THE REGATTA FLAG



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About This Book

At a Glance

- **Reading level:** English level A2- (CEFR) · British English
- **Age:** 8+
- **Length:** 12 chapters · ±16,000 words

Edition

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Version	Date	Notes
1.0	August 2026	First edition.
1.1	August 2026	Language corrections
1.2	September 2026	Illustration corrections.

About the Story

The Series

Puffin Bay is a small fishing village on the Cornish coast, where the Penhale family has run the boatyard and the little sailing school for three generations. Finn, Lily, Martha and Ollie know every tide, every boat and every story in the harbour — and when something strange drifts in with the fog, they are the first to go and look. The sea brings the adventure; the village brings the warmth.

This Book

Every autumn the regatta flag of Puffin Bay goes up to the sailmaker to be looked over. It has done so for a hundred years. The rest of the year it lies folded in a wooden chest in the harbour office, under the counter, with one key.

Then Mr Nance turns that key, lifts the lid — and the flag is gone.

Nothing is broken. Nothing else is touched. The harbour money is still in the tin on the shelf beside it. And in twelve days that flag is a hundred years old, and the whole village will be down on the quay to watch it go up the mast.

Ollie goes round the old people of the village, and half of what they tell him is wrong. Lily rules three columns in a new notebook: the date, what we know, and how we know it. And somebody remembers a light in the sail loft one night, late — and the loft has been dark ever since.

There is no thief in this story. There is a locked chest, a second key that nobody ever wrote down, and twelve days.

Chapter 1: The Empty Chest

It was the last Monday in October. The boats came out of the water.

It was half term. There was no school all week. So the whole village came down to the slip. That is how it is done here. Five boats have to come out. Everyone who is free lends a hand.

Finn Penhale stood at the bottom of the slipway. He was in the sea up to his knees. It was cold enough to hurt. He did not say so.

“Number four,” called his mother. “Bring her on.”

Sarah Penhale ran the sailing school. She ran it in a red smock. She had a whistle on a cord. She hardly ever used it.

The old yard tractor stood at the top of the slip. Harry had backed the trailer down into the water. A trailer is a thing on wheels. You put a boat on it. Then you pull it up.

Boat four came in over it. She came in wet and slow.

“Left a bit,” said Martha. “Left. Now hold her there.”

Martha Penhale had a hand on each side of the boat. Her sleeves were rolled up. Her arms were red with cold. She had not once mentioned it.

Finn held the nose straight. The tractor took up the strain. The trailer came out of the sea. Boat four came up the stone with it. The water ran off her and down the slip.

“Good,” said Sarah. “One more.”

Lily was at the top with the school list. She had it on a board. She ticked each boat off as it came. Four ticks. One to go.



By eleven the last boat was up. Five of them stood along the quay in a row. They looked odd out of the water. Boats always do.

Mrs Chegwin came down from the shop with tea. She had a can in each hand. There was a bag of buns under her arm.

"Drink it while it's hot," she said. "And don't put the cans down on the wet."

They sat along the wall in a line. Their hands went round the hot tea. Out in the harbour the water was flat and dark. It was a grey day. There was no wind in it at all.

A round grey head came up between the moorings.

"Hello, Pearl," said Lily.

Pearl blew out. Then she went under again. Nobody threw her anything. Pearl did not seem to mind either way. That is how it is now.

Ollie Trewin had two buns and a good story. The story was about his uncle's boat. It got longer as he told it.

His wool hat lay on his knee. He was using both hands.

He should not have used both hands.

There was one hard beat of wings. The hat went up off his knee. It went over the wall. Biscuit came round the end of the shed with it. He sat up on the harbour lamp. The hat hung out of his beak.

"That's not food," said Ollie. "That is a hat."

"He doesn't know that," said Martha.

"He can't eat a hat."

"He's going to try," said Finn.

Biscuit tried. It took him a long time. Nobody helped.

"Give it back," said Ollie.

Biscuit did not give it back. He dropped it on the roof of the shed. Then he sat on it.

Then Mr Nance came along the quay. He had his book under his arm. Everyone stopped talking. They were not told to. It is simply what happens. The harbour master comes along with his book. The quay goes quiet.

Mr Nance was seventy, near enough. White hair. White eyebrows. He had been harbour master for years and years. He wrote everything in that book in a slow round hand.

"Boats all up?" he said.

"All up," said Sarah.

"Then I've the meeting to tell you about." He opened the book. There was a red mark on the page. "The harbour meeting was Thursday. We voted on the flag."

Ollie sat up. Everyone did.

There is a flag in Puffin Bay. It is not like other flags. It comes out once a year, for the regatta. It goes up the mast at the end of the quay. It is white and dark blue. It is much bigger than people remember.

"It was sewn in 1926," said Mr Nance. "Sewn by hand. In this village. By the women of this village. It says so in this book. Finished on the seventh of November."

Lily's head came up.

"That's a fortnight," said Mr Nance.

"Twelve days," said Lily.

Mr Nance looked at her over the top of the book.

"Twelve days," he agreed. "Well. On that day the flag is a hundred years old. So the meeting says we hoist it. On the day itself. Not at the regatta. On the seventh."

"Hoist it?" said Ollie.

"Run it up the mast," said Harry. "Same as regatta day."

"And then we take the photograph," said Mr Nance.

He said it in a way that meant something. Lily and Finn knew the one he meant. It hangs on the wall of the harbour office. It is brown all over.

In it the quay is full of people. The men have caps on. The women have long skirts. Their arms are folded. Three boats lie in the water behind them. Above the whole lot hangs the flag. It stands out straight in the wind.

It is the day they first put it up. There is a line under it in white ink. *1926.*

"Same place," said Mr Nance. "Same step. Same flag. And this time it's us on the quay."

Nobody said anything for a second. Then Mrs Chegwin said "Well". Her voice had gone wet. She blew her nose.

"Right," said Mr Nance. "So it wants checking. It goes up to the sailmaker every autumn. It's late this year. That's my fault."

He turned round. He went along the quay to the harbour office. Finn and Lily went with him. Ollie went too. So did Martha. So did most of the tea.

The harbour office is one small room by the steps. It smells of paper and paraffin. There is a counter down one side. It is worn smooth in the middle. The brown photograph hangs above it.

Under the counter stands the chest.

It is a wooden chest, dark with age. It has two iron bands round it. It has stood in that corner longer than anyone can say. The regatta flag lives in it all year. The flag is the only thing in it.

Mr Nance got out his keys. He has a great ring of them. He knows every one. He put the small one in the lock. He turned it.

It turned. It had been locked. Now it was not.

He lifted the lid.

Finn was looking over his shoulder. He saw the inside of the chest. It was full of nothing.

Not quite nothing. There was a cloth in the bottom.

It was a wide piece of white cotton. It was old and soft and washed a hundred times. The flag lies in it. You fold the cloth over the top. That keeps the dust off.

Mr Nance lifted one corner of it. Then the other. The cloth came up light and easy in his hand.

There was nothing wrapped in it at all.

Mr Nance stood with the cloth in both hands. He did not move.

“Mr Nance?” said Lily.

“It’s gone,” he said.

Chapter 2: One Key

In Puffin Bay the grown-ups look first.

They do not send the children out of the room. They do not tell them it is nothing. They look at the thing properly, with the door open. You stand at the back and keep your mouth shut. Then the looking is done. Then everyone helps.

That is how it went in the harbour office.

Harry came along the quay in his apron. He still had a plane in his hand. Sarah came up from the pontoon. Mrs Chegwin shut her shop. She does that about twice a year.

"Show me," said Harry.

Mr Nance showed him. The lid up. The white cotton cloth folded back. The bottom of the chest, dark and empty.

Harry got down on one knee. He put his torch on the lock. He looked at it for a long time.

"Nothing on it," he said. "No marks. Nobody has been at this lock."

He ran his thumb along the edge of the lid.

"Nothing there either. It has not been forced."

"It was locked," said Mr Nance. "I turned the key myself. You saw me."

"I saw you."



Sarah was looking at the shelf beside the chest. There is a tin on it. The harbour money lives in that tin. Mooring fees, mostly, in coins and notes.

She lifted it down and looked inside.

“How much should be in here?”

“Nine pounds and some coppers,” said Mr Nance.

Sarah counted it out on the counter. Nine pounds. And some coppers.

“Then it isn’t that sort of thing at all,” said Harry.

He said it quietly. It went round the room anyway. Whoever opened that chest had left the money there. It sat six inches away.

Ollie was at the window. He had his elbows on the sill. There was a ginger biscuit in his hand. He was going to say a clever thing.

He never got to say it. There was a beat of wings behind him. The biscuit went up out of his fingers.

“Oh, come on,” said Ollie.

"You had it out in the open," said Martha.

"I was holding it."

"You were waving it."

Biscuit sat on the office roof. He ate it in one go. Then he looked in at the window. He wanted to know if there was another one.

Then Mrs Chegwin said the thing that changed the room.

"Who else has a key, then?"

Nobody said a word.

"If nobody else has a key," she said, "then somebody had that key. And there is one ring of keys in this harbour."

She did not mean any harm by it. That is the trouble with a room full of people. There was a hole in the middle of it. Somebody always starts filling the hole.

Mr Nance put his hand flat on the counter. He looked older than he had that morning.

"It's my chest," he said. "It's my key. It has been on my ring for eleven years. And I never sent that flag up this autumn."

