

THE
ISLAND
THAT
WASN'T
THERE

Ruth Snowden was lucky enough to spend her early childhood in two rambling old houses in the country, crammed with books, hidden corners, mice and ghosts. She began writing poetry and stories when she was eight and has never stopped since. One of her three children, Manda, was a real tomboy and always wanted to be a pirate – Rosie's character is partly based on her.

Ruth lives by the sea in Cumbria with her human family and a black cat called Purdy.

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*For Manda,
who always wanted to be a pirate*

Chapter Four

Flotsam and Jetsam

Next day was Saturday. Plum came round in the morning on his bike and knocked on our door just as we were having breakfast. 'Emergency meeting,' he said, showing me a glimpse of his pirate scarf under his denim jacket.

That's our secret sign – wearing a pirate scarf round your neck. Mine's one with a red and orange pattern like flames. Plum's is black with skulls on and I'm dead jealous of it.

'Ten o'clock, usual place. Cal's orders.' He didn't say where, so Alex wouldn't know. We didn't want a gang of Big Boys coming.

But I knew where. Our meeting place is out on Sugar Tongue, by the statue of the boy looking out to sea with a spyglass. There's a mouse in his pocket if you look carefully, and there's even little carved bats hung up underneath where he sits if you know where to look.

After breakfast I made an excuse and dashed off out. I

made sure nobody was following and then I ran right along Sugar Tongue. I scrunched in under the statue on the seaward side, looking up at the bats and waiting for the boys. I didn't want to be seen by anyone else who would give us away. The wind had gone completely now. It was still cloudy, but really warm and the water was dead calm.

Cal gave me a real fright, sneaking up from the far side and going 'Boo!' all of a sudden. I jumped nearly out of my skin. But I didn't scream. We waited for Plum, and he soon turned up, red in the face again with running.

When Plum had got his breath Cal said, 'Right then. Beachcombing today, me hearties.'

'What for?' I asked.

'Flotsam and jetsam chucked out of boats and that,' said Cal. 'You'd better look hard, 'cos I've decided what your test is for joining the Gang.'

'What?' I said nervously. My voice wavered.

'You've got to find something on the beach that No Man Has Found Before.'

'What about woman?' I said.

'Eh?' said Cal.

'You said no man. What about woman?'

'Or woman then,' said Cal, a bit crossly. He didn't like having his leadership challenged.

'Cool!' said Plum excitedly. 'It'll have to be something really unusual. Treasure or something.'

'Treasure?' I said. I was excited too now.

'Or a keg of rum perhaps,' said Plum hopefully. 'We

could roll it up the beach for the Old Git Gang.'

'Get them rollicking drunk!' shouted Cal. 'So's they'll tell us more about the Dead House!'

I wasn't so sure about the last bit. But I followed the boys anyway. They ran off down Sugar Tongue towards West Beach, yelling like a couple of banshees.

But I didn't run. I walked slowly because I was worrying. How on earth was I going to find anything on the shore that No Man Has Found Before? It would be really impossible. My heart sank as I realised I was probably never going to be a full member of the gang.

We'd had a good look in Lucky Corner after what Old Plum had said. There were no gold bands lying around though. There were bottles and cans, lumps of driftwood, shells and plastic bags, all in tangled heaps. Cal found a big white fish crate, but it had a hole bashed in the side so it was no good. Plum found a black wellington boot.

'P'raps it's Pordy's,' he said. 'P'raps a shark ate the rest of him.'

'Don't get sharks that size round here,' said Cal.

'You do! My dad told me!'

'He was having you on!'

'Was not!'

'Was!'

'Was not!'

Plum lunged at Cal. Cal was standing below him on a pile of slippery, stinky seaweed, so it sent him sprawling,

even though he's a head taller than Plum. I watched while they writhed and rolled about, having a fight.

'Your mums'll kill you!' I said. They were getting all seaweed tangled in their clothes, and Cal had a big streak of beach tar down his cheek. They stood up, panting and grinning, enjoying it. Cal swiped at Plum and they both went down again.

Meanwhile I got bored because fights are a boy thing. So I started untangling a mermaid's purse from some mangled old orange fishing net. It was a whole one and I wanted it to keep. It was a black, crackly pouch, with long twisty springs at each end.

They aren't really mermaids' purses of course. My teacher told me that. They're really egg cases from a fish. The springy things hold them on to seaweed. But it was fun pretending.

