

The Beach Dogs

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Random House Children's Books

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For Anna and Sarah

1

The Café Dog

THE SEASIDE RESORT of Multon is not very big. It has a short pier with an amusement arcade and a kiosk at the end selling souvenirs, ice cream, rock and candy floss. There are also a putting green, a crazy golf course, tennis courts, a paddling pool for toddlers, some guest houses, a few shops, two pubs and a café. The main reason people go to Multon is not so much for these modest attractions but because of the town's situation. It lies at one end of a broad bay, sheltered from the wind, and the sea around it is comfortably warm throughout the summer. Bathing there is a delight and, at the height of the season, Multon is thronged with visitors. There are boat trips across the bay and also to the island of Clany, about half an hour distant. Only a small number of people live on this island and most of them are monks, hidden away in the monastery which has been established on Clany for centuries.

The esplanade at Multon follows the curve of the bay and is lined by fishermen's cottages, most of which are now converted into shops or guest houses. Near the entrance to the pier, some years ago, one of the cottages was turned into the Seagull Café. This was owned for thirty years by the same proprietors, Mr and Mrs Clements. Every morning during the season the café door was opened by Mr Clements at exactly half-past eight. Not to let in the first

customers of the day, because there were never any around so early, but to let out a little white rough-haired terrier called Zoe. Zoe was a West Highland White, a Christmas present one year from Mr and Mrs Clements' son to his parents. She was rather an unlooked-for Christmas present since the owners of the Seagull Café were not too happy about keeping a dog in a place where food was served all day. So they decided that during the hours when the café was open, Zoe would have to be put outside. And when it was closed, or if the weather turned very cold, she would only be allowed into their living quarters above the café.

Zoe got quite used to this and usually made a beeline for the steps leading down from the promenade to the beach, especially in wet weather when she would shelter under the pier. She liked to roam around the shingle, exploring the new scents her inquisitive nose picked up each day. She made friends with another dog, Bertram, who was often to be found on the beach too. But whereas Zoe was still young and full of energy, Bertram was old and spent a lot of time sleeping. Then she would leave him and wander off on her own. It was because of this, more than anything else, that one September, late in the season, they embarked on an adventure which was to have consequences neither of them expected.

2

The Pier End Dog

BERTRAM WAS A boxer. His brindled coat was grizzled; he was overweight and wheezy; in fact if he exerted himself too much his breathing became quite laboured. He belonged to Mr Locke, the owner of the pier kiosk. As Bertram grew older, Mr Locke's wife used to remark that the dog smelt, and so her husband had to take him to the kiosk every day in the season to get him away from the house. There was no room for a big dog inside the hut, so most days Bertram waddled along the pier to the steps down to the beach and made his way to a favourite spot. This was a patch of sand amongst the pebbles that caught the sun for most of the day and so remained warm and cosy. Zoe was always on the beach before Bertram. Sometimes he couldn't find her straight away and he would bark once or twice to call her. Then he'd soon see her, trotting briskly towards him in her perky way, her bright black eyes gleaming like buttons and her white coat always looking as if it had just been brushed. Bertram was very fond of Zoe, in a fatherly, indulgent sort of way. He was fourteen years old, and felt it was his duty to look after the little terrier. He knew that Zoe liked him very much too but was only too aware that he wasn't lively enough for her, and this realization always gave him a pang.

One particular morning in late September Bertram and Zoe met as usual. It was a bright crisp day and Zoe stood by a breakwater snuffling the air and savouring all the delicious scents carried on the breeze. 'There's no warmth in the day,' Bertram grumbled. The chill in the air told him the season was coming to its end and he felt morose. He knew that he and Zoe wouldn't be able to see each other for much longer. For although the Seagull Café stayed open throughout the year, Mr Locke closed the kiosk in the winter months as Multon's tourists vanished until the spring.

Zoe didn't reply. She wasn't interested in weather changes, when there were much more absorbing things to investigate. Then she said, 'I've been speaking to the other dog again.'

'Oh, have you?' said Bertram. He was a little envious of 'the other dog', a black and white terrier-shaped mongrel who was full of stories and seemed to have lots of fun with Zoe. 'You don't want to believe everything he tells you.'