"Now, Mr Nance—" said Mrs Chegwin.

"No. I'm the harbour master. It sat in my office. It has gone out of my office."

He stopped. He looked up at the brown photograph on the wall.

Finn did not like hearing that at all. Mr Nance had run this harbour for eleven years. He wrote down the weather every day. He had a whole shelf of it.

Then Sarah spoke. She only said one thing.

"We are not going to spend twelve days on whose fault this is. We are going to find the flag."

That was all. It went into the room like a hand on a rope.

Mrs Chegwin shut her mouth. Mr Nance took a long breath. He stood up straight.

"Right," he said.

"Right," said Harry. "Now. It goes to the sailmaker every autumn."

"It does."

"Then the sailmaker has it early."

"That's the thing," said Mr Nance. "The loft has been shut a fortnight. There has been no light in it. Nobody has been up there at all."

They all turned and looked out of the office window. You can see the boatyard from there. Above the sheds runs the long room with the low windows. That is the sail loft. Sails are cut and mended in it.

The windows were dark. They had been dark for a fortnight.

"And he goes off to his sister's most autumns," said Harry. "Up country. He always has."

"And I never sent word," said Mr Nance. "So he doesn't know it's wanted." He rubbed his face with his hand. "I'll try the number."

The telephone in the harbour office is black and heavy. It is older than Finn's father. Mr Nance turned the pages at the back of his book. There is a list there. He has been adding to it for thirty years.

He rang the number. They all stood and heard it ringing.

It rang for a long time. Nobody picked it up.

"Nothing," he said, and put it down.

"He's at his sister's," said Mrs Chegwin.

"Then he hasn't got it," said Martha. "He can't have. He hasn't been here."

Nobody had an answer to that.

Harry looked round the room. He looked at the four of them along the wall.

"Right," he said. "Four pairs of eyes. Go on, then."

So they looked. They looked the way Harry had. Under the counter. Behind the chest. Along the shelf. In the cupboard with the buoys in it. Finn even opened the coal box. He got told off. He shut it again.

The flag was not in that room. You cannot hide a flag that size. It would fill a bed.

Lily was not looking. Lily had gone out.

She came back in ten minutes. She had a notebook from the shop. It was small and dark green, with a hard cover. She had paid for it out of her own money. She had not asked anyone first.

She sat down on the step by the door. She opened it flat on her knees.

Finn came and looked over her shoulder.

She had her pencil out. She drew one line down the page. Then another. Now there were three tall columns instead of one.

At the top of the first she wrote *Date*. At the top of the second, *What we know*. At the top of the third, *How we know it*.

"That's new," said Finn.

"It's the third one that's new," said Lily. "Pascoe says so. Anybody can write down what they think. You have to write down how you got it."

She put the date in. Then she held her pencil over the second column. She did not write.

In the end she put: *Last seen — nobody has said yet.*

"Nobody's said?" said Finn.

"No. Everybody has said it's gone. Nobody has said when they last saw it in there." She looked up. "That is not the same."

Behind them Mr Nance had his harbour book open. It lay on the counter.

"I'll have written it," he said. "Every autumn. Flag out, flag back. It'll all be in here."

He turned back a year. Then two. Then five. The pages went soft and brown at the edges. The writing changed halfway down one page. It changed again further back. The ink went from blue to black. Then it went a thin rusty brown.

He read them out as he came to them.

October. Flag to sailmaker.

October. Flag to sailmaker.

September 30th. Flag to sailmaker.

Over and over. Year after year. Back and back. Three hands, and then a fourth.

Lily had her pencil ready. Then she stopped writing.

"Mr Nance," she said. "Go back again."

He went back again. It said the same.

"It doesn't say who," said Lily.

"What?"

"It says the flag went to the sailmaker. Every year, all the way back." She put her finger on the page. "It never once says who took it."

Chapter 3: What the Village Says

By Tuesday morning the village had an answer. It had about nine of them.

That is what a village does with a hole. It fills it up.

Mr Roskilly had seen a van on the top road. A grey van, he said, on the Sunday, going slowly.

Someone else said the flag had been sold. Someone else said it had not been sold. It ought to be, she said. Then they could have a proper new one.

Then old Mr Bray said the worst thing of all. He said the flag went rotten years ago. He said they burnt it, quietly. He said they had a copy made. He said nobody was ever told.

Finn heard that one outside the shop. He went hot all over.

"That is not true," he said.

"I only heard it," said Mr Bray.

"Who from?"

Mr Bray thought about it. He could not say.

So Lily wrote it in the third column. *Mr Bray. Cannot say who from.* And that, in her book, is the same as nothing.

Sarah gave them the two days. It was half term. There was work in the yard. She let them go anyway.

"Ask the old people," said Harry. "They were here. We were not."

That was Ollie's job, and Ollie is good at it. He knows every door in the village. He knows the ones to knock on twice.

He made a list of names. He wrote it on a bit of card. He was very pleased with the list.

He put it down on the harbour wall for one moment.

There was a beat of wings. The card went up over the water. Biscuit had it by one corner. He carried it out over the moorings and dropped it.

"That was the whole list!" said Ollie.

The card landed flat and lay there, going round. Martha got the boat hook. She got it back. It came up wet and grey. You could still read most of it.

"He didn't even want it," said Ollie.

"He wanted you to want it," said Martha.

They went round the village all afternoon. It rained a bit. They drank a great deal of tea.

And this is what they got.

Mrs Kitto said the men of the village made the flag. Mrs Kitto is ninety-one. She was quite sure.

Mr Bray said it went to a man in St Ives. Every autumn, he said. He was quite sure too.

Someone's aunt said there was a hole in it. A lamp burnt it, in 1953.

Mrs Chegwin knew three things. One: the flag has the year on it, in one corner. Two: it is bigger than the door of the shop. Three: Mr Nance carries it up to the loft himself. Every autumn.

The third one was not true. Mr Nance had never carried it anywhere.



Ollie came out of the shop and stood in the rain.

"Half of this is wrong," he said.

"More than half," said Lily. She had the notebook out. Her second column was nearly empty. Her third column said *says so*. It said it over and over.

"They're not lying," said Ollie.

"No," said Lily. "They just don't know how they know."

Ollie went quiet. Then he said it. He had been not saying it all day.

"I have to ask them how they know."

"Yes."

"You can't ask Mrs Kitto that. She's ninety-one."

"You can if you're nice about it," said Martha.

So he tried it. It was harder than it sounds.

He went back to Mrs Kitto's. He sat down again and had another piece of cake. Then he said, "Mrs Kitto, can I ask you a thing? How do you know it was the men?"

Mrs Kitto looked at him over her cup.

"My mother told me," she said.

"Was she here in 1926?"

"She was born in 1931."

Then Mrs Kitto laughed. She laughed out loud, for a long time. She said it was a very good question. Nobody had ever asked her it before. She gave him a second piece of cake for it.

After that he asked everybody. *How do you know that?* Nicely, sitting down, with cake. Some of them did not like it. Most of them did.

And the pile of sure things got smaller. It also got much better.

Lily did not go round the doors. Lily was in the harbour office with the book.

She went through it page by page. Mr Nance let her. He sat behind the counter and did his mooring bills. He left her to it.

Between two pages, near the back, there was a letter.

It was folded once. It was typed on good paper. The name of the town museum ran across the top. It was dated last November.

Lily read it twice. Then she took it to Mr Nance without a word.

The museum wanted to borrow the flag. They were making a display for the summer. A hundred years of the bay. Old photographs, a boat, nets. And the flag in the middle of it. They would look after it. They would give it back in September.

Under it, in Mr Nance's slow round hand, was his answer. *Asked and answered. No. That flag stays in the harbour.*

Finn came in and read it over her shoulder. He went white.

"They asked for it," he said. "And they were told no. And now it's gone."

"That does look bad," said Mr Nance.

He looked at it for a moment. Then he pulled the telephone across the counter.

"Right," he said. "Then we ask them."

He rang the museum. It took a bit of time. They found the right lady in the end. Lily could hear her from the door. A bright, kind, busy sort of voice.

Yes, she remembered the letter. Yes, she had been sorry about it. No, they had not come for it.

"We can't very well take a flag off a harbour," she said.

Then she said, "Is it lost? Oh, I am sorry. Do ring me when you find it."

He put the telephone down.

"Well," said Finn. "That was quick."

"That is why you ask," said Mr Nance.

And Lily wrote in her third column: *Museum: rang them. Not them.* For once the day's best line went in the second column. Not the third.

At supper it was fish pie. Harry said grace. He did it the way he always does. Four seconds flat.

"For what we are about to receive, Lord, make us thankful. Amen."

Then he passed the pie round. He asked what they had.

They told him. The van. Mr Bray. Mrs Kitto's mother. The museum lady.

Harry listened to the lot of it.

"Right," he said. "Now I'll tell you what I think. It will turn out to be something ordinary. It nearly always is."

"Ordinary?" said Finn. "It went out of a locked chest."

"It did. And there will be a plain reason for it." He took some more pie. "And we shall all feel daft. Big strange answers hardly ever happen. Small ordinary ones happen every day."

Ollie's mother came round after supper to fetch him. Mrs Trewin had her hood up and her boots on. She stood in the doorway and would not come in.

They were still talking about it. She listened for a bit.

