wait, wait!’

Sam’s hand dithered nervously around the throttle handle. He wanted to turn it and steer *The Sea Witch* from the wall so he could get away, but he couldn’t. His hands were frozen by his indecision.

‘Move it. Move it,’ Sam urged himself.

Johnny stared, petrified, from Sam, to the man at the top of the steps, and back again.

Then uncontrollably, Sam’s numb wrist moved stiffly, jerking the throttle. The engine revved too hard, and he found he was unable to turn it smoothly. The boat moved through the water like an injured fish, in stops and starts. Nevertheless, Sam managed to steer the vessel away from the harbour wall steps, where the dark figure was rushing to descend upon him.

The man yelled out again, almost as if he were in pain this time. ‘Stop! No... No...not *The Sea Witch!*’ he cried.

Panicking to escape, Sam cleared the wall with its flashing light and guided the craft out of the harbour and into the bay.

The little boat bounced onward across the waves. Up and down she went—spray lashing her sides, wetting Sam and Johnny’s cold faces. Sam looked back the way they had come. The old man, with the stocky build and deep voice, was still waving his arms at them from the end of the harbour. Then he seemed to fall out of sight. There was a splash, and Sam and Johnny were alone on the black tar sea in the dead of night.

‘Jesus, Johnny. Old man Whiley nearly had us then; he’ll kill us tomorrow when we bring his boat back,’ Sam said, shocked.

Johnny climbed back along the boat. He stepped over the seats right up to Sam’s face; his slate grey eyes were shining, and a tear welled out onto his cheek. There was no sadness in his friend’s face, only emptiness and fear. A great sensation of uneasiness washed over him, and for the first time, he worried that everything happening now was beyond his control.

Johnny looked confrontational, dangerous, and there was a moment’s uncomfortable silence that seemed to last forever, their faces only inches apart.

Johnny’s lips pursed. ‘That wasn’t Whiley—it was my grandfather.’

Chapter Two

The Sea Witch

A cold shiver ran down Sam's spine. He was thinking about the mournful, desperate tone in Johnny's grandfather's voice.

Poor Mr P. and the way he wailed from the harbour wall, as if Sam and Johnny had done some terrible deed toward him.

It made Sam's skin cold and clammy, and his stomach was sick at the thought.

Johnny slowly retreated away from Sam, back over the seats. He kept glaring deep into his eyes and remained as silent as a ghost ship. He sat down on the cold, hard surface and lowered his head into his hands in a gesture of defeat.

Maybe Johnny's grandfather was telling the truth. Not just amusing him with some weird story, passing the time, but genuinely telling the truth about what happened to him as a boy. Can it be possible for a story, so unbelievable, to have actually happened?

Then he tried to wipe it from his mind because if it had actually happened to Johnny's grandfather, then it could also happen to him.

Sam's mind became gripped in turmoil, swaying from no it can't possibly be true to uncertainty, because the old man's voice was so horrifyingly real. However, one thing Sam was certain of was Johnny's grandfather believed exactly what he was saying; of that, he had no doubt at all.

For the first time, Sam really considered the possibility that there might be some truth in it. The game to use the story to exaggerate the adventure, to make the blood flow, to become involved in the story and act it out in every detail, with added excitement, was just what Sam liked to do.

But if this is really for real? Sam shivered again.

He looked back toward the tiny lights on the shore and considered the prospect of turning the little boat around and going in. He stared down at the oily blackness of the ice-cold sea and then at Johnny, who was about to put his hand into it.

‘No, Johnny!’ Sam shouted to him. ‘Don’t put your hand into the water.’ But it was too late.

Johnny looked surprised and shocked by the sudden outburst. His fingers reached below the surface, and it was obvious he saw nothing wrong in that. However, Sam was thinking that Johnny didn’t realise he was entering into the lair of monsters and demons, but Sam was considering it now.

‘The lair of monsters and demons,’ Sam mumbled into the darkness. It threw his mind back to his Bible days. Not that he came from an overly religious family or anything like that. But he could remember when he was little: a warm bed and his mother’s smiling face looking down on him. Sam didn’t have Bible bedtime anymore, but he often heard Mum next door, in his little sister’s room, reading as she had to him when he was her age.

Water is the place where demons come from and return to when they are cast from men and children.

Sam remembered well a chapter his mother read from the book of Isaiah. It was about Jesus casting demons out from a man.

When Jesus cast the demons out of the man, they entered a herd of pigs nearby. The pigs, in their fright and madness, were forced by the demons into the sea and drowned which enabled the demons to return from whence they came.

A tremble ran down Sam's spine for the third time.

'Three times the cock crows, Judas.' The words mumbled through his lips. *I bet them demons are still down there.*

The adventure hadn't been much fun so far, a little too intense, by the look on Johnny's face and coupled with the memories of Mum's Bible story. Sam was wishing now he had come alone and was still considering returning to where the harbour lights were flashing on and off, showing him the way home. He wasn't thinking about himself. It was for Johnny's sake he was thinking about returning to dry land. Sam knew he could take it, even the old man shouting, not a problem, but the despair on Johnny's face... Sam had not seen him cry before, and it was harrowing.

Johnny instantly retrieved his hand from the water and shouted, 'What... What?' as if he missed something Sam had seen.

'Oh, it's nothing,' Sam assured him.

'What do you mean nothing?' shouted Johnny. 'I nearly jumped out of my skin. Thought I was about to get my bloody hand bitten off.'

He picked up a rod, released a hook from the reel, and started to stretch out the silver foil strips of the lure between his fingers.

'Listen, Johnny, I've been thinking, and things haven't gone so well tonight, you know with your grandfather and all. Maybe we should give it a miss. What do you think?'

Johnny laughed sarcastically.

‘Well we’re here now. We’ve done all the damage we can do, and we’ve upset everyone who’s likely to get upset. Or we will have by the time my grandfather has finished with us. With him telling everyone, I mean including your mum and dad and Old Whiley, so I don’t really think it matters now anyway, do you?’

Sam thought for a moment, hesitating. He didn’t think he should mention the sea witch. He winced because he had dismissed the story as nonsense, and it was he who made Johnny feel stupid in the process. It was a victory for his manipulation of Johnny’s mood. An abrupt about face from, *I’m not going to go out in that boat tonight, to we might as well stay and get on with it now that we’re here.*

Sam realised Johnny’s hesitation, and what might have been considered borderline cowardice, had nothing to do with *The Sea Witch* or the story told by his grandfather at all.

Poor Johnny. He must have been struggling between what I wanted him to do and what his grandfather told him to do. No wonder he felt so bad when his grandfather shouted to him in such a harrowing tone, begging him to get out of the boat.

Mr P. must have been petrified of going near The Sea Witch, thinking about how the sea witch dragged his friend, Tommy, into the sea when they were just boys like us . And at the same time, he must have been desperate to pull Johnny from the boat, back onto the safety of the harbour steps.

Sam was consumed with guilt. He couldn’t possibly tell Johnny now that he suspected his grandfather may have been telling the truth.

‘Sorry,’ Sam stammered, hoping his friend didn’t ask why he was apologising.

‘Oh forget it, we’re here now. Let’s get the lines out and test the bottom of this bay,’ replied Johnny.

Sam was relieved Johnny's tone had risen from despair. He smiled and nodded then picked up his rod thinking that things might improve after all.

The undulating sea lifted the boat up and down, as if caressing it in its liquid arms. It was about eleven-fifteen, and the sky was almost as black as the sea except for the stars sparkling, as though God had thrown glitter out randomly onto a table. The moon had risen amongst the stars, reflecting onto the water like a big, round, white lantern. The light from it lit up the side of the boat, separating it from the sea with a thin, white beam that trailed off into an arc, following the contour of the stern and Johnny's slim, jagged shape.

Johnny had only lifted his fingers from the water a few minutes earlier, and they were only submerged for a matter of seconds. But still, it was long enough to make Sam tremble at the thoughts of something pulling him over the side into the black, murky depths.

A few minutes later, he turned off the engine; the boat stopped, and the silence became intoxicating. The only sound was the occasional rustling of warm jackets as they moved about, preparing rods and checking lures.

Suddenly, a long screeching sound, high pitched and haunting, came up from beneath the boat.

Johnny and Sam stopped moving instantly and stared at each other. Fear gripped them. Sam hoped desperately that whatever it was did not notice them and slipped past like ghosts from different times.

Sam could see the silence was terrifying Johnny.

Johnny's lips silently mouthed words, but no sound came out.

‘What was that?’ Johnny whispered, as breathe poured from his dithering lips like cold smoke.

‘I don’t know,’ replied Sam, trying desperately not to cry.

‘Could it be a whale, a dolphin, or something like that?’ Johnny asked.

Sam realised Johnny was trying to make some sort of sense from it, as if it had to be something natural, but how could it?

Two moons glistened in the reflection of Johnny’s eyes, and his bottom lip dropped, quivering again.

From Johnny’s expression, Sam could see he was more than scared. Even if he agreed with him that it might be a whale or a dolphin, Johnny would not believe him. Sam did not believe it. More than anything he feared Johnny might panic totally or bring the sea witch upon them, like a giant sea monster leaping up from the water onto the boat. The image in his head stopped Sam from telling Johnny what he really thought.

An icy coldness surrounded him, raising goose bumps, and hairs stood up all over his body. He stared terrified into Johnny’s pitiful, moonlit eyes.

‘I don’t know, Johnny,’ Sam finally spoke. The words crumbled like dust off his tongue.

The screeching echoed once more from beneath the boat.

Its sound carried a stronger force this time. It lifted the boat upward and then dropped it in quick succession, making it shudder violently. Waves wildly lashed the sides of *The Sea Witch*, and the wind began to blow much harder, whistling passed their ears. Johnny and Sam cried out for help, knowing that no one could save them. Sam reached out, grabbing the wooden edged side of the boat with one hand and his fishing

pole in the other. He screamed and prayed for the tempest to stop, but the boat continued to bounce up and down and roll heavily from side to side.

Sam threw the rod down onto the deck. His legs turned to jelly as he wobbled toward the back of the boat then fell onto the wooden bench by the outboard motor. He was desperate to get it started, and his mind filled with thoughts of the sea witch and little Tommy Elcinarb.

What is it beneath us, rising up from the bottom of the black mire, rising up, coming for me and screeching horribly?

Sam could see Johnny was thinking the same thing as he tried desperately to get to the back of the boat, also scrambling to the engine. He needed to pull on the white cord; he yearned to pull it because he knew it would fire up the gritty sounds of the engine, and it would bring it to life, driving them away to safety.

Johnny's face was filled with determination. His watery eyes were wide and desperate, now reflecting the square shape of the outboard engine from the moonlight.

Sam yearned to steer the little boat toward the flashing lights and the safety of the harbour, and more than anything, he wished they had never gone out in *The Sea Witch* at all.

But Sam hadn't reached the cord when he heard a loud thud on the side of the boat, close to where he lay. Only a piece of wood stood between Sam and whatever it was in the icy waters.

He gazed up, his body sprawled across the last seating, his head near the boat's aft, close to the engine, his hand, like Johnny's, claw-fingered and reaching out.

'Quick, Sam, quick,' Johnny's voice was desperate and breathless. 'Oh, God... pull the cord.'

Sam stopped suddenly and pulled back his hand; he put his finger up to his lips. He stared into Johnny's eyes, brow furrowed, and shook his head slowly from side to side.

Oh, Johnny, I hope you can read what I am trying to tell you. He pointed frantically to where the sound was coming from. He held Johnny's gaze and prayed for him to be silent.

Neither of them moved, and there was a long period of nothingness.

Sam started to doubt his own senses. Perhaps nothing had really happened at all, just a few weird sounds from the sea and the creaking wood of the boat, or perhaps a whale had gotten too close. *Strange things do happen at sea, and an over active mind can blow things out of all proportion, causing strange things to happen. Or at least, it starts people imagining that strange things are happening when really there is a simple and logical explanation.*

Sam had almost convinced himself that everything was fine although a seed of doubt remained. His heart still raced, and his chest rose and fell frantically, like a grey hound on a dog track. Slowly it began to ease, and the pain in his lungs started to subside.

'Perhaps it was a whale,' Sam finally agreed, whispering and still staring at the boat's wooden aft.

All was silent again.

Johnny's body lay collapsed across the seating next to Sam. He lifted his head, gazing into Sam's hazel brown eyes, searching for solace.

Sam gave him an arced smile.

Johnny returned the smile; it was infectious, as though Johnny was able to read his mind. Sam could see Johnny was equally embarrassed, but more than anything, it proved to them both that they were the best of friends.

And to think, Sam could have let a few sounds frighten the life out of him.

Johnny and Sam began to right their bodies. They pushed down on the wooden bench, returned to a seated position, and laughed out loud raucously.

‘I’ll tell you what, Johnny, that’s what it’s all about.’ Sam’s mouth rounded, and he exhaled with relief.

‘What? Scaring myself half to death, you mean?’

‘Yeah, Johnny, could you feel the rush?’ shouted Sam, his fist clenched, and his arm swung wildly in the air.

‘Yes I can, but I don’t want to feel it again, not ever. What do you say we call it a night, get back in there, and apologise to Grandpa.’

Sam said nothing, and there was an ominous silence for a few seconds.

‘Come on, Sam. It’s not even midnight. We’ve been out here less than an hour; he can’t be that angry, and if we take it back now, together...’

Sam thought for a moment. It had been a good night after all. He had nearly been scared half to death, got the rush, and the only thing missing was a few fish, and that could wait for another day.

‘Okay, Johnny, you’re right; enough is enough. Isn’t it amazing how a story like that can bring out a real buzz,’ Sam said, laughing and patting Johnny on the back.

‘You can keep your buzzes, Camponara; it’s too much excitement for me.’ Then Johnny’s voice became more serious. ‘You do realise we are in deep shit for this, don’t you?’

‘A minute ago you said we’d be alright?’

‘I know but...’

‘Nothing new there, then.’ Sam smiled at him, not at all concerned.

‘I’m still a bit unnerved about being out here though. What do you say we get the boat started and get the hell out of here?’

Sam nodded to Johnny; then he clutched the outboard steering column in one hand and the cord in the other. He turned his body slightly to the right, the cord handle gripped tight, ready to yank.

Suddenly, there was a loud splash behind him. Sam let go of the cord and turned instinctively to the sound. ‘What the hell is that,’ he shouted. His mouth fell open in shock while terror ripped through his body. There were two black feet suspended in the air before quickly disappearing into the blackness of the sea. Water, white froth, and spray followed, and then blackness returned. It was Johnny—he had disappeared beneath the waves. In a second, he was gone.

Sam moved frantically to the side of the boat only to see the swell gather, erasing any trace of Johnny. It was as if he had never been.

His heart filled with despair, and he cried out at his loss. ‘Johnny! Johnny!’ Sam wept.

Oh, God, save me. This is worse than anything I’ve ever....

For a second, Sam thought he could hear the old man’s voice crying out to him from the shore. But it couldn’t be. Surely, he was too far away in the darkness to see anything; surely, Johnny’s grandpa could not know.

Sam’s breathing became quick and shallow; he thought he was having a heart attack, and his hands trembled beneath the surface of the water. Desperately, he tried to

reach out for his friend. All the time Sam feared that he, too, might be dragged in. It didn't stop him from touching the inky water though. His loss was almost too great to bear, and coupled with guilt, it felt as if he had drowned Johnny himself.

Sam slumped back onto the side of the boat, choking on his sobs. He was consumed by a feeling of hopelessness. The silence, damp and cold, surrounded him, but Sam had no sense of it being there. He was numb to it. Nor did he recognise the sound of the sea or the wind. He had no urge to move; he didn't care what happened to him now. The guilt was crushing—he had just lost his best friend...his only friend.

It was five till twelve when the waves began to lash the sides of the boat, and a breeze blew across the sea toward the shore. The sky was still black except over the town, where the streetlights on the shore made it appear brownie-orange.

This is my fault. Why do I never listen? Why do I always have to go too far? Mixed in amongst these thoughts, were the muddled emotions of self-preservation, for which Sam could find no answers.

What is everyone going to say? What are Johnny's mum and dad going to do? And worse still, what about his granddad, who warned us not to go out in The Sea Witch tonight? He is going to kill me. I will be like him when he was a boy, when Tommy Elcinarb died out here. Oh my God, poor Johnny. I am going to be cast out of the town, treated like a leper. And what about the police? This is entirely my fault. They might say I murdered Johnny, threw his body into the sea. I could go to jail for this.

Sam's thoughts were racing around inside his head. Emotions jumping from fear of what might happen to self-preservation and guilt but most of all guilt. Johnny had never wanted to go out on *The Sea Witch*, and yet, it was Johnny who suffered the consequences. Sam hadn't thrown himself across his friend as he had promised. It

hadn't been Sam dragged into the sea—it was Johnny, and he had done nothing to stop it from happening.

Suddenly, there was a loud slapping sound, like a wet rag being thrown down onto a kitchen table. It brought Sam back to the present, and for the first time, he realised the boat was moving vigorously up and down and from side-to-side on the choppy waves. Sam was cold and terribly alone. He pulled his dad's coat closer around him, his hands hidden away beneath the fabric with his arms folded across his chest and hands tucked under his arms.

His eyes followed the wooden edge, stopping suddenly at the dark shape of a slimy, lacerated hand. It held onto the side of the boat, only four feet from him. Common sense said he should scream and try to escape, but he could not summon the energy to do so.

The head and shoulders of the black robed witch appeared over the side of the boat. The hood fell from her, revealing short, raven hair that moved like thin black eels or a poisonous cap of sea urchins. Her face was full of anger as she leaned further into the boat. She pushed herself up onto the side, as far as her upper torso could go, bringing her closer to Sam. Her yellow eyes bulged, and the black pupils projected an anger and coldness, like goat slits meant to intimidate, but they did so much more.

Sam's entire body trembled, and he was unable to move. An extra shock pulse ran through his shoulders right down to his fingertips, like pins and needles when she spoke.

‘Where is it?’ she screeched, as if she expected Sam to have the answer.

‘Where is what?’ he replied confused and almost crying.

‘You know what I am talking about. You know, you know! The pendant, of course,’ she screeched again impatiently.

‘What pendant?’ Sam cried back at her. ‘I don’t know what you mean.’

‘Then I’ll drag you in and play with you for a while beneath the waves before I cut out your tubes and strangle you with them. Then whilst you are still alive, and believe me, I can keep you alive for a very long time without your limbs or liver, without your breath or flesh, and I’ll feed you to my urchins and crabs while you watch. Now, where’s my pendant?’ the sea witch shouted again, dragging up her other hand from beneath the waves.

In it she held a limp Johnny by the back of his neck. His eyes were closed, and his head rolled to the side as if he were dead.

Sam gasped; his shaking fist instinctively came up into his mouth. Johnny began to moan quietly.

‘Do you want to join this one?’ she asked angrily.

Sam shook his head quickly, and his eyes stung with salty tears.

‘The one that spurned this creature carried my pendant away. He took what was mine. I can smell his soul. They are the same, he and the boy,’ she said pulling Johnny to her face, inhaling deep lung filled breaths through her nose. ‘Does he still live?’

‘Yes, yes, he does,’ Sam answered immediately, thinking about Johnny’s grandfather. He was in a dither from the cold and fear and wet, but he sensed for the first time that he might live through this and perhaps save Johnny, too.

‘And can you get my pendant from him?’ she asked as she shook Johnny sharply. He opened his eyes slightly. It was awful. Sam could see his despair, his mind weak and all hope obliterated.

‘And if I can, will you release Johnny?’

She looked at Johnny for a moment, as if deciding his worth. ‘You want him back?’ She spoke with a callous lack of concern.

Sam nodded again. ‘Yes, of course I do; he’s my best friend.’

‘*Then get my pendant,*’ she shrieked. ‘But beware: If you do not return on the next new moon, exactly fifteen days from now, then *this* will be food for my crabs, and it will be your fault.’

‘But how can you keep him alive for fifteen days? He’ll be dead anyway when I return... You’re a liar,’ Sam said, approaching her and bravely raising his voice.

Johnny’s slate, grey eyes started to close again.

‘He will be alive,’ she smiled , causing the fleshy, pink cracks in her black lips to widen.

A slimy black eel, thick as a garden hose with corrosive yellow eyes and fins wafted by its gills, appeared from under the poisonous black urchins at the back of her neck. It ran downward, curving left and right along the flesh on her shoulder and then over her black robe. It wound down her arm, around her wrist, and into Johnny’s mouth.

He struggled and choked, his mouth frothing and gurgling for a few seconds before he became limp once more.

Sam gripped the edge of his seat, shaking, repulsed, nauseous, and desperate to get away.

‘I shall feed him with the air and nutrients he needs for fifteen days exactly. If you do not return, I shall feed him to my crabs... *I want my pendant!*’

Slowly, silently, she glared into Sam’s eyes as she lowered herself back into the icy waters. Johnny disappeared beneath the waves with her. Sam moved to the edge of the boat and looked down into the sea. He could still see her wicked, cold, yellow eyes

staring up at him defiantly until finally, they faded away. Sam knew she had drifted down to the bottomless pit in the bay.

For a long time, he sat in the boat. The moon still shone down from a clear, black sky, reflecting on the horizon line, separating the sky from the shimmering sea.

However, the wind started to blow stronger, pushing *The Sea Witch* back toward the beach. The black waves continued to chop the little boat from side to side, rocking it like a cradle.

Drained of all of his energy and weak with fear, guilt, and despair, Sam fainted, leaving the little boat to drift on the tide and the wind.

In his ignorance, Sam had laughed when Johnny told him about his granddad whimpering in *The Sea Witch* fifty years earlier. Now he whimpered himself, sounds from the torment of his dreams reaching over the sea. No one could hear him. The black robed witch had gone; it was past midnight, and she would not return for fifteen days.

Chapter Three

The Man in the Black Suit

Sam awoke, startled by a loud voice and someone shaking his arm.

‘Sam, what are you doing?’

‘Em, em, I’m trying to open my eyes, but the sun...it hurts.’

It made Sam squint, and he struggled to sit up. His back and shoulders ached like never before from lying in the hard boat all night. Slowly, he rubbed his eyes and moved away the sand men with his fingers, and then finally, he managed to open them.

Jenny stepped to her left, blocking the sun. Her body cast a shadow across Sam’s face, so he could see her.

‘Sam, what are you doing in Whiley’s boat and on the beach, too?’ she asked.

Sam sat bolt upright immediately. ‘What? On the beach?’

‘Yes,’ she replied sharply. ‘Whiley’s going to kill you if he catches you here.’

‘Why? What time is it?’

‘It’s nearly twenty past nine, and Old Man Whiley usually gets down here by ten o’clock for his first trip out.’

‘Yes, I know. I know,’ said Sam, jumping up. ‘Can you help me get her back into the sea?’

Jenny’s pretty face smiled. ‘You’ll have to wait a minute whilst I get my shoes and socks off.’

Sam leapt from the boat as she sat down on the sand.

Oh, I'm in so much trouble, but I'm saying nothing of what happened last night to Jenny. I've no time anyway.

He was desperate to return *The Sea Witch* back to her launch before Old Man Whiley arrived. If Whiley caught him now, then any chance of saving Johnny would be lost before Sam had even started looking for the pendant.

Jenny helped Sam push the boat a few feet back onto the sea. Then *The Sea Witch* began to glide above the golden sand, visible beneath the clear soft ripples. Jenny continued to push until she was up to her knees, deep enough for Sam to start the motor; then she stepped back onto the dry sand, and *The Sea Witch* fired into life.

Sam barely gave Jenny a second glance before urgently setting off to sea. The little boat chopped about on the incoming waves. It splashed her bow and sprayed her seats as she moved away from the beach out onto the deeper sea; there, she settled on the calmer water.

Sam brought *The Sea Witch* around to the right into the channel and passed the flashing white lights on the end of the tall harbour wall. The beach and Jenny disappeared out of sight.

* * * *

Jenny waved to Sam tentatively as he set off. She did not mean to, but it was instinctive. Sam had not acknowledged her help with a glance, a nod, or a wave.

How rude.

She was confused and annoyed with his lack of courtesy; after all, it was she who helped him to free *The Sea Witch* from the beach.

Not a thank you, not even a wave, or turn of his head.

His eyes had been all tired and red and too sad for a boy of his age. She started to revel in the idea that there must be something sinister going on to make a boy stay out all night and then behave so oddly.

Is it me? I did nothing to upset him.

But she was intrigued—too intrigued to let it end there. She had no choice; it was her duty to find out more.

It's not often you find a boat beached up, Old Whiley's boat, too, especially with a fourteen-year-old boy fast asleep in it. Sam must have known Whiley needed it for the tourists, so he definitely had a very good reason for taking it, and something really bad unquestionably happened for it to end up on the beach.

Jenny began to muse on fantastic thoughts of what might have happened. She decided, whether Sam wanted her to or not, that she was going to help.

* * * *

What am I going to do?

A gaping emptiness made Sam's stomach ache as *The Sea Witch* peacefully chugged in the last few feet. It was as though she were almost asleep, exhausted by the events of the previous night. He cut the engine, and she glided in alongside the stone steps where she usually moored.

Sam blushed, conscious that above him all the tourists, who lined the white, metal barrier running along the top of the harbour wall, were looking down at him. Even the children, sitting with legs dangling over the side, were watching the little *Sea Witch* come in.

It wasn't meant to be like this. The mission had failed beyond anything Sam could imagine; it was a complete loss—a disaster. Sam felt dirty and disgusted with himself, and he wanted to hide away forever and cry.

His body shuddered with the shock, and his mind raced wildly, unable to stop. He was going over the same scenes, replaying them like a movie clip. *Johnny's feet disappearing beneath the blackness. His white flesh face, slowly, sleepily writhing in the clutches of her horrible hand, and that disgusting, slimy creature slithering down his throat.* Every time Sam thought about Johnny and the fact that he would probably never see him again, his skin trembled, and panic gripped him.

All these people are looking down at me as if they know what I have done. I am a criminal, a murderer, a fool.

Gripped by guilt and despair, Sam could not switch off from what he had seen. Even though in his heart he knew it was impossible, his irrational mind told him they knew. It was supposed to be a game, another mission, perhaps the greatest mission of Sam's life. 'How can it have gone so wrong?' The words mumbled from Sam's lips, even though there was no one there to listen.

By now, Johnny and Sam should have been in school with tired eyes, laughing and whispering about the excitement of the night before. They should have been able to get the boat back under the cover of darkness, and no one would have known, not even Johnny's grandfather. Later, they could have joked and taunted him a little for his crazy story.

Instead, Sam was carrying so many regrets, so many burdens.

I just have to get away from these people, staring down at me with their accusing eyes.

Hastily, he tied *The Sea Witch* back to the rusty metal ring from where he had abducted her the night before. Then he leapt from her and ran to the top of the steps where a sign read, *Old Whiley's Mackerel Fishing Trips*, along with the times so that people knew when to come and queue. Sam barely touched the steps as he ascended to harbour level, avoiding eye contact with all of them.

Some of the tourists started to jostle around. They mumbled nervously, as if they assumed it was Sam who was going to take them out fishing.

It's understandable; they have good reason to be worried. After all, who would be mad enough to go fishing with me, put their lives in the hands of a kid, especially this one?

Above their heads, a pale, turquoise sky lifted Sam's heart, and for a short time, it diverted his attention away from his thoughts. It was one of those skies that you look at and know it's going to be the sort of day when the seagulls will squawk louder and with a tone of optimism about them. They will glide across the air instead of sitting along the rooftops. Sam listened to the chattering of tourists; their voices were full of laughter and frivolity. He was sure even the two white nimbus clouds that hovered, like small cotton wool clumps, were certain to melt away, leaving only blue sky and sunshine.

The sight only distracted him for a few seconds before he was drawn back into the dark world of violence and remorse with no escape.

Beside the burden of guilt, Sam feared for his own safety, remembering Johnny's grandfather's cries from the previous night.

If he were here, still waiting for me now, surely he would kill me.

Did the old man fall into the sea? Was there a splash? Now, I'm not so sure. It's not very likely. He probably threw something in, the life belt perhaps, angry and walked

away. One thing I am sure about is Johnny's grandpa seeing two of us go out, and when he finds only I returned...

I might as well go and hand myself in to the police right away because the old man is bound to tell them Johnny was with me. However, if the old codger wasn't here? If it was him who fell into the sea? Then nobody would know what I have done, and I could get away with it.

Sam was seized by an uncontrollable urge to flee. He ran through the tourists, pushing them aside to escape the consequences of his deed, a deed so bad he knew it could not be washed from his hands.

He lifted his bike from the ground, where it lay abandoned from the night before. It was alone, but Sam barely noticed; he just had to get away. He started to run with his bike alongside, away from the tourists and *The Sea Witch* as fast as he could.

Suddenly, Sam heard Jenny's voice shouting his name down the quay.

'Sam! Sam, stop, will you?'

He turned around to see her running after him. Her hand waving in the air, long auburn hair bouncing and blowing out of all shape, and her face flushed with exertion, which made her eyes look bulgy and ready to pop.

Jenny was struggling to keep going. Her legs started to wobble just before her school jacket came loose, swaying violently from side to side, revealing her crisp, white shirt. The yellow and black pinstriped tie lashed her face like a silk whip.

He admired her determination; she could almost be a boy except for all that hair. But she was clearly distressed, panting, and about to stop, so Sam slowed, allowing her to catch up.

‘Stop, Sam, stop!’ Jenny begged, panting and falling onto his arm, whilst trying to catch her breath.

‘Let me go, Jenny,’ Sam replied sharply, yanking his coat free. ‘I don’t like anyone touching me.’

Jenny bent over, putting her hands on her knees just below her grey, pleated skirt. Exhausted, she said, ‘Give me a minute, Sam, please. I just need to get my breath back.’

‘Go away, will you? Just leave me alone,’ he shouted at her angrily.

Jenny reached for him again, touching his arm as he turned to leave.

‘Oh, that’s nice, Sam. That’s gratitude. Have you forgotten already it was me that got *The Sea Witch* back into the water for you? What would you have done if I hadn’t awoken you?’ Jenny didn’t wait for an answer. ‘Whiley would have had you by now, and then you would have been in for it.’

She was right; Sam knew he had to stop for her.

He pivoted around as Jenny finally straightened up. ‘Are you alright?’

‘I will be; my chest wrecks, but it’s easing from the burning sensation a bit now.’