'He was telling me about his master's house on the island,' Zoe answered, 'so he had no need to make that up.'

The mongrel spent most of his time riding around in a boat belonging to his master, a retired seaman who now made a living ferrying passengers around the bay or across to Clany and back.

Bertram yawned and tried to change the subject. He thought the mongrel was too rough and ready to be a fit companion for Zoe. 'Let's walk under the pier and up to the rocks,' he suggested. Zoe knew this would take them away from the part of the beach where the boat lay waiting for the day's first customers. She wouldn't be diverted.

'I don't know why you're not more friendly to that dog,' she said. 'He can be a lot of fun. All we do is talk about our owners.'

'Not all the time,' Bertram protested. But he had to admit they often compared notes about their owners' lack

of interest in them.

'We haven't much longer together this year,' Bertram wheedled. 'Can't it just be the two of us till I go?'

'Oh come on, then,' Zoe relented. 'Let's run.'

Bertram bit back the answer, 'You know I can't' and struggled gamely after her little white figure as she scampered over the pebbles. It wasn't long however, before he had to pause for breath, his old sides heaving, watching her diminish into a tiny speck in the distance. Zoe soon noticed she wasn't followed and came dancing back, for she wasn't unkind. 'I'm sorry,' she said. 'I forgot again.'

Bertram was still gasping for breath. 'I used to ... run like the ... wind,' he panted. 'You wouldn't think ... so now.'

'I wish I'd known you then,' said Zoe wistfully, 'Jack can run and leap in a flash - you should see him chase a ball.'

'Who's Jack anyway?' Bertram asked grudgingly, knowing the answer already.

'The other dog, the one that—'

'Yes, yes, I know,' Bertram interrupted, 'Jack. Sounds like the right sort of name for a rough and tumble character like him.'

'Come on, you've got your breath back,' said Zoe impatiently, and led him down to the water's edge. The sea glittered in the early morning sunlight, as Zoe chased the ripples that ran inshore. Bertram sighed. She was so full of vigour while he—

'How d'you know we haven't got much longer together?' she asked him suddenly, interrupting his thoughts.

'As I said, it's less warm,' he reminded her. 'The darkness comes sooner, and surely you've noticed that there are far fewer humans around now? All this tells me my master will soon be leaving the pier and not coming back for a long time.'

'Aren't you clever?' Zoe flattered him, though she really did think so. Bertram loved her to praise him. His spirits

lifted as he stumped through the wavelets. 'When you've been around as long as I have, Zoe,' he muttered, 'you'll—'

'Oh, *no one's* been around as long as you have,' she teased, but she said it so prettily that Bertram wasn't hurt, only amused. Then he remembered the kennels.

'I hate it when my master leaves the pier,' he told Zoe. 'He and my mistress always go away and abandon me for an age, shackled up with a lot of strangers in kennels. There's no peace or privacy; noise from morning till night and herded together for walks like a lot of sheep.'

'I've never been in kennels,' said Zoe.

'I hope you never will be.'

They went on to the rocks and sniffed at the deep pools left by the tide. Zoe surprised a shore crab and ran after it as it scuttled away along the sand. She came back to tell Bertram, 'Jack lives on the island all the time when his master stops working.'

Bertram didn't care what he did. 'Jack this, Jack that,' he mimicked. 'There was a time when you were quite content with my company. We didn't need anyone else.'

Zoe stared at him. 'You're an old grumbler,' she said. 'I think I'll go off if you don't cheer up.'

'Do what you like, Zoe,' he muttered. 'I'm going to have a lie down.'

'Oh, not already!' she exclaimed, but Bertram paid no attention and settled himself well away from any uncomfortable pebbles. His old body needed its comfort. Zoe watched him with irritation, feeling Bertram was deliberately trying to annoy her. Soon he'd be dozing again. She turned away and set off determinedly back in the direction of the pier.