"Is that all still about the flag?"

"It is," said Harry.

"Then I'll say a thing," said Mrs Trewin. "It's probably nothing."

"Go on."

"There was a light on in the sail loft," she said. "One night. Late. I saw it going home."

The kitchen went very quiet.

"When?" said Lily.

"That's the trouble. I couldn't say to a day. A fortnight back? Maybe more." She thought about it. "It was up late, mind. Half past nine, near enough. I remember thinking, somebody is working late up there."

"And after that?" said Harry.

Mrs Trewin shook her head.

"That's the thing," she said. "There has been nothing since. Not one light in it, not one night. It has been dark up there ever since."

Chapter 4: The Man Who Writes It Down

You do not go up to Old Pascoe with nothing in your hands.

That is not a rule. Nobody ever said it. It is simply how it goes. So on Thursday morning they made a cake.

It was a flat heavy cake with fruit in it. Lily read out the recipe. Martha did the mixing. Finn watched the oven. Ollie ate about a third of the mixture. He said he was testing it.

They put it in a tin. Then they went up the point.

The path goes up behind the chapel. It is steep. It gets windy at the top. The lighthouse stands at the end, white and shut up. Old Pascoe's cottage sits under it.

The tide was low. Out to the right the whole bay lay open and grey. Down below them the *Curlew II* sat on her mooring, small and neat.

Biscuit came with them the whole way. That should have been a warning.

Ollie had a paper bag of toffees in his coat pocket. He bent over to do up his boot. The bag came out of the pocket about an inch.

That was enough.

"Oh, no," said Ollie. "No, no, no."

Biscuit went off down the wind with the whole bag. He landed on a rock and had a go at it. Toffees in a paper bag are not easy. He could not get in.

"Good," said Ollie. "I hope he thinks about that."



Pascoe opened the door before they knocked. He always does.

"You'd better come in," he said.

That is Pascoe for *I am pleased to see you.* Finn knew it now. Once you know it, it is quite easy.

The cottage was warm. The black stove was going. The tin mugs hung on their hooks. The great brass telescope stood at the window on its three legs. It pointed out over the bay.

"We brought a cake," said Martha.

"So I see."

"It's about the flag," said Finn.

"I know it's about the flag."

"How do you—"

Pascoe looked at him. Then he looked at the telescope. Then he looked back at Finn.

"Oh," said Finn.

"There were nine people round that office door on Monday," said Pascoe. "And Mrs Chegwin shut her shop. She does that twice a year."

He cut the cake into thick pieces. He gave them one each. Then he sat down in his chair by the window.

"Now," he said. "Say it in order."

So they said it in order. Lily read out her book. The empty chest. The lock with no mark on it. The money still in the tin. The letter from the museum, and the museum rung up and cleared. Mr Bray. Mrs Kitto. The light in the sail loft.

Pascoe put out his hand.

"Let me see that."

Lily gave him the notebook. He held it out at arm's length. He read all three columns.

"Date. What we know. How we know it." He gave it back. "Good. That last one's the only one that costs you anything."

"Ollie's been asking people how they know," said Martha.

"Has he," said Pascoe. "And how did that go?"

"Badly," said Ollie. "Then better. I've had four pieces of cake."

"That's the job," said Pascoe.

Then Lily asked the question they had walked up the hill for.

"Mr Pascoe. The light in the loft. Mrs Trewin saw it. She thinks it was a fortnight back. Can you—"

She did not have to finish it.

Pascoe got up. He went to the wall of shelves. There is a book there for every year. The year is painted on the spine in white. He put his finger on this year's one. He pulled it out.

He put it on the table. He turned the pages backwards. His hands were slow and quite sure.

"There," he said.

They all leaned in.

The writing was small and hard, in capitals. One line for each thing seen.

FRI 9th. 21.40. LIGHT IN THE LOFT.

Under it: *22.30. OUT.*

"There you are," said Pascoe. "Friday the ninth. Twenty to ten at night. It went off again at half past ten."

Nobody said anything for a second.

"A fortnight, they told you," said Pascoe. "It was not a fortnight. Today is the twenty-ninth. That is twenty days."

Lily wrote it down. She wrote it in the second column. In the third she wrote *Pascoe's logbook. Seen with own eyes.* She pressed rather hard.

"That is the difference," said Pascoe. "A fortnight is what people say when they do not know. The ninth is what you say when you wrote it down."

"So somebody was up in that loft," said Finn. "Twenty days ago. At night."

"Somebody was."

"But the sailmaker's away," said Finn. "He goes to his sister's."

Pascoe put his cup down. He looked at the four of them. He looked honestly puzzled, and Pascoe does not look puzzled often.

"Why would that stop him?"

"Stop who?"

"The sailmaker," said Pascoe. "It is the end of October. He will have come for the flag."

There was a silence in that kitchen you could have leaned on.

"Come for it," said Lily.

"He fetches it himself. He always has." Pascoe said it the way you say the tide comes in. "He lets himself into the office. He takes the flag out of the chest. He carries it up to the loft. He does it there. Then he brings it back down."

"He lets himself in," said Martha.

"He has a key."

"To the office?"

"To the office and to the chest," said Pascoe. "He has had them longer than I have had this cottage. He had them before I went out to the light."

Ollie put down his cake. Ollie does not put down cake.

"Mr Pascoe," he said. "Who is he? What's his name?"

Pascoe looked at him for a moment.

"Jago," he said.

"Jago."

"That is his name. Jago the sailmaker. He is over at Selder Cove. Two miles over the cliff." Pascoe shook his head slowly. "You lot call him the sailmaker. You've called him that all your lives. I don't suppose one of you has ever asked."

They went down that hill a good deal faster than they came up.

They told Sarah first. That is the house rule. It has stopped being a rule now. It is just the first thing you do.

Sarah listened. Then she took them straight along to the harbour office.

Mr Nance was doing his bills. He looked up.

Lily told it. She read it out of the book, in order. She gave the third column as she went.

Mr Nance did not say anything at all. He put his pen down. Then he picked up his ring of keys. He looked at it a long time. He had never really looked at it before.

"There were two keys made for that chest," he said. "Two. It says so in the front of the book. Mr Bassett gave them out. He was harbour master before Mr Trelease. Mr Trelease was before me."

"Two keys," said Sarah.

"I have one." He let the ring drop on the counter. "I have never once wondered where the other one went. Not in eleven years."

Then he said the thing that made Finn's stomach go cold.

"And I have never met the man in my life."

"You've never met him?" said Ollie.

"I have had his bills. I know his writing. I have never once seen his face."

Mrs Chegwin was in the doorway. She had come along the quay with her coat over her apron. She had heard the last of it.

"Well," she said slowly. "Now then. That's a thing."

"What is?"

"He comes over on the Tuesday bus," said Mrs Chegwin. "Every week, near enough. Papers and a tin of pilchards, and he never says much."

She stopped. She was working it out as she said it.

"He wasn't on it this Tuesday. Nor last Tuesday. Nor the one before that."

Chapter 5: Dust and a Pair of Glasses

The key to the sail loft hangs in the yard office. It hangs on a board. There are forty others on it.

Harry took it down without looking. He can find any key on that board. He can do it with his eyes shut.

“Right,” he said. “Come on, then. All four of you. And walk where I walk.”

The way up is outside. Wooden steps run along the end wall of the shed. They are steep. There is a rope for a handrail. At the top there is one door.

Harry put the key in. The door had swelled with the wet. Doors do that here. He put his shoulder to it. It went in with a bang.

Cold air came out at them. It smelled of new rope. It smelled of old cloth. There was a little tar in it too.

Then they were standing in the sail loft.

Finn had been up there four times in his life. Perhaps five. He had forgotten how long it was. The room runs the whole length of the sheds. It is low. Small square windows go all down one side. Some are at knee height. Some are up at head height.

The light came in flat and grey. It lay along the floor.

The cutting table stands down the middle. It is the biggest table any of them had seen. It is one long piece of old wood. It is worn smooth. There is a metal edge down one side. There is a rule cut into it, in inches.

The racks are along the far wall. Sails lie rolled on them. One above the other. They are tied with tape. Each one is labelled in white on the end.

At the near end stands the sewing machine. It is under a grey cover. It is black and heavy. It is about as old as the room.

“Nobody touch that,” said Harry.

“I wasn’t going to,” said Martha, who was going to.

Then Lily said, “Look at the dust.”

They looked. Once you see it you cannot stop.

There was dust on the window sills. There was dust along the racks. There was dust on the sewing machine cover. It was thick and soft and grey.

There was dust on the floor. Their own boot marks came in through it.

"Nobody has been up here for weeks," said Finn.

"Twenty days," said Lily.

"Right," said Harry. "Now look at the table."

They looked at the table.

There was no dust on it at all.

It was swept clean from end to end. Not wiped. Swept, with a brush. That is what you do to a big flat thing. You do it when you are about to use it.

And down the middle of it ran a line. A white chalk line, end to end.

Martha put out a finger. She touched it. A little white came off on her hand.

"That's chalk," she said. "That's a mark for cutting."

"It is," said Harry.

Nobody said anything for a moment. Outside, a gull went over the roof.

Then Ollie said it.

"So somebody swept a great big table. And drew a line on it. And then never came back."

"That's about the size of it," said Harry.

Lily had her book open on her arm. She was writing fast.