Sam smiled at her. ‘Yeah, I know what you mean.’ Then tears started welling up in Sam’s eyes again. Thoughts of Johnny filled his head. ‘I’m in big trouble,’ he mumbled lowering his head.

‘What did you say?’ she asked, as if unsure she had heard him correctly. ‘What do you mean, you’re in big trouble?’

Sam didn’t answer. He couldn’t.

Jenny was quite petite in comparison to Sam. The top of her head only rose to just above his nose. Behind her, Sam could see some of the tourists, about fifty metres away, parading down the harbour steps to board Whiley’s boat.

Jenny's voice brought Sam away from his thoughts. Suddenly, he became aware of the hustle and bustle of even more tourists, making their way to the beach by the drove.

'Sam, you don't look well. Your eyes are all red and puffy, and your skin looks white and clammy. Do you feel ill?'

Sam sensed genuine concern, but he didn't understand why.

He supposed maybe it was because they were both in the same class at school, although that was a weak excuse for her to concern herself with his health. Until today, they hadn't really spoken at all except for things like can you pass me the rubber, or have you got a ruler?

Sam didn't bother much with girls and all that stuff, but in a way, he welcomed her interest. Heaven knows, he needed someone right now.

'Come on, let's keep walking,' Sam told her, moving off.

Then Jenny noticed what Sam had been looking at.

'I see Whiley's arrived.'

'Yes, I've just been watching him.'

'I know, and I see you've got away with it, too. You should be happy. He doesn't suspect anything. Where there's no harm, there's no foul,' she said, brushing her fingers along his arm and smiling.

Sam knew Jenny was expecting him to be more pleased about it than he was, but he could not bring himself to smile.

'Yeah, well, I've not got away with it for long.'

'What do you mean, not for long?'

Sam wanted to break down and confess. Expunge all the poison he had experienced during the night and project it onto her like vomit. But he couldn't. He hadn't worked it

out in his mind, and it was just a mixed-up, mushy mess. So, he straightened his face and bit his bottom lip to stop the words spilling from his mouth.

Gently, Sam touched her arm, taking her attention away from Whiley's steps.

'Come on, let's get out of here.'

Sam knew he sounded edgy, and he began to move quickly away.

Jenny struggled to keep pace.

'Look, Jenny, you'd better get to school, or you're going to be in serious trouble. You're already over an hour late, and it's the first week of term.'

'Yes, I am, and so are you. Now what do you mean, not for long?' she persisted.

'Just leave it, Jenny. Leave it.' Desperation and anger mingled in Sam's voice. He noticed a few of the tourists staring at him as they walk passed.

I'd better shut up, or I'll end up in a tourist fight.

Jenny went quiet. She looked shocked.

Can't decide whether I'm pleading or telling, can she? Either way, I can see she didn't like it.

I'm not angry with her; in truth, I'm ashamed I couldn't save Johnny. Ashamed Johnny is at the bottom of the sea instead of me. Scared to death of getting caught. And I can't share my feelings or explain what has happened to her. Or anyone.

Sam climbed onto his bike.

'Go to school. Just go to school,' Sam said at a loss with what to do with her.

'I'm not,' she insisted. 'You need me, and I'm going to help you.'

'It's no good. You can't help me; it's too late,' he said, holding back the tears. 'But please, don't tell anyone you've seen me here today. It will just make things worse.'

A tall slender man, wearing a dark suit, stood by the window of Ben's Tackle and Bait shop about twenty feet away. He had been watching Sam and Jenny argue and appeared to be waiting for someone, but suddenly, he started moving quickly toward them.

His dark hair was short and almost black, and his sunglasses matched his suit, tie, and shiny, black shoes. His body moved from side to side, trying to avoid collisions by gently herding tourists out of his way. There was an urgency about him, which made him appear to be almost dancing the quickstep across the harbour walkway.

Jenny hadn't noticed; she was still determined to not let Sam escape without him revealing answers. She grabbed his arm to stop him from riding off.

'Just tell me,' she shouted impatiently.

'Tell you what?'

'Tell me what's been going on?'

'Not now,' he said, shrugging off her hand aggressively. 'You wouldn't believe me anyway. Just leave me alone, okay? Leave me alone.' He scowled and pushed the bike's peddle to the floor, anxious to ride away before the stranger got to him.

Jenny was caught by surprise. She lost her balance as Sam sped off. At the same time, the man in the black suit almost fell on top of her. He stumbled as she swivelled inadvertently into his path. For a split second, she was off balance and dazed by the double shock, which knocked her to the ground, distracting both of them and allowing Sam to escape.

'Come back, Sam! Come back!' Jenny shouted after him, but he kept going and was soon far away from the harbour and on the road.

* * * *

Some of the tourists stopped to stare down at Jenny and the man in the black suit. They seemed confused and slightly alarmed. She climbed back onto her feet, helped by the man. He lipped an apology before he quickly straightened his tie, brushed off his trousers, and slipped back into the crowd.

‘You alright, girly?’ asked a big, round, balding man in a sky blue T-shirt and white shorts.

Jenny nodded and smiled. ‘Yes, I’m fine.’

The round man grinned back before he continued on to the beach.

But something niggled at Jenny; she could not understand why the man in the black suit came toward her like that with such determination. He pressed past her as if he intended to catch Sam before he moved off. She thought maybe she was just in the way. Once he had missed his target and fell onto her, where did he go? He picked himself up and disappeared without any explanation, without even telling her what he wanted?

Is this something to do with Sam taking Old Whiley’s boat? Maybe he is one of Whiley’s visiting relations; he certainly doesn’t live around here. Jenny knew that for sure. She knew everyone who lived around town.

Jenny rubbed the dust from her knees then searched beyond the tourists and the car park toward the main road, looking for Sam.

Sam had pedalled across the bridge, which straddled the harbour estuary, and was well away from town by the time Jenny composed herself. He turned up the hill and disappeared from view in the direction of his house.

Chapter Four

Jenny Chatter

Saturday morning found Sam's little sister, Ellie, pirouetting around the foot of his bed. She flung out her arms and kicked up her legs while tiptoeing back and forth slowly around the room.

'Can you watch?' she asked, after shaking Sam from a surprisingly comfortable sleep.

He pretended not to notice, hoping she might glide back out the bedroom door.

But she shook him again with a determined expression on her little face.

'Sam, can you watch me please,' she asked again.

She must be practising. Sam smiled into Ellie's bright eyes.

She was wearing her white tutu, a leotard, and long white stockings. She was proud of something she had learned and wanted to show off for him. Sam smiled again, encouraging her.

'Go on, Ellie. Show me,' Sam agreed, surprising himself.

A few days earlier, he would have growled, pulled the covers over his head, and shouted at her to get out. He rolled his head on the pillow, following her as she moved around the room like a clumsy fairy, swaying this way and that.

'What do you think?' she asked.

'Oh, yes, that's really good. I can tell you've been practising.'

'I have. All morning,' she explained, still moving around the room.

'What do you mean all morning?'

Light shone through the curtain, filling the room with a dim luminosity. It was definitely after sunrise, but he was unsure what Ellie meant by the term all morning.

Mum came into the room, wearing her dowdy orange dress with a white apron tied around her waist. She always wore the apron on house-dusting day. Her face looked fresh and alive, and her brown eyes gleamed as if all was right in her world. But Mum was like that most of the time anyway, even when it wasn't.

'Morning, Sam.' Mum smiled. Their eyes met before she sauntered over to the curtains, spreading them back in a whooshing motion, allowing the bright sunlight in.

'Mum...what you think of my ballet?' Ellie asked, her arms reaching upward and then down in an arc. 'Do you think I'm good enough to go to ballet lessons?'

Mum walked over to the bed and looked down at Sam. She touched his forehead and cheek gently with the back of her hand. 'Em... Oh yes dear, I'm sure we can sort something out,' she replied.

Sam had fallen ill after returning from sea on that terrible night. Nearly a week was gone, and he had not even started looking for the witch's pendant. He wanted to forget Johnny. The thought of seeing his friend's grandpa, and the sea witch, petrified him. But in order to save Johnny, he needed to retrieve the pendant from him and then risk his life again in the witch's presence. He quailed at the thought of what he knew he must do and decided to stay in his room. Mum had other ideas.

'You're looking a little better. Those dark rings around your eyes have gone, and your temperature has dropped. I think you can get up now.'

Sam pulled the covers up over his blue and white pinstriped pyjamas as high as his chin. 'I dunno, Mum. I think I might stay here a little bit longer, thanks. I'm still not feeling so good.'

‘No, you won’t do, lying there. Anyway, there’s someone downstairs who wants to see you, so you’d better get up.’

Sweat sprang up on Sam’s body. A list of people filtered through his mind. The man in the black suit, the police again, or even worse, Johnny’s grandfather.

His voice quivering slightly, he asked, ‘Who is it?’ He had stayed in bed for most of the week to avoid seeing anyone, but now they were coming to him.

‘It’s a young lady. I didn’t know you had a girlfriend,’ Mum teased. ‘Come on, Ellie, let’s leave him to get dressed.’

Mum closed the door behind her, leaving Sam alone in the quiet.

Just couldn’t leave it alone could she, coming here to my house?

It must have been Jenny, but then out of all the people that might have come, she was the one person he could probably handle the easiest.

Jenny was sitting at the pine dining table, with a glass of lemonade, when Sam came down the stairs.

‘Morning, Sam.’ Jenny smiled and put the half-full cup on the table.

He could feel his Mum watching him from the kitchen door.

‘What do you want?’ he asked sharply.

‘Be nice.’ Mum scowled at him.

‘Just thought I’d come and see how you’re doing ‘cos I’ve not seen you in school this week.’

‘Well, I’ve not been feeling so good.’

‘No, I’m not surprised really,’ Jenny replied.

Sam glared at her before taking a fleeting glance at his mother.

Mum's eyebrows were raised, and Sam knew she was thinking something had gone on that she needed to know about, but she didn't comment.

'Is there any word about Johnny Pothelswaite, yet?' Mum asked Jenny, a concerned frown creasing her brow.

'No, not yet.' Jenny looked at Sam. 'The police have been round though, doing a door to door search and asking questions in town.'

'I know, dear, they've been up here, too. I do hope he's alright.'

'Yes, I'm sure he will be.' Then Jenny turned to Sam and quickly changed the subject. 'I've come on my bike. Do you fancy going for a ride?'

Mum put a plate of toast on the table and a glass of milk in front of Sam.

'Just have something to eat first,' she insisted. 'You need to build up your strength; it's no good not eating.'

Jenny looked at Sam again, worry crossing her face, but she said nothing.

Jenny must have realised she'd said too much already. Sam picked up a piece of toast and started chewing. I know what Jenny's thinking with Mum carrying on like she is. She's just making Jenny more suspicious, making her think something is going on. Up to now, all Jenny knows is I took the stupid boat out... Sam sighed. And Jenny's not helping with Mum, either. Mum's eyes narrowed when Jenny said about her not being surprised I was ill. Isn't it obvious I'm not going to tell Mum I was out in The Sea Witch? She would have grounded me forever. Better get Jenny out of here before she puts her foot in it again.

He finished off the slice of toast and took a large gulp of milk from the glass.

'Right, we're off, Mum. Going for a ride. See you later.'

Sam put the glass back on the table and headed for the door.

Jenny followed.

‘See you later, Mrs. Camponara. Oh and thanks for the lemonade,’ she said, smiling and pulling the door to.

‘Yes, yes, see you later, Jenny. It was nice meeting you,’ replied Mum.

Sam was relieved to get outside. He needed to separate them as soon as possible before a thousand questions rained down on him. But Jenny on her own... That wouldn’t be too bad. In fact, he thought she might even be able to help.

His head was clearer now, and he needed someone to confide in, and it certainly wasn’t his Mum. But how much to tell Jenny would depend on how much he could trust her. Sam didn’t want her spreading gossip around school. If the kids found out, he would never live it down, and the police might take him away.

Suddenly, a sound came over the trees. *Ch k, ch k, ch k.*

‘What the heck?’ Sam yelled ducking his head. He looked up at the sky and followed the sound.

‘It’s the air-sea rescue. They’ve been out every day, following the coastline and hovering over the bay, looking for Johnny,’ Jenny told Sam. ‘I think they’ll give up soon. People around town reckon if Johnny was out there, he’d have been found by now. What do you reckon has happened to him?’

‘Come on. Let’s go,’ Sam said, climbing onto his bike and ignoring her question.

They set off down the dry dirt track by the edge of the Farndale’s field. Sam noticed Bessy, the neighbour’s horse, looking at him askance. She stared with her big, brown eyes, and he could not help but smile as she turned and ran off to the other side of the field.

The sun shone down from an azure, blue sky, and it helped Sam see the world as a brighter place. For a short time, his spirits rose.

‘Phew...’ Sam said, wiping his brow. ‘It’s hot this morning, isn’t it?’

‘It is, but it’s not morning. It’s nearly three o’clock in the afternoon,’ Jenny informed him.

‘I can’t believe I’ve slept that much. I must have been worn out.’

His mind drifted back to Johnny and the sea witch. He was terrified the police were coming to drag him away kicking and screaming.

After riding a short distance, Sam stopped and climbed from his bike. He laid it on the hard dirt track and sat down on the bumpy grass sidings, exhausted.

‘Come, sit next me,’ he invited her, wiping his brow again before patting the ground.

* * * *

Jenny laid down her bike.

At last, Sam’s going to tell me what happened to him and The Sea Witch. Why else would he have come? I half expected him to turn me away, without even speaking. The way he left me on the harbour, I knew I was taking a chance turning up at the house. The last time we spoke, he was all wound up and looking really ill. Shouting and behaving totally irrationally. Now he’s calm, quiet, and thoughtful, and possibly ready to speak. Oh, I hope he is. I’d better wait, though. When we met, I was terribly pushy, expecting Sam to reveal what could be his deepest, darkest secret, just like that. Maybe that is why he clammed up like he did. I don’t want that to happen again. Nobody likes pushy people, so it might be better, this time, if I wait just a little bit longer.

* * * *

‘Look at that,’ Sam said, pointing at the white mare in the distance. ‘It’s Bessy, she ran off as soon as I rode near her. She never used to do that.’

‘Is that all you wanted to talk about, a horse?’

Jenny sounded disappointed, and Sam knew why. He also knew what she wanted to talk about.

After a short pause, she spoke and changed the subject, ‘Sorry about what happened back there at your house.’

‘What?’

‘Putting my foot in it with your mum. I realised I had as soon as I opened my mouth.’

‘Oh, that doesn’t matter. I’ll think of something to tell her if she asks.’

All manner of terrible things were going through Sam’s mind. Death, murder, and sea witches. Everything else seemed insignificant. Certainly, nothing at the house mattered now.

He pulled a tall blade of grass and stuck it in his mouth, chewing the end of it and wondering how he was going to tell Jenny about Johnny? There was an ominous silence between them.

Suddenly, he said, ‘Jenny, can you keep a secret?’

Jenny was dying to find out what happened, Sam knew that for sure, but he needed to hear the tone of her voice. He was hoping he would know whether or not he could trust her. If she let him down, the whole school would be ridiculing him, laughing. But more importantly, the police would be coming to lock him up, and then how would he save Johnny?

‘Yes, of course, I can,’ she replied, gently touching Sam’s forearm

Looking deep into Jenny's eyes, he thought he might see the answers there. Maybe if her eyes didn't give her away, there would be something else. She would squint or lines would appear or she would turn away. Something would be there telling him he could trust her. Otherwise, Sam would say nothing of Johnny—or the sea witch.

Sam needed her; he knew that much for sure. He needed to confide in Jenny for the sake of his sanity, to share his burden, and lighten his load of guilt. Jenny was unwittingly about to share his grief.

So, Sam decided to tell his story. Nervous and hesitant, not because he was frightened of what she might say, but because she might not believe, leaving him to continue carrying his terrible sorrow alone.

'The other day,' Sam started, cautious at first, 'when you found me on the beach in Old Whiley's boat...'

Jenny's eyes lit up, and she smiled. 'Yes, what were you doing on the beach, fast asleep?

'You haven't told anyone? About me being in the boat, I mean.'

'No, why would I? You've got away with that one. Old Whiley didn't have a clue you had taken her.'

Sam lowered his head, filled with concern, and then stared into Jenny's eyes. 'I'm not worried about the boat. It's Johnny...'

'I know, the police have been going around questioning everybody about his disappearance.'

'I was really ill in bed, and they came up to my room asking if I'd seen Johnny. Of course I said no.'

'That seems a bit harsh when you're not well.'

‘I guess that’s because they know I’m his best friend.’

‘Some of the kids are saying no one has seen him since September fifth, not even his family, and he’s definitely not been in school this week.’

‘Not likely to either.’

Jenny’s lip started to quiver. ‘Why? What’s happened to him?’

Sam hesitated and stared down at the ground. When he lifted his head, tears welled in his eyes.

A look of shock washed over Jenny’s face.

‘What are you saying?’ Jenny cried, raising her hands to her mouth. ‘Why won’t they see him?’

It was obvious she knew what Sam was saying, but her reaction was less than calm. To some degree, Sam had come to terms with what happened, although he couldn’t free it from his mind.

But Jenny had just put two and two together—*The Sea Witch* on the beach, only Sam in it, his insistence that Jenny didn’t mention the boat to anyone, and then he told her she was not likely to see Johnny again—it was all too much. Sam had just indicated to her that Johnny was dead, and she was backing away from him, shaking feverishly. It was like she had developed an instant repulsion to him and wanted to escape. Her eyes gave her away, but Sam just needed more time and a chance to explain.

I should have been more tactful. After all, I was good with Ellie, just an hour or so earlier. I tolerated her being in my room when all I wanted to do was sleep, and I didn’t shout. I even gave some praise. I thought Jenny was so keen to know everything; nothing would stand in her way. Now she looks ready to bolt, and I haven’t even started to explain myself.

‘What did you expect me to say?’ Sam breathed, snapping a blade of grass in two.

‘I don’t know. I thought you were going to tell me why Old Whiley’s boat was on the beach. How the sea was so rough you fell and banged your head, knocking you out or something like that, but I had no idea Johnny was with you.’

‘But Johnny’s always with me.’

‘And I’m supposed to know that because?’ There was an awkward silence before Jenny sighed. ‘Look, Sam, I’ve seen you and Johnny at school together; that’s all. I have no reason to think you are together all the time outside of school. You told the police you haven’t seen Johnny, but he went out in the boat with you, didn’t he? Why did you lie to them, Sam?’ She wept, shaking her head.

Sam gently squeezed her arm to reassure her, but she pulled away immediately.

‘Wait, Jenny, just calm down; nothing is going to happen to you. Just let me explain.’

‘Explain what...that you’ve killed Johnny?’ she shouted. ‘How can you explain that?’

‘I’ve not killed Johnny! I’ve not.’

Their eyes met, both terrified for different reasons, but Sam could see a glimmer of hope there.

‘So, Johnny is alive?’

‘Not exactly, but he’s not dead.’

‘Look, Sam, Johnny is either dead, or he’s not.’

Then Jenny paused as if she was collecting her thoughts.

‘So, why didn’t you go to the police straight away?’

Sam remained surprisingly calm, but he knew if he is going to get Jenny on his side, then he would have to be.

‘Please, just let me start from the beginning, and then you can make your mind up. Okay?’

Jenny nodded, her face flushed, tearful, and untrusting.

He began by telling her about Tommy, Johnny’s grandfather, and the sea witch.

‘I’ve heard this story, years ago, but everybody knows it was just an excuse. Johnny’s grandfather killed Tommy Elcinarb and tried to cover it up with his boyish tale.’

‘No... No... That’s just it. It was not a boyish tale—it’s true. Johnny’s grandfather was telling the truth, but nobody believed him.’

Then Sam told her what had happened that night with Johnny.

‘He was taken the same way, Jenny, and now it’s happened to us.’

Sam couldn’t stand it anymore. His head dropped into his hands, and he wiped the tears from his face.

It was all sounding a bit too unbelievable; he could see it in her expression. She withdrew, her eyes no longer making contact, her body angling away from him.

‘Jenny, I know it all sounds far-fetched. It does for me, too. If I had not seen it with my own eyes, I never would have believed it.’

Sam hesitated. What he was about to say next would sound even more bizarre, and he was beginning to lose hope again.

‘Johnny isn’t dead. Not yet at least. But he will be if I can’t find the pendant she lost and return it to her on the start of the new moon, the twentieth of September—exactly fifteen days from when Johnny was taken.’

Jenny lifted her tearful face, eyes piercing Sam's.

'So, how are we going to find this pendant?'

Her question raised Sam's spirit immediately. She believed some of what he had said. Certainly, the pendant could validate it and would help to prove he didn't do anything to Johnny. And if Johnny's grandfather supported his statement, then he could go to the police and tell them what happened.

'The witch said the pendant was snatched from her by Johnny's grandfather fifty years ago. So, we need to ask him about it.'

'But the police say he's gone missing, also. They reckon he's got something to do with Johnny's disappearance because he hasn't been seen since the fifth of September either. And with his record...'

'Well, we know he has nothing to do with it because Johnny was with me.'

'We have to tell the police, Sam,' Jenny pleaded.

'No, we can't. I'll be locked up, and we'll never see Johnny again. We need to ride up to Johnny's grandfather's house and hope he's turned up there.'

Sam was still afraid of seeing him, but with Jenny by his side, it didn't seem quite so bad.

'It's no wonder we never saw Mr. Pothelswaite go out on a boat, is it?' Jenny commented. 'Not really a land-lover like we thought, is he? He's just scared of what's under the sea.'

Surprised by her awareness, Sam admitted, 'I've never noticed that.'

'Arr, you see? That's because you've not got my experience.'

Sam shook his head. 'What are you talking about?'

'My experience as the town's busybody, of course,' she said proudly.

Sam smiled at her.

‘I think a town busybody is just what I need right now.’

Chapter Five

Grandpa Pothelswaite

Sam and Jenny decided to ride into town to see if Johnny's grandfather was home. It was unlikely because if he had returned there, the police would have surely arrested him.

The idea of coming face to face with the old man made Sam feel somewhere between anxious and terrified.

'It's the only way for you to clear your name and possibly save Johnny,' Jenny said, as the bikes trundled down the dusty track.

They stopped on the edge of the narrow, tarmac road. Overhead, a canopy of green leaves followed the road, shielding it from the warm afternoon sun. The road descended steeply and bent around to the left, contouring an enormous, white and grey rock, which jutted out and curved spherically. Above the rock, roots from the trees protruded from dirt like long, brown, twisted fingers mingled with green, reed-like grass.

'Where are we going?' Sam shouted, pulling harshly on his brakes.

'Obviously, we're going into town,' Jenny called back over her shoulder in her most sarcastic tone.

The bikes had been bouncing over the bumpy dirt track, but now they were on a smooth surface, skimming over the black tarmac. It required more of Sam's energy to slow down than anything else.

‘I know that, but where in town?’ Sam barked, annoyed.

He had never been to Grandpa Pothelswaite’s but had met him on several occasions at Johnny’s house. Usually, he would sit in the old chair at the table by the window. Sam pictured him spooning chicken broth, with a dithering hand, from a bowl. Some of it dripped from the short, grey stubble protruding from his chin.

‘He lives around the corner from Johnny on Dover road, the white house with the blue windows.’

How does she know that? Oh, yes—town busybody.

The bikes sped around the bend, skimming by the spherical rock when the town came into view. It was beautiful. Sam had always thought so, no matter how many times he saw it. Whenever he came around the white rock, he knew he would be looking down on the town.

There’s nowhere better or more beautiful in the whole world.

A few seconds later, the bikes descended to harbour level and to a junction, where they had to stop or risk being run over by the tourists’ cars. Sam pulled up alongside Jenny’s bike.

‘You mean, we’ve got to pass Johnny’s house?’ he asked, afraid.

‘I know, but we have no choice. We’ve got to find out what Johnny’s grandfather knows.’

‘And what if we bump into his mum? I don’t think I can face her yet, not until I have some answers or at least some hope. You know she won’t believe me without some support from Johnny’s granddad, and even so, she’ll still blame me, call the police, and call him a doddering, old fool.’

‘Well, we’ll ride passed very quickly and hope she isn’t looking out of the window. Okay?’

She set off again, negotiating a spot between the hoards of cars lining up to enter the town. Sam followed her out onto the now-level tarmac, almost wheel to wheel with the cars. Their red taillights flicked on and off only a few inches away from him.

He followed her across the bridge, bearing right away from the main flow of traffic, and into the narrow streets, too small for the cars.

‘Come on. Keep pedalling,’ Jenny said, encouraging him to pass Johnny’s house.

Sam wanted to turn around and ride away in the opposite direction. *A mother has lost her son. How can I look at her? Please, God, don’t let her see me.*

He passed a row of pink houses with white frames and window boxes full of blue and red flowers. Sam lowered his eyes and tilted his head away as he passed the house, praying he hadn’t been seen. He pedalled faster, and relief flooded through him as he turned out of sight and onto Dover road, where Johnny’s grandfather lived.

Jenny braked to a halt.

‘Here we are,’ she said brightly, a little out of breath and her cheeks flushed.

She climbed off her bike, stood it carefully against the wall, and started up the four white steps to the door.

‘Come on, Sam. Let’s get it over with.’

She sounded like his mother, encouraging him into the dentist for a tooth extraction.

‘It’ll be better when it’s over,’ she promised.

But Sam wasn't so sure. He hesitated, cautious, and felt physically sick. He looked at the white stone steps that would bring him face to face with the man who had pleaded with him from the harbour wall only a few days earlier.

The house stood in the middle of a row of terrace cottages. All of them white, with little panel glass windows and narrow low doors. Many of them were in need of paint, and Grandpa Pothelswaite's was no exception.

Jenny ran her finger along a carving in the door where the paint had cracked and split. The unusual design drew his attention. It was unlike anything Sam had seen before.

'Ouch,' she yelped, putting her finger into her mouth. 'That bloody hurt!'

She looked at Sam, annoyed.

He dismounted and began climbing the steps.

'What are you doing?' Jenny glared at him. 'Hurry up. We haven't got all day.'

Sam felt small, cold, and hemmed in by the claustrophobia of the narrow street. He gazed up at a jagged line of blue sky between the two rows of buildings. The houses were only a few feet apart, and dark, cold, dismal walls loomed everywhere.

'I'm glad I don't live down here,' he said.

'Why?'

'Because it's so dark. The light can't get in.'

Jenny frowned at him.

'What? Don't you think it's dark down here, then?' Sam asked, puzzled by her expression.

'No,' she snarled.

‘It is. It’s horrible, like being trapped with everything right on top of you. It’s like these people all live nose to nose. Look out the window and you’re in somebody else’s house. I bet you can watch two or three televisions at the same time from here.’

‘Yeah...well you might have to...get used to it...see,’ Jenny retaliated, even more annoyed.

‘What do yer mean?’

‘If them police lock you up, then you’ll have to live with everything on top of you as well,’ she said, pointing a finger. ‘Mind you, it might do you some good.’

‘How could it?’ Sam said, still confused and becoming more frustrated with every word.

‘Well, you might learn a little bit about people. Perhaps, you’ll know when they are being serious and pay a bit more attention to them, instead of drifting along in your own spaced out...’

‘Hold on a minute,’ Sam objected, perplexed. ‘What’s the matter with you?’

‘Oh, never mind,’ Jenny replied, barging into Sam’s shoulder and stomping down the steps. She lifted her bike from against the wall, visibly upset, and started to ride away.

‘What’s the matter?’ Sam was hot and flushed. ‘Where are you going?’

‘I’m not staying around here with you; that’s for sure,’ she shouted back.

Sam couldn’t understand why she was so annoyed with him.

‘Come back, Jenny... Okay, I’m sorry,’ he yelled, holding his arms out.

She was about to disappear around the corner when Sam bellowed to her, ‘Well, I’m going home then. I’m not going to bother, and it will be all your fault... Your fault, see, not mine. Your fault we haven’t saved Johnny.’

Sam was getting more and more worked up. He was confused and annoyed because she had deserted him for no reason he could think of. Then, just to add fuel to his anger, she lifted her finger and showed him the bird.

Sam was about to scream down the narrow street at her when the door suddenly opened, and a large hand dragged him backward by the scruff of his neck.

Everything was a flash of confusion as his feet left the floor. Off balance and overcome by dizziness and panic, he struggled to figure out what was happening. Then all was silent. Hot, stale breath washed over his face, and dizziness crashed over him as his eyes focused on the protruding, silver-grey hairs, wrinkled eye lids, and slate, grey face filled with anger. A gnarled fist gripped and twisted his T-shirt under his chin. It almost lifted his feet from the floor again. The old man pushed Sam's back firmly against the inside of the old wooden door which slammed shut, incarcerating him within the house.

The room was dark due to the lack of light able to penetrate the tiny windows. The low ceiling barely rose above the tall man's head. The dark wooden beams and grey, cracked hanging plaster were knitted amongst the blue glint of spiders' webs.

Frantic to look anywhere except into those accusing eyes, Sam's gaze skittered over the bookcase behind the man. He settled on a carved wooden ornament, and his stomach threatened to expel its contents. The evil visage of the sea witch glared back at him.

'You've got some nerve, boy,' Johnny's grandfather threatened, tightening his grip. A tear welled in his mad, glaring eyes, and his bottom lip quivered with anger.

Sam had never seen Johnny's grandfather like this before. It was as though he was talking through pain, gripped in his locked teeth.

Sam said nothing, and his arms remained at his sides, defenceless. This was what Sam had expected, and he could take it; he deserved it.

‘What are you doing here? Looking for forgiveness? Want me to vindicate what you’ve done?’

Sam lowered his eyes, ashamed.

‘No, sir, I know you can’t any more than you can remove the guilt I’m feeling, even if you wanted to. I wanted to say I’m sorry to you anyway. I was stupid for not listening to what you told Johnny. I know that now, but I thought it was just another sailor’s tale.’

‘You didn’t believe it, did you? You’re just like everyone else. You think I’m a murderer.’

‘No, sir. No, I don’t. I don’t,’ cried Sam, fearing for his life.

‘You must have,’ he shouted, furious. His eyes burned like fire again.

‘But, Mr. Pothelswaite, I believe you now, and at the harbour, I didn’t know it was you. I thought it was Old Whiley. I thought it would be a good laugh. You know exciting, like an adventure.’

Johnny’s grandfather’s eyes were still filled with madness and anger, and he slammed Sam hard against the door again. ‘Can you tell me why I shouldn’t just kill you right now?’