3

The Boat-trip Dog

JACK, THE BLACK-AND-WHITE mongrel, was lying by his master's hut. He had been fed and now his owner, known to everyone as Seaman Halebury, was having his breakfast. Jack blinked lazily in the sun, enjoying a rare moment of stillness. There would soon be plenty to do. When the first queue of customers formed for a boat trip, Jack knew his work was about to begin. He would run up and down the shingle alongside the catwalk the passengers used to keep their feet dry as they filed into the small craft. He believed he was shepherding them inside and, once they were all in, he would jump on to the raised plank himself and trot nonchalantly along it to take his place in the small cabin for the length of the voyage. He always went to the same corner, like clockwork, and he had the air of being far more familiar with boats and sailing than any of the passengers. The *Crest* was a small craft with a noisy, sputtering engine. It tended to roll and pitch in even a moderate swell, but Jack understood its every movement and he felt very much as though it was *his* boat.

Now the *Crest* rocked gently at its moorings and Jack's wiry, elastic body, about the size of a fox terrier, was for the moment quiet. He watched Zoe approaching. He liked her a lot, above all because he loved an audience. As she came near he sprang to his feet, wagging his tail.

'Back again, eh?' he cried. 'Where's the old feller, your companion?'

'Bertram's by the rock pools. Sleeping, I expect.'

'Oh well, that's age for you,' Jack said. 'Can't blame him, eh?'

'He can be a bit of a moaner at times,' Zoe confided. 'Although,' she added loyally, 'I've a great affection for him.'

'Course you have,' Jack agreed. 'Bound to. Known him a long while, haven't you.'

'Yes.'

'What's he moaning about? The master?'

'Sort of. He feels our beach days are almost over for this year and he's dreading being cooped up.'

'Cooped up? What - indoors, you mean?'

'His owners put him in kennels, whatever they are. He hates it.'

'I've heard of them,' said Jack. 'Poor old Bertram. But it has got quiet, hasn't it? I think he's right about the end for this year. When my master packs up we'll be going to the island for a spell. What happens to you?'

'Oh, I get shut up most of the time myself,' said Zoe. 'But my owners'll keep working. I'll be forgotten about upstairs.'

'Sounds dull,' said Jack. 'Listen, I've got an idea. Fancy a boat trip some time?'

Zoe's eyes shone with excitement. 'Oh!' she cried. 'When? How? Where?'

'Hold on, hold on,' Jack answered with amusement. 'Let me think about it. You could bring the old'un too.'

'Oh, *he* wouldn't come.'

'How d'you know? Have you asked him?'

'But where would we go? Tell me!' Zoe begged.

'Ever been to the island?'

'No, never.'

'Like to go? Lots to explore there if you don't know it. There's a giant—'

'A giant!'

'Yes - huge.' Jack could see he was impressing her and began to elaborate. 'Bertram's a big dog but he'd look like a pup by the side of it. Ever seen a giant?'

'No. I don't know what you mean.'

'You will when you see it.' Jack's ears pricked up. He'd heard a sound. 'Ah, my master's stirring. He'll be calling me. You go and tell Bertram my idea and I'll think how we can do it. Meet me tomorrow!'

Seaman Halebury stepped out of his hut and stretched. He gave a greeting to Zoe whom he recognized, but she ran off as she was a bit afraid of him.

Bertram was still lying by the rocks. He wasn't asleep and he was pleased when Zoe reappeared. 'Finished your nap?' she enquired sarcastically. 'I've got news.'

'I don't spend as much time sleeping as you try to make out,' the old boxer defended himself. 'What news?'

'We're to go on a voyage.'

Bertram gaped.

'We're invited on a boat trip, my dear old friend,' said Zoe enthusiastically. 'Jack wants to show us the island. There's a giant there!'

Bertram ignored her last announcement, looking disdainful. 'What a silly idea,' he declared. 'As if we'd want to do such a thing!'

'But I do want to!' Zoe cried crossly. 'Of course I do. It's more exciting than lolling about here all day moaning,' she added pointedly.

'Oh, I see. You want to. Well, why tell me then?'

Zoe was piqued. She actually wanted Bertram's company on the boat because she wasn't sure how Jack's owner would react to some extra passengers. 'Oh, you always spoil things,' she accused him. 'You're invited too. Jack said to meet him tomorrow to talk about how we