Finn walked down the length of the table. He went slowly. He had his hands behind his back. He looked at the top of it the whole way.

He got to the far end.

"Dad," he said.

They were folded up neatly on the corner. A pair of glasses. Half-glasses. The sort that sit low on your nose. Thin gold frames. One arm was mended. Somebody had used a bit of copper wire.

They were folded shut. They lay square with the edge of the table. A man puts his glasses down that way for one reason. He is going to want them again.

There was no dust on them either. Well — a little. Twenty days of it.

Harry stood and looked at them. He did not pick them up.

"Here's a thing," said Martha.

She was at the side of the table. She had found it with her hand. Not her eyes. There is a soft strip of wood there. It runs along the table edge. A needle stood up out of it.

It was a long needle. It was thicker than a sewing needle. It had a flat end. A thread hung from it. It was thick and pale. About a foot long.

"He stuck it in the table," said Martha. "Look. That's what you do. You put the needle in the wood. Then you don't lose it."

"That's what I do with a pencil," said Ollie.

"You lose the pencil," said Lily.

"I do lose the pencil."

Harry was still looking at the glasses.

"Right," he said at last. "Find me that flag. Look everywhere. Don't move the sails on the racks. Tell me. I'll do it."

So they looked.

They looked under the table. They looked along the wall. They looked behind the door. They looked in the wooden box under the bench. There are hanks of thread in it. There is a lump of beeswax. There is a leather palm. It has a hole worn in it.

They looked up in the roof. There is nothing up there. Cobwebs, and the tops of the beams.

Martha put her head under the grey cover. There was no flag on the sewing machine.

There was no flag anywhere.

There is a pile of sail bags in the far corner. It is past the end of the racks. They are canvas, and grey. Each one is tied at the neck with a cord. There are about a dozen of them. They all look exactly the same. They have looked the same for years.

Ollie was standing near them. He had half a bun in his hand.

He should have known better. The door had been open the whole time.

Biscuit came in low along the floor. He went out again in one movement. The bun went with him.

"That's the third time this week!" said Ollie.

He waved his arm at the door. His glove came off his hand. It went sideways. It landed on top of the pile of grey bags.

Ollie went over to get it. He put one hand on the bags. He leaned across. Under his hand, one of them gave a little.

He picked up his glove. He put it back on. He went back to the table.

Nobody looked at the bags. There is nothing in the world less interesting. A pile of old sail bags is the dullest thing there is.



“Nothing,” said Finn. “It’s not here. It’s not anywhere.”

They stood round the swept table. The last of the light was going. It was near four o’clock. The room was getting dark at the ends.

Harry picked up the glasses at last. He held them on the flat of his hand.

“Dad,” said Finn. “What?”

“I’m thinking,” said Harry.

He turned them over. The little copper wire caught the light.

“A man came up here,” he said. “He swept this table. He drew his line. He got his needle out. He put a thread in it. Then he took his glasses off.”

He stopped.

“And he put them down. There. Folded. Square with the edge.”

He looked round at the four of them.

“Now. Why do you put your glasses down that way?”

Nobody answered.

"You do it when you're coming back for them," said Harry. "In the morning. You put them there so you know where they are."

He put them down again, in the same place. Square with the edge.

"He never came back," said Lily.

"No," said Harry. "He never came back. And that was twenty days ago."

And it stopped being about a flag. Finn felt it happen. It was the same in all four of them. They stood in that cold room. They all felt it.

Somewhere over the cliff there was an old man. They had never once thought about him.

Chapter 6: Over the Cliff

Nobody slept much that night. In the morning they were all in the kitchen. It was half past seven.

Finn got there first. Then Lily. Then Martha came in without knocking. Then Ollie, with his coat done up wrong.

Sarah put the kettle on.

"Right," she said. "Say it."

"We think he's ill," said Lily.

"So do I."

"We want to go over there."

"So do I," said Sarah. "We'll telephone first."

That is the way it goes in this house. You tell first. Then you go. It is not a rule any more. It is just the shape of things.

They walked along to the harbour office. Mr Nance had the book open before they were through the door.

He read the number out. Sarah rang it.

They all stood and listened.

It rang eleven times. Lily counted them. Then Sarah put it down and rang it again, in case.

Eleven more.

"Right," said Sarah. She got her keys out of her pocket. "Coats."

The yard van is old and blue and smells of rope. Sarah drove. Harry stayed with the boats. Mr Nance stood in the office door and watched them go.

The road to Selder Cove goes up out of the village. It goes up past the chapel and out onto the top.

Up there it is all gorse and stone walls and wind. There are two gates. Ollie got out for both of them. On the left the land runs out and stops. After that there is nothing but sea. It is a long way down.

It is two miles by the road. It is less than that as a gull flies.

They knew that for a fact. A gull was flying it.

Biscuit came the whole way. He sat on the top of the van at the gates. He went along above them in between.

"He thinks we've got food," said Martha.

"We haven't got food," said Ollie.

"He doesn't believe you."

Then the road turns down. Selder Cove comes up at you all at once.

It is smaller than Puffin Bay. There is one grey slipway. There is one wall and one shop. A row of cottages goes up the hill behind. The boats sit up on the hard for the winter. There is a smell of paint.

Mr Voss was on the slipway. He had a boat upside down on trestles.

He looked up. He put his brush in the tin. He stood there with both hands out.

"Well," he said. "Puffin Bay."

They had not seen him since the summer. He is tall and a bit bent. He has thick white hair. He is very pleased to see anybody at all. Some old men are.

"Come up, come up," he said. "Mind the paint."

They went up. He got out a tin of biscuits from the shed.

Ollie took one. He was still saying thank you.

There was a beat of wings.

"Oh," said Ollie, into his empty hand.

"That's a gull off our harbour," said Mr Voss.

"He is not off your harbour," said Ollie. "He's ours. He followed us over the cliff."

"Then he's a fool," said Mr Voss. "There's better bins in Puffin Bay."



Sarah did not sit down.

"Mr Voss," she said. "We're looking for Mr Jago."

The smile went off Mr Voss's face. Not in a bad way. It just went.

"Ah," he said. "Yes. Poor old Jago."

Finn's stomach went cold and small.

"He's been in his bed," said Mr Voss. "It's near three weeks now. He came home from your place on the Friday night. By the Sunday he was down with it."

"Down with what?" said Sarah.

"A chest. And a cough with it, a bad one. You could hear it out in the lane." Mr Voss shook his head. "Seventy-two he is. It goes hard at that age."

"Has anybody seen him?" said Lily.

"Course they have, my love." He looked quite surprised. "Mrs Pengelly next door has done his shopping every day. The doctor came out twice. He's up again this week. He's sat in his chair, anyway, and that's up, for Jago."

Lily let out a long breath.

"He's all right," she said.

"He's better," said Mr Voss. "He's not right. He's not walking to any buses yet, I'll tell you that."

There was a bit of quiet on that slipway.

Then Sarah asked the question. She asked it kindly and straight.

"Mr Voss. Why did nobody send word to us?"

Mr Voss opened his mouth. Then he shut it again.

"Well," he said.

He looked out at the water for a moment.

"I thought you knew," he said. "That's the honest answer. I thought somebody would have rung over. Mrs Pengelly said the same to me. She thought his sister would have done it. His sister thought he'd have done it himself, I expect."

"And we thought he was at his sister's," said Sarah.

"There you are, then." Mr Voss rubbed the back of his neck. "Everybody thought somebody had. So nobody did."

Finn was looking at the ground.

Three weeks. A man had been lying in a bed two miles away. Near enough three weeks of it. And Puffin Bay had spent the week talking. A grey van. A museum. Old Mr Bray's rubbish.

Nobody had picked up a telephone.

"That's the trouble with a hill," said Mr Voss. "It's only two miles. And it might as well be twenty."

"Where is his house?" said Martha.

Mr Voss pointed with his brush.

"Up there. The end one. The green door."

They went up the hill. Sarah went in front. That was right and none of them argued.

It is a short row of cottages. They are white, with slate roofs. There are pots by the doors. There is nothing in them at this time of year.

The last one has a green door. There is one window beside it, low down and wide.

They came up the path.

And there he was.

He was sitting in a chair. It was right up close to the window. The light was on his face. A thin old man. Thick white hair, combed straight back. A blanket over his knees. There was a cup on the sill beside him. There was a folded newspaper too. He was not reading it.

He was looking out at the sea. He had been looking out at it for a long time.

Then he turned his head. He saw them coming up his path. Four children from Puffin Bay and a woman in a red smock.

Finn saw it happen. He watched the old man work it out. Right there behind the glass. It took about a second and a half.

Mr Jago put his hand on the arm of the chair. He got himself up out of it. It took him a moment.

He came to the door himself. He opened it. He stood there holding on to the frame.

He had a jumper on over pyjamas. He did not seem to care.

Nobody had said one word yet.

"You've come about the flag," said Mr Jago.

Sarah opened her mouth.

"No," he said. "No, don't. Let me say it."

He looked at the four of them standing on his path.

"I have made a right mess of this," he said.

Chapter 7: Mr Jago Tells It

The front room was warm. There was a fire in it and a smell of soup.

Sarah got him back into his chair. She did it before he said another word. He did not argue much. He was out of breath from standing up.

Mrs Pengelly came in from next door. She had the soup. She took one look and put the kettle on. Then she brought bread and jam for the children. Then she went out again.