‘No, I can’t,’ Sam replied, whimpering. ‘But it won’t bring Johnny back, will it?’

‘Arr, shush, boy,’ Johnny’s grandfather said, releasing Sam abruptly and turning away. ‘An adventure, you say.’ He pondered, whispering the words, and Sam could see he was remembering what that was like.

‘And was it an adventure? Did you enjoy your meeting with the sea witch?’

His voice started rising once again.

‘No, sir, no. I wished we’d never gone out there, even before she appeared.’

Johnny’s grandfather turned slowly, meeting Sam’s eyes.

‘I know, son. I felt the same way,’ he empathised in a softer tone. ‘It’s like a re-occurring nightmare or as if we’re all cursed, unable to free ourselves from it. I’ve asked myself over these past few days if I would have been better not saying anything to John in the first place. Or perhaps, I should have told him not to mention it to you. Would that have made a difference? But if it was fate that it was going to happen, then he would have gone anyway. He would have had no choice—destiny already in motion and set against him from the start.’

‘We had no plans to go out,’ Sam said.

‘Then it is my fault. You children today are all so disobedient. I should have said nothing,’ he replied, turning and slumping into a wooden chair by the table.

‘No... We might have decided to do it anyway. Just because I hadn’t thought about it until Johnny told me the tale, it doesn’t mean we wouldn’t have gone. We might have gotten the idea later, without you saying anything at all.’ Sam didn’t want to pass even more guilt over to the old man.

‘But Johnny...he was always such a good boy. I truly believed he would do as I asked. Where were you when he...when he told you about the sea witch?’

‘I was sitting on our porch looking out to sea when I heard Johnny riding up to the house, his bell ringing. I knew it was him, even before he came around the house, but I couldn’t understand why he was riding so fast and being so noisy. He didn’t normally.’ Sam smiled thinking about his best friend. ‘Johnny was always so laid back. He tended to stroll around quietly, barely noticeable, really, but on that day, there was something different about him.’

‘So, the witch’s lures were already set.’

Mr. Pothelswaite’s voice, although sad, returned to the familiar one Sam knew, and he felt the fear drip away. He sat down opposite the old man at the dark oak table by the window, his eyes fixed on the wooden carving of the sea witch behind his shoulder.

It was her top-half appearing from the bookshelf, her back curved, and she was reaching into the boat, all carved from one piece of wood, just as Sam remembered her. The detail was meticulous; her fallen back hood exhibited every barnacle and wart, every bump and line and laceration on her bony hands. But in the carving, there was nobody in the boat, just two fishing rods and a small bag. It sent a shiver down his spine.

‘Do you mean it was going to happen no matter what we did?’

‘I don’t know. I’m no expert. Maybe fate does play a part, or maybe we are cursed. You, too, now that you have seen her. Your family will be in danger, as well. Something you will have to live with all your life. The fear your father or sister or children one day will be taken from you and drowned, to be eaten by crabs and sea creatures.’ His head fell into his hands, and he sobbed for a moment.

Sam knew he was thinking about Johnny lying at the bottom of the sea.

Mr P. stood and picked up the carving from the bookshelf, throttling it in one hand then he calmed, slumping back into the chair, before resting the witch on the table in front of Sam.

‘There was something strange about the other night whilst we sat on the porch,’ Sam said. ‘I know it might sound silly, but the sea sounded louder than usual.’

‘Louder than usual?’

‘It might not have done, but I was very aware of its sounds, rushing up onto the beach, the waves turning and making a sort of shushing sound.’

‘Well...I suppose it is possible the witch was already talking to you through the sea, putting ideas there into your minds, casting her spell, and encouraging you to take out *The Sea Witch*, Maybe in some sort of subliminal way.’

Sam was starting to feel better, although he was no nearer to getting free from what had happened. He found some solace in the idea he was manipulated by the witch. Johnny had been, too, probably. It was possible that she was pulling the strings from the start, perhaps planning every detail and even stopping Johnny’s grandfather from being at the harbour much earlier.

‘So, it’s not my fault? Not all of it, not really?’

‘Hold on, son; it’s not that easy,’ Johnny’s grandfather said, reminding Sam of the seriousness of the situation. ‘John is dead... Lord forgive me for saying it, and somebody’s going to get the blame eventually. Somebody’s head always has to roll when a person dies. Haven’t the police been around to see you yet?’

Sam nodded.

‘They’ll be back, you know, and they’re not going to believe any of this. They deal only in facts. They will find out the two of you went out in the boat, and only one of you came back.’

Sam felt like he had been punched in the stomach.

‘I know,’ Sam cried into his hands. ‘I’ve thought about this, thought of nothing else, in fact. That’s why I came to see you in the first place.’

‘Well, what do you expect me to do about it? They didn’t believe me fifty years ago, so they’re not going to believe me now.’ Johnny’s grandfather scowled, and then

his face filled with intense pain, like hot metal against tortured flesh. Closing one hand around his fist, he pressed upon his heart. His eyes fell to the floor, and his body slumped on the spot as if he was about to faint. Then dithering, he turned to Sam again and said in a very quiet mournful tone, 'John is dead. You're here, and there's nothing we can do about it.'

After wiping his eyes, he looked at Sam, his face full of empathy and compassion.

'It could go really bad for you; boys of ten and over are responsible for their own actions according to the law in this country. It could be they'll lock you up, like they did me, and you will never live with your family again. That's if it goes bad. All it takes is for one person to stand up in court and say they saw you leaving the harbour with Johnny on board. That's what happened to me in any case.'

'But Johnny's not dead!' Sam announced, disclosing what the witch had told him.

Johnny's grandfather didn't flinch.

'Sam, you know he is, and I know he is. God rest his soul.'

'No, he's not,' Sam argued, raising his voice defiantly. 'She said she wouldn't kill him, not yet anyway. She said she'll keep him alive until the next new moon because you have something she wants.'

Johnny's grandfather looked at Sam, confused. His gaze met Sam's across the table, and fear swept over his features. 'Is it me she wants, then? After all, I escaped her once; perhaps she has come back for me now.'

'She said you have a pendant belonging to her, and she is willing to trade Johnny's life for it.'

Mr. Pothelswaite cried, 'What pendant?' Pressing his fists against the table and standing, he paced up and down the room, a finger on his lips and his expression intent.

Sam watched in anticipation.

‘A pendant, a pendant,’ he said to himself, his mind racing back fifty years. ‘What does the pendant look like?’ he asked, perhaps hoping it would jar his senile mind.

‘I don’t know. I was hoping you could tell me.’

‘What? You didn’t ask her?’

‘It happened so fast. I was confused and frightened,’ Sam admitted.

‘Yes, I know. I know,’ he agreed still pacing. ‘There was a struggle, shouts, screams, and kicking feet, but I didn’t see anything. I was so scared that I fell back and closed my eyes, and when I opened them, Tommy was gone. There was no pendant, not that I saw. But if she says she lost it that night, perhaps Tommy pulled it from her and dropped it into the boat before he went down. Perhaps it rolled under a seat or something, who knows?’

‘So, you don’t know anything about the pendant? You don’t know where it is?’

‘No, I’m afraid I don’t. I can only guess,’ he replied, wincing slightly.

‘Then my coming here has been a waste of time.’ Sam rose from the chair, despondent.

‘No, not a complete waste,’ he said, putting his hand on Sam’s shoulder. ‘I shall see what I can find out about it.’ Then waving his hand to indicate the array of books, he said, ‘As you can see, it has been my life’s work to study the unknown, ever since Tommy’s death. But nothing much is written about the sea witch, not that I have been able to find, except she is a weather watcher and a healer.’

‘A healer? I don’t believe it.’

Johnny’s grandfather met Sam’s eyes and grinned before his serious expression returned. ‘I, too, can only think bad thoughts about her, but this is what I know.’

He turned and slumped back onto his chair, resting his arms on the table before prodding a few of the books with his finger, as if consuming information through it. Samsat and stared patiently into his swollen eyes. Almost immediately, the man began to talk, reciting from the pages of the books in front of him.

‘It is said she is a daughter of the god Phorcys, a Gorgon, like Medusa.’

‘Medusa? Who is Medusa,’ Sam asked.

‘Medusa was one of three known daughters of Phorcys. She was the only one who had serpents in her hair. Legend says she was very beautiful, and all the men wanted to marry her, even some of the gods. Rumours spread amongst the gods’ kingdom that she was more beautiful than the goddess Athena. When Athena heard she became jealous; she cast a spell upon Medusa, turning her hair into serpents and her eyes orange with black slits, like a snake. Now, she was so ugly that men turned away at the sight of her, and any man that looked long enough for her to look back was instantly turned to stone.’

‘So, is our sea witch called Medusa?’

‘I doubt it. But she is probably one of the three daughters or another that no one has ever written or heard of before. Anyway, it can’t be Medusa because according to the legend, she was killed by the Greek hero, Perseus.’

‘Then why didn’t I turn to stone when I saw the sea witch, Gorgon, whatever it was?’

‘I don’t know, Sam. Maybe only Medusa can turn people into stone. Maybe only Medusa was cursed, and Athena let her sisters go, or maybe it has something to do with the pendant. If she is desperate to get it back, it could be the source of her power.’

‘If it is, then surely she’ll turn us all to stone as soon as we give the pendant to her.’

‘She might not want to. I’m sure Medusa didn’t. She was just a victim of her own beauty and another woman’s jealousy. I think age and loneliness must have made her bitter. Anyway, we haven’t even found the pendant, and we don’t know what it looks like, so I wouldn’t worry about that yet. We’ve got a lot of work to do and very little time. I’ll keep looking for information about the pendant, and you try to stay out of the police’s way. If they put the facts or so called evidence together, I’ll see you in about four or five years. That is, if you’re lucky; ten or twenty, if you’re not.’

‘What about Schooner, Tommy’s uncle?’ Sam asked. ‘Do you think he might have found it?’

‘Well, Schooner’s probably dead by now, but if he did find something in that boat, he never gave it to the police. It would have shown up as evidence in my court case.’

‘Maybe he decided to keep it for himself.’

‘If he did, then I hope he rots,’ Johnny’s grandfather said bitterly. ‘It might have been the proof I needed to clear my name. Schooner still has family down at Lamorna Cove. I’ll give ‘em a call and see if they can help.’

Johnny’s grandfather opened the door, and Sam stepped out into the narrow street.

‘One more thing. Could you have a word with Johnny’s mum for me? I feel really guilty about...err...you know. Perhaps you could let her know it wasn’t my fault.’

‘Oh, they’ll be no consoling her at the moment, Sam. You’d better just stay out of her way. Medwin’s like everyone else. She’s not going to believe a story like that, not even from me.’

‘You mean she doesn’t believe what happened with you and Tommy?’

‘Oh, we’ve talked, and she knows my side of the story alright, but she doesn’t believe it. I could tell by the look on her face.’

‘You mean, even Johnny’s mum thinks you murdered Tommy all those years ago?’

‘Can’t stop people believing what they want to believe. She probably does, never given her opinion, not in front of me in any case. Wouldn’t be fair for me to ask her, and it would probably cause a bigger rift if I did. She’s not blood, you know. She married my son, and that’s all. Good sorts but not one for ghost stories, if you know what I mean. Anyway, she’ll not be phoning your house, so don’t worry. She was going to the first morning she found John’s bed empty, but I told her to leave it. Said I would do that for her, and then later, I told her I phoned you, and you knew nothing about it.’

‘Thanks, Mr P., but why did you do that for me?’

‘Like I just said, she don’t believe in ghost stories. There’d be no point trying to explain to her. I knew you’d come, even if it was just to apologise, and I didn’t want the police talking to yer, not ‘til I had.’

‘Well, they have. They came up to the house the other day.’

‘You told them nothing?’

‘No I couldn’t. They’d have laughed at me and thrown away the key. You know men in white coats and all that.’

‘Aye, you’re right lad; they would have.’ A momentary smirk appeared on the old man’s face.

‘And what does Johnny’s dad think? Does he believe you killed Tommy?’

‘Well, he’s always carried the stigma of being the son of a murderer. Probably put a chip on his shoulder, too. Nothing much I can do about that. But I’ve always kept a special eye on him, steered him to land jobs and kept him away from the sea, especially on the fifth of September every year. Still...I can’t keep an eye on everyone, can I?’
Guilt showed on his face.

Chapter Six

Ridgemont Secondary School

The rest of the weekend was uneventful. Sam stayed home most of Sunday and pottered around the garden and the shed. He even played bat and ball with Ellie for an hour.

Monday morning arrived, and Sam went to Ridgemont Secondary. It wasn't a place he normally adhered to, but he had an idea. For the first time in the whole of his life, he thought the school might be of some use.

Monday comprised of registration, numeracy, literacy, ICT (information and communication technology) and art.

He thought about skipping the morning sessions, but then he would have had a lot of explaining to do to his new form teacher during afternoon registration. So, Sam decided it would be better to make a day of it.

He parked his wheels in the school bike shed and walked around onto the playground at the back of the school, where the students liked to hang out until the bell rang.

Sam was dreading the idea of walking onto the playground. Johnny wasn't with him, and he knew everyone would be expecting answers. All the way to school, Sam was bombarded with pictures of Johnny's face. Notices were plastered on every lamppost and shop window. The heading, in big letters, read: *Boy Lost, Johnny*

Pothelswaite: Have you seen him? His address and telephone number were at the bottom.

Sam took a deep sigh and turned the corner onto the playground. Some of the boys were kicking a tennis ball around. Pushing, pulling, tugging grey jumpers, and white shirts. Other jumpers piled up as goals posts on the white lines marked out for the Rounder's pitch.

Girls were running around, chasing, playing tick, whilst other students just skipped and used the Hop Scotch numbers marked out on the floor. Some boys and girls hung together in tight groups, just chatting and laughing, and a few parents dotted around, waved, and walked back to their cars.

Amongst one group of girls, Sam saw Jenny. She turned her back on him as soon as he looked at her. It was obvious she wanted him to see her ejective turn. He brushed it aside, wondering why she became so irate the previous Saturday.

A lot of the pupils had thrown down their bags into piles, marking their spots. Sam stared at his wrist watch; the bell was taking forever. Glumly, he made his way over to the Trenant Hall entrance.

Some of the pupils began nudging each other.

'Look, it's Sam Camponara,' one of the girls said, glaring and making Sam feel self-conscious.

Then a tennis ball hit him in the leg, followed by big Billy Baumont trampling over him and knocking him to the ground.

'Oh, sorry, mate,' Billy said sarcastically.

Sam looked up at him, furious. 'What're you doing, Baumont?'

'Can't you take a joke?' Billy scoffed.

Some of the other boys gathered around as Sam started to get up off the ground.

‘Oh, yeah, I can take a joke, but that wasn’t very funny.’

Sam closed his fist and punched Billy in the nether regions as he stood up.

Billy instantly went down holding his parts and moaning.

Sam smiled down at him, straightening his shoulders and lifting his chin, but to his horror, Billy began to pick himself up.

‘Right, you’re going to get it now, Camponara,’ Billy growled angrily, throwing a huge right then a left.

Scuffling broke out, arms flailing from both sides, but big Billy Baumont towered over Sam, and a thud on his chin knocked him to the ground once again.

Billy stood back breathless and flushed, his chest wheezing a little. ‘Think you’re the big man, do ya? Talk of the school? Well, you’re not, see?’

Sam looked up at him, confused and dazed. ‘What are you talking about?’

Jenny suddenly appeared between them. ‘Leave him alone, Billy. You’re just a bully; that’s what you are.’

A chorus of girls’ voices support her. ‘Leave him alone, Billy,’ they all said together.

Billy was speechless.

The bell rang, and the doors flew open. Hundreds of young people paraded across the playground.

‘See you later, Sammy boy.’ Billy grinned down at Sam before he turned and walked off toward the school entrance.

Jenny offered Sam her hand and pulled him onto his feet.

‘What was that all about?’ he asked, dazed and holding his chin.

‘I told you everyone was talking about you and Johnny last week, and you know how Billy likes to be the centre of attention. I guess he must have been jealous, especially after those posters went up everywhere.’

Everyone filed down the corridor into their classrooms with bags on their shoulders, facing forward, pushing, and shuffling.

‘Err...you two,’ Mrs. Armgate called out. ‘Jenny Chatter, Sam Camponara, stop your chattering and come in quietly.’

‘Ha ha, very funny, as if I’ve not heard that a million times before,’ Jenny whispered to Sam.

They gave the teacher their most apologetic smiles, and then Mrs. Armgate turned around, and the noise increased again. Billy sat at the front, next to his two sidekick-thugs. Sam had renamed them Frowning Frank and Dwit the Twit.

Jenny whispered in Sam’s ear again. ‘You know this is just the start of it, don’t you? Billy’s going to want to know where Johnny is, and so is everybody else, including Mrs. Armgate. What are you going to tell them?’

‘I honestly don’t know,’ Sam replied, feeling nervous.

Sam hung his bag over the back of the chair and took out a book. He began to read, hoping no one would talk to him.

The pentagon shaped tables had blue tops and five chairs around each of them. In the middle of the tables were red plastic containers with enough pencils for each student.

Opposite Sam sat Philipa Toodlesqib and to her left was Tony Brown. On her right was Paul Numan. Between Sam and Paul Numan stood Johnny’s empty chair.

Tony replied to his name being called out first, followed by Sam and then Jenny, as the list followed in alphabetical order. Sam waited nervously for Mrs. Armgate to reach the p's. Jenny stared at him, and Sam knew she was almost certainly thinking the same thing.

'Johnny Pothelswaite,' Mrs. Armgate called out in a slightly higher tone, looking at Sam.

Everybody looked up from their reading books toward him, silently waiting, eager for her next words.

'Em...no Johnny, again,' she said, putting a red cross against his name and frowning above the lower rim of her glasses. 'Sam, is there anything you can tell us about Johnny?'

'Err...no, Miss. I've not seen Johnny for days,' he replied.

'Well, don't you think that's a little strange?'

'I do, Miss. I'm worried sick about him. He's been gone for the best part of a week.'

'Yes, I know that, Sam. Well, I would like to talk to you later. Perhaps after school if you don't mind waiting for a while?'

Sam nodded. 'Yes, Miss.' There was no way he was going to tell her anything. He lowered his eyes back to *How to Catch Sharks Without Getting Wet* by Fletcher Goufelrod.

The rest of the morning went smoothly for Sam. He kept to himself as much as possible, standing alone at breaks, for the most part. He passed the time by looking for spiders in the gaps between the school bricks and the window frames. Catching flying

long legs and placing them onto the girls' shoulders so that they ran around screaming proved to be amusing.

Afternoon registration came and went, and then everyone lined up at the door to walk down to the ICT suite.

'Now, today,' Mrs. Armgate began, 'I want you to look for information about a foreign country. Think about describing what it looks like. Try to imagine what it would be like if you lived there. Is it densely populated or sparse? Think about things like that. The information you find today will be used in your descriptive writing lesson tomorrow with Mr. Scribble. Is that clear?'

When no one responded, Mrs. Armgate continued. 'What will the place look like? Is it warm or cold? How do people survive there? What work could you do to make a living if you lived there? And what clothes might you wear? Are there any questions?' She looked around at the silent room. 'Okay, off you go, then.'

The classroom door opened, and Billy lead everyone down the corridor to the computer suite.

Sam put his hand on Jenny's arm as the class started filing out of the room.

'I need your help, Jenny,' Sam whispered as Mrs. Armgate followed the students and disappeared into the corridor in front of the stragglers.

'What for?'

'I need to find as much information as I can about sea witches. This is the perfect opportunity.'

'Oh, I thought you were going home and not bothering about all that.'

‘Yes, well, I couldn’t, could I? Johnny’s my best friend, and he needs me. Anyway, I saw Johnny’s grandfather. I’ll tell you about it later. Just type in sea witches or Medusa...things like that.’

‘What if Mrs. Armgate catches me?’

‘Tell her you’re going to write about living underwater.’

Jenny’s face brightened. ‘Now that’s creative!’ She pulled up a chair, put in her login information, and immediately connected to the Internet looking for anything under the title sea witch. A list of headings came up. Jenny clicked on a title, and the page opened. After a quick glance, she closed it. Sam started doing the same, but he was nowhere near as fast as Jenny.

After a few minutes, Sam could see Jenny was beginning to lose hope. ‘There’s lots of information. Most of it is a waste of time though because the information is fantasy gaming stories instead of material based on fact or legend,’ she said, closing another website.

‘What’s the difference?’

‘Well, most mythology is based on facts, you know, just exaggerated. And a lot of it did happen hundreds or thousands of years ago. Whereas, gaming stories are just someone’s imagination, and a complete waste of time for us.’

Jenny continued to scroll through pages of text and pictures before finding the *Encyclopaedia Mythica*.

‘Hey, Sam, listen to this,’ Jenny whispered loud enough for him to hear but quiet enough to evade the teacher’s attention. Sam stared at her computer screen and waited for her to tell him what she had found. ‘It says here sea witches focus on the moon’s lore, the tides, and weather magics. It says sea witches work alone and use black, white,

and grey magic.’ Jenny perused through a few more pages. ‘This is interesting; it says the devil sent Francis Drake sea witches to raise a storm so he could defeat the Spanish Armada in 1588.’

‘Who’s Francis Drake?’ Sam asked.

‘Never mind that. He sold his soul to the devil so the sea witches would help him.’

‘Jenny, I’ve found something,’ Sam said, pleased. ‘It says here that Medusa’s home lies on the western side of the ocean. Well, this is the western side of the ocean, isn’t it? What if it was here? Right here where we live? It says she is the mistress to the Western Gate of Death because her home lay at the entrance to the Underworld. What if that entrance is here, in our bay, the bottomless pit, and it only opens up for one day in each year?’

‘The fifth of September,’ they whispered in unison.

‘But she’s not waiting for the fifth of September now, is she? Not anymore. The witch said she would return on the next new moon,’ Sam announced.

‘Then it must be very important to her if she’s planning to come back so soon.’ Jenny looked back to the computer. A picture of Medusa followed by some information filled the screen.

‘But it says here Medusa was killed,’

‘Yes, she was, and that makes it even worse. If it is one of Medusa’s sisters who have taken her place then we’re done for. It says here Medusa’s sisters, Sthenno and Euryale cannot be killed; they’re immortal. But maybe it’s not even them; maybe it’s someone that no one’s even heard about until now.’

‘Have you found anything about the sea witch’s pendant?’

‘No, it doesn’t say anything at all.’ Sam was very disappointed. ‘Perhaps it doesn’t exist.’

‘It had better exist, Jenny, because if it doesn’t, then it will be the last we’ll ever see of Johnny.’

Worried, they stared at each other until Jenny’s eyes lit up as a thought popped into her head.

‘Imagine. An object taken from the Underworld? And it’s in someone’s possession right here in Cornwall.’

Sam dowsed her enthusiasm immediately very depressed by it all. ‘I hate to break the bad news, but what if it was picked up by a tourist, it might not be in Cornwall at all.’

‘Then it’ll be gone forever, and we’ll never see Johnny again,’ Jenny replied.

Mrs. Armgate moved to the front of the class, her hands positioned to clap.

‘Right, everyone,’ she said. ‘I hope you have all got something from today’s lesson, and you can use it for literacy tomorrow. You should have; you’ve all had plenty of time.’

‘Well, we’ve certainly got something, but I don’t know what good it will do us,’ Sam commented quietly to Jenny.

After last break Sam was enjoying the art lesson. It seemed impossible considering Johnny was always there, like a dark cloud in the front of his mind. The lesson was connected to the theme of places and journeys to tie in with literacy and ICT. The paints were out, and the tables covered with newspaper.

The pupils’ task was to create one big piece of artwork between them. Mrs. Theodore, the art teacher announced, ‘If the work is really good, it will be put up on the

wall. Every journey has a beginning, and every journey has an end,' she explained, 'and I would like that to be clearly visible in your work.'

Teamwork was not easy for Sam; he preferred to work in twos or on his own. He knew the task was to work as a group, but it made him fractious, worrying about what other people were doing. So, he let everyone else do the beginning and the end, whilst he concentrated on the middle, filling it with rolling waves, boats, and sea witches.

The final bell went. Billy's bullying hadn't been so bad. After Jenny's warning, Sam expected to be fighting again during break, but it hadn't happened, and hardly anybody mentioned Johnny. It must have been because he said he didn't know where Johnny was at registration.

The door opened, and the whole class filed onto the playground. Billy was first, heading toward his very large parents.

'Hey, look,' Jenny whispered, steering his eyes with the turn of her head toward the door leading into the corridor.

'It's the man in the black suit.' Sam glanced at him, worried, as he peered in through the glass in the door. 'Must be a right old perv... You wouldn't think they'd let him into school though, would you?'

'I know, and he was watching you from the railings this morning when we were on the playground.'

'What? And you didn't tell me?'

'Well, it slipped my mind when you and Billy started fighting.'

'That's it. I've got to get out of here.' Sam surged forward, pushing some of the pupils out of the way, making them jeer and moan.

Jenny managed to get between the door and Mrs. Armgate. This caused her reaching hand to miss Sam's shoulder, and he passed through onto the playground.

'Come back here, young man,' Mrs. Armgate shouted sternly, but Sam just kept on going, his black bag swinging back and forth.

'Thanks, Jenny,' Sam shouted, looking back and smiling before he ran off around the corner toward the sheds. He lifted out his bike and pedalled away from Ridgemont Secondary as fast as his legs would take him.

Chapter Seven

A Very Mysterious Day

Each day when Sam arrived home from school, he half-expected the police to be waiting, but they weren't, and things were seemingly ordinary at the house.

He sat on his bedroom windowsill, staring out across the sea. One of the trawlers, *Agnes* or *Just*, was coming home.

I could really do with Dad being here, but he never is, not when I need him at any rate. He's always working away, selling those ruddy pies...pies... Who cares about pies? I certainly don't.

Sam scrunched up a piece of A4 paper and hurled it across his bedroom.

I wish he were home more because nothing ever gets done, and our poor house is looking really bad.

Sam thought about the shed door hanging off, grey paint peeled from the lattice wood. The guttering was rusty and coming apart over the front porch window.

I wish I could tell him about Johnny and the sea witch, but I can't. The last time I spoke to him, he was telling me how I needed to be the man of the house. Oh, I don't want to be the man of the house, not now.

Sam threw himself onto his pillow.

I want to tell him what has happened; he could sort it out for me.

But Sam couldn't tell him.

Dad doesn't even know who I am; and he won't believe anything I say. Who would? I'm the man of the house; that's what he said, so I've got to try and find a way out of this mess on my own. But how?

Weary, Sam rolled off the bed onto his feet, drudging his way back over to the window. He looked down, staring at the split white paint around his window frame.

Then suddenly the door swung open.

'Hello, Sam, what are you doing?' Ellie asked, standing in the doorway holding her teddy.

'Do you never put that bear down?'

'Sometimes. When he doesn't need cuddling,' she replied, walking over to the window. 'Want to play a game? I'm bored.'

'Not really, El. Why don't you help Mum get the tea ready?'

She gazed up at him. 'What's the matter, Sam? You look really sad.'

'Do you miss Dad?' he asked her.

'No... Yes... Well, sometimes. Why, do you?'

'Yes. Ever since we moved here, Dad seems to be working all the time.'

At least I've got Mum. Oh, I hope she doesn't find out about Johnny. She'd be really upset, and she doesn't deserve that.

'Well, he's here now. He must have decided to come home early to see us.'

'Thanks,' Sam said, immediately brighter. He flew out of his room and across the landing, smiling. But his mood changed as he reached the top of the stairs and heard his parents shouting.

Poor Mum, she does her best trying to keep the house tidy. What does he expect, coming in here shouting? Every week she sweeps. I bet it gets her down even more than

me. She's great, really, and he doesn't deserve her. She washes and irons, and she's the best cook ever. What more can he want?

‘When are you going to do something with this house?’ Mum demanded.

Sam tiptoed down the stairs and across the dirty, threadbare carpet in the hall.

I've changed my mind; I don't want to see Dad, not at the moment anyway.

‘One day, when I get on top of this blessed mortgage, I'll make this into the most beautiful house in Cornwall,’ Dad said.

‘But by then, the kids will have grown up, and the house will have fallen down,’ replied Mum.

Sam looked toward the kitchen; he could see her standing by the open door. She was frowning like she did when Sam was sharp with Jenny.

Sam knew Mum wasn't really angry. She was frustrated because Dad worked such long hours and did not come home as often as she would have liked.

‘I suppose you'll be up and out early in the morning again,’ she continued.

‘I'm afraid so, well before Ellie and Sam are awake,’ he replied.

‘And when will you be back?’

‘No more than two days. Anyway, why are we arguing?’

‘Because the rest of the time you're only arriving back just before bedtime,’ Mum countered.

‘You know if the van's near enough, I'll park it in a lay-by and hitch a ride home,’ Dad protested.

He told Sam once that he hitched for nearly eighty miles to come home to see them.

It had to be hard for Dad because he needed to be up and thumbing his way back even earlier the following morning. It was much easier just going into the factory.

‘You know I have to keep an eye on the tacho-graph. Too much time or too many miles and young Mr. Piermont Junior said he’ll give me my cards.’

‘I know you want to be with us,’ Mum said to Dad, smiling at last.

‘Yes, love, I do’ he replied, putting his arms around her. ‘But we have to pay the mortgage on the house. It’ll be worth it one day.’

Sam had heard enough and stepped outside, closing the door quietly behind him.

I do love our house, though.

He looked back over the front porch and the falling-down veranda fence. It was so easy to imagine what the house could be, but was it really worth it? Sam wasn’t so sure.

But he did understand Mum’s situation. Torn described it perfectly. If Dad wasn’t away so much, Mum would be happier, and he was sure they’d both love the house even more. But if Dad weren’t working, they wouldn’t own it because the property would have been repossessed, and they would have nowhere to live.

The house had everything Sam could have asked for. Well, not so much the house but the location. He ran across the grass onto the rocks. A breeze blew off the sea, and the salty chill bit at his cheeks.

On one side lay the sea, the rocks, and the beach. On the other was the woods, the lanes, the farms, fields, and the town where Johnny lived, only a mile or two away.

The sun was shining again, and Sam had heard people say there was going to be an Indian summer this year. It was good for the town because it meant the tourist season would continue to the end of September or maybe even longer.

But Sam had had enough of tourists for one year and looked forward to the quiet of the winter.