'Look!' shouted Plum suddenly, pointing down the beach. I think Cal was beginning to win, so he was desperately looking for something to distract him. We looked.

'Cool!' said Cal. 'There really *is* a keg of rum.' Something small and dark was bobbing in the waves at the edge of the sea. He set off down the shingle at a run, wanting to get there first.

It *was* a keg. A small wooden one, just like the ones in the wine merchant's in town. But when Cal picked it up it was really light and he realised it must be empty. A dark trickle of water came out of a small hole in the bottom.

'No good,' said Cal disappointedly. He chucked it back

into the water with a big splash and got sea all up the legs of his jeans. Plum seized his chance and shoved Cal from behind, so he staggered deeper in and got wet up to his knees.

For a moment Cal looked like a thunder cloud. I had to think really quick, before a *real* fight broke out. I knew that Plum would lose. He'd curl up in a tight ball on the shingle, trying not to cry, while Cal lost his temper and thumped him. He's OK is Cal, but sometimes he forgets how big he is.

'Wait!' I shouted hurriedly. 'We can still use it!'

The boys both looked at me. 'How?' said Cal doubtfully.

'We could . . . I know – we could play a trick on the Old Git Gang!'

Cal forgot to be mad at Plum. His temper never lasts long. 'How?' he said again, looking quite interested.

The keg was beginning to drift away from the shore as I spoke. 'Pretend we think it's full. But tell them we couldn't quite reach it. They'll have to row out to it in *Kittiwake!*'

'Hey yeah!' said Plum, grinning cunningly. 'We might get a ride.'

'OK then,' agreed Cal. He got out of the sea and wrung his jeans legs out, but they were still sodden. He didn't care though. This was going to be a smart laugh.

The Old Git Gang were sat in a row in their usual place. At first they didn't believe us about the rum keg, but I put on my innocent-blond-curls look. 'It's true, honest,' I said.

Strictly speaking this wasn't a lie, because there *was* a rum keg. We just didn't mention it was empty.

Pordy got up first. He liked rum a lot. 'Can't hurt to have a look, eh lads?' He got off the wall and began his crab-walking towards West Beach. Old Plum followed, grumbling and leaning on his stick.

But Yan Eye didn't get up. He pushed his greasy cap to the back of his head and watched the other two lumbering off. 'Daft pair!' he said, and carried on sitting there like his backside was glued to the quayside wall.

We felt a bit uncomfortable, him staring at us with his one eye. So we just left him and ran after Old Plum and Pordy. When we reached them we could see that the keg had disappointingly washed back up again, and was lying on the shingle.

Pordy staggered down the beach and picked it up. He shook it hopefully, but all he got was another trickle of sour sea water. Old Plum struggled down more slowly. He moved like a puppet with dangly arms and legs that wouldn't move where he wanted them to.

When he got there Pordy pulled a sour face. 'Empty!' he said. They both looked dead disappointed, like when Mum says you can go to the cinema but Dad gets in from work too late.

I felt a bit guilty, watching them walk back along the quayside. They looked tired and grey, like two tatty old gulls with their feathers moulting. It didn't seem as funny as I thought it would.

The boys must have felt the same really, though they didn't say. They pretended it was dead funny for a bit. 'Did you see Old Plum's face!' laughed Plum, sitting on the dry shingle and pulling the legs off a dead starfish. I wished he wouldn't, even though it was dead and dried-up.

'Aye,' laughed Cal, 'and Pordy must've thought he was in for a real good night!' But the laugh he did sounded a bit forced, and he and Plum soon wandered off, leaving me on the shingle. The beachcombing was over and the sky had gone grey again out over the sea.

I stayed down there a bit by myself, worrying about what Cal had said about the Harbour Gang test. I had to find something really unusual. A mermaid's purse didn't count – they were often washed up on the shore.

Maybe an unusual stone? Or I could cheat by just giving Cal *any* old stone and saying he couldn't prove whether anyone had found it before or not.

Somehow I didn't think Cal would fall for that one. So I sat down and began sifting through the stones, looking for a really strange one. But I couldn't find one that I thought would do, so I began chucking them into the water.

After a bit I found a piece of wood and tossed that in the water, so I had a target to aim at. I got into a drowsy sort of rhythm, with the grey waves and the splosh, splosh of the pebbles.