“Sit down, the lot of you,” said Mr Jago.

There were not enough chairs. Finn and Lily sat on the floor by the fire. That was better anyway.



Mr Jago put his hands flat on the blanket over his knees.

“Right,” he said. “You’ll have questions. I’ll tell it in order and then you can ask.”

“You don’t have to do it now,” said Sarah.

“I do have to do it now.”

So he told it.

He is a slow talker. He stops in the middle of things. Finn found that he did not mind at all.

"I came over on the Friday," said Mr Jago. "The ninth. First bus."

Lily got her book out. He saw her do it and he waited for her.

"Go on," she said, going red.

"I came early this year," he said. "I had a reason. That flag turns a hundred on the seventh of November. I have known that for about forty years."

"You knew?" said Ollie.

"Of course I knew. It says so on it."

He waited for that.

"The top strip is white," he said. "The year is worked into the corner of it, in blue. Whoever did that was better with a needle than I am. And I am the sailmaker."

"So you came for it," said Martha.

"I came for it. I let myself into the office at eight. I have a key to that office. I have a key to that chest. I have had them since Mr Bassett's day."

"Mr Nance didn't know that," said Lily.

Mr Jago stopped.

"No," he said. "No, I don't suppose he did. We'll come back to that. It's the worst bit."

He went on.

He had taken the flag up to the loft. He had swept the table. He always sweeps it. Then he had opened the flag out flat. Full size. He had not seen it so since last autumn.

"It fills that table," he said. "It's nine strips wide. Dark blue and white. Blue and white, all the way down. And the year in the corner."

"Nine," said Lily, and wrote it.

"And I stood there and looked at it," said Mr Jago. "And I thought, oh dear."

Nobody said anything.

"Three of those strips are done," he said. "Finished. Not torn — you'd see a tear. Gone soft. Do you know what soft means, in cloth?"

They shook their heads.

"Hold it up to a window," he said. "The light comes through it. Put your thumb on it and it gives. It's still a flag to look at. It's still a flag in a chest. But you put that up the mast in a bit of wind—"

He stopped and looked at the fire.

"It would go in one go," he said. "The whole middle of it. In front of the village. On the day."

Finn thought about that. He thought about the brown photograph on the office wall.

"So you decided to mend it," said Martha.

"I decided to mend it," said Mr Jago. "Properly. Not a patch on it. Three new strips. Cut and set in by hand, the same as the rest. It's about ten days' work for one man. I had four weeks. That was enough."

He looked round at them.

"And I said nothing to anybody," he said. "That was the plan. Say nothing. Do it. Hang it up there on the seventh, perfect. And let them all look at it."

"That's a surprise," said Ollie. "That's allowed. That's a good surprise."

"It was," said Mr Jago.

He said it in a way that made Finn's neck go cold.

"I worked till half past ten that night," he said. "Then I got the last bus home. And on the Sunday I couldn't get out of my bed."

He put his hand up to his chest. Then he let it fall again.

"Three weeks," he said. "I've been no use to anybody."

Lily was writing. She stopped and did not look up.

"And that," said Mr Jago, "is where it stops being a surprise."

Ollie looked up.

"You lot were worrying," said Mr Jago. "Weren't you. Somebody was lying awake over that chest."

"Mr Nance was," said Martha.

"There you are."

He straightened himself up in the chair. He said the next bit carefully. He had said it to himself in that bed. A good many times.

"A surprise stops being a surprise the minute somebody lies awake over it," he said. "That's the whole of it. After that it's just a thing you're not saying. And I should have sent word."

Nobody answered him.

"I could have," he said. "That's the part I can't get round. Mrs Pengelly would have posted a letter for me. Any day of the three weeks. I told myself I'd be up on the Wednesday. Then I told myself Friday. Then I stopped telling myself anything. I lay there and let it run on."

"You were ill," said Sarah.

"I was ill for the first week," said Mr Jago. "I was quiet for the other two."

Then he asked the question he had plainly been holding.

"Is Nance in trouble?"

They all looked at each other.

"Over the key," said Mr Jago. "It's his chest and his office. And I've had a key to both since before he had the job. He never knew. And now the flag's out of it." He shut his eyes for a second. "That's mine, that is. That's not his."

"Mrs Chegwin did say who else has a key," said Ollie, honestly.

"I'll bet she did."

"And Mum stopped it," said Finn.

"Did she." Mr Jago looked over at Sarah. "Well. Thank you."

"He blamed himself for the rest of it," said Sarah. "You'll have to come and see to that yourself."

"I will," said Mr Jago. "I'll do that first."

Lily had been quiet for a bit. She was looking at her book.

Then she put her pencil down and counted on her fingers.

She did it twice, to be sure.

"Mr Jago," she said. "Today is the thirtieth. The seventh is a Saturday."

"It is."

"That's eight days."

The room went quiet.

Mr Jago looked at her for a long moment. Then he nodded slowly.

"Eight days," he said. "Yes. I've counted them too."

"Three new strips in eight days," said Martha. "How long does one take?"

"Three days. For a man with two good hands and no cough."

Martha did the sum. Everybody did the sum.

"Then we help," said Finn.

Mr Jago put his head back against the chair.

"There's a thing you don't know yet," he said. "And you'd better know it now."

"What?" said Lily.

"You've been up in that loft. Nance told you to look for a flag, I expect."

"We did look," said Finn. "It isn't there."

"It is there," said Mr Jago.

He held up one hand. Then the other. He moved them apart.

"It's not in one piece any more," he said. "I took it apart myself. Strip by strip. Every stitch of it, out. The strips folded. Labelled. Put away."

He let his hands drop.

"That flag is in a grey bag on the floor of my loft," he said. "In nine pieces."

Chapter 8: Nine Pieces

It was dark by five. It always is at that time of year.

They went up the loft steps with two lamps. Harry went first with the big one. Sarah came last. Mr Nance came too, in his coat, and did not say much.

The loft looked different at night. The lamps made a yellow room in the middle of it. The ends of it went off into black.

"Right," said Harry. "The corner."

The pile of sail bags sat where it has always sat. A dozen grey bags, all the same, tied at the neck.

Harry undid the first one. Inside was a sail. He did up the cord again.

He undid the second. Another sail.

Ollie was standing on the other side of the pile. He put out his hand and touched the third one down.

"This one," he said.

"Why?"

"My glove landed on it. On Thursday." He went a bit red. "It went in. All the others are hard."

Harry looked at him. Then he pulled that bag out of the pile.

He put it on the end of the cutting table. He undid the cord.

Nobody said a word.

Inside were nine folded pieces of cloth.

They lay in the bag one on top of the other. Flat and neat. On each one there was a small square of paper. Each square was pinned on with a brass pin.

The papers had numbers on them. *1. 2. 3.* And so on, down to *9.*

The writing was small and old and very careful.

"Well," said Mr Nance, and had to stop.

Lily got there first.

"Table," she said. "Lay them out in order. One at the top."

So they did.

They took them out one at a time. Harry passed them along. Martha and Finn laid them down the length of the table. Lily read out the numbers.

"One. Two. Three. Four. Five."

The table was not long enough. The last two hung off the end and Sarah held them.

"Six. Seven. Eight. Nine."

Then they all stood back.

There it was. The regatta flag of Puffin Bay, in the lamplight, in nine pieces.

White, blue, white, blue, all the way down. Nine long strips, side by side. Not sewn to each other any more. Just laid there, touching.

It was much bigger than any of them had thought.

In the corner of the top strip was the year.

It was worked into the white cloth in dark blue thread. Four numbers. *1926.* The stitches were tiny. Whoever made them had taken her time.

Lily put her hand near it and did not touch it.

"That's a hundred years old," she said.

"Near enough," said Harry.

"Somebody sat and did that. In this village. With a needle."

"They did."

Mr Nance had his hat off. Finn had not seen him take it off.

Then Harry picked up the lamp. He held it low, behind strip five.

The light came straight through it.

You could see the shape of his hand through the cloth. You could see the beams of the roof through it. It looked like a bit of white paper held up to a window.

"Oh," said Martha.

He moved the lamp along to strip three. The same. Then strip seven. The same.

The blue ones were fine. The other whites were fine, or near enough.

"It's the white that's gone," said Harry. "Three, five and seven. All white. The whites were always the softer cloth."

"So he was right," said Finn.

"He was right about all of it."



Then a boot came up the outside steps. The door pushed open. It was Mr Voss. He had his cap in his hand. The cold came in with him.

"He wrote things down," said Mr Voss. "He wrote for an hour. I said I'd bring it over tonight."

He had two folded sheets of paper.

He gave the first one to Mr Nance.

"That one's yours," he said. "He said it was private."

Mr Nance took it and turned away a little. He read it by the lamp. It was not long. He read it twice.

Then he folded it up small. He put it in his top pocket. He buttoned the pocket.

"Right," he said.

That was all he said. But he stood a bit straighter after it. And he put his hat back on.

The second sheet was for the loft.

Lily read it out. It was written in the same small careful hand as the labels.

The strips are numbered from the top. Keep them in that order.

Three, five and seven come out and are made new. Do not touch the others.

There is white cloth in the long box under the bench.

Do not cut anything.

Voss says he will bring me over on Saturday. Then we start.

H. Jago

"He's written us instructions," said Martha.

"He has."

"On a folded piece of paper," said Lily.