He walked across the lawn to where it stopped suddenly on a tidy line of shale, stones, and rocks, descending steeply toward the sea. The rocks were ever increasing in size until Sam could not call them rocks or pebbles anymore. Large boulders mingled with small ones, entering the sea and disappearing beneath its waves.

The sky was like a blanket of azure blue, paling as it dropped into the distance, finishing suddenly on a purplish, grey horizon. The waves rolled up onto the rocks, licking them gently. Within the gurgles, Sam began to hear something that made the hairs on his neck stand up, and a shudder ran down his spine. Something beneath the waves was calling out to him.

‘Help me, Sam. Help me, Sam,’ it whispered.

It sounded soft and dreamy, as if travelling from a long way off.

Sam was too afraid to move closer, but he could not help staring at the waves. His eyes searched for Johnny, and his ears followed the eerie sounds of his friend’s voice.

It was hopeless; she was teasing him, that evil witch. Anger thrummed through his body, and he wanted to scream out loud. He couldn’t, of course. His mother would hear and come running with questions. Questions Sam could barely think about answering without wanting to break down and cry.

He left the beach and went into the kitchen, poured a glass of milk, and took it outside to sit under the porch, shaded from the sun.

Mum’s footsteps clambered down the stairs, and she appeared in the doorway, wearing her white, cotton apron and carrying a dirty, pink feather duster.

‘Hello, Sam,’ she said in a cheerful voice. ‘Had a good day at school?’

‘Yeah, it was alright,’ Sam replied in a depressed tone.

‘Oh, one of those days was it?’

‘They’re all ‘one of those days’ at the moment.’

Mum sat down beside him. Ellie followed her out, with a yellow duster crumpled up in her hand, and sat on the other side.

‘What’s the matter? Things not going so well at school?’ She scrunched up her face in sympathy. ‘I never liked school. I was glad when it was all over. It’s funny really because the other kids seemed to enjoy it. You must have taken after me. Sorry about that.’ She wrapped her arm around him and rubbed his shoulder.

Sam glumly took another sip of milk.

‘So, has Johnny turned up yet? We’ve not seen him around the house for days.’

‘Mum! Haven’t you been into town at all this week?’

‘No, I have lots to keep me busy around here. Why should I?’ she asked.

‘Because Johnny’s been missing for nearly a week now! There are posters up everywhere with his face on them. Everybody’s talking about it, and the police are still looking for him.’

‘Oh, Sam, I’m sorry. I thought he’d be back by now. When the police officer came to see us the other day, he said he didn’t think it was anything to worry about. He thought Johnny was a runaway, probably a family tiff. He said that’s usually what happens, and he’d be home the next day. A week, my, that is a long time. No wonder you’re so down in the dumps.’

‘Down in the dumps—it’s terrible,’ Sam replied, almost bursting into tears.

Ellie rested her head on Sam’s shoulder, trying to console him.

‘Well, I wouldn’t worry about him too much, Sam. He’ll turn up. I think the officer’s probably right; he’s had a row with his dad and ran away. He’ll turn up,’ she

said calmly. 'It won't be anything for you to worry about, not around here. He'll be fine.'

Mum paused for a few seconds, reflecting on what she had just said.

She can't seriously believe what she is saying; can she?

Then Mum said, 'Perhaps we should take a ride into town to see Johnny's mother, ask her if we can do anything to help.'

Sam panicked at the idea. 'No, err—leave it, Mum. You'll only upset them more, and there's nothing you can do, is there?'

'I know, dear. I'm sure you're right,' she agreed. 'Oh, that poor family. So, what do you think has happened to him? Do you think he's run off?'

'I don't know. Maybe. But Johnny didn't say anything about a row to me,' Sam said quietly, shaking his head.

'Well, you sit there and have a rest. What would you like for tea? I'll cook you something special to cheer you up.'

'I'm not very hungry.'

'Maybe this will cheer you up: Your dad's home,' she said, smiling.

'I know. I heard him.'

Mum stood up, slapping her knee with the duster before she disappeared into the kitchen, closely followed by Ellie.

Sam stayed on the porch, his head filled with voices from the sea. He thought it was going to drive him crazy; they just went on and on.

Sam. Sam. Don't forget me, Sam.

* * * *

After tea on Sunday, Sam went back out onto the porch, and the voices began whispering off the sea again, like a continuous, pre-recorded message. The light started to fade earlier than it did only a week before. It was only about eight-thirty in the evening when the big, orange sun began to disappear behind the edge of the world.

The telephone rang and was picked up after three rings. Sam could hear Mum's disapproving voice talking into it sharply.

'Well, can't it wait until tomorrow? It's far too late for a young boy to be going out now.'

Sam's ears pricked up.

What's she talking about? I'm always out late. Maybe she's worrying about what happened to Johnny?

There was a pause. 'Oh, wait a minute. I'll go and get him for you.'

Sam worried it might be the police again, and his stomach rolled uneasily. Mum appeared at the porch door.

'There's somebody on the phone for you.' Mum looked a little perplexed as Sam gazed up at her. 'It's Johnny's grandfather, Mr. Pothelswaite.'

Sam was relieved and concerned all at the same time.

Why would he be phoning at this time? What could have happened? What can I say to Mum? And how am I going to explain the purpose of Mr. Pothelswaite's call?

Sam picked up the phone.

'Hello,' he said, speaking cautiously into the black mouth-piece.

'Hello, Sam... Sorry to bother you at this hour, but I need you to come over to my house.'

‘What now?’

‘Yes, as soon as you can.’

‘Why? What’s it about?’

‘I can’t explain it now, but it’s very important,’ Johnny’s grandfather insisted.

‘Mum’s not going to like it; it’s already gone dark...’

‘I know,’ he interrupted. ‘I wouldn’t ask if it wasn’t so important. You’ll need to be persuasive. Make sure she lets you come.’

‘I can try,’ Sam said with his big, brown eyes looking at her.

Mum was standing by his side, arms folded, sternly staring down at the phone and waiting for answers.

‘When you have finished, pass the phone back to me,’ she said.

Nervously, Sam said, ‘Mum wants a word.’

His eyes dropped as he slowly handed her the phone.

‘I was so sorry to hear about Johnny,’ she started. ‘What has happened to him?’

There was a pause then Mum nodded and made a little moan before pausing again.

‘Then you’ll understand why I don’t want Sam running around in the dark, Mr. Pothelswaite. We can’t bring him. His Dad is in bed and has to be up early, you know.’

There was another pause.

‘No, I’m sorry. I really must insist it will have to wait until tomorrow. Sam’s far too young to be going out at this time of the night... Goodbye.’

But while Mum was busy finishing her conversation with Mr. Pothelswaite, Sam sneaked out of the house. He hastily collected his bike from the old shed and rode off down the dirt track. He heard Mum open the door and run onto porch and around the side of the house. Sam pedalled hard into the darkness.

‘Sam, you come back here!’ she shouted angrily. Her voice carried down the lane and reached his ears, so Sam bent lower over his handlebars and pedalled even harder.

Chapter Eight

The Aegis Shield

Sam rode his bike into a dimly lit alleyway. The street lamps gave off orangey tints, creating a sombre mood. There was an eerie sensation about the place, everywhere silent. Although Sam had been there before, it was a different world in the dark. The orange illumination cast from the streetlights barely stretched from one lamp post to another, leaving chunks of black where murderers could lurk. The shadows cut across the walls of tall houses and tiny panel windows, moving like giant, black monsters.

The end of a row of buildings disappeared into the inky night as if they were dropped into a black hole in front of him. But as he slowly pedalled closer to the blackness, orange lights appeared to his left and then to his right as one alleyway finished and another began. Sam turned at the corner of another house, and so it continued, like a never-ending maze of juts and turns, sending his adrenaline racing from the fear of what might be around the next corner.

In the dark, the houses looked taller, like giant ogres surrounding him, silently moving, closing their narrow passages, until Sam felt claustrophobic. He imagined someone, or something, leaping out onto him, knocking him from his bike and bludgeoning him to death. Silence everywhere, biting at his ears, until startled, he heard the eerie, echoing sound of a door opening around the next corner. His bike cogs clicked, like the ticking of a loud clock, as he slowly freewheeled into the subsequent alley. Around the corner and some distance away, Sam caught sight of a small face turning toward him, lit by a streetlamp. It was Jenny.

She pretended she hadn't seen him and entered the house, closing the door behind her long before Sam rode past. To his relief, he recognised Johnny's grandfather's house as he turned onto Dover Road.

Sam stood his bike carefully against the wall and climbed the four steps to Grandpa Pothelswaite's door.

The door opened quickly, like the springing of a trap. He didn't even have time to knock.

'Sam, come in quickly,' Mr. P. was insistent. He looked down the alley in both directions, his bulging eyes searching for life. There was none, and he ushered Sam into the room before closing the door.

'What is it? What is so important it won't wait until tomorrow?' Sam met the old man's eyes. 'Have you found the pendant?' Excitement brought a tremor to his voice.

'No, not quite, but I think I know where it is.'

'Where...where do you think it is, Mr. Pothelswaite?' Sam's heart lifted with the news.

Johnny's grandfather began to pace up and down, deep in thought; his fingers pulled on his bottom lip, as if he was looking to release the answers from there. The room appeared darker and more morbid than ever. Johnny's grandfather looked very strange. Just seeing him like this sent a shiver down Sam's spine. Grandpa P.'s dark, animated shape visibly blended into the walls to the point of almost transparency, like he was a dark spectre.

Then Sam caught sight of a carving the old man had made. It was on the table waiting, and Mr. Pothelswaite kept taking quick glances at it. After pacing up and down

silently for the third time, he said, 'By the way I've made this for you.' He picked it up and handed the object to him.

'What is it?' Sam asked, recognising there was one identical to it, but older and weathered, residing on Grandpa Pothelswaite's front door.

Sam sat down, holding it out in front of him.

'Do you hear voices in your head, Sam? The voice of the sea witch taunting you constantly?'

Sam smiled up at him. 'Thought only I could hear that, and I was going completely mad.'

It came as a big relief realising the voices were not in his head at all but real, and there were others who could hear them, too.

Sam nodded emphatically.

'This is called an Aegis; it's a protective shield that wards against sea witches and demons. It will stop you hearing whispering voices whenever you are behind it, and it will stop you having nightmares about them, too.'

Holding the carving in both hands, Sam examined it in the dim light. It was carved from solid oak and quite heavy. He reckoned it was about five pounds in weight and twenty five inches in diameter. Medusa's head had been carved into the middle. Her tongue was too big for her mouth, and snakes poured from her head, winding and curving to different points all around the shield. It was shaped like a thundercloud and inlaid with goat's skin and fish scales.

Sam ran his fingers over the soft, smooth surfaces. 'I've seen this before,' he said, turning it around with interest.

'You have?' Grandpa Pothelswaite asked surprised. 'Where?'

‘Not the shield but the head in the middle; it’s Medusa, isn’t it?’

‘I’m impressed...you remembered.’ Grandpa Pothelswaite smiled and sat down opposite Sam. ‘Strange though, don’t you think? How something so witch-like works against a witch. But like poles do repel, maybe that’s it?’

Sam continued talking as if Grandpa P. hadn’t said anything. ‘The sisters’ names are Sthenno and Err, Err, Euryale,’ he stammered.

‘Yes, I know,’ Grandpa P. interrupted, feeding off Sam’s passion.

‘Did you know Medusa lived at the entrance to the Underworld and that it’s at the western end of the Ocean?’

Grandpa P. smiled again. ‘Yes I did, but...’

‘That could be here...here in the bay,’ Sam explained, excited. ‘This is the western end of the Ocean isn’t it? What if Hadese ...’

‘Arr, you know about Hadese, do you? You have been busy.’

‘Yes, me and Jenny... Well, we’ve been researching information on the Internet; it’s much quicker than books with lots of pictures, too. That’s how I recognised Medusa.’

Grandpa P. scowled and appeared slightly alarmed.

‘Jenny? Jenny who?’ he asked.

‘Jenny Chatter from school.’

‘Oh, yes. I know Jenny. She lives just around the corner.’

‘I know,’ Sam said, thinking what a jerk he had been. Now, he realised why she had left him in such a terrible temper the last time he was here.

‘So what does Jenny know about all this?’

‘She knows pretty much everything.’

‘I see,’ the old man said uncomfortably.

There was a moment of painful silence, but Sam, bursting to share his and Jenny’s ideas, continued. ‘What if Hadese replaced Medusa with one of her sisters when Perseus killed her, and the gateway to the Underworld is protected by our sea witch here in the bay?’

‘Then we could be in big trouble, Sam, big trouble. If it is Sthenna or Euryale who has taken Johnny, then we won’t be able to kill her, and that means we’ll be relying on her keeping her word once we give back the pendant.’

‘Yes, yes, the pendant,’ Sam said, swallowing convulsively. ‘You said you might know where it is, Mr Pothelswaite...’

‘I told you I would make some phone calls to Tommy’s family to see if I could find anything. Well, I had a very interesting conversation with a little girl who lives over at Lamorna Cove. Her name is Ella Stevenson, Schooner’s great granddaughter. She’s about six or seven years old, and when I asked her if she had heard the term sea witch, she said she had. Seems her family has sea witch paintings and ornaments all over their house. They’re friends with sea witches because they bring them good fortune and safe passage on the seas. Well, that’s what she meant. But then, what was most interesting was a voice in the background asking the little girl who she was speaking to. It was a woman’s voice, very irate, as if she was unnerved by the conversation we were having. She snatched up the phone from the child and aggressively asked who I was. Of course, I put the phone down at once.’

‘Why?’ Sam asked.

‘Because I didn’t want to let them know they were talking to me. Not now that I suspect they have the pendant.’

‘But what makes you think they have the it?’

‘The little girl. She described it. She said she borrowed it and wore it like a necklace. When Schooner saw her, she said he shouted and made her cry. He told her it was a present from a sea witch and—’

‘Did she say what it looks like?’ Sam interrupted, all excited again.

‘Yes.’

‘And?’

Grandpa P. hesitated. ‘Well, it’s not what you might think.’

‘Just tell me,’ Sam said, fit to burst.

‘It’s simply five strands of sea weed with three knots in it.’

‘Weed with knots in it?’

‘Yes, three knots, but don’t take it too lightly, boy. This could take us into dark places. For everything good there’s something bad, and people who have amassed fortunes without the dignity of labour often have dark forces boring deep beneath their surfaces. Everyone pays the price at one end or the other.’

‘Mr. Pothelswaite, I haven’t got a clue what you’re talking about.’

‘That’s alright, lad; it doesn’t matter.’

‘So, what are we going to do?’ Sam asked, eager for a plan.

‘We’re going to sail up past Penzance into Lamorna, walk up to the house, and steal that weed whilst they’re all asleep in their beds. Do ya think you can do it?’

Their eyes met across the dark table, and Sam smiled.

Chapter Nine

The Trip to Lamorna

A thick, soupy sea mist settled between the narrow streets. It made the alleys even darker and eerier than they were before. The wall appeared grey where Sam's bike stood, barely visible, but still undisturbed.

The mist touched his face like cold fingers as he opened the door. He stepped out of the old man's warm but dismal room.

The mist hadn't been there when Sam arrived, and he wondered if the sea witch had conjured and gathered it around the old man's house, like a mob to let him know that she knew he was inside.

She wants to frighten me, so it's lingered, waiting for me to leave the old man's house, to damp me all over. She wants me to be cold, so I'll be uncomfortable and afraid of travelling the narrow passages at night. Maybe this is her warning to keep me away from the narrow streets, the old man, and certainly away from the ocean.

Even with Mr. P. with him and the dispensation of reassurance that he not had earlier, Sam still felt it was unsafe to venture far.

Maybe the witch was out there, watching their every move from Hades Gate, looking at them through her magic ball. Perhaps she was sending the mist to hinder their progress, to change their minds about making the trip to Lamorna Cove. After all, to sail in such treacherous weather conditions was crazy. If she could summon up the mist,

then she could summon up the winds and certainly put an end to them as she, or witches like her, did to the Spanish Armada.

Sam decided to try to change Mr P.'s mind about going out. The old man didn't even sail, not since Tommy's death at any rate.

Mr P. pulled the door shut with a firm yank and hurried down the four steps into the alley.

'Mr P., don't you think we're better leaving this until tomorrow night?' Sam asked, trying to keep up with the old man's long strides.

Mr P.'s pace did not alter nor did he look at Sam. There was determination in the old man's march, like a soldier on his way to war, and it made him appear twenty years younger. Ramrod straight, he paced through the mist as if nothing could stand in his way.

'No, Sam, we must do it tonight whilst we both have the zest for it.'

'But tomorrow night might be better if there's not any mist,' Sam suggested, fearful they might be driven onto the rocks and drowned.

'Yes, but tomorrow night there may be more mist and the night after that and the night after that, especially if you know who has sent it.'

'Oh, you were thinking that, too?'

'Thinking what?'

'Thinking she might know what we're up to somehow and she might be trying to stop us.'

The old man didn't reply but continued to pace down the wet, cobbled stones through the grey and white mist toward the harbour.

'The only thing is if she is trying to hinder us then...'

‘Shush all this talking. She’s not trying to hinder us,’ he said, stopping to meet Sam’s eyes. Bending down, he gripped Sam’s coat and pulled him closer. His face was so close, the old man’s stale breath brushed across his skin.

‘If anything, she will be trying to help us, not hinder us. I think she might be giving us cover.’

‘Why? Why does she want to help us?’

‘Schooner hasn’t given the pendant back to her, has he? I thought at first he might not even know about the witch or the pendant, but after speaking to his great granddaughter, he obviously does. He must have some hold over her. I think the witch needs us to take the pendant from Schooner, by force if necessary, and give it to her because she has no way of retrieving it for herself.’

He pushed Sam away, and they stared at one another for a second. Their feet were still, and the silence was profound. It was as though only the two of them existed in the world—a weird, eerie world, lost in a thick, white soup.

Then Sam had an idea.

‘I know! Let’s go by car. It’s much quicker and much safer.’

Sam shuddered at the idea of sailing the boat with the sea witch below them.

‘I wish we could. Reckon, I’d have stolen a car if needs be rather than set sail on these waters, but in all my years, I never learned to drive.’

Suddenly in the distance, Sam heard footsteps. *Click, click* sounds that had gone unnoticed before and were now coming closer. He felt his heart miss a beat as the tapping of shoes on the cobbles grew louder.

Mr. P. looked at Sam and whispered close in his ear.

‘I don’t think the witch knows what we’re doing, Sam, and even if she does, it doesn’t matter. I think we can use the mist to our advantage, that’s all. We can leave unseen, and we can beach at Lamorna., No one will know. Maybe it’s her plan or maybe it’s not.’

The footsteps behind them stopped.

‘Come, we must move with haste,’ Mr. P. said, his head nodded toward where the sounds were coming from. ‘Someone, or something, is close by.’

‘Here take this, hold it tight,’ he said, passing Sam the Aegis shield he had made for him. ‘Swam in Holy Water, that has.’

‘What do ya mean?’ Sam and his short legs strained to keep up.

‘I dipped it in the font at St. Michael’s when Father John wasn’t looking.’

Sam wrapped it in his arms, holding it to his chest like a breastplate, and the fear lifted from him instantly. He didn’t understand it, but he was aware he felt different. All of his concerns just seemed to disappear—the white and grey mist, the eerie silence, the unseen footsteps, and the sea witch—none of it mattered. It was as though a great weight had been lifted, and all that remained was a twinge of guilt and Johnny. Sam realised the sea witch had been filling him with such dark thoughts, and the Aegis shield stopped her.

They hurried through the mist, around the corner past Johnny’s house, and down to the bottom of the narrow street where the main road crossed the estuary bridge. They left the cobbles behind, and their brisk pace continued for a hundred yards past Mr. Booty’s fruit shop and onto the quay, where the two trawlers bobbed up and down gently.

Everything appeared in sepia tints and tones rather than in colour. Almost like picture stills, Sam's eyes focused on each frame. There was something very strange about one of the trawlers. Behind the wheelhouse gathered, grey nets lay on the deck in a pile. One end of a net was hoisted up over a metal boom, a guide for lowering the nets over the side of the boat into the cold sea.

It looked like a limp body, hanging by its feet, and Sam struggled to control his fear.

The boats were like sleeping men, held up and packed together tightly in a crowd of invisible water. Jostled, pulled, and pushed this way and that, bobbing slowly from side to side and up and down, occasionally scraping the harbour wall buffers. They sounded like old men snoring.

The quay wall dropped down into an even thicker, whiter blanket of mist and down there, out of sight, was the sea and possibly the witch.

On the other side of the harbour, the only thing visible through the mist was the pastel orange, hazy blobs of light emanating from the streetlamps. There were no inns or shops, not even a quayside wall. Sounds carried from across the estuary, people coming and going and occasionally singing. It gave Sam a tenuous anchor to the real world.

Eventually Mr. P. and Sam arrived at the white barrier and the sign that read, *Old Whiley's Mackerel Fishing Trips* and the steps leading down to the smaller boats.

'We're not taking *The Sea Witch*, are we?'

Fear filled Sam's eyes, and his voice trembled.

'You must be joking,' he replied. 'You'll never get me in that boat again.' Fear equal to Sam's was plain in his voice.

'Thank God for that,' Sam said, relieved.

‘No, we’ll take the *Padstow Lady*, and you can steer.’

The *Padstow Lady* was very similar to *The Sea Witch*, about eighteen feet long, five feet wide, and two feet above the water when fully laden. She had a small outboard motor and steering column at the stern and three rows of wooden polished seats for the tourists to sit on. She was white on the outside with a green trim, and her name was displayed proudly across the back on a cream rectangular plate with a thin green line around it.

‘I can steer? Thanks, Mr. P.’

Sam searched amongst the grey images for the *Padstow Lady*.

‘Yes, well, I’ll watch from the front of the boat just to make sure you don’t bump into anything.’

Unexpectedly, a grey figure materialized through the mist. It was small with a hood over its head. Sam knew straight away it was Jenny, even though her silhouette looked small and bulky with her hands huddled inside her warm duffle coat and the hood partially covering her face.

‘Hey, Jenny, what are you doing out?’

‘Oh, I’m just walking for a while,’ she replied.

‘I bet you are.’ Sam laughed a little. ‘We heard you when we were still on Dover Road.’

‘You’re too quick for me, Sam.’ Jenny smiled.

‘Trying to sneak up on me, hey?’ said Sam, joking. ‘Do you know Mr. P.?’

Jenny looked a little confused.

‘You mean Johnny’s grandfather? Of course I do, I live around the corner, don’t I? We all live on top of each other, remember?’

‘Oh. Yes...I’m sorry about that.’ Sam was embarrassed, and his gaze dropped to the cobbles for a second.

Jenny smiled and gave him a soft jab to his stomach. ‘I forgive you this time.’

Then Mr. P. nodded and smiled at Jenny, amusement bright in his face.

‘I think we’d better get on, Sam. We have no time to lose,’ he said, descending the steps toward the five boats. Mr. P. paused and looked up at Jenny. ‘Hope you don’t think me rude, Jenny, but time waits for no man or boy.’

She didn’t acknowledge him. Instead, her gaze was riveted to Sam.

‘You’re not taking *The Sea Witch* out again, are you?’ she asked, concern on her face and in her voice.

‘No, I wouldn’t take her out, not after the last time,’ he replied, trying to set her mind at ease.

‘Then where are you going?’

‘I think we’ve found the witch’s pendant,’ he whispered, excited and pleased. ‘I’m going to try and get it now.’

‘What...out there in this weather? No, Sam, you can’t,’ she said, looking into the grey fog. ‘Nobody goes out in this weather.’

Mr. P. was perched on the front of the boat. He pulled his long, swirling oil skin coat around him like a silent phantom. His head disappeared beneath its hood, and his grey form was barely visible in the white mist. ‘Come on, Sam. We’ve got to get moving,’ he said, looking at his watch.

Sam pushed back his cuff and stared at his own. It read ten-thirty p.m.

‘It will take us an hour or more to get over there,’ Mr. P. continued.

Sam turned away from Jenny toward the steps.

‘I’m not letting you go, Sam.’ She grabbed his arm before he could move away.

‘What do yer mean, you’re not letting me go? You can’t stop me,’ he replied angrily, tugging away from her.

‘Then I’m coming with you.’

‘No, you’re not; it’s far too dangerous.’

‘Come on. What’s taking so long?’ Mr. P. hollered up sounding exasperated.

Sam glared furiously at Jenny. She held onto his coat tightly by the elbow. Sam realised it was pointless arguing and threatening. He wasn’t getting anywhere, and Mr. P. was pressing to get on.

‘Okay, come then, but it’s on your own head. If something goes wrong, I can’t promise to save you.’

Jenny giggled.

‘I’ll probably have to save you, you mean.’

He followed as she descended the damp, slippery steps to the water. Jenny stretched her leg across the short gap between pier and boat without any help. Sam jumped after her, causing the little boat to rock from side to side quite violently for a few seconds. Slowly, it settled as Sam sat back with his arm across the steering column, and Jenny settled on the seat just to his right.

‘Okay, Mr. P., you can untie her now.’

‘I can’t. It’s my fingers; they’re not nimble enough anymore.’

Sam climbed over the seats and released her from the mooring, and then he clambered back and sat next to Jenny.

‘What’s she doing here?’ the old man asked.

‘She insisted, and when Jenny insists, you might as well just give up.’

Sam smiled meeting her eyes. He passed the Aegis shield to her and pulled three times on the ignition cord before the *Padstow Lady* fired into life.

‘Push us away from the side,’ Sam said, enthusiastically, ‘and we’ll get underway.’

The front of the boat moved peacefully away from the dark grey wall. Sam throttled back a little, slowly steering her out into the channel, past the light on the end of the harbour wall, and into the open sea.

Holding the shield to her chest, Jenny asked, ‘What is this, Sam? It feels sort of warm and soothing like a—’

‘Like a protective shield,’ Sam interrupted.

‘No, it’s sort of strange, really, because it feels all warm and cosy.’

‘Warm and cosy?’

‘Yes, like my security blanket.’

Sam chuckled.

‘You don’t still have a security blanket, do you?’

‘Well, no...no, I don’t.’ She smiled, a little embarrassed. ‘But I can remember what it felt like when I had one.’

‘I bet you still do,’ he teased.

‘Well, okay I do. But I never use it anymore.’

Sam looked at the silent Mr. P. He could tell the old man was very amused, even though he could barely see him. The mist hanging on the water whirled around him as the little boat passed through it.

‘Steer her around to the right, Sam. We’re heading southwest,’ Mr. P. instructed.

The mist was everywhere, blotting out the surface of the water and swirling white smoke which appeared to move as if blown by Poseidon’s silent breathe.

‘Slowly,’ Mr P. said as they chugged along through gaps in the mist.

These gaps enabled Sam to see the undulating, tar black sea and the rocks standing out of the water like crooked, cracked towers.

‘Look at those, Jenny. I never knew rocks stood out of the water like that,’ he said.

Sam felt Jenny shiver as the white mist covered them once again, like a curtain being drawn, veiling their eyes and leaving them with the eerie sounds of lapping waves and sea creatures.

Slowly, Sam steered the boat around a dark shape at Mr. P.’s direction. It could have been the witch, tall and still reaching up from beneath the sea ten feet into the air. As they went around it, Sam saw it was only another craggy rock.

Echoing sounds awakened the silence and then faded as if they had never been. Each time Sam’s heart began to beat faster, and Jenny moved closer to him.

They passed the torn, black rocks on the shores off Talland Bay and the tiny harbour towns of Polperro and Polruan. At least they weren’t heading out into open water. Sam feared that more than anything. Then the mist parted once again and three spherical towers, set at different heights on the side of a hill, came into view.

‘What’s that over there?’ Sam pointed out the manmade lights shimmering up from the ground onto the round surfaces, just above the shoreline.

‘That’s the castle at St. Mawes, built by Henry Eighth about AD 1540,’ said Mr. P.

‘Not very big for a castle, is it? And it’s not even on the top of the hill.’

‘Oh, you know about castles then, do you, Sam?’ Jenny said, sarcastically.

‘I know a bit. I know castles are supposed to be on the top of a hill; that’s for sure.’

‘Why?’

‘So the soldiers can shoot arrows and spears down at the enemy. You’re not going to win a battle trying to throw them upward, are you?’

Jenny didn’t respond.

Poseidon blew, and the castle disappeared back into the mist. For a long time, there was nothing other than white, smoky fog, and the little boat bounced over the waves and troughs uneventfully. Soon reddish pink, green, and orange lights appeared a long way off.

‘It’s going to take us a lot longer than I thought to get there, Sam,’ Mr. P. said, disappointed.

‘I thought you knew how far it is.’ Sam was starting to feel very cold and insecure again.

‘I do. Well, it didn’t seem very far in a car.’

‘I thought you couldn’t drive.’

‘I can’t, but my son drove me over to Penzance only last year, and as you know, I’ve not been on a boat for years. Anyway, it has taken us forty minutes to get this far, and we have to go around the Lizard before we reach Penzance. Lamorna is a little way on from there.’

‘How long then?’ Sam asked, becoming agitated.

‘I’m not sure...probably a couple of hours.’

‘A couple of hours? You must be kidding!’

Forty more minutes passed before Sam saw the hazy orange and white lights. It was like looking at streetlights with his eyes nearly closed, all blurry and undefined yet beautiful. More than anything, it meant land.

‘Careful now, Sam, many a ship has gone down around here.’

‘Why? Where are we now?’ Jenny asked.

‘Well, do you see them lights we just passed? I think that was Falmouth. So in front of us is St. Kevern, better known to sailors and fishermen as the Mannacles.’

‘The Mannacles?’ Jenny gasped.

‘Yes, the Mannacles,’ Mr. P. announced, looking past the front of the boat and into the mist. ‘Many ships have gone down on the Mannacles, but not us, Jenny, not us.’

As you know, I’m not a sea-faring man myself, but I’ve lived my life by the sea, and I know the tales. I know the dangers. I know where they are. I’ll point them out to you, boy, and you’ll steer us through. I have faith in you, Sam, and that is all I need.’

‘Tell us. Tell us what you know,’ Sam said eagerly, always ready for a tale.

‘Round here, the rocks stand out of the water like church spires, tall and deadly to any ship that loses its way.’

Dong... Dong... Dong... Dong...

‘Do you hear that?’

Sam nodded as Mr. P. turned to meet his eyes through the eerie mist sweeping over the boat and consuming it.

