

# Otters' Moon



SUSANNA BAILEY

EGMONT



When we came to the island it was summer, but summer stayed behind on the mainland.

There's a chill in the air here. The sort of chill that runs through you when something is about to happen. Something bad. We *have* had blue skies – the kind of blue skies a little kid would paint, only without the yellow sun in the corner. If we see the sun at all, it's pale and half-hearted. Like *it* doesn't want to be here either.

I was *kind* of looking forward to all the 'fresh air and outdoor stuff' Mum kept on about when she sold me this Scottish island holiday. When she said the house was a stone's throw from the beach. I saw rolling waves; warm, golden sand. Kids that would be made up to have a boy from London come and liven up their boring island life. Well, true, the house is near the beach. It's all by itself on the clifftop, overlooking the bay. But the sand here is malevolent, full of tiny sharp edges to cut your feet. And it's more grey than golden. The sea stings your eyes and





it's too still. Like it's holding its breath. Waiting.

As for the local kids, they're not interested in making friends. They just nudge one another and look away when they see me coming. Or whisper behind their hands. Not the kind of whispering the girls back at school go in for – this is different. It's like they know something.

Something *I* need to know, too.

But yesterday I did meet a girl with something to say.



She's sitting on the patchy grass outside our fence, staring out to sea and flicking pebbles over the edge of the cliff.

I risk a 'hello.' She carries on throwing and staring. I stand there, scuffing at the grass with the toe of my trainer, wondering whether she heard me over the whine of the wind. Whether to try again.

Wondering why she's here and whether *she's* in need of company, too.

My throat feels dry. She's probably just another unsociable islander. I could look pretty stupid here. I pick up a white pebble, weigh it in my palm; decide to give her the benefit of the doubt: I've had enough of one-way conversations with seabirds.



I sit down next to her and join in. Must be ten minutes and twenty pebbles before she speaks.

'You're him, then? At Cliff House?' She screws up her eyes like there is bright sun only she can see.

I nod. Ten days on this island and I'm as tongue-tied as everyone else round here.

Another five pebbles worth of silence.

'I'm Meghan. Meg.' Her pale hair lifts in the breeze. She pulls a strand of it into her mouth, tilts her head to look at me from under her fringe; points to the left side of the beach below us. 'That's my house – down there.'

'Where?' I peer over her shoulder.

'The boathouse.'

'You live there? But it's all boarded up . . .'

She looks at me again, a pebble poised in her hand.

'Grandad said a boy was poking around yesterday.'

I think of the old man I saw down on the shore, bent and thin as driftwood; his hair bleached and dry like the grass among the dunes. I had noticed his eyes as I passed: still as the sea, and blue. Bright, vivid blue.

'I wasn't "poking around"; I say. I was *looking* around. Looking for something interesting to do. Not that I found anything.'

Meg stands up. 'I have to go,' she says. She brushes sand

and dead grass from her jeans. 'Don't come by our house again, OK?'

'What exactly is your problem? You and everyone else in this place. Against the local religion to be friendly, is it?'

'Just don't come by,' she says, and grabs my arm. 'I'll come for you, OK? I'll come for you.'

'What makes you think I want you to?' I mutter, as she walks away.

'You do!' she calls without looking back.

I flick my last pebble over the cliff and watch it fall.