It was then I heard the noise behind me, up near the top of the beach. It sounded like somebody crying, only different somehow. Odd like – so it made the hairs go up on the

back of my neck. I always thought that was just in stories, but my hair really *did* it, *whoosh*, in a shivery wave.

I looked all up and down the shore, but there was nobody there except me. The odd sound went on – a sort of thin wailing, like a gull makes far out over the water.

I stood up and walked along a bit, trying to find exactly where it came from. Then I realised there was an extra-big bank of seaweed, piled up in a long line near the harbour wall at the end of the beach. There must be somebody crying behind it.

It was quite steep – the waves had piled it all in a stinky, slithery mass. My feet squished into it as I scrambled up, like treading in old porridge. Or dead men's brains, I thought horribly, remembering the Dead House again.

The crying noise stopped as I was scrabbling up, as if the person had heard me and didn't want me to know they were there. It wasn't until I got right to the top that I saw her. And even then I didn't see her for a moment because her hair was the same green as the seaweed, so she blended in.

Chapter Five

Anemone

Her skin was greenish too. A sort of pale blue-green, like the aquamarine in Mum's engagement ring. And it looked kind of slimy, like a fish. She looked really ill, I thought.

She heard me scrabbling up the seaweed pile and turned her head to look at me. Half of her was buried, under a mass of twisted seaweed and bits of old rope, so I could only see to her waist. But she looked about my size, perhaps just a little bigger, so I guessed she was a bit older than me.

I nearly screamed when I saw her eyes, but I was so scared the scream got stuck in my throat like a cork. They were huge and very dark, like fish eyes, or some sort of weird insect thing. The silver-grey light from the clouds reflected in her wide-open pupils.

She smiled then, sort of, and began to speak. Her lips were thin, and her teeth, when I saw them gleaming white, were

pointed – *sharp*-looking. But her voice was quite ordinary.

‘Thank goodness,’ she said, rather unexpectedly, ‘can you help me get out of this lot?’ She pointed to the seaweed that was tangled all round her legs. I hesitated for a moment – I was still wondering if she was some sort of giant insect . . . or an alien maybe? I shuddered when I thought of touching that pale fishy skin.

Mum had always taught me not to stare, and I knew that it wasn’t some people’s fault if they looked different. So I blinked and took a deep breath.

‘Sure. Does it hurt?’ I asked, beginning to feel sorry for her.

‘No. I just can’t move. It all got twisted round and round when the waves were thrashing me about.’

I couldn’t understand quite what she meant. Had she been swimming in that big storm or what? If so she was a prat and she deserved to have been drowned. But I didn’t say that. Instead I just sort of chatted politely as I began to untwist her.

‘My name’s Rosie,’ I said.

‘I’m Anemone,’ she replied.

‘Anemone? Like sea anemone?’ I thought it was a strange name.

‘No. Just Anemone.’ She looked puzzled.

‘How old are you?’ I asked, changing the subject. She must be new to the area, and if she was younger than me, maybe I’d ask her to join the gang so I wouldn’t be the youngest any more. Or the only girl.

‘Six hundred and forty-one at the next full moon,’ she said. Calmly, as if it was perfectly normal. I stared at her. Was she a nutter or what? She was obviously lying, but I still felt she’d got one up on me somehow. I felt myself go red, so I bent my head down. I was having to struggle with a particularly long strand of seaweed anyway. It was the thick, brown, strappy sort that grows right down by the low tideline.

I yanked it off at last and then began untwisting some hairy old blue rope. Anemone was wriggling her legs underneath, trying to help. She sat up and began yanking at some more seaweed.

All of a sudden a big lump of weed came away, and I could see her legs underneath. She had weird tights on. Sort of fishnet ones made of gleaming pearly stuff. There again, I thought, not fish *net*, so much as fish *scale*.

I stared for a moment, forgetting it was rude. ‘What’s wrong?’ asked Anemone, pulling a long strand of green weed out of her hair. It was exactly the same colour, so it looked as if she was actually pulling her hair out.

‘Your tights,’ I said, ‘I’ve never seen any like that. They’re really cool,’ I added hastily.

‘Tights? What are tights?’

I pointed. ‘On your legs. Your stocking things.’

She looked really blank. Her wide black pupils stared into me, swallowing me like dark holes in the sea. ‘Legs?’ she said, with a slight shudder. ‘I don’t have *legs*, you idiot.’