‘That’s the sound of the bell buoy. People round these parts paid over a thousand and one hundred pounds for that two hundred years ago, so that souls might be saved on nights like these.’

Sam felt a shiver run through his body after hearing the lonely cries of the bell buoy. It floated out there all alone, bobbing up and down on the black mire, lost in the mist, calling out and warning people their lives were in peril. Now, it called out to Sam across the cold and deadly sea.

‘This is the Mannacles reef, and it has no mercy,’ Mr. P. continued. ‘It is two and a half miles wide and stretches out from the shore for over a mile; most of it is just below the surface of the water. It’s covered in jagged edges and craggy spires, ready to rip the hull open on any ship.’

Now I’ll tell you about the fateful night a transport ship was bringing the Ninth Dragoon Guards back from the Napoleonic war in 1807. She was called the *Revenge*. Our men were fighting in France; my great granddad was one of them. The battle raged, and we suffered heavy losses and were forced back across Spain, enduring terrible godforsaken conditions. Hundreds died, starving, wounded, and beaten. The poor crippled horses were shot, and the men’s morale couldn’t have been lower, but at last the Dragoons reached the coast and boarded the *Revenge*, relieved they were finally going home.

They boarded her on the nineteenth of January at Corunna in Spain and suffered turbulent winds and waves, which lashed her sides as they crossed the Bay of Biscay. But they passed safely and rounded the Lizard late on the night of the twenty-sixth of January, heading for Penzance. It was a cold and bitter night; the winds were howling in from the east, and the white mist covered the perils that lay beneath the waters. It was the twenty-sixth of January 1807 at just after two o’clock in the morning when the *Revenge* struck the reef. The Mannacles ripped into her, tearing the bottom from her hull like ripping flesh from a man’s bones. Water gushed in, and men were screaming and crying and gurgling on blood and salt water. Three Officers: Major Fathersham, Captain Duckinfield, and Lieutenant Davids along with one hundred soldiers all perished. Death was everywhere; corpses floated all over these waters in the mist—my great grandfather’s, too—and the whole coast along here was like a deathly grave.

But that wasn't the end of it, as I said. The Mannacles have no mercy. She's never had her fill; so on that very same night only two and a half hours later, she struck again. This time against the poor souls of the Brig of War, *The Lady Rose*. One hundred and thirty men and twenty passengers...'

'Oh stop! Stop,' Jenny said. 'I don't want to know anymore.'

Mr. P. turned and smiled from beneath his dark hood into Sam's eyes, sending him a chill.

'It's not me, you understand. In fact, I quite enjoy it, but I think you're frightening Jenny.' Sam said, putting his arm around her shoulder. He could feel her shivering.

'It's not that, I don't mind the stories. It's just so, so cold and so spooky out here,' she said.

Suddenly, an eerie echoing *boom* broke the silence. It was a ship's foghorn in the distance. Jenny jumped and squealed, and Sam held his breath, listening. Thirty seconds passed in silence, and again it boomed out of the veiled whiteness for five seconds. Then there was silence once more except for the chiming of the bell buoy in the distance, and the steady chug of the *Padstow Lady's* engine.

'It can't be a ship, can it? Not now. It can't be a ship coming onto the reef, heading toward us?' Sam yelled to the old man.

'No, Sam, it can't be a ship. They must know the reef is here, surely they must know, surely they can see the lights. There must be lights up there on top of the cliff somewhere?' Jenny cried.

Boom! It sounded again even louder.

'Listen, Mr. P., it's getting closer,' Sam shouted.

'No, Sam, look; it's coming from the lighthouse,' Jenny cried out.

‘I see it,’ he said, pointing out the intermittent white light beaming weakly through the mist.

‘Yes, children, we must be rounding the Lizard,’ The old man confirmed. ‘There’s the lighthouse up there on the edge of the cliff. Look...can you see the two stacks? It’ll not be long now.’

Mr. P. was right, and before long the little *Padstow Lady* had crossed the bay harbouring Penzance, Newlyn, and then Mousehole.

Thick mist still surrounded them. On the shore to their right large, grey boulders were stacked one on top of another, rising high into the air, becoming lost in the dark mist. Other boulders lower down disappeared beneath the surface of the waves.

‘Nearly there now, Sam. Lamorna Cove is just around the next bend,’ Mr. P. said.

Sam felt relieved. It had been an arduous journey, and his arm ached from holding the steering column steady for so long. He was tired, cold, and tetchy.

‘What time is it, Mr. P.?’

‘Why do you ask?’ he replied, looking at his watch.

‘I want to know how long it has taken us to get here. Don’t forget we have to get home, too.’

‘It’s twelve-thirty.’

‘Twelve-thirty! Oh my God, I’m going to be in such big trouble,’ Jenny fretted. ‘My mum’s probably phoning the police right now.’

‘I never thought of that.’ Sam looked at Mr. P. concerned. ‘I hope we’re not going to get you into too much trouble.’

‘Don’t worry about me, lad. I’m not going to get into trouble.’ Then he sniggered secretively.

‘Well...my mum won’t be phoning the police. She knows me too well. I stay out until all hours. The only problem is she knows I’m with you, Mr. P., and my dad is home tonight. So you’re certain to get some flak for it.’

Mr. P. smiled. ‘That’s okay, boy.’

Jenny defended her parents. ‘They’re bound to be worried about us with Johnny missing, and everyone’s thinking he’s been kidnapped or murdered or something. They’re going to be a bit more cautious about their kids, aren’t they?’

‘Yeah, you’re right,’ Sam agreed. ‘But my mum won’t phone the police,’ he repeated with a tinge of disappointment.

Sam brought the boat around and followed the rocks as they fell away into Lamorna Cove.

The grey rocks gave way higher up to broken, black slate, and the large mound looked like it could slide into the sea at any minute.

The white mist still hung in the air, partially covering the mount but not enough to hide the enormity of it completely.

To the left was a small harbour wall, about twenty feet high, which protected a tiny slipway for launching small boats and dinghies. In front of them stood a row of cottages, some with their lights still burning in the windows.

‘Sam, cut the engine,’ Mr. P. whispered, his finger pressed firmly to his lips.

He did as Mr. P. asked, and the little boat glided in toward the tiny horseshoe beach.

‘Is that where we are going, Mr. P., into those cottages over there?’

‘No, look up,’ he said pointing, his crooked finger aiming up onto the slate hill, above and to the right of the cottages.

There, a large house stood alone, frighteningly dark and foreboding, looking down over the bay.

‘Up there, lad. That’s where I want you to go.’

Chapter Ten

Schooner Stevenson

‘Okay, Sam, it’s up to you now. You know what we’re looking for, don’t yer?’ Mr. P. climbed over the side of the boat onto the tide-lapped sand.

The old man’s bulky shape was barely visible in the mist. His voice slithered in ghost-like whispers along the boat to where Sam and Jenny sat. He moved about the front of the boat, gathering rope between his hands then heaving his body backward, lifting the front of it firmly up onto the sand. Sam thought it was unnatural for a man his age to lift a boat up like that, especially with him and Jenny on board.

If anything, the mist had thickened, obscuring most of the house on the slate hill. At times, even the yellow glow from the front porch light disappeared completely. The mist crawled across the hillside in layers of ever changing density. The door slowly reappeared, unveiling a large whitish yellow, oblong surround and the door itself.

‘Stay here, Jenny. You’ll be safe until I get back,’ Sam said, though he wasn’t sure it was true. He realised he was scared for her.

‘But...’ Jenny started to argue, still holding the Aegis shield to her chest.

‘But nothing. I’ve let you come this far, and now you must let me do the rest on my own. I’ll be back soon,’ Sam promised, pressing down on her shoulder.

She looked up at him with large, worried eyes.

‘Be quick then, Sam. Be quick, and the first sign of trouble up there you just get out, you hear me?’

‘I will, Jen, don’t worry. This is one mission that’s not going to fail.’

The first part of the mission had been successful; they were here and still alive. It hadn't been easy with the cold, the mist, and the fear of being crashed upon the rocks. Sam had survived with pride and courage and was ready for whatever lay ahead. His success gave him a great upwelling of confidence and brought a broad smile to his face.

But as Sam moved away from Jenny and the Aegis shield, his resolve started to drain. Almost immediately, an atmosphere of turmoil and madness surrounded him, as surely as if it had been slipped over his head and pulled around him like a woolly jumper.

Oh, God, I'm not sure I can do this.

Sam clambered over the polished bench seats, his confidence waning, his smile gone.

He was outside the protection of the Aegis shield, and all he could think about was what lurked inside that horrible house, looming over the cove. Fear swept through him, sending pins and needles racing to the surface of his skin. Even looking at its ominous shape made him want to run away and hide. Sam could not understand his dread. The house stood there, a dark shape broken by the mist, but it was still and quiet. No one was around to disturb him, and Jenny and Mr. P. were close by. However, extraordinary, paralyzing feelings filled him with anxiety and fear.

Jenny watched him. Sam had spoken bravely to her only seconds earlier as if he were a man, as if nothing could bother him, strong and tough. Nothing could stand in his way.

What will she think of me if I turn and run?

Sam moved over the seats and climbed out onto the black sand.

Johnny's grandfather's slate grey eyes gazed down at him, cold and lifeless, from beneath the hood of his black, oilskin jacket. 'Five strands of weed, three knots,' he reminded Sam coldly.

'I know, but where shall I look? I haven't got a clue where it is.' Desperation filtered through Sam's quivering voice.

'Where would you keep your most valuable possession?'

'In a safe,' he replied.

'Would you? I wouldn't. If somebody wanted your most valuable possessions, that's the first place they would look. And you would surrender it, by gun or by knife, so no, not the safe.'

'Then where? Where shall I look?'

'You will have to explore each room silently, unheard and unseen. If you wake them and they catch you, God knows what they will do to you. Just don't get caught. If you hear them moving around, get out of there quickly. They should be asleep now. It's late, very late, later than we ever intended to be. You shouldn't have a problem so long as you are quiet.'

'I can't do it. I thought I could, but I can't,' Sam confessed. 'I'm afraid to go in. I don't understand it. It's only a house, but when I look at it... Oh, God, don't make me go in.'

'It's not just a house, Sam. It's Schooner's house, and you must go in. If not for yourself, then do it for Johnny. You're his only hope.'

'I know. Those voices are back. I can hear them louder here than I could back home, and I couldn't hear them at all when I sat next to Jenny.'

'It's because you have moved away from the shield, boy. That's all.'

Sam's head was filled with fear and furore, and Johnny's voice continued whispering through the sea, '*Save me, Sam. Save me.*'

'I don't know, Mr. P., I think the sea witch is stronger here than she is back home. It somehow seems more overwhelming. I know it doesn't make sense, especially if Hades' Gate is back in the bay. There's an atmosphere here chilling me through and frightening me like nothing I've experienced, except for that night when I lost Johnny. And what if it's not there, the pendant? What if I just can't find it?' Sam cried, desperately looking for a way out.

'Then at least you will have tried, and that's all you can do,' Mr. P. said calmly.

Sam was really panicking now.

'I never thought I'd be so scared. I've done some things, some dishonest things, stupid things, and it never bothered me before, but this...it just doesn't feel right. You know when you get those gut feelings...'

'Gut feelings? A lad your age? I don't think so. If you had gut feelings, then you would have known not to take Johnny out in *The Sea Witch* in the first place,' Mr. P. said, flaying Sam's guilt.

'Oh, God, don't say its name. Not now, not now.'

'Then you must know it's not gut feelings you're experiencing, It's just nerves; that's all, and anyone would have them, not just you. You haven't the knowledge to know what gut feelings are. Do you know what I think gut feelings are, Sam? They are people's brains, subconsciously deciphering their chances of winning or losing, and you, a fourteen year old boy, can't have enough experiences to do that, not in situations like these.'

‘You’d be surprised at how much experience I’ve had. Anyway, you said the law says lads my age are responsible for our own actions, so the law must think we have gut feelings.’

‘Do it for Johnny, Sam, if not for yourself. If you don’t, I guarantee you’ll be shipped away within the week. The police will come around to your house, and they’ll listen to your gibberish talk, and then they’ll take you. And if they don’t, then I’ll do you in myself.’

Sam took a step back, shocked. He never expected Johnny’s grandfather to say anything like that. He hadn’t imagined he could be so ruthless. Sam glared angrily into the old man’s eyes. He hated the old dog for a moment.

‘So, I don’t have much choice then, do I?’

‘Not if you want to remain free,’ Mr. P. replied.

‘Then I’ll go and take a look around, but if anyone so much as moves in there, I’m gone.’

Johnny’s grandfather patted Sam on the back.

‘Good lad, Sam, good lad.’

Sam lowered his head and walked into the mist behind the row of cottages, the boat on the sand disappearing behind him. A shale path, edged with grass and weed, passed by the six small gardens. Sam could barely see in the gloom. He tried to walk along the edge of the grass to stop the scrunching of shale under his feet. The path began to incline quickly, and before long, he found himself looking down over the grey rooftops of the cottages and into the cove where Jenny sat motionless in the little boat.

In front of him, the black slate house appeared even bigger and scarier than it had from the beach. Sam scraped along the inside of the stone-stacked garden wall,

crouching silently, hidden in the blackness. He moved on like a trench-man, back bent and determined to be unseen amongst the shrubs and bushes at the side of the house near the window.

Eventually, he rose up from beneath the windowsill and peered into a darkened room. Dark crimson curtains were slightly adrift, allowing him to see some of the room's interior. It was empty and silent. His fingers plucked at the window edges, but it didn't move. It was locked. Further to the back of the house, large stone brickwork disappeared into the incline of the black slate hill. It was unlike anything Sam had seen before.

After a moment, he noticed a small window had been left slightly ajar.

His chest tightened and thudded as if it wanted to burst. His skin became clammy with sweat. If he was being honest, Sam hoped all the windows were locked. He didn't want to go in, but slowly he pulled up the window and climbed inside.

'I bet you wouldn't do this for me, Johnny,' Sam breathed, sliding down from a worktop next to a sink and taps. 'It's a utility room and very nice, too,' he murmured, recognising the dark outline shapes of the under-worktop dishwasher and dryer. Large cupboards lined the walls. Beautiful cornices and edging, quality workmanship, and the sheer plush and size of the room reeked of money.

In front of him and to the left, a closed door was visible from the small amount of light coming in through the window. Further to the left, another door was slightly ajar. Sam departed the room, cat-like, trying not to notice that below the wall cupboards something moved. It pushed the wall outward, forming the shape of the witch's face, and its hand reached out to touch him. Sam refused to acknowledge her, convincing

himself he was imagining things. The witch followed silently; he could see her from the corner of his eye until the wall finished at the door casing where she disappeared.

Sam found himself in the kitchen, and again, it had all the mod cons but nothing unusual. And then he saw a large, white, three-dimensional wall sculpture of a sea witch blowing wind into the sails of a ship. He crept over to the round dining table; it was white with a thick bevelled glass top. Sam ran his fingers over the cold surface, fascinated. The bloody thing probably cost more than the house Sam lived in. Beneath the glass was a beautifully painted map of *The Southwest of England*, scribed in an Oldie World style. The four points of a compass were painted in pastel blue and red and edged in black and gold leaf. The map reached out to the table's rim. Shaking his head in wonderment, Sam stepped back to view the legs that came up from one central column and separated into four beautiful maidens, again in white. The maidens' hair curved like sea serpents, spreading out to support the table top, and the base stretched out like squid or octopus appendages, holding it steady. The sight of the legs gave him a chill and reminded him of the reason he was there in the first place.

How much money does old man Schooner have anyway? What a house!

The house was silent except for the ticking of the kitchen clock, and the voices in Sam's head. They started to change, rubbing his nerves raw. His chest was tight again, and his breath came in shallow gulps. Johnny's whispers were beginning to fade and were now transforming into much more sinister sounds.

It was the witch's voice getting louder and clearer. In a whisper, as if the words were coming off the sea, she heckled him.

'Where are you going, Sam? Where are you going? What are you doing, Sam? What are you doing?'

Sam shook his head in an attempt to throw it from his tormented mind, but he could not.

His gaze focused on the large blue slate tiles of the floor, perfectly smooth, and separated by light grey lines. He walked across them quickly, feeling the need to escape the room and the voices in his head. As he neared the door, he saw a large hall with what looked like beige carpet and a white staircase. The porch light shone onto it through the large glass panels in the door.

Suddenly, Sam was alerted by a sound. He wasn't sure what it was he heard, but... Sam's heart stopped. He held his breath and froze in place. Something, or someone, was moving. Sounds travelled from the top of the stairs—a rustling sound, a chesty cough, a child's cough possibly. Sam had been aware he wasn't alone in the house, but this brought the reality of it home. Other people were moving, breathing, sleeping, and possibly... *Oh, God, no. Awakening!*

He couldn't do it. That much was clear now. The fear of coming face to face with another person in the house was too much, even for him. He could not step out into the hall, climb those stairs, slip into the bedrooms, and open those drawers, not whilst people lay asleep beside him. He shuddered just thinking about their startled eyes popping open, bodies jumping up from their beds in fright and screaming.

'What you doing, Sam? What you doing?' The whispers continued.

The walls were moving again. Sea witches swam through the plaster as if it were water. He turned and crept quietly back through the kitchen into the utility room. He was about to leave when he noticed a closed door to his left.

'Where are you going, Sam? Where are you going?' The whisper grew quicker and quicker in pace. *'Where are you going, Sam? Where are you going?'*

Sam gripped the handle of the door and softly eased it down until it clicked. Slowly, he pushed the door open. The room was in darkness, and the little bit of light from the utility room hardly helped. He felt around on the wall for a light switch. Quickly, one of the witches moved her hand, reaching wallpaper fingers to touch him. Sam moved his searching hand just in time. Breath hissing through his teeth at his close escape, he stepped further into the room and away from the wall.

‘What do you want?’ a cold, emotionless voice asked.

Sam gasped; he saw no one, just an empty voice in the darkness. Sam did not speak, and a cold shock ran down his spine.

‘Well, you must want something or you wouldn’t be here. What do you want?’ There was a rustling sound followed by the striking of a match. Sam watched it spark and flame. A hand, old and knobbly, lit the wick and replaced the glass on a small lantern.

‘I’m sorry; I didn’t expect to find anybody in here.’

‘You wouldn’t, would you? Stuck in a hole in the ground next to the washing machine and the dirty clothes basket.’

An old man confronted Sam, not old like Grandpa P. but much older, at least eighty, almost ancient. His face was covered in lines and white hairs where there shouldn’t be any, and his skin sagged badly, drooping below his completely black eyes. He looked fragile and weak, almost bald except for a few thin, long hairs, which fell across his head and onto his face. He had grey stubble around his chin, and his ears looked too big for his head.

He sat in an old, worn upholstered rocking chair, and he wore neglected grey pyjama bottoms and an old dressing gown. Sam felt sorry for him immediately.

The flame from the lantern cast an amber glow on the walls, but as it moved, dark shadows swayed backward and forward, like ghosts dancing around the room. Sam got a faint whiff of seaweed, and behind the old man, two witches were moving back and forth, silently possessing the room as if guarding him like sentinels.

On the left wall was the old man's bed. He hadn't slept in it recently; the sheets were laid straight and tucked in at the edges. A cabinet stood next to it, and there was a large dressing table further down the room.

'Are you just a common thief, boy? You look a bit young to go robbing houses,' the old man commented.

Sam realised who he might be talking to.

'Are you Schooner Stevenson?'

'Who's asking?' he replied sharply.

'I'm not sure I want to tell you that, seeing as I'm robbing your house and all.'

The old man laughed.

'Good answer, boy. And what is it you came here to rob? Anything in particular?'

'As a matter of fact, there was one thing,' Sam told him.

'Go on then. Enlighten me.'

Sam stepped closer to the old man. 'The witch's pendant.'

The old man glared back, motionless, and the voices in Sam's head stopped immediately. A few seconds passed before the witches made a long *ooo* sound.

'You are Schooner Stevenson, aren't you?' Sam asked him again.

'I am, but what is this pendant? I don't have a pendant, and I've never heard of a pendant.'

'I expected you to say that.'

He stared into Stevenson's dark eyes.

'Five strands of weed, three knots.'

Schooner gasped, holding his chest. He was stunned, and the witch made another loud *ooo* sound in Sam's head. Shadows fluttered around the walls behind the old man.

'How did you...' he asked, shock making his voice thin and high pitched.

'Never mind that, just give—'

'You don't want the pendant, lad. I can assure you,' Stevenson told Sam.

'Well, you've had it for long enough, and you've done alright for yourself out of it, haven't you?'

'Oh, you think so, do you?'

'Yes, I do. Look at the house, how did you get all this?'

'I suppose through the pendant in a way, but I didn't know what it was...or what it could do. I just found it.'

'Where is it, Schooner?' Sam threatened, glaring at him, whilst at the same time trying to ignore the spectres staring back through the wallpaper, constantly moving and thrashing their fingers aggressively toward him.

'Let me tell you something, boy. When I first got the thing, I didn't know what it was and even now. I've never heard it called a pendant before. Not long after I got it...'

'You mean when Tommy disappeared?' Sam asked angrily.

'Yes, when Tommy... Anyhow, I got this voice in my head telling me to sell my boat business and buy a trawler. Crazy really, it was a good little business, but things went well for me. The nets were full whenever and wherever I cast. When others caught nothing, my nets were always full, and I never did see a swell or storm appear where I

went to fish. I bought a second boat, and she, too, brought me nothing but fortune. I harbour them at Newlyn. Well, my son does now. But she keeps coming to see me ...’

‘The witch you mean?’

‘Yes, the witch. She keeps coming in my dreams, hounding me she does. ‘Throw that weed back into the sea,’ she screeches. I know I cannot. It has to have some value for her to keep going on like that. Then she threatened to sink my boats and kill my kin. So I held her whatever it was...weed...over the fire and squeezed it in my hands. She didn’t like that, panicking, wailing, sobbing in my head. Anyway, I saved her pendant thing, but she knows... She knows if she hurts one of mine, it goes in the fire.

And one other thing, I will never dare take it out on a boat. When I go out, it stays home because I know she will sink me if I took it with me. So you see, Mr. Robber Boy, although you may know about it, I cannot let you have it,’ Schooner sniggered. ‘You could say it’s my family’s life insurance policy.’

‘They possess your house. You know that, don’t you? They’re here in this room with us now. I can see them moving beneath the wallpaper,’ Sam said calmly.

‘And you’re not scared?’

Sam could see Schooner expected he would be.

‘I am, but I’ve seen worse over the past week or so.’

‘They do more than possess your house, you know,’ Schooner warned.

‘What do you mean?’

‘If I give you the pendant, they will possess you, too.’

Schooner pulled back his dressing gown, revealing his chest. Old grey hairs on white, withered flesh—and then the witch’s head appeared, stretching his skin and screaming. She was moving, and Sam was repulsed by the pain in old Schooner’s face.

‘Get me my pendant, Sam Get me my pendant, and you can have your friend,’ the witch wailed.

Sam jumped back, panicking.

‘Bollocks to that! I’m out of here,’ Sam shouted, fear and sickness coursing through him. He turned to run through the door, trying not to scream in terror as the old man thrashed about in his chair.

His escape came to a sudden halt in the doorway when his face firmly embedded in a dark oilskin jacket. It was wet and cold upon his skin, and he looked up startled, meeting the wearer’s eyes.

‘Where yer goin, Sam? Stand there and don’t move,’ Johnny’s grandfather said firmly.

He looked past Sam to Schooner, who was still writhing in his chair.

‘So, you’re still alive after all these years, you old blaggard. Where’s the pendant, Schooner?’ he bellowed angrily.

The house-witches fluttered their capes silently, back and forth along the wall, and reached out plucking at Sam and Mr. P.

‘Check under the bed, quickly. We haven’t got much time.’

Now there was urgency about Mr. P. that Sam hadn’t seen before.

He lifted the mattress. ‘There’s nothing here.’ Sam said.

‘Then check the drawers.’

Sam ran over to the long chest, opened the drawers frantically, and tossed the contents onto the floor.

Mr. P. grabbed hold of the old man by his gown, ripping it aside and baring his chest and shoulders. There it was, tied around the top of his right arm.

‘I’ve got it, Sam. I’ve got it,’ he said, ripping it from the withered flesh recklessly.

Schooner cried out in pain and loss as Mr. P. passed the pendant to Sam.

‘Right, you can leave now, quickly, through the window from whence you came.’

Sam wrapped the pendant around his hand, gripping it tightly. Adrenaline rushed through his body.

Johnny’s grandfather pulled a short axe from beneath his black coat.

‘No, Mr. P,’ Sam cried, ‘don’t do it!’

‘I’ve got to, Sam. I have no choice.’

‘You have, Mr. P., you have. He’s not worth it,’ Sam pleaded.

‘Just leave, boy. Leave now before it’s too late,’ Mr. P. shouted, pushing Sam away.

But before Sam had a chance to move, the axe came down across Schooner’s head, flicking red across Sam’s face. He ran from the room, his ears filled with the sounds of violent death. He threw himself headfirst through the utility window and onto the cold, wet ground below.

‘Jesus Christ, I can’t believe that. Jeez!’ Sam cried, running away from the murderous scene and into the mist.

By the time he reached the *Padstow Lady*, his chest was ready to burst, and his heart was thumping so violently, it felt as if it was on the surface of his skin.

He bent down panting, holding onto the edge of the boat and cupping handfuls of ice-cold seawater onto his face.

‘Oh, God. Oh, God. That was horrible,’ he cried.

‘Have you got it?’ Jenny asked impatiently.

Still breathing heavily and barely able to talk, he nodded. 'Yes, Jenny, I've got it.' He showed her the pendant wrapped around his hand and then pushed the boat out onto the water, climbing on board. The *Padstow Lady* didn't let him down. She fired into life immediately, and Sam gripped the pendant, guaranteeing a safe passage back home.

Surprisingly, the mist cleared almost as soon as the little boat left Lamorna Cove. The moon shone down onto the water, lighting up the shoreline so that every spike and crack of rock protruding from the sea was easily seen. The air remained still, and the waves barely moved.

Sam took the rudder and turned the throttle gentle, whilst Jenny sat close, pressing against him.

'Are you okay? You were gone for such a long time,' she inquired.

'Oh, Jenny, it was awful,' he said, shaking his head and screwing up his face as if he had put something horrible into his mouth. 'There are witches in there and the old man Schooner, and I could hear other people upstairs. I didn't dare go up there, though.'

'Witches, what do you mean, witches? Did they try to catch you?'

Jenny turned her adoring gaze on Sam.

'No, it wasn't like that. They're in the walls, the ceilings, the very fabric of the house. It's as if they're a part of it, the house I mean, flushing their thoughts through it and making the house theirs. The atmosphere in there is evil, Jenny, evil and deceitful. I felt like I was being watched all the time. Even though I was only there for such a short time, I sensed they were trying to influence me, trying to take over my thoughts. But I didn't let them. I promise you, I did not let them.'

'And what about Schooner?' she asked.

‘As I said, he’s there all right, but his body is distorted and falling apart. It was horrible. Schooner’s been under their spells for so long, and he’s taken so much from them. He’s completely possessed.’

‘What do you mean completely possessed?’

Sam knew Jenny loved every word of his tale.

‘Well, I remember Mr. P. telling me that everybody pays in one way or another. For everything good, there is something bad, and if you take it without paying for it, then it will get you in the end.’

‘What does that mean? You’re not making any sense.’

‘Don’t you see? Schooner made all that money but without really working for it. The witch told him what to do, how to get it. She told him to buy the fishing boats, and she filled his nets for fifty years. He’s paid for it now, all right. Even though he didn’t work for it, he’s paid for it now. You see, with every wish he made for fish or money, the witch took over his house and possessed his body more and more. Now he is so full of evil, it shows itself physically through his skin. Jenny, you’re not going to believe this, but it actually came out of his chest and told me to take the pendant from him. The sea witch betrayed him. And the house...the house is the most beautiful house I’ve ever seen. But Schooner, he lives in darkness and squalor. He prefers it that way, I could tell.’

‘Goodness me, that is unbelievable,’ she said, slumping back into the seat.

Sam looked down at his hand.

‘Show me it, Sam. Show me what it looks like,’ Jenny urged him, following his gaze down to the pendant.

He opened his hand revealing the emerald green strands of weed, tied together in three knots. It glistened with freshness as if it had just been plucked from the sea, but that was impossible. It must have been at least a thousand years old.

‘It doesn’t look much, does it?’ Jenny said, disappointment plain in her tone.

‘But that just makes it more interesting, don’t you think?’

‘What do you mean?’ Jenny asked, confused again.

‘Well to us, it doesn’t look much at all. In fact, if we didn’t know what it was, we would probably throw it into the sea without a second thought. That means it’s the power of what it can do, and not what it looks like, that is so important to the witch.’

‘Oh, yes, I never thought of that,’ she agreed. A smile crossed her features followed by a moment of tense excitement.

‘Well, think about this,’ Sam said, holding up the weed and smiling. ‘We have Johnny’s life right here in our hands.’

Jenny picked up the Aegis shield from the seat next to her, wrapping her arms around it and holding it to her chest like a doll.

Sam sensed its nearness because the voices were fading again.

‘What do think would happen if we made one wish on it?’ Jenny asked.

Sam had already had the same thought, but he hadn’t dared say it. He thought about the house on the edge of the rocks, his dad’s job, paying the bills, making their house into the most beautiful house in Cornwall. For a moment, he felt the burden of making serious decisions. He could help his parents and forget about Johnny, pretend he never existed. With the pendant in his possession, no one could touch him, not the police or the people in the town or Johnny’s grandfather, not if he wished their thoughts away. But Sam had seen what happened to people like that—Schooner and the house at

Lamorna Cove. It gave him a chill just thinking about the way Schooner died. The old man's life was over. He had sold his soul to the Devil along with Francis what's his name, and although he didn't dare mention it, he wondered what had become of Mr. P. and why Jenny hadn't asked where he was?

The sun was close to rising when Jenny and Sam arrived back at the harbour. Over the sea the sky was still velvet black, but above the estuary valley, a pale blue lined the hilltops and blended gradually upward into beautiful shades of purple. Beyond the purple, it merged into the dark navy of monstreal blue and then black. The colours reflected on the water, forming a rich tapestry of undulating beauty.

The *Padstow Lady* chugged in the last few feet alongside *The Sea Witch* and the other mackerel boats. Sam cut the engine. Jenny slept through the last part of the journey home, her head resting safely on Sam's shoulder.

