

Chapter 1

“It’s no good, you’ll have to get round the front and lift it up again,” said Robbie’s dad.

Robbie knelt down yet again on the damp sand. He dug around the wheel of the barrow.

“Lift it. Come on lift it!” The pieces of driftwood almost slipped off as Dad pushed the shafts down in an attempt to help Robbie.

Robbie tugged at the wheel. The barrow was so heavy now he couldn’t move it.

“Come on lad, one more heave now.”

Robbie gritted his teeth and pulled. The wheel jumped out of the sand and Dad was able to push it forward.

It was too early for the holidaymakers. Robbie and his dad had the beach to themselves.

“I told you it was a good idea to come now,” said Dad. “You always get the best bits just after the tide’s turned.”

“I’d rather have stayed in bed,” mumbled Robbie.

“Get on with you!” answered Dad. “Don’t know what they’re missing, those folks up there with their fancy central heating and things.” He bent down and picked up a strange shaped piece of wood. It was twisted and bleached with salt. There were little holes here and there from where some insect had made its home in the past. “I think this might make a good bird’s head, don’t you?”

Robbie’s dad liked working with his hands. Robbie’s mum and dad didn’t care about not having much money. They just enjoyed what they did. Dad was always pottering around making things from bits of driftwood and he grew all of their vegetables. Robbie wished his mum would go out to work like the mums of some of his friends. Then they might not be so

poor. Still, at least she did paint scenes from the seashore, which she sometimes sold to the tourists.

And today they had to collect more wood for Mr Thomas' sculptures. The wheelbarrow was filling up quickly.

“You're getting an eye for this,” said Mr Thomas. “You'll be making sculptures yourself one day.”

Robbie shuddered. The last thing he wanted to do was turn out like his parents. He wanted a life with constant hot showers, carpet under his feet in the morning and smart clothes - just like his friend Jace had. He was glad there was no one else on the beach. If some of his classmates could see him now — with his worn out shorts and hand-knitted jumper, walking along the shore collecting rubbish — they'd laugh at him even more that they already did.

Dad stopped suddenly. He shook his head.

“There's something not right,” he said. “Don't you think?” He was looking up at the sky.

Seagulls were circling over them. That was not unusual. But the silence was, especially considering how loud they had been earlier when he'd just got out of bed. At this time of day, they were normally much noisier.

“They're too quiet,” said Mr Thomas. “Perhaps there's a storm brewing.”

Robbie looked at the sky. There was no sign at all of a storm. There was no wind and not a single cloud. It was almost as if the world had stopped.

Mr Thomas shrugged his shoulders.

“Ah, well, we'll find out when the time's right,” he said. “I doubt whether we can do anything. Now then, I could do with a few large, smooth white stones as well”

By the time they had got to Osman's Leap, the high headland at the end of the bay, the wheelbarrow was quite hard to move.

“We'd better go back along the top path,” said Mr Thomas. He looked at his watch. “But it's too early to go back yet. Your Ma won't want us under her feet yet. There's something I need to see to with Bill Daley.” He tapped the side of his nose. “Men talk. Why don't you take yourself off to see that mate of yours? Be back in time for lunch.”

“Okay, then,” said Robbie.

He wondered why on earth his father needed to talk to the coastguard about anything so secret. He daren't mention, either, that he couldn't go and see Jace. Jace was still on holiday in the States with his family. Dad would probably makes some sarcastic comment about how daft Jace's family was to want to go all that way when they lived so near this wonderful beach. Or he might just look away, ashamed because he couldn't take his family on holiday.

Robbie headed into town. The holidaymakers were coming out of their B&Bs now. The sunglasses and the sun cream were on. It seemed funny to him that they were all on holiday in the place where he actually lived all of the time.

He was going against the flow of people carrying buckets and spades and rolled up towels. They were all going down to the beach while he was walking away from it. He arrived at Gull Cliff Bay's one and only amusement arcade. It was only a very small one. Even so when it was opened two months ago, his dad had complained.

“They're spoiling the place,” he'd said.

But Robbie longed to try out some of the machines in there. Sometimes he would walk through, watching other kids having a good time. Today, though, it was deserted. Those people who played the machines, no matter what the weather was like, weren't out of their beds yet. It was so sunny and bright that the families with small children were all on the beach. Most of the people from school who lived in Gull Cliff were away on holiday. Some of the older ones had holiday jobs, waiting on tables in the cafes, making beds in the hotels or serving ice creams in the shops.

Robbie wandered through the deserted hall. He touched the console of the skiing machine. If only he'd got a bit of change. He'd had a go on that once before, when Jace's dad had brought the two boys down there. It really was fantastic.

“Paying guests, only, thank you young man,” a voice snarled at him.

Robbie turned to see where the voice had come from. A tall, overweight man with dark hair and dark bushy eyebrows was frowning at him. Robbie thought he recognised him, but he couldn't quite remember where from.

“Sorry!” whispered Robbie.

“If you're going to play, you pay,” said the man. “Otherwise don't touch.”

Robbie felt himself going bright red.

“Hey, I know you, don't I?” said the man. “Don't you go to school with my nipper?”

Robbie then remembered who it was. Sam Baker's dad. He shuddered. Sam was one of the two biggest bullies at Megilly High. Robbie nodded.

“Well, next time you come here, come a bit better dressed,” said Mr Baker. “You're bringing the tone of the place down.”

Robbie dawdled back out into the bright sunlight. Things were definitely getting back to normal now. The holidaymakers were on the beach and the townspeople were going about their usual business. He made his way to one of his favourite shops, PC Paradise. A laptop just like Jace's was in the window.

"Bet I don't get that for my birthday," thought Robbie. He really could do with a computer. Sure, he could use Jace's any time, and there were plenty at school. But having his own — and an Internet connection — now that really would be something. He saw the price. No way would he be getting that — his mum and dad didn't even understand those amounts of money. But he enjoyed looking.

Robbie carried on down to the old harbour. It was quite hot now. He watched the men unloading the fishing boats. One man he'd seen down there quite often before was putting large metal canisters on to his boat. Robbie wondered idly what might be in them. It was more usual to see people taking things off the boats. He looked up at the sky. Still no clouds at all. And no seagulls. Had they gone inland? Was there a storm brewing? Despite the heat, he shivered.

He didn't dwell on it, though. He had something else to think about now. He was hungry. Surely it would be all right to go home? It was almost lunchtime.

In no time, he was back at the cottage. Mum was cooking dinner in the kitchen. Her hands were tinged with blue. She'd been up to something. But everything was neat and tidy again. There was no sign of whatever she'd been doing. And she was looking pleased with herself.

"Ready for your lunch?" she said.

Robbie grinned and nodded.

"Do us a favour, then," said Mum. "Set the table."

Robbie started to take the knives and forks out of the drawer. As he moved over to the sideboard to get the place mats, he looked out of the window. Still the blue, blue sky. Still, no sound from the seagulls. He listened to the silence. It was eerie. It was not right. And there was something else - now not only could you not hear the seagulls, you couldn't see them either. There was not a single seagull in the sky.

“Where have the seagulls gone, Mum?” he asked.

Mrs Thomas dropped the bowl she was holding. It smashed loudly on the stone floor.