‘Whh?’ I mumbled. My mouth closed up. There were

no words I could think of to say. I felt as if I'd been really rude. Perhaps she was disabled or something. But hang on . . . I was sure I'd felt her legs thrashing about under the seaweed.

Anemone looked exasperated. 'For goodness' sake. You look as if you've swallowed an eel!' She rolled her eyes right up into her head, and turned her thin lips down into a pout. 'Mermaids don't have *legs*. We have *tails*!'

I must have looked dead gobsmacked. My mouth just hung open, so I looked like a fish too.

'That's my *skin*,' she said sarcastically. 'Not *tights*. Whatever they are.'

My mouth came back to life. 'No kidding,' I said slowly. I felt as if my brain wasn't working properly. 'You're a *mermaid*!'

'Sure. What's wrong with that?'

'So mermaids are *real*?'

Anemone pulled the last of the seaweed away from her tail. It lay there on the pebbles, gleaming like a huge fish. I couldn't take my eyes off it.

'Course we're real,' she said scornfully. 'Do I *look* as if I'm not?'

'Well no, but . . .'

'Huh!' she snapped suddenly. 'You humans are so pathetic! You think you're the only ones on the planet!'

I didn't know what to say to that, so I kept quiet for a moment. Anemone gazed out to sea and suddenly she looked really sad. A pale, misty, white tear like a pearl rolled

down her cheek and lay shimmering on the seaweed pile. It looked solid.

'I want to go home,' she sobbed suddenly, bending her head and covering her eyes with her hands. I noticed then for the first time that there were delicate webs of skin between her fingers – like a duck's feet, for paddling through the water.

I put my arm around her. She wasn't cold and slimy at all like I'd thought. She felt warm and soft. 'Where do you live?' I asked her, just like you'd ask a kid who was lost in town.

'Over there, under the waves.' She pointed vaguely out to sea and the light shone through the web of skin between her finger and thumb. 'Many miles away . . . it's a long swim and . . .'

Her voice trailed off. Secretly I thought she was a bit of a wimp. Six hundred and forty-one and she couldn't find her own way home. But I didn't say so.

'Don't you know the way?' I asked.

'Of course I do,' she said faintly. 'But normally I would ride.'

'Ride?'

'A sea horse. Don't you know *anything*?'

'So where *is* your sea horse?' I asked, ignoring how rude she was being.

'How should I know?' she snapped, suddenly looking angry. 'He bolted when the lightning flash came and I was thrown off his back. That's the only reason I ended up tangled

up in all this seaweed in *this* dump.’

‘In any case,’ she added, ‘it’s far too dangerous for me to try and swim back home alone. It’s the Finfolk. They’re back . . .’ Her voice trailed off again. She looked even paler, like she felt sick or something.

‘Who’re the Finfolk?’ I asked. I didn’t like the sound of them much.

But Anemone seemed to be rambling, like people do on TV when they’re in shock or something. ‘I don’t want to be a Finwife . . .’ she said, her voice wavering. ‘A sad, miserable being . . .’

‘What do you mean? What’s a Finwife?’ I asked. None of this was making any sense at all. Who were the Finfolk? Where were they *back* from?

‘The wife of a Finman of course! Finmen are cursed – they have no girl children of their own so they have to marry mermaids – or humans.’

‘Humans?’ I didn’t like the sound of this either.

‘Yes. When they force you to marry them you grow sad after seven years, really depressed after fourteen . . . and then . . . you become a Finwife! The most miserable being imaginable!’ Anemone broke down and began to sob uncontrollably.

It was then, as she sat there with her webbed hands covering her eyes, that I first noticed the bracelet on her wrist. It was made of tiny fragments of shell and coloured stones, joined together on a thread as fine as a hair. A covin shell was fastened at each end to make a clasp.

I had never seen such a beautiful delicate thing before. How could anyone possibly have made it? I reached out my hand to touch it. It felt cool and somehow powerful – as if some unseen magic flowed from it.

But I soon pushed this strange new feeling to the back of my mind. I was a pirate, wasn't I? Pirates had to be tough and rough and fierce, not interested in girly bracelets. And Anemone needed my help right now to get her home without the Finfock kidnapping her out in the open sea.

'Don't worry,' I said gruffly, giving her a squeeze around her shoulders. 'I'll help you get home safe.' Hopefully the Old Gits would help with one of their boats. But would they believe me – especially after the rum keg incident?