'Wake up, Jenny. We're back,' Sam said quietly.

Slowly, she lifted her head from his shoulder and yawned. 'What...already?'

Sam smiled at her. It wasn't *already* for him; it felt like forever. 'I wish I could have slept all the way home like you.'

'Ha, ha, Sam... Careful what you wish for, especially whilst you're carrying that around with you.'

I know Jenny is only joking, but it is a point worth thinking about.

Sam tied up the boat and stepped out onto the slippery, stone steps leading up to the quay. He held her steady whilst Jenny stepped over.

'Thanks, Sam,' she said.

Chapter Eleven

Five Strands of Weed, Three Knots

When Sam opened his eyes the following morning, the sun was shining in through the bedroom window. The curtains were pulled back, and he knew he was late for school again. His Mum had come into the room earlier, telling him he was in trouble and he had to get out of bed, but he had ignored her, and eventually, she left seething and slamming the door behind her.

He felt guilty about that. Sam didn't like seeing Mum upset, but he knew Johnny's life and his own freedom were more important than school or creating a few minor rifts at home.

He reached over the side of his bed and eased out a small, brown wooden chest. The top was curved and ornately decorated in carved symmetrical patterns. There were no inscriptions on it, and it was made from chunky, thick wood.

Sam pulled up the small metal fastener and lifted the lid, revealing the witch's pendant. Five long, bright green strands of weed, tied in three places. He had never seen the pendant in daylight before. It still looked moist, as though it had just been plucked from the sea. He was gratified he had succeeded in getting the pendant. It certainly hadn't been easy. Only a few days earlier, Sam hadn't known what the pendant was, what it looked like, or where it might be. Entering that house had taken every ounce of courage he could muster. For a moment, a warm smile swept across his face, and he was excited by his success. Then he thought about the witches patrolling the walls of the

house, about Schooner and Mr. P., and the fact he had deserted the old man, possibly leaving him to die at the hands of Schooner's family and those terrible witches.

Sam took a deep breath and sighed. His head fell back onto the pillow. How quickly the days had gone. Tomorrow night, he would once more take out *The Sea Witch* and bargain for the life of his friend.

Carefully, he placed the green pendant back into the box, closed the lid, and pushed it back under the bed and out of sight.

Sam was on the phone with Mr. P. when Mum came into the dining room from the kitchen.

'Left me out there last night did yer, Sam?' Mr. P. said in a strange voice. 'Left me out there to die, did yer? Not very nice, that.'

Sam slumped into the dining chair and began stumbling over his words. 'No, Mr. P... It...it wasn't like that...yer...yer...yer told me to go.'

Tears began welling in Sam's eyes.

'I told you to get out. Get out of the house. I never told yer to leave me in that godforsaken place.'

Mr. P.'s voice was filled with dark anger and revenge.

'I'm goin ta get yer for that, Sam. I'm goin ta get ya...' Sam threw the phone down, sweating and shaking, his head spinning. 'Oh, Sam, what am I going to do with you?' Mum asked, getting ready to lay into him in her very highest-pitched voice. 'The school's been on the phone again, and they said you've barely been near the place. What's going on, Sam? Please tell me.'

Mum dropped onto the chair next to him and reached out, gently squeezing the top of his arm. 'I'm so worried about you. I know something's going on, something you're not telling me about.'

'Everything's going to be alright, Mum, I promise.'

'But why can't you tell me? I'm sure I can help if only you'd tell me.'

Sam started to get up.

'Just leave it, Mum. I've got it sorted,' he told her.

'How can it be? You don't listen to me. You don't go to school. Eventually they'll take you away from us. You know they will, don't you, Sam?' Concern was evident on her face.

If only she knew.

'The school's already told me they are informing the Educational Welfare Officer at Social Services.' 'And telling him what?' Sam replied, raising his voice.

'Telling him that you aren't going to school, of course. I've warned you already; they won't put up with it.'

Sam sighed.

'Okay, Mum, I'm going to school now.'

'You're still going to get a late mark, Sam. Turning up at dinner time isn't going to be good enough for them. And frankly, it's not good enough for me. Things have got to change... Sam, you're only fourteen-years-old.' She paused for a moment to catch her breath.

'I want you in at eight. And I want you to stay in, in bed, early, so you can get up for school bright-eyed and bushy-tailed tomorrow.'

‘Okay, Mum,’ Sam agreed, looking up at her. ‘Promise?’ insisted Mum with a worried smile.

Sam fell silent lowering his eyes. *How can I promise? I have to be out there in that terrible boat tomorrow night. I cannot tell her. She won’t understand, She’ll stop me from going, and Johnny will be lost forever.*

‘Right, I’d better get off then.’ Sam began to move away.

‘Promise,’ she insisted again, staring at him without a smile.

Sam crossed his fingers behind his back.

‘Okay, I promise.’

Mum’s smile shone through the worried expression on her face. ‘Here’s your lunch, Sam,’ she said, handing him a small plastic bag tied in a loose knot at the top. ‘Now, please make it to school and don’t let me down.’

Sam collected his bike from the shed and headed down the dirt track. Before long, he was descending quickly around the white rock, and the town came into view. There were black, white, and blue flashing lights all along the quayside. Crowds of people were gathered, forming a tight clump at the end of the harbour wall where the light flashed. Police were attempting to keep people away from the edge. As he came closer, crossing the estuary bridge, Sam saw Jenny heading away from the crowd.

He screeched to a halt in front of her.

‘What’s going on?’ Sam asked, worried and bemused by all the commotion. ‘They’ve found a body in the water.’

‘What?’ Sam hollered, instantly thinking of Johnny, a sickening feeling burning his throat. ‘It’s not Johnny, is it? Tell me it’s not.’

‘I dunno, Sam, couldn’t get near enough. The police aren’t telling me anything. I heard some people muttering though. They said it was an old man.’

‘Schooner... It must be Schooner...’

‘What do you mean it must be Schooner?’ Jenny asked, stepping away from the bike. ‘You said you saw Schooner only last night in that horrible house.’

‘Yes. I did.’

‘Then how can it be if...if...’

A tear welled on the lower lid of Jenny’s eye.

Sam worried she was contemplating that he had been lying to her all along. ‘I told you. Schooner was there.’

‘But those people said it looks like the body has been in the water for quite some time...maybe a week or more.’ ‘But it can’t be,’ Sam said, distressed.

Jenny looked thoughtful. ‘Sam, what if it’s not Schooner, but Johnny’s grandfather?’

‘What do you mean Johnny’s grandfather? That’s impossible.’

‘Well, he’s not been seen since the night Johnny went missing.’

‘Yes, he has,’ Sam shouted at her, frustrated.

‘No. The police have been looking for him everywhere. Put out a nationwide APB on him, you know with him already being a murderer. Johnny went missing and he went missing all at the same time. I told you this age’s ago.’

‘What? We saw him last night and before that I told you I saw Mr. P. the day we fell out at his house.’

‘No, Sam, we didn’t see him.’

‘Yes, we did.’

‘Well, I didn’t and apparently neither did anyone else,’ Jenny insisted.

Sam could not believe what he was hearing.

‘Look, Jenny, I’ve seen him. We’ve both seen him. What are you talking about?’

‘Stop saying that.’ Jenny said angrily. ‘If he has been seen, where is he?’ ‘Jenny, we went to Grandpa P.’s house. Remember the day we...’

‘Yes, but I didn’t see him. I rode off? And I didn’t know he was missing then, only that he had eluded the police.’

Sam’s head was spinning. He was having flashbacks to a phone call less than an hour earlier, the boat trip to Lamorna Cove, the dark hood pulled back and revealing Mr. P.’s grinning grey face and cold eyes, staring at him through the mist. Then blood and violence, hefty arms swinging an axe in frenzied arcs amidst thudding sounds and gargled words lost in froth and blood. Shivers pricked Sam’s skin, cold and tingling. He found himself inside Mr. P.’s house, and it all seemed so real that he could almost smell it. He shook the visions away.

‘I’ve got to go. I’ve got to get out of here.’ Sam felt like he was about to lose his mind. ‘You were out there last night in the boat. Why are you doing this to me?’ He almost cried, sweat breaking out on his brow. He fought the urge to throw up.

His bike wobbled frantically as he set off toward the old man’s house.

I have to see him. I need to know if he is still alive, even if he is going to kill me.

‘Come back! Where are you going?’ Jenny shouted after him as he disappeared into another crowd making their way to the end of the harbour. *What is going on? She was there last night. Jenny was there in the boat with Mr. P. and me. It doesn’t make sense. Why would she say such things? Why would she deny he was there with us? Driving me*

crazy, that's what she's trying to do. She must be, there's no other explanation. But why? I thought she was my friend...

He had ridden a short way down the quayside when suddenly the bike came to a stop, as if it had hit a brick wall. But it wasn't a wall; it was the man in the black suit, holding onto the handlebars, his legs on either side of Sam's front wheel.

'Whoa, slow down, Sam,' the man said.

'What? You know my name?'

'Of course I do. I've been trying to talk to you for some time now. Been to the school, your attendance is not very good, ~~and~~ why do you keep running away from me?'

He stood upright and straightened his tie.

'I've spoken to the police already. They came up to my bedroom when I wasn't feeling too well.' 'What happened, Sam? Catch a chill, did you?'

'Do ya want ta move away from my bike?' Sam asked angrily, ignoring his question.

'Not yet, Sam. I want to ask you some questions first. As you've probably guessed, I am a police officer, but I'm not from around here.'

'I know that. You only showed up when all these weird things started happening.'

'Weird things, what weird things?' the officer probed.

Sam clammed up pursing his lips, and then a thought popped into his head.

'If you're a copper, how come you haven't been up to my house?'

'Because I didn't want to frighten you,' he said. 'I thought it might be better to send someone your mum and dad already knew. You know, a stranger showing up, asking questions, big bad detective and all that. I just wanted someone to have a quiet word with you. You do understand I just want to find Johnny safe and well, right? There'd be

no point upsetting your parents, not if there's no reason to. Trouble is, Sam, your friend Johnny, he's still missing, and you haven't given us any answers yet.'

Sam kept his head low. He didn't want to make contact with the officer's eyes for fear he might give himself away.

The man continued, 'You see, people tell me that you and Johnny Pothelswaite were always together.'

'Yes, we are, we were, I should say.'

'So, you should know where Johnny is or what has happened to him, yes?'

'Why? Why should I know?' Sam replied, agitated. 'I'm not his keeper; we're not stuck together, are we?'

'Okay, so when was the last time you saw Johnny?'

'Em...that must be over a week ago,' he answered nervously.

'Well, it would be; he's been missing for fourteen days now. So, like boats, do ya, Sam? Is that how you caught your chill?' the officer continued, barely pausing for a breath.

Sam began to sweat again. 'What do ya mean? Why would you ask that?'

'I hear some of the boys like to take the boats out, sort of like joyriding, but on water. Right. Are you one of those boys, you and Johnny?'

'Yes, some do, but not me or Johnny. We never take the boats out,' Sam said, shaking his head.

'So where were you on the fifth of September, the night Johnny went missing?'

Sam felt something choking his throat as he tried to speak. 'I... I was...'

'He was with me,' Jenny said, appearing from out of the crowd of people who were still moving in droves toward the harbour end for a look.

‘Arr, Jenny Chatter; I’m...’

‘I know who you are,’ she said. ‘You’re Detective Brindleblack, the psychologist and forensic investigator from London.’

‘I’m impressed, Miss Chatter,’ Detective Brindleblack said, smiling. ‘I’m not really from London though. I’m from around here originally. At any rate, this is where I grew up. So, where were the two of you last night? I know neither of you made school this morning. Late night was it?’

‘No, not really,’ Jenny replied.

‘Oh, I think it was,’ Brindleblack said with an air of certainty in his voice.

‘Yeah, well, you wouldn’t know, would ya?’ Sam said to him aggressively.

‘Now, there’s no need to get shirty, son,’ Brindleblack told him.

‘Who are you calling son? You ain’t my dad... Ouch!’ Sam yelled as Jenny elbowed him in the ribs.

‘Well, maybe we did stay out a little late last night, Officer,’ Jenny agreed, glaring at Sam before smiling at Brindleblack.

‘I know you did. The station received a call from your mother after one o’clock this morning. Worried sick she was, too, so I know there is something going on that you’re not telling me. Funny how you two are out most of the night, and then this turned up this morning.’

Brindleblack’s body shifted, and his head turned. He was referring to the corpse creating so much interest at the end of the harbour. ‘I think you know a lot more about this than you’re letting on.’

‘Push him into the sea, Sam,’ whispered the witch. ‘Push him in, and he’ll not bother ye no more.’

Sam cocked his leg over the bike and laid it on the floor.

‘Go on, Sam. Push him into the sea,’ she whispered again. ‘Do it, Sam. Do it! Marauding hands will drag him under, that scabby dog, down and down into deep water, where crabs will feed and flesh will flare. Push him in, Sam. Don’t be scared.’

Jenny gave a yelp of surprise as Sam leaped at the detective. ‘Arrg,’ he shouted, pushing Brindleblack backward.

Unbalanced, Brindleblack’s legs wobbled, and he tripped. Sam kept on pushing him backward toward the edge. The detective’s arms were flying everywhere, desperately trying to regain his balance.

‘Sam!’ Jenny screamed.

‘Hey... Hey!’ Brindleblack shouted, overwhelmed, his feet balancing on the edge, his arms swinging wildly. He teetered on the brink.

Jenny slammed into Sam’s side, rugby-tackling him away from the man, and knocking him onto the ground.

‘What do you think you’re doing? Have you gone completely mad?’ Jenny yelled. She stood up, almost in tears.

Meanwhile, noticing the commotion, two police officers came rushing over, and one grabbed Sam by the collar, roughly pulling him onto his feet.

‘What’s your game, laddy?’ he bellowed.

Detective Brindleblack regained his balance and straightened his coat.

‘Right, I think that’s just about enough from you. Do you realise you can be arrested for assaulting a police officer?’

Sam glared at him.

‘Take him down to the station. The girl, too. I think that it’s time we got to the bottom of all this; play time is over.’

Sam scowled at the man as he was dragged away toward the police car.

‘Oh, Sam, what have ye done?’ the witch cackled.

* * * *

At the police station, Sam sat opposite Detective Brindleblack and his associate, P.C. Clatterquake. She was better known to Sam as Lucy Love Lips, on account of the fact Sam and Johnny saw her only last year, up against the chippy wall in a lip lock with Freddie Beaumont, big Billy’s older brother. Lucy grew up in the town, and although she was much older than Sam, she knew him quite well.

He could tell by the way she twitched and squirmed around in her chair, she was uncomfortable with the situation, and that only made Sam more nervous, wondering what she knew or thought she knew.

‘See much of Freddie, do ya, Lucy?’ Sam said sarcastically.

‘Now’s not the time, Sam,’ Lucy replied, blushing a little.

He sniggered.

‘Yes, P.C. Clatterquake’s right. This is a very serious business,’ Brindleblack told him. ‘I don’t want to frighten you, but up to now, you are our number one suspect. Do you know what that means? It means all the evidence points to you.’

Brindleblack’s dark eyes bore into him, never flinching, and his face was stern and cold.

Sam stared back at him angrily. 'What evidence have you got? There is no evidence, is there?' Sam insisted, his heart pounding. He prayed Brindleblack was bluffing. 'There can't be any evidence because I haven't done anything wrong.'

'Well, Sam, let us mull it over and see where we end up. Tell me...how long have you lived here?'

'Five minutes.'

'Your house?' he said, agitated.

'I bet you already know, don't you?'

'One year, three weeks, and two days,' Brindleblack said smugly. 'But what I really want to know is why did you move from Warrington? It's such a long way. You don't need to move to the other end of the country to get away from vengeful neighbours.'

'We didn't have vengeful neighbours. Anyway, I'm not saying anything, not until Mum gets here. You have phoned for my mum, haven't you?' Sam asked, apprehension clear in his voice.

'Can't have been easy, uprooting, moving to a new area, your dad having to find a new job?'

'Err, phone call... Mum?'

'We were just about to do that,' Brindleblack replied. 'Can you pop out and ring Sam's mum, Constable? Tell her there's nothing to worry about, just need a little chat.'

Brindleblack folded his arms smugly, resting against the back of his chair. 'You know, Sam, Jenny's in the next room pouring her heart out right now, singing like a little bird. She'll not be thinking about you. She'll be trying to save her own skin. You can bet your life she'll blame everything on you, and I bet she hasn't asked for her mum, either.'

Lucy had already left the room, clunking the heavy door shut behind her. Sam was inflamed. ‘No, she won’t. Even if there were something to tell, she wouldn’t drop me in it.’

Brindleblack’s face changed instantly. Anger flared in his eyes, and he leaned across the table, his face inches from Sam. ‘Are you sure about that? Because I know I would if I was her. It’d be no fun losing all her family and friends and being locked up in some dump for God knows how many years.’

Sam was undeterred. ‘Like Mr. P., you mean?’

‘Exactly like Mr. P.,’ Brindleblack said firmly. ‘And look where he’s ended up.’ He sat back into his chair.

‘So it is him floating in the harbour,’ Sam said thoughtfully, and then he remembered why he was here, held against his will. Rage exploded from him, and he slammed his fist on the table. ‘I’m still not saying anything until my mum gets here. You can’t make me, you git!’ He glared at the detective, stubbornly refusing to give in.

‘God damn it, Sam, can’t you see I’m trying to help you?’ Detective Brindleblack shouted.

Sam pursed his lips and glared back at him.

Brindleblack looked down at the table, tapping his finger on the hard, wooden surface before he met Sam’s eyes. He changed in an instant—Sam thought he was about to leap at him in an uncontrollable rage, instead he picked up the Dictaphone and clicked the off button. Slowly placing it down, he leaned across the table, his eyes still locked on Sam.

‘What do you know about *The Sea Witch*?’ he whispered viciously.

Sam sniggered.

‘Woooo... Ghosts and ghouls,’ he said, shaking his hands, taunting.

‘Right. Okay...I’ll speak to you later when your mummy gets here,’ he said mocking him. The detective’s face flushed with anger, and he climbed to his feet and left the room, closing the door firmly behind him.

Wow, how does he know about The Sea Witch? He didn’t say anything about sea witches in front of Lucy Love Lips, but he wanted me to know that he knew something.

Why?

Chapter Twelve

Detective Brindleblack

The corridor was almost as cold and dull as the interview room, cream walls, no pictures, and a severe lack of windows. Detective Brindleblack was about to peer in through the peephole in the next cell when suddenly it opened.

The station super stepped out, closing the door quietly behind him. He ran his hand across his grey, messed hair and pulled straight his dark blue, zigzag patterned tie. . 'Did you tell the girl?' Brindleblack asked curiously in a low voice.

'I did,' he replied, smiling. 'I told her everything you told me to. It was incredible, really. I still find it all very hard to believe myself. I could tell by her face; she connected with everything I was saying. It was as if everything made sense to her.' He rolled up his white shirtsleeves, revealing the lower part of his incredibly hairy arms.

'And what did she say?'

The super laughed. 'She spilled everything. Her mouth was working so fast it was impossible to write it all down.'

'Thank goodness for tape recorders, then.'

'She said Sam showed her a piece of seaweed, expected her to believe it has magic powers.'

Brindleblack smiled at him.

The super continued. 'Tomorrow night Sam and Jenny are going out in the boat, supposedly to bring Johnny back from the bottom of the sea, swapping him for the magic weed, or witch's pendant she called it.'

'Well, that's going to happen,' Brindleblack mocked, and then he said in a serious tone, 'At the end of the day, Sam Camponara's a murderer, and we've simply got to prove it.'

'Just one other thing, Brindleblack. If things go wrong out there, I never once heard anything about two children going out on a boat or a detective sailing with navy marines. To my knowledge, this never happened. Do you understand me?'

'And if all goes well?' Brindleblack asked.

The super smiled, shrugged his shoulders, and patted Brindleblack on the arm. 'Then everyone will be happy, won't they?'

'Okay, when Mr. or Mrs. Camponara arrive, I'll ask Sam a few dizzy questions so he doesn't suspect we are onto him. Then I'll send them on their way.'

'And I'll sort out what you'll need for tomorrow night, in your name of course.'

Chapter Thirteen

Mrs. Chatter

Before long, Mrs. Camponara arrived.

‘Oh, Sam, you’ve finally got yourself into some serious trouble,’ Mum cried, beside herself with worry.

‘Don’t worry, Mrs. Camponara. Everything’s going to be just fine. Sit here and have a glass of water. It will help you calm yourself,’ Detective Brindleblack said, sitting down beside her.

Sam looked on sceptically. He was not at all taken in by the detective’s compassionate tone.

I don’t know what he’s up to, but whatever it is, it isn’t going to work. Clearly, he hasn’t got anything on me. If he had, he wouldn’t be telling Mum everything’s fine. ‘Now, I’ve had a little word with Sam, and he tells me he hasn’t seen Johnny since the night of the fifth of September, when they both sat out on your porch.’

‘That’s right, Officer. I remember listening to Sam and Johnny laughing and messing about, you know the way boys do.’

‘And what time did Johnny leave?’

‘Oh...um...it must have been about eight-thirty.’

She paused and thought for a minute.

‘Yes, it must have been because Johnny stuck his head into the house, and Sam said he was leaving as the second episode of Corri was about to start.’

‘And Sam didn’t go out again that night?’

Mrs. Camponara nervously kneaded her gloves on her lap. A few seconds went by before she replied. 'No, err...no, I'm sure he didn't. We all went to bed early that night because everyone was shattered.'

Suddenly, the heavy, dark green door opened, distracting his mother. The super leaned in, smiling at Mum. 'Sorry to interrupt but I thought you would like to know Mrs. Chatter is leaving now.'

Jenny stood behind him in the corridor, looking worried, with her mother next to her. Mrs. Chatter's woven, pale, pink hat and matching jacket looked very smart. Sam thought she looked like a proper lady.

She pulled a white handkerchief from the black handbag hung over her arm. She stared sternly at Sam and then wiped her nose and dabbed at her eyes. 'Never in all my life,' she said pompously, obviously disgruntled at being called to the station. Then she pushed Jenny in the back, past Sam's interrogation room toward the front door.

'Well, that's about it for now, Mrs. Camponara,' Detective Brindleblack said. 'If you would like to follow Mrs. Chatter out, I'll get back to you if we need to speak again.'

Brindleblack gave Mum a little hand shake and a smile.

'Thank you, Officer,' Mum said gratefully.

Outside, Sam and Jenny walked behind their mums just out of earshot.

'So, what did you tell them?' she asked.

'Nothing... I told them nothing. I said I didn't know what happened to Johnny or his grandfather. I still find that business with Johnny's grandfather hard to believe. I think Brindleblack was winding me up. I'll take a ride over to Mr. P.'s house. What do ya say, Jen? Do ya fancy coming with me?'

‘I can’t. I’ve been grounded for the rest of the week.’

‘Why? You’ve done nothing wrong.’

‘I know, but you don’t know my mum. She’s so angry about having to come down to the police station. Says she’s never been in a police station before. She said it’s your fault, and she doesn’t want me to hang out with you anymore.’

‘You won’t be coming out with me tomorrow night then, will you? Probably better if you don’t anyway...it’s far too dangerous for a girl.’

‘You bet your life I’m coming; I wouldn’t miss it for the world.’

‘So what did you tell them?’ Sam asked her.

‘Nothing,’ Jenny replied.

Sam smiled. ‘I knew you wouldn’t.’

Chapter Fourteen

Night of the New Moon

It was nearly eleven when Sam arrived on the quayside and stared down at *The Sea Witch*. A grey mist rolled out of the blackness toward the harbour, creeping slowly above the black tar sea, silently touching the water's surface, coming closer, and rising up like a grey giant into the night sky.

He gazed up at the clear velvet blackness above the mist dotted with the white diamonds. The moon wasn't visible, but the starlight shimmered on the sea. . Everything more than twenty-five feet away melted into the shroud of the giant grey mist that descended.

Sam shuddered from the cold; the temperature was plummeting. He pulled up the hood on his duffle coat then put his cold hand into the pocket. He withdrew the green pendant, keen to check it was still there, one last time.

He descended the steps and climbed into *The Sea Witch* nervously, placing the pendant back into his pocket. Sam knew she was out there waiting for him, waiting at the bottom of the bay at Hades Gate. He tried not to think about the witch too much or what might happen to him; it was too much for him to bear.

'Wait for me,' Jenny whispered loud enough to capture his attention, as she briskly descended the steps. Her shiny, black school shoes tapped on each one. She wore a warm, grey, hooded duffle coat and below that, a tartan skirt and long, black, woollen

tights. In her right hand, she held an old metal and glass lantern, which creaked as it swung back and forth.

Sam felt relieved to see her; he didn't fancy going out alone into the mist.

'I thought you weren't coming,' he said, smiling as she reached the bottom step.

'Why? I told you I would.'

'You sound like Johnny.'

'What?'

'Oh, never mind,' Sam tittered quietly.

The Sea Witch rocked slightly as Sam stood up. He pulled the Aegis shield from beneath his coat and placed it onto the seat, and then he reached out his hand to help Jenny across the gap. The voices from the sea flooded back into his mind.

It was Johnny calling out to him again.

'Not long now, Johnny,' Sam promised in a whisper. 'Jenny, your hands are shaking. Are you okay?'

'Yes, I'm fine, just cold that's all.'

Sam pulled the cord, and *The Sea Witch* fired into life. 'Untie her for me, will you?' Sam asked her.

I'm sensing something odd...like a coldness or distance between us. Narr, surely not, it must be my own fear making me think like that.

She hastened clumsily over the seats to the front of the boat, releasing *The Sea Witch* from her tether. Sam steered the little boat away from the others and toward the lights on the end of the harbour wall.

'Are you sure you're all right? You seem a little strange,' Sam asked again.

'What do you mean strange?' Jenny replied sharply.

‘Well, maybe not strange but a little tense.’

‘I’ve told you,’ Jenny said, ‘I’m fine. And if I’m tense, it’s hardly surprising, is it?’

Seeing as we’re out here in this pea soup looking for a sea witch.’

‘Then come and sit back up here next to me.’

She didn’t move.

‘Come on, Jenny. The fog is getting thicker, and I won’t be able to see you soon,’ he explained.

Reluctantly, she scrambled back along the boat and sat next to him.

‘I can tell you’re afraid. I am too. Just think of it as another mission, that’s what I do.’ He said, putting his hand on hers to reassure her. ‘And try to relax, will you? This is one mission that’s not going to fail.’

The Sea Witch chugged through the dark and mist, past the lights, and into the open sea. Sam steered her around to the left and into the Bay where the witch had snatched Johnny from the boat.

‘Oh, I must light my lamp,’ Jenny said, nearly crying and shaking the box of matches from her pocket.

Sam looked at her and sneered. ‘Why are you bothering? That’s not going to help us see any better, not in this mist, and the witch certainly won’t need it to find us.’

‘Well, I want to light it anyway,’ she said stubbornly, holding the box in her shaking hands. She struck and missed the box several times before the match ignited.

‘Okay, if you want to, light the blessed lamp, but it won’t do you any good.’

Jenny held her breath for a second terrified.

‘Oh, look at you. I knew I shouldn’t of let you come. You’re going to be totally useless to me in this state.’

Jenny stared back at him furious. 'What do you mean useless?'

Sam could see the anguish in her face, but instead of sympathising, it made him angry. All he wanted to think about was poor Johnny and how he was going to save him.

'How are you going to help me drag Johnny back into the boat if you can't hold yourself together?'

'I'll be fine. Don't worry about me,' she replied, standing up and swinging the lamp back and forth in the air.

'Put the blessed lamp down, will you? That's really annoying,' Sam shouted at her.

Jenny rested the lamp on the bench in front of her, and Sam calmed himself.

'Are you sure you'll be okay,' he asked her again, thinking he might take her back. But after looking at his watch, he realised it was impossible. He would never have time to take her and get back to meet the sea witch. Johnny would be lost forever.

'There's no time now, anyway. It's twenty past eleven.' Sam gave a deep sigh, his eyes meeting Jenny's. 'Are you ready, then?'

'I'm as ready as I'll ever be,' she replied, her voice quivering with cold and fear.

Sam smiled at her reassuringly, and then there was silence as he cut the engine. The little boat drifted slowly through the thick mist, which swirled over it and around them and everywhere, blotting out the lights from the harbour and the houses in the bay. Sam stared at Jenny, meeting her large brown and green speckled eyes one last time before leaning over the side of the boat and dipping his hand into the icy-cold sea.

'I've never seen a mist this thick before. Have you?' Jenny said quietly.

‘No, but I suppose we should have expected it. It’s that blessed witch; that’s what it is. She doesn’t want anyone to see what she’s up to tonight, and I bet she’s trying to scare us.’

Jenny picked up the shield. ‘Well, I’m not scared. I’ve got this to bash her with.’

‘No, seriously, you need to prepare yourself for what you’re going to see, so you don’t fall apart. She is very ugly, frighteningly ugly; she has yellow eyes, a screeching voice, and knobbly fingers with long, sharp, broken nails. Her face and hands have long cuts on them, as if she has been hurt many times before, and she has sea creatures attached to her—eels, sea urchins, and barnacles.’

‘I have seen the pictures, you know, when we were on the Internet at school, remember?’

Sam puffed out his cheeks, releasing some air slowly along with his patience. *Jenny’s not going to listen to anything I say tonight.* He pulled back the cuff on his coat and gazed down at his watch again. It was eleven-thirty p.m.

‘I’m getting bored.’ Jenny yawned, patting her mouth.

Sam was about to touch the water for the second time when suddenly the boat began to shake and buffet up and down violently. A deep moaning sound echoed up and out of the water, and Sam threw himself away from the side of the boat, knocking over the lantern and rolling on the floor beyond the second bench.

Jenny screamed out, ‘Sam! Sam!’

But Sam was face down and terrified, he knew she was coming; he had suffered at her hands before. He rolled over, looking for Jenny, fearing for her. The sea witch occupied her seat, and Jenny was nowhere to be seen.

‘Where’s Jenny?’

‘I’m here,’ the witch said laughing at him and exposing her bloated, blue tongue.

Sam turned his eyes away, sobbing. *What’s wrong with me? I must be seeing things. The evil bitch, she’s driving me insane.*

Beads of sweat gathered on his face, and Sam tried to wipe them away, scared to look. ‘Jenny, please tell me it’s you,’ he cried, and then he turned to her. ‘No!’ Sam yelled weeping, his gaze connecting with pure evil. She pulled back the hood on her black cape, revealing the slimy, slithering, black urchins he had seen before.