She was smiling. Finn saw why about a second later. Old Pascoe sends his lines down the hill on folded slips of paper, signed — *J.P.*

"They'd get on, those two," said Ollie.

"They've known each other sixty years," said Mr Nance.

Then Sarah did the sum out loud, and it went quiet again.

"Right," she said. "Let's be honest about this."

She put one finger on the table for each thing.

"Today is Friday the thirtieth. The flag has to hang on the mast on Saturday the seventh. That is eight days."

"Eight," said Lily.

"Three strips. Mr Jago says three days each for a fit man on his own." Sarah looked round. "That is nine days of work in eight days. And he is not a fit man this week. He cannot climb those steps yet."

"He can be carried up," said Ollie.

"He is seventy-two, Ollie."

"He could be carried up carefully."

Sarah did not laugh, but it was a close thing.

"School starts again on Monday," she said. "So that's two whole days, and after that it's after school and it's dark."

Nobody spoke.

"I am not saying no," said Sarah. "I am saying I want everybody counting the same numbers. That is all."

Ollie had a bag of chips in his coat. He had bought them on the way and forgotten them.

He got them out now. He had them open for perhaps two seconds.

The door was still open. The lamps were bright.

A grey and white shape came in at head height. It took the whole bag out of his hands. It went straight out again.

"The BAG!" said Ollie. "The whole bag!"

"He's getting better," said Martha.

Down on the roof of the shed there was a noise. It was a paper bag being murdered.

They all laughed. Even Mr Nance laughed. It was a good moment to have.

Then Finn stopped laughing.

He was looking at the nine strips on the table. He had been looking at them for a while.

"Mum," he said.

"What?"

"We're going to do it, aren't we. We're all going to work all week."

"I expect we are."

"And then on Saturday we'll bring him down to the quay," said Finn. "And we'll run it up the mast. And it'll be finished. And he'll see it for the first time from the ground."

He turned round.

"That's the same thing," he said.

Nobody understood him for a second. Then Lily did.

"It's a surprise," she said.

"It's exactly a surprise," said Finn. "It's his own flag and we'd be doing it to him. He said it himself. He said sorry for doing it to us."

They were all quiet.

"So somebody has to go and ask him," said Finn. "Not tell him after. Ask him first. What does he want done, and how does he want it done."

He looked at his mother.

"That's right, isn't it?"

Sarah looked at him for a long moment.

"Yes," she said. "That is exactly right."

Chapter 9: Stitch by Stitch

Mr Voss's van came down the hill at nine. It was Saturday morning.

Half the village was on the quay. That was not planned. It just happened.

Mr Jago came out of the van slowly. He had a coat on over the jumper this time. He stood. He looked up at the loft windows.

Finn got to him first. He had been waiting for this. Since six o'clock.

"Mr Jago," he said. "Before we start. We have to ask you a thing."

"Go on, boy."

"It's your flag. Well. It's the harbour's. But it's your job." Finn ran out of the good words. "We could do it all week. We could bring you down on Saturday and show you. We could make it a lovely surprise."

Mr Jago looked at him.

"But we're not going to," said Finn. "So what do you want?"

There was a pause. Mr Voss looked away and smiled at the wall.

"Nobody's asked me what I want since about 1974," said Mr Jago.

"Well, we're asking."

"Then I'll tell you." He put his hand on Finn's arm. It was mostly to hold himself up. "I want to be in the room. I want to see every stitch that goes in it. And I don't want anybody being kind to me behind my back. Not ever again."

"Right," said Finn.

"That's a good question, that was," said Mr Jago. "You got there quicker than I did. It took me three weeks in a bed."

They got him up the loft steps in the end. It took two men. And a lot of stopping. Harry had put a chair at the head of the cutting table. There was a cushion in it. There was a blanket over the back.

Mr Jago sat down in it.

He stayed in that chair, on and off. He stayed there all week.

The white cloth came out of the long box under the bench. Harry rolled it out. Mr Jago put his half-glasses on. He looked at it. He said it would do.

Then he said, "Right. Strip three first."

And that is when Martha got her hands on the sewing machine.

She had the grey cover off in under a minute. She had it out on the small table. The one by the window. She oiled it. She turned the wheel with her hand. She listened to it.

"It's fine," she said. "It's stiff. It's not broken. Somebody's just left it standing."

"That somebody would be me," said Mr Jago.

Martha did not hear him. She was away.

She found the thread. She got the end of it in her teeth. She made a point of it. She started to thread the machine. Up and round and down. In the right order. Nobody told her any of it.

Finn watched her do it. She was fast. She was happy.

"Three days a strip by hand," said Martha, without turning round. "We haven't got three days a strip. This will do a strip in an afternoon."

"It will," said Mr Jago.

"So we're all right."

"We are not all right," said Mr Jago.

Martha stopped. She had the thread halfway through the needle.

He held out his hand. There were two bits of old white cloth on the table. They were scraps out of the box.

"Sew those two together," he said. "Go on. Down the middle."

She did it. It took about eight seconds. It came out neat.

"Now pull them apart," said Mr Jago.

Martha took one bit in each hand. She pulled.

The cloth went with a small sound. It did not tear in the middle of the cloth. It tore straight down the line of the stitching. From one end to the other.

Martha looked at it.

"Oh," she said.

"There you are," said Mr Jago. "A machine puts in a hard line. Little holes. All in a row. All the same. And old cloth tears along a hard line. Every time."

He tapped the table.

"That flag is a hundred years old. Put a machine seam in it. Then you have made it a place to tear. The mend would be the thing that killed it."

Nobody said anything.

"It has to be hand stitch," said Mr Jago. "The same stitch as the rest of it. A hand stitch gives. It moves with the cloth. That is why that flag is still here. The women who made it are not."

Martha put the thread down.

She was not gracious about it. She was not gracious about it for about ten minutes.

She put the cover back on the machine. She did it harder than she needed to. Then she went and stood at the window. She folded her arms. She looked out at the harbour.

Mr Jago did not say one word to her. Not the whole time.

Then she came back to the table.

"Show me the stitch," she said.

"Sit down here," said Mr Jago.

He showed her. It is not a hard thing to learn. It is a very hard thing to do well.

He gave her the leather palm off the bench. You push the needle with it. He showed her the lump of beeswax. You run the thread over it twice. Then it goes through the cloth clean.

"Small," he said. "Even. Same size, all the way. You are not in a hurry."

"We are in a hurry."

"You are not in a hurry," said Mr Jago, "for the next seven days."



Martha sewed for two hours.

They could all see it. That was the worst part. There were six people in that loft. Every one of them could see the line she was making.

It went along fine for a bit. Then it wandered. Then the stitches got long. Then they got short again.

At the end of two hours she sat back. She looked at it.

Mr Jago leaned over. He put his thumb on the seam. He ran it along, slowly, from one end to the other. He said nothing for a while.

"Take it out," he said.

Martha did not argue. She got the little hook. She unpicked every stitch she had put in. It took her twenty minutes. Two hours, undone.

Then she did it again.

The second one was better. It was not good. It was better.

At four o'clock Ollie's father came up the steps.

Mr Trewin had been out to the pots. He had come straight up. He still smelled of the sea. He is a big slow man. He says about nine words a day.

He looked at the flag on the table. He looked at Mr Jago. He took his coat off.

"Where do you want me," he said.

He sat down at strip three. He started to sew.

Finn watched his hands. Then he stopped watching the rest of the room.

Mr Trewin did not look at what he was doing. He looked out of the window. His hands went on without him. In and out. Small and even. The same stitch every time. All the way down.

"Dad," said Ollie. "How can you do that?"

"Nets," said Mr Trewin.

"You've never said."

"You've never asked."

Martha moved up one chair. She sat next to him. She watched every move he made. She did not say a word for half an hour. That is a Puffin Bay record.

In the middle of all that, Ollie went to eat his pasty.

He had thought about this. He had put it inside an empty sail bag. He had tied the cord in a knot. He was rather proud of it.

Biscuit had sat on that bag for two hours.

Ollie undid the knot. He got the pasty out. It was in his hand for less than one second.

"HOW?" said Ollie.

"He waited," said Lily. "He is cleverer than you."

"He is a gull!"

"He waited two hours," said Lily.

The chapel bell went at half past ten on the Sunday. The village went. Then it came back and got on with it.

By Sunday evening strip three was in.

It was the first of the three. It lay there between strip two and strip four. White and new and a bit too bright. It was joined to the flag. All the way down both sides.

They stood round it. Nobody said anything.

Mr Jago got up out of his chair. He put both hands on the table. He leaned over the seam.

He went along it with his thumb. Slowly. All the way down one side. Then all the way up the other.

About a foot from the end he stopped.

It was late-at-night work. The stitches there were long and tired. Everyone knew who had done that foot.

Mr Jago straightened up.

"Again," he said.

Chapter 10: Not Enough Cloth

Martha did that foot of seam again on Monday morning.

She did it before school. She was up in the loft at ten past seven. She had one lamp. Nobody asked her to.

Finn came up at eight. She was sitting back, looking at it.

"Well?" he said.

"Better," said Martha.

That was all she said about it. But she went to school in a good mood. Martha does not do that on a Monday.

School started again that day. Half term was over.

Biscuit came to school too. He sat on the wall by the gate. At break he came down. He took Ollie's sandwich. The whole school saw it. Ollie got a clap. He did not want one.