‘Oh, God, not again, you cannot take Jenny. You cannot,’ Sam cried out, reaching over the side of the boat, searching through the mist and black water for a sign of her.

‘Ha, ha! What’s the matter, Sam? Lost your girlfriend?’ The witch laughed at him.

He couldn’t stand it anymore and lunged forward into the open skeletal arms of the witch.

‘I’ll kill you for this,’ he screamed at her. ‘Why? Why?’

She wrapped her arms around him, knobbly fingers gouging into his sides and clawing at his face.

He could feel the softness of her flesh beneath him, and it made him feel sick to be so close to it. The force of her arms crushed his sides, as if she were trying to squeeze the life from him.

‘No, no, you’re not having her. Bring her back! Bring her back!’ he shouted between sobs.

It was all he could think about as he placed his hands around the witch’s slippery throat and squeezed with all his might. Her yellow, goat-like eyes continued to burn into him. They wrestled on the deck at the back of the boat for what seemed like ages. He

struggled to remain on top, his face scratched and bleeding from the desperate creature's fingernails.

Suddenly, there was a loud noise, a bang, perhaps a shot fired, and then a clicking sound, and a bright white light shone down on him at the same time.

He turned quickly to see where the light was coming from, his eyes squinting in pain, his hands still grasped firmly around the witch's throat.

The men in the boats surrounding The Sea Witch have saved me, and I've caught the witch—that horrible witch. I have caught her for everyone to see, and now they will have to believe I haven't killed Johnny.

A voice came through a speakerphone held by one of the silhouetted figures. 'Move away from the girl, or we will shoot you,' he said.

'I have the witch,' Sam shouted back. 'See for yourselves! I have caught her.'

Three white boats surrounded the little *Sea Witch*. Their boats were much bigger, looming over him. In each boat at least four men were pointing rifles at him as if he were a dangerous criminal.

'Move away from the girl, now.' The voice said again sharply.

Sam was confused. They should have been pleased; he had caught the evil creature. He looked at the witch, his hands still pressing down around her throat.

'No! No, it can't be,' Sam cried out horrified. Jenny's sleeping face met his gaze, her body limp on the deck below him. She wasn't moving, and he wept, thinking she was dead.

Sam released his hands from her throat and pulled her up to him, panicking and whimpering uncontrollably.

'Move aside, son,' one of the men said.

He stepped across into the little boat, pushing Sam to one side, so he could get to Jenny. He looked down at her lifeless body.

It was the man in the black suit, Detective Brindleblack. Gently, he tipped her head back and began breathing into her mouth.

Sam watched on.

‘Please, God, bring her back,’ Sam cried, cowering on the boat’s deck between the seats.

Three times he blew into her mouth before Jenny took a gasp of air, coughing and spluttering. She tried to sit up, but Brindleblack told her to lie still for a few minutes.

‘She’s going to be okay,’ he shouted to the other men.

Their guns were lowered, and they stood looking down into the little boat.

Brindleblack turned to Jenny with a smile. ‘You are a very brave girl,’ he said.

‘I’m sorry, Jenny,’ Sam cried, moving closer to her. ‘I could have sworn you were the witch, well not you, but...’

‘I know you are, Sam. You couldn’t help it,’ Jenny replied, looking up at him.

‘I’m just sorry we had to use you like this, Jenny. We were almost too late,’ Brindleblack said.

‘I know. I had forgotten to light the lamp, and with the fog being so thick, I was frightened you wouldn’t see it.’

‘We nearly didn’t. It was by pure chance we came close enough to you before it disappeared.’

‘Sam knocked it over by accident, and it went out,’ Jenny explained.

‘Yes, but I thought you were just being silly,’ Sam said, defending his actions and still nearly crying. ‘You should have told me.’

‘It’s okay, Sam. You weren’t to know, and I’m sorry we tricked you like that, but it was the only way to be sure.’

‘Sure about what?’

‘Sure that you killed Johnny.’

‘*Killed Johnny?*’ Sam cried, horrified.

‘Yes, and old Schooner,’ Jenny said.

Sam felt sick. ‘No, no, that wasn’t me.’

‘Yes, Sam,’ Brindleblack agreed. ‘When Jenny told us you’d been up to Lamorna Cove, we paid a visit to Mr. Stevenson’s house, and we discovered the poor man axed to death on his bedroom floor.’

‘But that wasn’t me, I tell you! It was Mr. P., Johnny’s grandfather.’

‘It couldn’t be, could it, Sam?’ Brindleblack asked calmly. ‘Johnny’s grandfather has been dead for at least two weeks. We got his autopsy report back this morning. Died of a heart attack before he fell into the sea.’

‘No, he didn’t. You remember, Jenny,’ Sam said, realising only she could save him now. ‘Mr. P., he was with us in the boat when we went to Lamorna. He told us all those stories about the bell buoy and the ships sinking on the Mannacles.’

‘No, he didn’t; it was all in your mind. You told me about the ships sinking, and you went up to the house on your own.’

Sam felt all the energy drain from his body. All was lost as pictures once again flooded into his mind. He pictured a scuffle between Johnny and him, Johnny glaring and grabbing his collar, pulling Sam inches from his face, and saying angrily, ‘That was my grandfather.’ There was a scuffle, and Johnny banged his head on the bench, and then Sam saw himself tossing Johnny over the side. He remembered the horrible

screams of Johnny's grandfather, and his body falling from the harbour wall into the sea moments later. Old man Schooner was screaming and pleading for his life just before the axe came down on him time after time after time.

'It was me,' Sam said, horrified. 'I didn't see any other people in Schooner's house except for Johnny's grandfather. But I heard voices upstairs. Were they just more voices in my head?'

Sam was lost. Nothing felt real anymore. Until now, it had been straight forward enough. Everything that had happened was the fault of the sea witch. All Sam had to do was get Johnny back in exchange for the pendant. Jenny would have seen the sea witch which would have supported Johnny and Sam's story, and everything would have been okay. Now, all was lost.

'I am the murderer,' Sam muttered to Brindleblack.

What other explanation could there be?

'Don't beat yourself up too much, Sam. It's not your fault. It's this blessed boat—cursed it is,' Brindleblack said.

'What do ya mean, it's cursed?' Sam asked, wondering if he was being offered some glimmer of hope, possibly a way out.

'Well, this isn't the first time something like this has happened. It happened to my family, too, and that's why we moved away from here. Before that, it happened to poor old Schooner's family, and they lost Tommy Elcinarb.'

'Yeah, everybody around here knows about Tommy. Johnny told me,' Sam said.

'But you know, Sam, nobody is ever going to believe a cursed boat is responsible. They're just going to laugh. Can you imagine it on the news? *'It wasn't me. It was my boat.'*' Brindleblack sat on the bench, close to Sam and Jenny. He brushed his hand

over his face then met Sam's eyes. 'I think this wretched boat needs to be burned so that nothing like this ever happens to anyone else. Having said that, as far as those men up there are concerned, you are a murderer, which, of course, you are. They all saw you trying to strangle poor Jenny. In their eyes, you have no excuse, and they would quite happily shoot you if you were to give them half a chance.'

'But you know it's not my fault?' Sam sobbed openly.

'Yes, Sam. Every year I turn up here for just a few days around the fifth of September because I have always believed my father. Unfortunately, nobody else will believe it, so you'll just have to take the rap and do your time,' Brindleblack explained, 'just like Mr. Pothelswaite did.'

'Wait, I've just remembered something,' Sam blubbered in an attempt to save himself. 'I spoke to Mr. P. on the phone at my house, the night we went to Lamorna. You can check the calls, and you'll see it was him.'

'No, Sam,' Brindleblack said, dashing Sam's hopes. 'I've spoken to your mother, and she says you were speaking to Johnny's mother the morning after you and Jenny went up to Lamorna. She rang your mother to see if you had heard anything, and you put the phone down on her. There were no other calls.'

'No... That can't be right!'

'Why? Do you think your mother is lying?' Brindleblack replied, cornering Sam.

'No...err,' Sam said, confused again before remembering something else. 'Well, what about Johnny's bike? I remember it wasn't there when I returned the following morning, never really thought about it then, I was in too much of a flap, but somebody must have moved it.'

'So you're admitting you were out on the boat with Johnny that night?'

‘Err...’

Then a dark figure on one of the boats stepped forward out of the mist. Sam couldn’t see him clearly, and he did not recognise him until he spoke.

‘It was me,’ Johnny’s father said sadly. ‘I knew Johnny wasn’t coming back, so I took his bike home and put it away in the shed for him one last time.’

Sam started to cry. ‘I’m sorry, Mr. Pothelswaite,’ he said, lowering his head, ‘I knew we shouldn’t have come out here, but we only wanted to have a laugh.’

The mist remained cold and damp and as thick as ever. Nobody spoke. The silence would have been deafening if it hadn’t been for Sam’s whimpering. Jenny put her arm around him, comforting him. He rested his head on her shoulder, filled with guilt and despair.

Then suddenly a shot echoed through the mist.

‘What the hell was that?’ a shocked voice asked, still holding his gun firmly into his shoulder and pointing it down into the water between the boats.

‘Carter...what are you doing?’ another voice yelled.

‘I saw something in the water, sir. Black and horrible it was,’ he replied.

‘Probably a dolphin,’ Brindleblack said.

‘That it was, sir,’ he replied in a hollow voice, ‘but like no dolphin I have ever seen before.’

Sam looked at his wristwatch, almost twelve.

‘It’s the witching hour,’ Sam said, hoping for the impossible.

It has to be her. He jumped as another shot was fired.

‘Yes sir, I saw it, too, this time. It stuck its head up out of the water. I saw it, grey in the mist. It’s no dolphin,’ another officer said.

‘Right, men, stay alert,’ the sergeant told them in an edgy voice. ‘Brindleblack, get those children out of there. We need to get moving.’

Suddenly, the little boat started rocking from side to side. Jenny screamed.

‘It’s the sea witch!’ Sam gasped.

She threw her arm over the side of the boat, lifting her body up out of the sea. Her black robes fell from her face, revealing the horrible black urchins moving on her head, and an eel as thick as a hose pipe ran from her throat and wound itself around her arm, disappearing beneath the misty water.

Brindleblack let out a cackled cry as he tried to move away from the witch. He fell back over a bench and sprawled in the boat’s bow.

Sam felt Jenny’s body tensing, shivering, and gasping at the sight of the sea witch.

‘Don’t shoot!’ Sam yelled up to the men on the boats. ‘You might kill Johnny.’

‘Hold your fire,’ the sergeant ordered. ‘Mark your target, but wait on my command.’

The Marines kept their guns pointed at the witch, their fingers twitching on their triggers.

The witch was grinning at Sam, making him shudder. She had no concern for the soldiers. Her needlepoint teeth held back her thick, blue tongue, and her piecing yellow eyes glared into him.

‘You have something for me?’ she whispered, broken and croaking.

‘I do,’ Sam said and then bravely asked, ‘Do we still have a deal?’

The witch tilted her head from side to side slowly, her eyes never parting from his.

‘Show me, boy. Show me the pendant,’ she insisted.

Cautiously, he reached into his pocket and pulled out the green strands of weed.

‘Give it to me,’ she demanded, her tone dangerous. Excitement consumed her glaring eyes. ‘Quickly, quickly, I need it. Give it to me.’

Her lacerated hand reached out toward him. Her bony fingers twitched, desperate to touch the pendant.

Sam pulled back his hand at the last moment.

‘Do we have a deal?’ he demanded.

‘Yes, yes,’ she squealed impatiently, pulling her other arm up out of the water. In her grip she held Johnny by his hair; his eyes were closed, as if he were asleep.

‘Oh, God,’ cried a voice from one of the other boats. It was Johnny’s father. ‘Is he alive? Oh please, let him be alive!’

A smile swept across Brindleblack’s face. ‘I knew it,’ he shouted, still cowering at the front of the little boat. ‘Look, everyone, it is true; you can all see it. It’s a witch that took Johnny Pothelswaite and Tommy Elcinarb and my poor father, Archibald Brindleblack’s friend, Nathaniel Corno. Twenty years my father has rotted in a cell, and now you can all stand up in his name and make him a free man.’

‘Give it to me, boy,’ the witch screeched at Sam.

‘Save Johnny, Sam! Save Johnny!’ Mr. Pothelswaite wailed.

‘Will someone take him away from this? Now isn’t the time! He could ruin everything!’ Sam yelled at the men on the boat.

‘Take him below,’ Brindleblack shouted, and two of the armed police officers dragged him away.

‘Save Johnny, Sam,’ he cried out over and over, reluctant to leave and struggling to remain. The effort was futile, and he disappeared beneath the deck.

The witch was still staring at Sam, undeterred, waiting for him to give her the pendant. The eel, which had sustained Johnny, withdrew itself from his mouth. It slithered up the witch's arm, curling itself around her neck like a black scarf, cold, dead eyes staring into Sam's. She gave Johnny a shake, encouraging him to open his eyes, and he started to moan sleepily, rolling his head.

Jenny gasped. 'Sam, he's alive!'

'Quickly, boy, give me the pendant. Our time is nearly up.'

'Throw Johnny into the boat, and I will give you the pendant,' Sam shouted.

The witch scowled at him. 'Ye better not be planning any tricks now, sonny, 'cos I'll kill ye all.'

'No tricks, I just want to make sure you don't drop him back into the sea when you get your pendant,' Sam told her, his heart racing so fast, he thought it was going to burst out of his chest.

Have I gone too far?

The witch seemed to take ages before she finally spoke. It made Sam think she was going to throw Johnny back into the sea then lunge at him and take the pendant with force.

'Okay,' she finally said, still glaring, 'no tricks.'

She threw Johnny into the boat, as if he was a rag doll, and then she reached out her hand toward Sam again. 'Now give me the pendant!' she screamed.

Sam held his hand out slowly toward her, and as he did so, he spoke loudly so that everyone could hear him. 'When I give her the pendant, all of you close your eyes. Don't look at her. If you do, it could be the end of you.' Sam showed her the green strands hanging limp across his open palm.

She snatched it from him quickly, her horrible cackling screech echoing through the mist. She was on fire with ecstasy, and she laughed hysterically, the screeching peals of sound rising toward the stars glimmering through the thinning mist.

Sam shut his eyes and felt around frantically on the bench by his side. There it was; Sam felt the smoothness of its scales and the warmth of its fur. He pulled it up in front of his face to shield him and Jenny from the witch's power.

'It's okay, Jenny,' Sam whispered, opening his eyes and putting his arm around her shoulder. 'I've put the Aegis shield between her and us.'

Suddenly, two shots rang out in rapid succession. Short, harrowing screams filled the air before absolute silence. Jenny and Sam squinted and jumped with every round fired.

'D' ya think it's gone yet?' Jenny asked after a few seconds of silence.

'I think so, but let's just wait a few more minutes,' Sam suggested, pulling her closer to him. Jenny smiled, and Sam was glad she knew now he had been right all along. He hadn't killed Johnny, Johnny's grandfather, or Schooner.

Sam began to relax when something pulled forcefully on the shield. They both screamed together, terrified, thinking the witch had returned. But she hadn't—it was Johnny, laughing.

'You did it, Sam. You did it,' Johnny said happily, patting his arm before falling onto both of them and hugging them copiously.

'Oh thank goodness it's you, Johnny,' Jenny said, laughing.

Sam grabbed him at the shoulder and shook him, staring into his eyes sternly. Johnny gazed back confused, and then Sam smiled at him and shook him again.

‘Oh, Johnny, we did it, me and Jenny. Yahoo!’ he shouted, as if he had won the lottery. All three of them laughed, happy and relieved at the same time.

After a few seconds their laughing stopped, something very strange had happened.

‘Where is Detective Brindleblack?’ Jenny asked. ‘He must have fallen overboard.’

‘Nevermind Brindleblack, look at the other boats. All the men with rifles have turned to stone.’

‘What are we going to do?’ Johnny cried. ‘Nobody is going to believe us now.’

Then a voice from one of the boats shouted to them. ‘I will.’

‘And so will I,’ said another.

‘And I,’ came yet another voice.

They looked up at the boat where the voices came from. It was Johnny’s father and the two police officers that had held him captive. The three men walked across the deck, closer to Sam, Johnny, and Jenny, so they could clearly see each other’s faces.

Johnny’s father stepped across into the little *Sea Witch*, smiling.

‘Oh, Son, I thought you were dead,’ he said, almost crying and hugging Johnny.

‘Sorry, Dad,’ Johnny said, ashamed. ‘I’m sorry we went out in the boat.’

‘Oh, shush, that doesn’t matter now. The main thing is you’re okay, and you are, aren’t you? I cannot believe it.’

He hugged Johnny again then wiped his eyes before looking at Sam.

‘Can you steer her back into the harbour, Sam?’ Johnny’s father asked.

‘No problem, Mr. P.,’ Sam told him.

Chapter Fifteen

Grandpa Pothelswaite's House

Sam sat at the table in old Mr. P.'s house, holding the carving of the sea witch in his hands. Beside him were Jenny and Johnny, and on the other side of the table, Sam's and Johnny's dads sat facing them.

The room was dark and dismal, just as Sam remembered it, but it wasn't a depressing place, not now. Sam could feel life within it, optimism, success, a sort of peace that hadn't been there before. It felt as though old Mr. P. were in the room, smiling at them because everyone knew he hadn't murdered anyone.

'I've got questions Dad. Things have happened that I just don't understand,' Sam said.

'Go on then, shoot,' Sam's father said. 'I might not have all the answers, but Johnny's father and I, we'll do our best.'

'That night me and Johnny took the boat out, we heard Johnny's grandfather wailing from the harbour wall, and then he disappeared.'

'I know. I saw him, too,' Mr. P. said. 'But by the time I got to him, it was too late. He had fallen into the sea. It was probably guilt that gave him a heart attack, driving him over the edge, knowing Johnny was out there on the boat with you. I stared down into the water, and even though it was very dark, I could see the sea witch dragging his

body away from the harbour, down under the sea, and I knew I would never see him again.'

'But if you saw that Mr. P. had been dragged away by the sea witch and Johnny was out there in the bay with Sam, why didn't you go to the police?' Jenny asked.

'The police didn't believe my father, so they weren't going to believe me. I thought I would just let them get on and do their thing. My father was dead, and me telling them wouldn't bring him back.' He turned to Sam and gazed sadly into his eyes. 'They punished my father for something beyond his control. I wasn't going to help them do that to you, Sam. As far as I was concerned, Johnny was gone, and that was the end of it. I couldn't blame you. It was that murderous witch.' He leaned back in his chair and smiled. 'I was a bit surprised when Detective Brindleblack knocked on my door and asked me if I wanted to take a boat trip to catch a killer. Everything that happened after that came as a complete shock to me, and the outcome was more than I could have ever hoped for.' He reached across the table, gripping Johnny by the arm with a smile and a tear.

After a moment, Mr. P. took a deep breath, stood, and went to the cabinet behind him, taking out five glasses; he placed them on the table.

'Then how come I saw your father here at the house and in the boat when we went to Lamorna Cove?'

'I don't know for sure, Sam. All I can say is, there are stranger things in this world than we care to admit to. Perhaps his bitterness and hatred from the injustice of the accusations against him were so powerful, it enabled him to extract revenge, even from the grave. After all, his whole life was ruined the night he and Tommy took out *The Sea*

Witch, as yours nearly was. It might be he possessed you in order to get to the pendant and, finally, Schooner.’

‘So, do you think it was Mr. P. who killed Schooner Stevenson?’ Sam asked.

‘I do, but maybe he did it through you. And who could blame him?’ he replied.

It was as though Johnny’s father thought it justice long overdue.

‘And what about the phone call to my house?’

‘That was Medwin, but in your mind it was him, too. Just accept it, Sam,’ Mr. P. said. ‘Strange things do happen.’

‘But he said he was going to kill me, too, because I left him at Lamorna Cove in that house.’

Sam’s dad looked into his eyes and smiled. ‘I don’t think he’s going to kill you now, do you? You’ve cleared his name, made everyone bite their tongues. No, I think he’ll be very proud of you, Sam.’

‘What do you think happened to Detective Brindleblack?’ Jenny asked.

‘Well, I’ve been looking into that,’ Mr. P. said. ‘It turns out Brindleblack’s father was taken away when the detective was only thirteen-years-old. They lived over at Talland Bay; I remember hearing something about it when I was about twenty.’

‘Ooo, that makes you very old now,’ Jenny said, teasing him.

‘Forty’s not old.’ Sam’s dad said, laughing.

‘Anyway,’ Mr. P. continued, ‘Brindleblack’s father was accused and found guilty of killing his friend because he had a lame alibi. He said he had been fishing around the bay, and his friend had simply disappeared. He never gave anymore excuses to defend himself, and there was no talk of sea witches. He simply said he had disappeared, and it was the boat that did it. He said *The Sea Witch* was cursed.’

‘So Brindleblack told the police they needed to get you back out there to prove you were a murderer, but what he was really looking for was proof that people who go out in *The Sea Witch* commit murder,’ Sam’s dad said grimly.

‘As we now know, it didn’t happen that way. However, it did prove his father was innocent. As to what happened to Detective Brindleblack, we can only guess,’ Mr. P. said. ‘His body may still turn up.’

He picked up a bottle of ginger beer from the floor by his feet and poured it into the five wine glasses. Sam’s dad and Mr. P. looked at each other, and then Johnny’s dad nodded and smiled.

‘Now, I’d like to make a toast,’ Sam’s dad said, raising his glass. ‘To my son, Sam, who not only saw a sea witch once, but I’m very proud to say, went to see her for a second time to save his friend, Johnny. To Sam, the bravest lad I have ever met.’

Sam smiled, as everyone raised their glasses to him.

‘To Sam,’ they all agreed.

He took a sip from his glass, and then lowering it, he looked at his friends. ‘Do ya know this was the best mission I’ve ever been on?’

Everyone drank the ginger beer in one gulp and crashed their glasses down on the table. They looked at Sam and laughed and laughed and laughed.

‘Hey, what do you say we all walk down to the beach and watch *The Sea Witch* burn?’ Johnny suggested.

‘I think that’s a great idea,’ Mr. P. agreed, climbing to his feet.

Chapter Sixteen

Burning the Sea Witch

Outside, it was cold, dark, and dank. Jenny pulled her coat up around her neck to keep the September chill out before she descended the steps onto the cobbled street. At the bottom, she shouted up to Sam and Johnny excitedly. ‘Come on, we’re going to miss it if you don’t hurry up.’

Mr. P. held the door open, and the cold air blew past him into the house. He shuddered. ‘It’s a cold night.’ He buttoned his coat up to the top and then pointed to the Aegis shield. ‘You wanna take that with yer?’

Sam stared at it for a few seconds, remembering fondly how it made him feel safe and protected. It stood up against the wall in the corner of the room, barely noticeable in the dim light.

‘You don’t think I’m going to need it, do you?’

‘No, I don’t, but Johnny’s grandfather made it for you, so it’s yours. I think you should take it with you.’

Sam smiled at him, picked it up, and pulled it to his chest. ‘I suppose I made it really. Grandpa P. was just pulling my strings.’

Johnny’s dad is right. I don’t feel any different, so the witch must have gone. Sam heaved a sigh of relief.

‘You see this,’ he said meeting Johnny’s eyes, whilst running his fingers over the goat’s fur and scales. ‘It will tell us when the sea witch is around, so we’ll know when it isn’t safe to go out in the boats.’

Johnny frowned at Sam, confusion plain on his face.

‘Listen, it all makes sense,’ Sam continued. ‘When the witch was around, I felt really weird, sort of nervous all the time, and when I pulled this toward me, I felt completely different right away. When I pull it toward me now, I feel just the same, so I know the witch has gone.’

‘That sounds like gut instinct to me,’ Johnny said.

‘I’m not going there again.’ Sam turned to Mr. P.

‘It sounds like a good idea,’ Johnny’s dad agreed. ‘Now come on, it’s nearly eight o’clock. They’ll be lighting it in a minute.’

By the time Sam and the others reached the beach, there was already a crowd of people gathered around the rope barrier. Their black forms jostled for space in the darkness.

‘Come on, follow me,’ Jenny said, nudging people aside and making a pathway to the front.

‘You definitely should have been a boy,’ Sam told her.

People moaned and cursed, but Sam didn’t care. *If anyone deserves to see it, it’s Jenny, Johnny, and me.*

In the middle of the rope circle, the white hull of *The Sea Witch* faced upward on the sand, like the belly of a small whale. She looked hopelessly uncomfortable and out of place.

A tall, bulky man moved around emptying a can of fuel onto her. He stepped back grumbling then reluctantly pulled out a large box of matches. After striking one, he threw it onto the hull. Immediately, there was a puffing sound, and the flames burst into life.

‘Hey, Sam, listen to Old Whiley. He’s still moaning. You’d think he’d be pleased to get rid of the old boat with everyone chipping in to buy him a new one,’ Johnny commented.

‘It’s probably hard for him to give her up, seeing as he owned her long before we were born. I bet, for him, it’s like putting your dog down.’

Oranges, yellows, and blue rose into the air ferociously and then ran out in all directions along the hull, eating up the fuel in a river of fire.

‘I’m sorry about your grandfather, Johnny. I know it was my fault. If only I hadn’t persuaded you to go out that night, he might still be alive.’

‘Well, at least that witch didn’t get him,’ Jenny said, interrupting.

‘What do you mean?’ Johnny asked.

‘His spirit, it must be free. The witch hasn’t got it, not like Francis Drake.’

Sam looked at her confused. ‘Can you explain that? Johnny and I haven’t got a clue what you’re talking about.’

‘Grandpa P. died from a heart attack, and his body was already dead before he hit the water. His spirit had left his body before the witch got to him. She pulled his body away from the harbour not knowing who it was because it was a body without a soul. That was probably why she released him. She kept all the others. Hence the reason Mr. P. could contact you, Sam.’

‘Jenny, you are clever,’ Sam said. ‘The witch did say when she held Johnny to her nose, she could smell the soul of the one who took her pendant. I guess people from the same family, their souls must all smell the same, and if his soul had still been with his body, then she would have known he was already dead.’

‘Do you think he is with us now?’ Johnny looked around.

‘Oh, I hope so. I don’t mind Grandpa P. watching over us,’ Sam said.

Johnny, Jenny, and Sam were so close to the fire, they could feel the heat emanating from it, and the light it created gave everyone an orange glow. The fire quickly settled into crackling. Orange and yellow wisps, before the hull of *The Sea Witch*, collapsed, sending red embers up into the air, and everyone cheered. It was like her final flurry of life, and now she was gone.

Sam turned to Jenny who was standing next to him. ‘I want you to have this,’ he said, handing her the Aegis shield.

Jenny looked at him in surprise. ‘No, Sam, I can’t accept it. It’s...it’s all you have left.’

‘That’s okay. I don’t need it anymore.’ He smiled and pushed it toward her. ‘Please take it. I want you to have it.’

She nodded and smiled at him, and then standing on her tip-toes, she kissed him on the cheek and whispered softly, ‘I’ll save it for you.’

A little flustered, Sam smiled back at her. He turned to Johnny who was still watching *The Sea Witch* burn.

‘So, mate,’ he said, patting Johnny on the back, ‘what are we going to do tomorrow?’

‘Thought I might go to school,’ Johnny said, ever so matter of fact.

‘Do you know? I think I might join you.’

Jenny gave Sam a nudge. ‘You should because that’s the toughest mission of all.’

It gave Sam something to think about.

The End

For those who want to know more about Sam

Samuel Camponara

‘Samuel Camponara, what are you doing?’ Mr. Booty, the harbour green grocer, bellowed.

Sam gazed up at him. *How does he manage to be there in front of me so fast? And how does he shout that loud without his mouth splitting and his head falling off backward?*

‘Did you see that, Johnny? He’s not human, him.’

Mr. Booty’s grey hair curled around the edges of his white hat, and his dark brown eyes burned into Sam’s. He looked like a butcher in his navy blue apron with thin white, vertical stripes. Mr. Booty towered over Sam, puffing out his chest. He looked ready for a fight.

‘All right, Seth?’ Sam said, calmly grinning up at him. Sam knew how to handle Mr. Booty. There were loads like him back home. Sam smiled at Johnny, who was saying nothing, and lowered his eyes to the floor. *He still has a lot to learn.*

Mr. Booty's fat, chubby cheeks burst into warm red beneath his long, grey moustache. 'Don't you *Seth* me, you cheeky young pup. It's Mr. Booty to you,' he said angrily.

For the life of me, I cannot understand how Mr. Booty came to own the fruit and veg shop in the first place. He doesn't seem to have much upstairs, but I guess he has enough to know what I'm up to. He appears from nowhere as soon as I stop near his fruit table.

Mr. Booty's shop was one in a row lining the road, which led down to the beach. It was also opposite the car park. Beyond that, the harbour wall and the estuary ran down to the open sea.

Normally, Mr. Booty was busy serving customers inside his shop. But at that particular moment, it was obvious he was busy guarding his table display from what he called Sam's sticky fingers. Sam didn't think they were sticky, just quick.

His eyes flicked passed Mr Booty's head, and at the same time, he pointed up into the air, pretending he was shocked, gasping out loud.

'Look, Mr. Booty, it's an albatross!' Sam filled his voice with amazement.

Mr. Booty turned to see it. Gazing up, he scanned the blue sky.

'Where? Where is it?' he asked, desperately searching. 'Rare in these parts, them albatrosses. All we get around here are those ruddy sea gulls, doing their dirt and nicking the ice creams. Where is it? I can't see it.'

Sam looked at Johnny and sniggered then lifted a banana from the table. He slipped it into his jacket pocket just before Mr. Booty looked down at him.

'There's no ruddy albatross, is there? You're pulling my leg again,' he said, shaking his head.

Sam laughed. 'It's his own fault, Johnny. He's really stupid.' He turned to Mr. Booty. 'Sorry, Mr. Fruity, I guess it was just a ruddy sea gull after all.' Sam and Johnny started to walk away.

'It's Mr. Booty to you, Samuel Camponara, and you'd better remember it. And ay, you mind your language!'

'Okay, Mr. Fruity,' Sam replied, without turning his head. He didn't want to look at him, but he did want him to see the banana he had taken. He waved it in the air from a safe distance away.

'You're no good, Camponara, no good at all. You wait until I see your mother; she'll be paying for that,' he shouted after them.