That made it all harder. They got out at half past three. It is dark by five at this time of year. So they had an hour and a half of good light. After that, the lamps.

Day eight.

Strip five went on the table after school.

Harry cut it. Mr Jago sat at the head of the table. He watched him do it. He made him cut it slowly. Twice as slowly as Harry wanted.

"Measure it again," said Mr Jago.

"I did measure it."

"Measure it again."

Harry measured it again. Then he cut it.

They got a good long way with strip five that evening. Mr Trewin came up after the pots. Mrs Chegwin sent a pot of tea down. Then she came herself. She stayed an hour.

At about eight o'clock Lily was rolling up the white cloth.

She stopped. She held the roll up.

"Mr Jago," she said. "How much of this is left?"

Mr Jago put his glasses on. He looked.

Then he took them off again.

"That's the end of it," he said. "That's not a strip. That's a sleeve."

Nobody moved.

"There were three strips in that box when I put it there," he said. "Or so I thought. I'll have used some in the summer. And not written it down."

He said it flat. No fuss at all.

"So we've got two strips and cloth for none," said Martha.

"That is about the shape of it."

The next bit was the worst evening of the week.

They went at it from every side. Ollie ran down to Mrs Chegwin's. He was back in four minutes.

Mrs Chegwin's shop sells everything. It sells white cloth too.

He brought a piece back on the counter roll.

They put it on the table. Right next to the flag.

They all made a noise.

It was white. It was very white. It was the whitest thing in that room by a mile. Beside it lay a hundred years of sun and salt and weather. The new cloth looked like a light switched on.



"No," said Mr Nance.

"No," said Mr Jago.

"It's white!" said Ollie. "You said white!"

"There's white and there's white, boy."

"Then we dye it," said Martha.

That was worth trying. So they tried it. Sarah made a pan of strong tea. She did it in the yard office. Martha put a bit of the new cloth in it. She left it an hour.

It came out yellow.

Not old. Not soft. Yellow. Blotchy at one end. And it went stiff when it dried.

"It would wash out in one shower," said Mr Jago. "And you would still see the line where it stopped."

"Then we use it anyway," said Ollie. "Nobody will see. Not from down on the quay."

There was a pause.

"You'd see it from the harbour mouth," said Finn.

Mr Voss had come to fetch Mr Jago. "You'd see it from Selder Cove," he said.

Mr Nance said the thing that finished it.

"You'd see it in the photograph," he said. "And that photograph will be on that wall in a hundred years."

Ollie gave up on that one.

Then Harry rang round. That took a while. There is a chandler at Falmouth. A chandler is a shop for boats. It sells rope and paint and canvas and the rest.

The man at Falmouth was kind about it. He had the right cloth. He could have it on a Thursday.

Thursday is day eleven.

"Two days to sew a strip in," said Mr Jago. "It would want three. And that is if it came in the morning. It would come at night."

He sat back in his chair. He looked tired for the first time all week.

Nobody said anything for a bit.

Then Lily said, "Can I ask a boring question?"

"Go on," said Sarah.

"We have looked in all the shops," said Lily. "We haven't looked in the record."

Finn did not understand her. Nor did anybody else.

"What record?" said Martha.

"The bag," said Lily. "We took nine strips out of that bag. Did anybody look in the bottom of it?"

They all looked at each other.

The bag was under the table. Harry had dropped it there on Friday. It had been under there for three days.

Ollie got it out. He held it upside down. He shook it.

Something fell out on the floor.

It was flat and folded. It was the colour of the flag.

Lily picked it up. She put it on the table, in the light. She opened it out.

It was a piece of white cloth. It was old. Old in the way the flag was old. Dull and grey-white, and it did not give under the thumb. The weave had gone loose along the cut edges, and nowhere else.

There was a small square of paper pinned to one corner. The pin had gone rusty. It had made a brown mark.

The writing was not Mr Jago's.

It was smaller and thinner. It slanted the other way.

Flag cloth. Over. J.T. Nov. 1926.

The loft went completely quiet.

"'Over'," said Finn. "What does 'over' mean?"

"Left over," said Mr Jago. His voice had gone odd. "It's what you write on an offcut. The bit you didn't use."

"Somebody cut the flag out of a roll," said Harry slowly. "And there was a piece over. And he kept it."

"Of course he kept it," said Mr Jago. "Sailmakers keep everything. It is the whole trade."

Martha had a tape out already.

She ran the tape over it twice. That was how she had been taught that week. Then she stood up.

"It's long enough," she said. "It's long enough for strip seven. There's a hand's width over."

Nobody cheered. It was too big a thing to cheer at.

Mr Jago got himself up out of the chair. He did that on his own now, mostly.

He picked the cloth up in both hands. He carried it down the loft to the window.

He held it up against the grey light.

He stood there. He looked at it for a long time. Longer than was comfortable. Nobody said one word to him.

Finn watched his back. He could not tell what was going on.

"That bag has stood in that corner since before I came here," said Mr Jago at last. "I have never once turned it out. Fifty-seven years."

He came back to the table with it.

"You want to know who wrote that," he said. He put his finger on the little brown-marked label.

"Yes," said Lily.

"Jack Tregear," said Mr Jago. "J.T. He was the sailmaker here before me. He cut this flag out in 1926. He was twenty-six years old."

He sat down. He put the cloth on his knees. He kept one hand on it.

"And in 1969 he took on a boy of fifteen," he said. "A boy who was no good at all. He had me in that loft six days a week for eleven years. He was the only man alive who ever had the patience for me."

Nobody moved.

"He would be a hundred and twenty-six," said Mr Jago.

He looked down at the cloth on his knees.

"And he left me exactly what I want," he said. "In the bottom of a bag. And never said a word about it. That is the most Jack Tregear thing that ever happened."

Chapter 11: The Last Stitch

That week had a shape to it. The shape was this.

School. Home. Bag on the floor. Up the loft steps. Wash your hands. Sit down. Sew.

Strip five went in on the Wednesday night.

On the Thursday Mr Jago cut Jack Tregear's cloth. He would not let anybody else do it. He was slow about it. He measured it four times.

"He'd have measured it five," said Mr Jago.

Then he cut. The last strip was ready. There was one day left.

Friday was day twelve. Eleven days were gone. It was the last evening in the loft.

Half the village came up.

Mrs Chegwin came at six. She had a flask of tea and a tin of buns. She stayed till the end. Mr Trewin came up from the pots. Mr Voss brought Mr Jago over. Then he stopped as well. Mr Nance came with the harbour book under his arm.

"I'll write it in tonight," he said. "When it's done. Not before."

They put two lamps on the table. They put one on the bench. The rest of the loft went dark and warm and quiet.

And then they sewed.

Here is the truth about that evening. Not much happened in it.

That is what the work is. You put the needle in. You pull it through. You put it in again, a quarter of an inch on. You do that fifty times. Then you have sewn a foot.

Lily's fingers went sore. Then they stopped being sore. Ollie kept dropping his needle. He kept finding it with his boot. Mr Trewin sewed a yard and a half. He never looked down once.

Finn sat at the far end with Martha.

He had hated this job all week. He had hated it on Sunday. He had said so.

He was still sewing on Friday.

He found something out that week. He did not tell anybody. You can be no good at sitting still, and sit still anyway. It does not get easier. You just do the next bit.

Under his hands the flag went by, inch by inch.

At one point he stopped. He looked at what he was holding.

The old stitches were right there next to his own. Somebody had put those in. In this village. A hundred years ago, in the autumn. With a needle and a lamp. On a night about like this one.

His stitches did not look as good as theirs. He kept going anyway.

Two things went wrong that evening.

The first was Ollie's chair. He got up in a hurry to look at something. The chair leg went back. It caught the edge of the flag. A whole corner came off the table and swung.

Harry got it. He had it in both hands before it went a foot.

Nobody shouted. Mr Jago did not even sit up.

"Right," said Harry. "New rule. Nobody moves a chair. You want to get up, you say so. Somebody holds the cloth."

"Sorry," said Ollie.

"You're all right."

The second thing was worse and it was nobody's fault. At about eight Martha stopped. She put her hand flat on strip seven.

"That's gone through two," she said.

She had caught a fold underneath. Nine inches of good stitching had gone through the new strip. It had gone through a bit of strip eight as well.

Mr Jago came along and looked.

"Take it out," he said.

"Nine inches," said Martha.

"Take it out."

She took it out. It cost her half an hour. She did not say one word about it. Then she did it again, properly. It was as good as anything sewn in that loft that night.

At about half past eight Ollie went to the door. He was going to shout at Biscuit.

Biscuit had been shut out since six. He had walked up and down the roof ridge the whole time. Every so often he put his head down. He made a noise into the loft window.

Ollie put his head out to tell him to be quiet.

Biscuit took the hat off it.

It was the same wool hat. He had taken it off the quay. That was the day the boats came out.

"He's had that hat once already," said Ollie.

"Then he likes it," said Lily.

Ollie stood in the doorway. He looked up at the roof. Then he shrugged.

"Keep it," he said. "It never fitted me anyway."



At twenty past nine they were down to the last few inches.

Everyone stopped pretending to do anything else. Mrs Chegwin stopped pouring. Mr Nance shut his book on his finger. They came in round the end of the table. All of them. In a ring.

Martha put in the last of her stitches. Then she stopped and sat back.