Sam and Johnny crossed the road and made their way through the car park until they reached the harbour wall.

'Where are we going?' Johnny asked.

'Thought we might sit up there where the small boats are moored. We can watch the trawlers coming in from there.' Sam sat down dangling his legs over the side above the sea. He peeled back his banana just as Johnny's grandfather appeared.

'Hello, Johnny. Sam. What are you two boys doing on this fine morning?'

'Hello, Grandpa.'

'Hello, Mr. P.,' Sam replied, staring up at him.

'We're waiting for the trawlers, *Just* and *Agnes*,' Johnny told him.

Sam liked watching the trawlers coming home. There was something exciting about them—the sea rolling up off the ship's bow and slamming against the quayside, causing white spray to spurt into the air. The little boats never did that.

‘They’ll not be back today though, lads,’ Johnny’s granddad told them. ‘They only left at dawn on the high tide, and Bob Calvert, the Captain of the *Agnes*, said they’d not be back for two days at the very least.’

‘One day I’m going to work for Bob Calvert. What do you reckon, Johnny? Fancy being a fisherman?’

‘Hard work, Sam.’ Johnny replied. ‘Cold, wet, and dangerous, too,’

‘There’s nothing wrong with a little danger.’

‘Yes, it’s all right you saying that, but the sea, she’s not to be messed with. D’ yer know what my dad says? He said the sea is like a woman. If you put down your guard, she’ll wrap herself around you, and she’ll never let you go, not until death do you part at any rate.’

‘Full of it...your dad... is he?’ Sam laughed at him undeterred, but secretly, he thrilled with Johnny’s words.

‘Aye, Sam, true is that; now have a little respect,’ said Johnny’s granddad.

‘Sorry, Mr. P.’

‘You should be. I told John’s dad that little tale many years ago. There’s things out there you don’t want ter be messin’ with. Best stay away from the sea, and get yourself a nice land lovin’ job. Less hassle and less pain.’

Mr. P. is a bit odd. He’s very intense and what a funny thing to say.

‘Hey, Mr. P., what do ya say we get a boat out?’

‘Err... Err,’ Mr. P. muttered, stepping back away from the edge of the quay.

‘Yes, come on. We’ll ask Jack if he’ll take us.’

Jack looked up from his little boat, amused.

‘No, err... You know I never go near the stuff. Hate water. Always have.’

Sam sensed there was more to it than that. *What could he be hiding? A bad experience of some kind leaving hating it? Or maybe something happened to one of his family? Did somebody drown? One thing was for sure, Johnny's granddad would prefer being run over by a bus than riding out on these waves.*

'Go on, Mr. P., just this once,' Sam goaded.

The old man's face became stern and flushed. He seemed about to tongue-lash Sam, but then he changed his mind and turned to Johnny. 'I'll be off, Johnny. See you later,' he said, and then as if an afterthought, he scowled at Sam. 'Sam,' he said, nodding. 'Now, you watch yourself.' He turned around and hobbled back along the quay.

'See you later, Grandpa,' Johnny shouted after him.

It looked like walking was hard work. Twelve metres away, an even older man, ancient even, came slithering toward them.

Every bit of him looked like he was falling apart. Twisted, thin legs doddering along at a snail's pace. His wasted body was bent over his walking stick which vibrated under the strain of his nervous hand. Then, as he passed Johnny's grandfather, he muttered something and grimaced at him nastily, narrowing his beady eyes.

'Did you hear that old man, then?' Sam asked.

'What? I didn't hear anything.'

'That old codger on the walking stick. He just called your granddad a murderer, the cheeky old sod. He must have heard him, surely, but he just completely ignored it. I wouldn't have. I'd have laid him out, but he just walked past as if he wasn't there.'

Johnny looked sullen, and he didn't speak.

Sam was annoyed Johnny would put up with that. 'What's up with everybody today?'

Johnny lowered his head. 'Oh, he's used to it.'

'What do you mean, he's used to it? There's no way you can get used to that.'

'If you'd grown up here in this town, you'd already know about Grandpa. But you've only been living here for a year, and Grandpa, he's old news now. Most people just ignore him, but occasionally, you might hear someone call him a murderer. Having a jibe at him, you know, some people are just arseholes like that, aren't they?'

'What? No way. I've never heard anyone say that before. He's great, your granddad. He's no murderer.'

'Well, that's what some people say. They say he murdered his friend, Tommy Elcinarb when they were boys.'

'I don't believe it.'

'It's true. Not that he murdered anyone, I don't believe he murdered Tommy, but they say he did. Taunted him for as long as I can remember, they have.'

'Watch this,' Sam said, smiling. Casually from where he sat, he threw down Mr. Booty's banana skin in front of the old man. He was only a foot or so from them. From the corner of his eye, Sam watched, hoping and praying for the old man to step on it.

Revenge for Johnny.

The old man did step on it, and it was incredible. In one movement, his feet slipped from under him. Arms, legs, and walking stick flew into the air for what seemed like ages. He cried out as his old bones came crashing down, hard, onto the cobbles.

Sam couldn't help laughing out loud, and Johnny chuckled beside him.

'Serves him right, the nasty old git,' Sam whispered to Johnny.

The old man rolled around, groaning and trying to right his body. Sam glanced at Johnny.

‘Camponara, you’re just too bad.’ He laughed.

‘Oh, he deserves it,’ Sam replied, pretending the old man wasn’t there.

The man moaned and groaned, whilst still trying to sit up and catch his breath, sounding very wheezy. ‘You did that on purpose,’ he grouched at Johnny.

Johnny looked at him, shocked. ‘Me? I haven’t done anything.’

Sam sniggered again, couldn’t stop himself, but the old man remained focused on Johnny. ‘Yes, that’s very funny, isn’t it? Throwing banana skins on the ground and nearly sending me into the sea. I could have drowned.’

Sam was struggling not to burst into hysterics, thinking about the old man rolling off the harbour wall, plus the fact that Johnny was being blamed for something he did.

Johnny looked all red and guilty.

‘Bad lot your family. Always causing trouble,’ the old man said, pointing his finger at Johnny’s face.

Johnny lowered his eyes again and sat quietly.

‘You must be joking. Now go on, hobble off, you old fart; we’ve had our fun,’ Sam told him, defending Johnny, who was clearly not up for it.

Suddenly, Mrs. Flem and Mrs. Snotgrass, both large, plump women, appeared. They marched across the quay from the fishmonger’s shop, arms folded, with stern, concerned expressions on their faces.

‘What are you two doing, Johnny Pothelswaite and Samuel Camponara?’ Mrs. Flem demanded. ‘You should be helping him up, not sitting there laughing at poor old Mr. Elcinarb.’

Johnny shot Sam a glance and shook his head. 'It's not Tommy's dad,' Johnny whispered to Sam. 'It's his uncle. Most of Tommy's family moved away after he disappeared.'

'You're just like your granddad, aren't you?' the old man growled, struggling to his feet, helped by the fat ladies. Then he scowled at Sam again. 'You want to end up at the bottom of the sea, do yer, lad? Keep hanging around with this one, and you will. Murder yer and throw yer body overboard, he will. Sea witches my backside, he'll murder yer if you give him half a chance. Can't help it, see, it's in his blood.' The old man's eyes locked with Sam, the anger in his gaze so sharp it seemed piercing, and his finger was pointing again.

Sam was shocked. 'Sea witches? What are you talking about?'

'What? Your friend hasn't told you about *The Sea Witch*? I'm not surprised,' he said, delivering a husky cough and spitting.

'Come on, Mr. Elcinarb, don't work yourself up like that. They're not worth it,' Mrs. Snotgrass said, shooting Sam and Johnny a disapproving glance with her sharp brown eyes. Taking his arm, she gently steered Mr. Elcinarb around in the direction of the fishmonger's shop. 'A nice cup of tea, that's what you need,' she told him.

'What was that all about?' Sam asked.

Johnny climbed onto his feet. 'I'm not in the mood for talking about things that have long gone. I'm going home.'

'What? You can't leave me like this. He was talking about sea witches.'

'I'm sorry. I can't; I'll see you later.'

'Are you still coming tonight?' Sam was thinking about the latest mission.

Johnny stared down, silent.

‘The pie factory,’ Sam reminded him.

‘Oh, yes. I’ll meet you there...four o’clock.’

Johnny disappeared between the tourists.

The Raid on the Pie Factory

‘Hey, what are you doing here?’ Sam breathed, as Johnny’s dark shape came into view.

‘I couldn’t sleep, so I thought I’d come and see if anything was happening. It’s been scarily quiet. Nobody’s been near the place, not a soul, and there’s hardly any noise coming out of there, either.’ Johnny peered through the pie factory’s black, metal gates. ‘So, what’s the plan?’

‘Right, I reckon we’ll sneak in as soon as the gates are opened and do a smash and grab before the drivers come in. We’ll have to think it through a little more before we do a bank heist though.’

‘Whoa, hang on, Sam; pies are one thing but...’

‘I’m only joking with you, mate. What are you like? Anyway, tell me about the sea witches.’

‘I don’t know anything about sea witches.’

‘Well, Mr. Elcinarb thinks you do.’

Johnny looked very uncomfortable.

‘Tell me what they’re saying about your granddad being a murderer then. If you don’t, I’ll ask someone in class at school.’

‘That’s a joke, Camponara. You’re never there. How many days did you turn in last year? And how many days have you turned in this year?’

‘I’m doing all right. I was in two days last week.’

‘Sam, the school year only started last week. We haven’t even had a chance to find our way to the new classrooms yet.’

‘Good point,’ Sam agreed, smiling. ‘What was that form teacher’s name again?’ He laughed quietly. ‘Go on, Johnny, tell me what you know; it’s driving me mad.’

The brick factory wall was freezing. Johnny’s smoky, grey breath drifted from between his dithering lips. Sam shuddered, and his skin prickled from the penetrating chill of the early September night.

‘Brrrr, it’s ruddy cold. What we doing out here?’

Before Sam had time to answer, there was a noise.

‘Shush, Johnny, I can hear footsteps. It’s the morning guard. Thank God for that.’

Sam pressed his back against the wall, melting into the darkness and disappearing. The clanging and chinking of chains carried clearly in the frosty morning. Sam and Johnny waited invisible in the shadows, barely breathing. A large, dark figure rolled the gate back then disappeared into the factory building. ‘Finally, the wait is over.’ Sam was ready to go.

‘I’ll wait here and keep watch for you,’ Johnny whispered.

‘I thought we’d agreed the plan already? We go in together, grab a pasty, and run for it.’

‘Narr, I think it’s better if I wait here.’

Sam knew there would be no changing Johnny’s mind, especially after watching today’s performance on the harbour. *Boy has he got a lot to learn.*

‘So, now it’s just a one man smash and grab?’ he vented, not bothering to hide his frustration.

Johnny smiled and then looked away.

Sam preferred Johnny to go with him—it was always scarier on his own.

‘You sure you’re not coming?’ he asked him one last time. ‘No, you go on. I’ll be alright here for a while.’ Johnny made it sound like he was doing Sam a favour. A few seconds later, Sam crept past the gates. He stopped and glanced back, meeting Johnny’s eyes one last time. Sam was scared, but he wasn’t about to show it. He smiled recklessly through the darkness and took a deep breath, sending a message telepathically.

Everything will be fine. Silently, he scurried out of sight of the gate.

Sam hugged the boundary wall, following the shadows, crouching and embracing the bricks until he reached the back of the first of a very long line of vans.

I hope nobody sees me now. I’m alone, and I know I shouldn’t be here. Sam’s eyes were everywhere. Big trouble if someone comes out of that bakery door. Sure to get caught. If I’m going to change my mind and run, now would be a good time. I haven’t been seen, and the only person who knows I am here is Johnny. He can’t say anything, standing there like a scaredy cat at the gate.

The back doors of the van were open, and the internal light was on. All the vans were the same boxy shape, creating rectangular shadows on the smooth, black bay floor.

But I’m so close; I can’t give up now. As long as I’m silent... Hmmm, what is that?

Delicious, mouth-watering smells drifted out of the van and tantalized Sam’s nose, leading him like a fragrant hand. He searched everywhere, before he picked up a Cornish pasty. They were his favourite and all he could think about on the way over.

Steam rose out as he tore open the soft pastry casing, releasing the mouth-watering smells of freshly cooked turnips, potatoes, meat, and gravy.

This is the best ever!

His lips meandered around the hot contents of the pocket, trying not to get burned. His eyes continued to survey the half-filled shelves of heavenly delicacies.

Oh look at that... Those little pink sponges are perfect.

He touched one of them gently with the tip of his finger. It felt sticky and smooth.

They were all covered by thin layers of white tissue paper, which protected them from flies and other little insects attracted into the van by the internal light. He pinched the paper leaves between his fingers and lifted them to survey each layer with interest. Rows of pies, in all shapes and sizes, on each shelf, cakes, custards, and strawberry and lemon tarts, they were all lined up in little paper cases.

I think I'll have to try one of those next. He revelled in the bounty before him, his for the plundering. Pastry crumbs gathered in the corners of Sam's mouth and on his chin. He gazed lovingly down at a tray of strawberry tarts.

A sudden sound gave Sam a start. His heart stuttered and then beat wildly.

What was that? A wave of panic rose in him. A shadow moved; he caught it in the corner of his eye. He turned quickly toward it, and there in the door way stood a large, angry, dark figure. His heart sank instantly.

Damn, the mission has failed. Disappointment followed by a wave of fear swept over him, making his body tingle down to the tips of his fingers.

I've taken too long. Those delicious pie smells and the fancy cakes were just too good. If only Johnny was with me, he would have made me hurry. I've been stupid. I should have picked up two pasties and left, a smash and grab, just like we planned. I

could have got away with it, but now it's too late... Oh, God, I need get out of here. I need to escape 'cos this guy's going to kill me. I can see it in his face.

But there was nowhere to run and nowhere to hide. Sam stood, trapped in the back of the van, shelves on both sides, and a pie held in his own criminal hand.

Not his dad's van, either. He had no excuse to be where he was.

Sam gasped, and his stomach fluttered nervously. He was naked...vulnerable...afraid.

It was Arthur Von Strictum, and he looked really, really angry.

For a moment, Sam stood rooted to the spot, unable to move. Fear held him there, like hands of ice, freezing him, and making his skin shudder.

What am I going to do? What is he going to do to me? Oh, God, I'm in big trouble now. Sam was trying not to cry.

Suddenly without warning, Von Strictum lunged toward him like an angry bear. His big hand clipped Sam hard around the ear, and then he started shouting at him.

Sam stumbled to the side, banging hard against the trays. His ear burned and throbbed from the blow, and his head was dazed for a second. He was scared, really scared; the man had gone completely mad.

I'm not going to cry, I'm not, I'm not.

Von Strictum yelled louder.

'Zam Camponara... Zu fieving brat! Vait til I tell zor fazure!'

The words, *your father*, released Sam from the grip of his terror, and adrenaline flowed through him like liquid fire.

I have to get out of here.

He rode the tide rising inside him: excitement, anger, determination. 'I'm having another pasty for that,' he shouted, snatching one up from the tray.

I feel like a lion, ten feet tall. 'Get out of my way.' He barged past the big man, as if he was a lightweight.

Von Strictum fell backward against the shelves, shocked by Sam's sudden aggressiveness. And then Sam was out of the van, fleeing across the black bay, through the gates, and up Ridgemont Street, running as fast as he could.

Johnny chased after him. 'Nice one.' He laughed as they ran off into the darkness.

Now, Sam was a Viking raider with only the streetlamps to occasionally silhouette his fugitive form.

'Slow down a minute, can't you?' Johnny gasped, slowing to walking pace.

Sam had a painful stitch lodged in his side, but he didn't care. He had just pushed eighteen stones out of his way.

He slowed beside Johnny. 'I feel like I could run forever... Wow, wasn't that great?' Sam laughed.

Finally, they arrived at the dimly lit harbour wall where the fishing boats rested for the night. All along the quay big metal rings, attached to heavy, reddish-brown chains, were screwed into the stone, edging at regular intervals, and beyond them, there was a drop of eight or twelve feet into the gently rolling sea.

On the other side of the harbour, shops, houses, and taverns lined the road, and behind them, houses dotted the hillside, making it look quaint and picturesque.

Many of the houses were only visible by the lights shining through their curtains. 'People getting up for work,' Sam said.

During the summer, the inhabitants of the town were always up early, preparing for another influx of tourists.

Johnny and Sam walked on, past the empty place where the trawlers were normally moored for the night. Johnny's grandfather was right—the boats hadn't come home. *An empty space along the quay just doesn't feel right.* Sam had never seen it like that before. *I wonder what the men on the Agnes and Just are doing now.*

Eventually, they came to the first set of stone steps leading down to some of the smaller boats. They were tied to metal wall rings by ropes, worn from soft blue to dirty grey and fraying at the ends after many years of tying and untying.

The small boats were used to take tourists mackerel and wreck fishing just off the coast. They carried about ten or twelve people on each trip during the summer, and they made three or four trips out each day.

Sam sat down to catch his breath. The step was cold and hard under his buttocks. His heart still raced, and his chest burned like fury. Sam's skin fluttered from the adrenaline rush not yet relinquished after being caught by the most evil looking man he had ever seen. But something else was on his mind, too—Johnny's grandfather and old Mr. Elcinarb's sea witches.

There was definitely something in it. No way would Mr. P. throw somebody overboard. Sam could never believe that. And he knew him well. All through the winter, Mr. P. had sat in that chair by the fire in Johnny's Mum's front room. He'd spent ages telling Sam and Johnny all kinds of interesting stuff that he got up to when he was a boy, but never once mentioned murder or sea witches. Mr. P. was thoughtful and kind. He talked quietly, and he even fixed Sam's bike with a puncture repair kit and a bowl of water one time.

But something happened out there in the bay. Something so bad, it frightened Mr. P. away from the sea for good. Sam was amazed by the way he reacted when he pulled his leg. He couldn't get away from the sea quick enough.

Sam couldn't get it out of his mind. Sea witches, he wasn't surprised. The old man always said there was more out there in the sea than we could ever imagine. Sam wondered what they might look like, those sea witches, human or animal.

I bet they look like walruses. They're pretty ugly. Oh, I don't know; it's been gnawing away at me all afternoon. I bet Johnny knows, and I'm dying to ask him. I only hope he doesn't go off on one again. I don't want us falling out and shouting, but why should he unless he has something to hide?

'Tell me, Johnny, what happened to your grandpa? It's been driving me nuts, not knowing when everybody else does.'

Johnny's face changed from being wild and happy to sullen and sad in an instant. He hesitated, looking down at the harbour stone edging as he had the previous day.

'You must have known I was going to ask you tonight. Come on, Johnny, I'm your best friend. You can tell me.'

'Well, no, everybody doesn't know what happened, not really. I've been told some stuff, but people say different things. Only Grandpa really knows what happened, and I've never asked him. I know it will upset him, and I was hoping one day he'd just tell me, and that will be the end of it.'

'You've got to ask him Johnny. Find out the truth.'

'What...to stop you worrying, to cure your nosiness?'

'No...well, yes, I suppose so.' Sam smiled at him, a little embarrassed.

Johnny didn't smile back. 'Listen, I'll have word...see what he says,' Johnny sounded reluctant.

'That's all I'm asking, just being nosy, okay? Are we cool?'

'You know we are.'

'Okay, mate,' said Sam, patting Johnny on the back.

'Hey, I wasn't expecting the German to be there that early, was you?' Johnny asked, laughing and changing the subject.

'No, I wasn't. He gave me a bit of a start, trapped in the back of his van. I thought I had at least another forty minutes to an hour.'

'You would have if he bothered to wash.'

'Doesn't the man sleep? You're right. There was a rotten smell in there. I thought it was my trousers, but I guess not. Next time you can go in, and I'll keep a look out.' Sam smiled, handing Johnny the pasty hidden in his jacket pocket.

'Yeah, okay, mate.'

But Sam knew there was no chance of that.

'I bet you're in for it now, Sam. When your dad gets home tonight, I bet you're really going to get it.'

'So what? It was worth it, wasn't it?' Sam said, rubbing his burning ear and putting the pasty to his lips.

Delicious smells drifted into his nose again. It made it all worthwhile, and Sam could not help making that *mmm* sound again as he took another bite.

Johnny just stared uneasily, but it didn't bother Sam.

A Grandfather's Tale

It was just after tea when Johnny came into view. His legs were going round so fast they were barely visible. His bike rocked from side to side, and he was continually ringing his bell.

Sam sat on the porch bench watching as

Johnny skidded to a halt in front of him.

What a dick.

Sam laughed when Johnny threw his bike down to the ground like a used toffee wrapper.

‘Hi, Johnny. What’s up?’

Johnny raced up the porch steps and leapt onto the bench next to Sam.

‘Oh, nothing. I just thought I’d pop over to see yer.’

It grew quiet as each of them waited for the other to speak, and

Johnny wriggled around on the bench.

Sam didn’t know what Johnny wanted because he wasn’t normally like this. And for what seemed like a lifetime, there was an uncomfortable silence.

Sam decided to tell Johnny what he’d been doing earlier just to break the awful silence. What he really wanted to talk about was sea witches and murderers again.

‘You’ll never guess what I’ve been doing today,’ Sam began.

Johnny smiled excited, turning on his seat. 'I bet it's something good. Your adventures are always good. Come on tell me, Sam, quickly. What have you been up to?'

Sam put his finger across his lips, glancing askance momentarily at the porch window, and then he breathed, 'I'll tell you in a minute.'

Johnny knew what he meant.

Mum was on the other side of the window, and Sam didn't want her to hear.

Furthermore, he knew the suspense made his adventures sound even more intriguing.

'I've been on a sniper mission,' Sam whispered.

Johnny looked into Sam's hazel brown eyes. 'You've not killed someone, have you?'

Sam laughed. Johnny was funny sometimes. 'What do you think I am? No, of course I haven't killed someone, never even saw anyone, come to that.'

Johnny's shoulders slumped back into their usual rounded posture, relieved of the momentary tension.

Then Sam smiled at Johnny again. 'I've been drawing lipstick targets on Mum's windows and shooting at them.'

Johnny tensed up again. 'What...shooting your mum's windows? She's going to kill you!'

'No,' Sam laughed, pushing on Johnny's shoulder. 'I haven't broken any. I been shooting blue tack at them with my catapult. Mum didn't see me or hear me. It was great for a while, and then I shot her arse. You should have seen her; it was dead funny.'

'You never did?' Johnny replied as if shocked.

‘I did. Three times I got her before she saw it was me. She jumped around and squealed, as if she’d been stung by a bee. You should have seen her trying to peg out the washing with blue tack stuck on her. I thought she’d go ballistic for that. Jumping around and shouting, but when she saw me, she didn’t go mad. She just smiled and used my Sunday name. She knew I was only teasing her. ‘Samuel Camponara,’ she said. After that, there wasn’t much point doing it, so I gave up. Mind you, it’s amazing how fast time goes because by then it was nearly tea time.’

‘I reckon you’re lucky you got any tea after that. Wish you’d come for me though. I think I would’ve enjoyed shooting blue tack at your Mum.’

‘I bet you would, Johnny. I bet you would. In fact, I wanted to, but you know I couldn’t. A sniper always works alone,’ Sam told him.

Johnny poured lemonade into a glass from the jug Mum had prepared earlier. He placed it back on the table by the side of the porch bench. He sat back down next to Sam, and they stared out to sea as the light began to fade.

‘I never do anything on my own because I can’t ever think of anything to do,’ he told Sam.

For a moment, he felt sorry for Johnny because he sounded so disappointed.

The sun had turned orange and distant, reflecting on the water above the horizon, and Sam felt the evening air cooling around him. The shining orb was about to disappear, so they sat quietly watching it and listening to the gentle waves shimmering up onto the beach below the rocks.

After a few quiet minutes, Sam spoke. ‘Don’t you think it’s funny how sometimes the sun is like a tennis ball, and sometimes it’s like a football?’

‘Doesn’t look like a tennis ball or a football to me. Anyway, I’ve never really thought about it,’ Johnny replied, uninterested.

‘Tell me, Johnny. What did your granddad say about the sea witches?’

Once again Johnny appeared tense, hesitant, and silent. Finally, he took in a deep breath.

Sam knew he was pondering the question.

‘Grandpa came over to the house for tea today. He sat in the old rocking chair by the fire.’

Sam nodded, hoping he wouldn’t stop.

‘I started to ask him about Tommy Elcinarb. You should have seen Mum and Dad look at each other, as if I’d just said something really bad. Anyway, Grandpa glanced at them with a settled smile, and then he looked straight at me. Mum and Dad walked out of the room; I guess they’d heard it all before, or they didn’t want to know. I told you I’d heard bits and rumours, but this was the first time Grandpa had spoken to me about it. He must have been waiting for me to ask. All this time, I’ve been avoiding it, thinking it was none of my business, and he would tell me when he was ready. I guess he was waiting for me.’

Johnny laid the now empty glass on the floor by his feet and imitated his old grandfather’s croaky voice. ‘I remember when I was a boy your age,’ Johnny began, chest jerking with humour. ‘Me and Tommy took out old Stevenson’s boat, pitch black, like drifting on black tar with only a few tiny lights reaching out to us from the town.

We put the rods out, dropping those lines into the black mire. It felt wrong that night, as if we shouldn’t be there dropping those lines into that sea, connecting to it. It

felt like stepping into a demons house uninvited. Do you know what I mean, Johnny, Grandpa said.'

'He really said this?' Sam asked, amazed.

'He really did. And I didn't know what he meant, but it sent a shiver down my spine. Partly because I could see the fear in his eyes as he told the story.'

'I love this part of the day,' Sam said in a quiet voice. He sounded almost detached. He didn't mean to, especially as he had waited so long for Johnny's tale. But the sea had a lure tonight. It looked so beautiful. Well, it always did, but it was odd really because Sam's eyes were drawn to it, and he found himself momentarily drifting away from Johnny's voice.

'Do yer want to listen to this story, Sam, or not?' Johnny asked sharply, bringing him back.

'Yes, I'm listening... I'm listening, but I'm not believing.' Sam wondered what had just happened, and then he rolled his eyes. 'To be honest, I was expecting something a little more realistic.'

'Why? I bet you'd take out a boat to do some fishing in the middle of the night.'

'Yes, okay, get on with it.'

'Good. Because now it gets really interesting,' Johnny stressed. 'He said they took out *The Sea Witch*.'

'You mean Old Whiley's boat?'

'Yes, but it wasn't Old Whiley's boat then. It belonged to Tommy Elcinarb's uncle,' Johnny explained.

'What? The old man we flipped yesterday?'

‘No, not him. It was Tommy’s uncle-in-law. His name was Schooner Stevenson. They were fishing out in the bay and not having much luck, not a single bite. They were moving around, reeling in and letting out in different spots. There was nothing but darkness all around them, and then something really strange happened. It was as though they’d settled over a giant hole in the bay because the weight on the line just kept going and going, spinning down deeper and deeper, like it was gonna come off the reel. Grandpa thought he was going to run out of line when he hit bottom. Almost instantly, the rod bent over, and the reel started screaming as even more line was pulled out. He flicked the lock over and began reeling in as fast as he could. Not easy when you’re our age, Sam. You know what it’s like with a few mackerels on your line at the same time. One hell of a fight broke out, and the boat was tipping from side to side. The rod was bending and pulling in all directions. ‘Let it go! let it go!’ Tommy shouted. But Grandpa wanted that fish. He thought it might be a shark, so he continued winding it in. Then he got the shock of his life.’

Johnny paused.

‘What? what?’ Sam asked, excited. ‘Don’t stop now! I think this is the best story I have ever heard.’

‘It wasn’t a fish at all...but a grey...fleshy hand’ Johnny looked pleased with Sam’s eye-popping reaction. ‘Yeah and Grandpa threw down his rod instantly, thinking he’d pulled up a dead corpse. He was terrified and could hardly get his breath. Then suddenly the long, knobbly fingers began moving down the edge of the boat toward him.

Its arm bent over the side of the boat, and it started pulling itself up slowly from the water.

Grandpa threw himself back away from it, landing next to Tommy. He cracked his head on something, and the next thing he knew, he woke up whimpering and screaming.'

'Whimpering,' Sam cackled in disbelief.

'Yep... Well, you would be, too.'

'Well, I don't believe it; he's pulling your wedge.'

'He's not. I'm telling you. You should have seen the fear in his face when he got into it, and I'll tell you something else. When Grandpa opened his eyes, Tommy was gone, and nobody ever saw him again. A tear welled in his eye when he said that.'

Sam gasped, completely absorbed in Johnny's tale.

'Apparently, there was a hell of a bellow about it. Some people said that Grandpa killed Tommy and threw him over board, but then there was no body, and none was ever found. I've heard people say that before. They said Grandpa went out in the boat with Tommy, and only Grandpa came back, but he never denied that, did he? Tommy's father sailed up and down the coast regularly, trying to find his body, and he never spoke to Grandpa again, not ever.'

'So what you're saying is, your Grandpa and Tommy went out fishing in a boat called *The Sea Witch*, and Tommy was snatched from the boat by a sea witch, and he was never seen again.'

'Yep, that just about sums it up...except for one thing.'

Johnny hesitated as he had done before, and then in a creepy voice, he said, 'It was on this very night, fifty years ago today.'

The sun had finally settled, blackening the waves and the sky. The porch light came on, and the curtains closed dimming the lights in the house. But the sea continued to call

to them through the darkness, shushing as the waves rattled against the shale on the shore.

‘I know...let’s ride down to town and borrow Old Whiley’s boat for a few hours, put out a rod. What do yer say?’

‘I knew you’d say that Sam, and that’s why I didn’t want to tell you. Grandpa told me not to go out tonight. He told me the story because he knows boys our age take the boats around the bay at night; he said he did when he was our age. But not tonight, Sam, he doesn’t want us to take the boats out tonight. It’s for our own good. In fact, he said that was the main reason he told me his story, that and the fact I’d finally asked.’

‘Get out of it, Johnny. You don’t believe all that nonsense, do you? It’s a great story though. Come on. This will be the best adventure we’ve ever had. And it’ll have to be Whiley’s boat, *The Sea Witch*, or it won’t be the same.’

‘I dunno, Sam. What if we get caught?’

‘If that’s all we’ve got to worry about... We won’t get caught. Come on; I’ll meet you here later tonight, ten-thirty. That’s when the tide is coming in. Let’s catch ourselves a sea witch.’

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