"That's it," she said. "There's one left."

There was one. One stitch, at the end of the seam. It was where the new white strip met the old blue one.

Nobody picked up a needle.

They all looked at Mr Jago.

He was in his chair at the head of the table. He looked back at them and he shook his head.

"No," he said.

"It's yours," said Harry.

"It is not mine. It never was mine." He put his hand flat on the cloth. "That flag is the harbour's. It always has been. And this time the harbour mended it."

"Then who?" said Ollie.

Mr Jago looked round the ring of faces. He took his time about it.

"Youngest," he said.

Lily went the colour of a lobster.

"Me?"

"You found the cloth," said Mr Jago. "Come here."

She went round the table. Her hands were not very steady. Mr Jago put his own hand on the cloth beside the seam. He held it flat and firm.

"Slowly," he said. "Wax it first."

She ran the thread over the beeswax. Twice.

"Now. In there. Straight down. Don't pull it hard."

Lily put the needle in. She brought it up. She drew the thread through. It lay down flat, the same size as all the others.

Then she made it off, the way Mr Trewin had shown her. She cut the thread with the little scissors.

The regatta flag of Puffin Bay was mended.

Nobody cheered that either. Mrs Chegwin blew her nose. Mr Nance opened his book. He wrote three lines in his slow round hand. He shut it.

"Right," said Harry. "Let's see it."

They cleared the table. Then eight of them took an edge each.

They lifted it off the table. They let it out full.

It filled the loft.

That was the thing none of them had been ready for. Folded, it is a bundle. On a table, it is a job. Out in the air it is enormous. It went from the sewing

machine to the door. It hung there in the lamplight. White and dark blue. It moved a little in the draught. The year was in the corner.

They stood there and held it up. They looked at it for about half a minute. Not one of them said a word.

Then Martha said, "Listen."

They listened.

Outside, something had changed. All week the loft had been quiet at night. Now there was a hum on the roof slates. There was a knock in one of the windows.

Harry went to the end window. He opened it a crack.

The air came in cold. Really cold. It came from a new direction.

Down on the quay a rope was slapping. Out past the harbour wall the sea had a white edge on it. You could see it in the dark.

Harry stood there a moment. Then he shut the window.

"Wind's gone round," he said. "North."

"Is that bad?" said Ollie.

"It's blowing," said Harry.

Mr Jago put both hands on the arms of his chair.

"That flag goes up a mast at eleven tomorrow," he said quietly. "In the open. In front of the whole village."

He looked at the great white and blue thing hanging across his loft.

"And it is a hundred years old."

Chapter 12: A Hundred Years

Finn woke up at ten to six. He lay there and listened.

It was still blowing. He could hear it in the roof. He could hear the sea. It was working along the harbour wall.

He got up and went down. His father was in the kitchen already. The light was on.

"Morning," said Harry.

"It's still blowing."

"It is."

They stood there in the kitchen. Neither of them said the next bit.

At half past six Harry went out to open the yard. He came back in a minute. He had a slip of paper in his hand. It was folded once.

"Under the office door," he said.

Finn knew that paper before he saw the writing. Small, hard capitals.

WIND WEST BY NINE. GOES WITH IT. YOUR FLAG WILL FLY, NOT FIGHT. — J.P.

"He was up in the night," said Finn.

"He is always up in the night."

At half past eight the wind came round. It came round to the west.

By nine it had gone soft. By ten it was a good steady breeze. It came off the land. It was the sort that fills a flag. It does not tear at it.

Harry went out to the mast. It stands at the end of the quay. He put his hand on the halyard.

The halyard is the rope for the flag. It runs up the mast. It goes over a little wheel at the top. Then it comes down again. You tie the flag on one end. You pull the other. Up it goes.

Harry ran it up and down empty. Twice. Then he did it again.

"Dad," said Finn. "It works."

"I know it works," said Harry. "I'm doing it again."

They came at eleven.

They came from the cottages. They came from the top road. They came up from the boats. Mrs Chegwin shut the shop. That was twice in one fortnight. It is a village record. Mrs Kitto came down in a chair on wheels. The school came. Mr Roskilly came in from the valley.

And Old Pascoe came off the point.

That was twice in one year. The village noticed it. He walked down the cliff path. He had his logbook under his arm. He stood at the back. He said nothing to anybody. Finn saw him look at the mast. Then at the water. Then at his watch.

Pearl put her head up by the far wall. She stayed there the whole time.

Mr Voss's van came down the hill. It was ten to eleven.

They got Mr Jago out of it. He had a proper coat on this time. He had a collar and a tie. He plainly wanted to be somewhere else.

Mr Nance took him by the arm. He walked him straight to the front.

"No," said Mr Jago.

"Yes," said Mr Nance.

"I'd rather stand at the back, Nance."

"I know you would."

So there he was at the front. In front of the whole village. With his hands behind his back.

He stood there a moment. Then he took a breath. Then he said his piece.

He did not make it long. He is not that sort of man.

"You'll know most of this," he said. "I came over on the ninth of October. I took that flag out of the chest. I used my own key. Nobody knew I had a key. That was my doing and nobody else's."

The quay was very quiet.

"I found it half gone," he said. "Three strips of it. So I took it apart. I started to make it right for today. And I said nothing to anybody. I wanted it to be a surprise."

He stopped for a second.

"Then I got ill. I lay in a bed at Selder Cove for three weeks. And you lot were down here worrying."

He looked round at them.

"Now here is the thing I have learned. I am seventy-two. I have taken my time over it."

He said the next bit slowly.

"A surprise stops being a surprise the minute somebody lies awake over it. After that it is just a thing you are not saying."

Nobody moved at all.

"I should have sent word," said Mr Jago. "It would have cost me a stamp. I am sorry. I shan't do it again."

And that was that. He shut his mouth and stood there.

Then Mr Nance stepped forward. He got in first. He was loud about it.

"Right," he said. "My turn. There were two keys to that chest. I only ever knew about one. That is a harbour master's job. I never did it. It is in the book now. In my hand. With his name against it."

He turned round to the village.

"And nobody here is to say one word to that man about it. He has mended our sails for fifty years. He has sent us a bill every autumn. Never once one we could argue with."

There was a laugh. It went right along the quay.

It was a good laugh. It let everybody out.

Mrs Chegwin said, “Hear, hear.” Then she blew her nose. After that it was over, and it was fine.

Then they hoisted the flag.

Mr Nance had it ready on the halyard. It lay folded on a clean board. He gave the rope to Mr Jago.

Mr Jago looked at it.

“Not on my own,” he said.

So they all took it. Mr Jago at the top of the rope. Then Martha. Then Finn. Then Ollie. Then Lily at the end. She had about four inches of it.

Before they pulled, Mr Nance took his hat off.

“A hundred years,” he said. “Thank God for the hands that made it, and for the hands that mended it. Right. Up she goes.”

He put his hat back on.

They pulled.

The flag went up the mast. It went in one long white and blue run. Halfway up, the breeze off the land got underneath it. It opened out. It stood.



It filled right out. It was enormous against the grey sky.

The whole quay made one sound. Not a cheer. Just a sound.

Finn stood with the rope in his hands. He looked up.

You could not see where the new strips were. You could see nothing at all. Three of them were a week old. Six of them were a hundred years old. Up there in the wind they were all one flag.

He looked along at Martha. Martha was not looking at the flag. She was looking at the seams.

Then they did the photograph.

Mr Nance had worked it out. He had the brown one in his hand. The same step, halfway up the harbour steps. The mast up on the left. The water behind.

The village packed itself in. It took a long time. It always does.

Ollie had a saffron bun.

He should not have had a saffron bun.

The camera went on the count of three. At two and a half a shape came in over the wall. Grey and white, at head height.

So there is a photograph on the wall of the harbour office. It is not brown yet. Give it time.

In it the quay is full of people. The flag is up on the left. It stands out straight in the wind. It is in the same place. Exactly the place it stands in the old one.

And down at the front there is a boy. His mouth is open. Both hands are in the air. About a foot above his fingers there is a gull. It is going away fast. It has a saffron bun in its beak.

Mrs Chegwin says it is the best photograph ever taken here.

Afterwards people stood about on the quay. It went on for an hour. They do that here.

Mr Jago had his chair brought down. It came out of the loft. He sat in it on the cobbles. He had a cup of tea. There was a queue to talk to him. He did not seem to mind.

He called Martha over at the end of it.

He had something in his fingers. It was the long needle. It came out of the edge of the cutting table. There was a bit of pale thread still through the eye.

"That was Jack Tregear's," he said. "It has been in that table since before you were born."

He looked at her.

"You had the worst two hours of anybody in that loft. And you sat down and did it again."

He put it in her hand.

"So it's yours. Don't lose it in the wood."

Martha did not say a word. That is a second Puffin Bay record.

And then it was over. The village started to go home.

That is when Ollie's father came up the slipway.

Mr Trewin had been out since half past five. He had his crab pots up on his shoulder. Four of them, roped together.

He put them down on the stone. He stood and looked at them.

Ollie went over.

"Any good?" he said.

"No," said Mr Trewin.

Finn came over too. So did Lily.

The pots were empty. Not one crab in the four of them. Not one.

"That's the same corner as last week," said Mr Trewin. "And the week before that."

He picked them up again.

"Three weeks," he said. "There's something gone wrong down there."

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