



THE MERMAID'S CALL

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ONE

The girl's scream woke me.

I was used to such starts by then, so I didn't reach for the candlestick ready to brain a stranger come to harm us. I did what I had done so often since the girl had come into my life. I pushed off the blankets and gathered the sweating weight of her into my arms, sat her up but held her down, against me. That was the best way. I had learnt that over many nights of screams and sobs and words in a way of talking I still didn't know. She had given up her German words when she was awake, but when she was asleep it was German that was her scream tongue. Only in sleep did she make any noise about what had happened to her.

'There now,' I said, and rocked her, though she was no small creature for that, and she was strong, too. Her sleeping body fought me, but I held on, rode it out with her. As I did too often.

She smelt of the harbour, where she had been all day amongst the crab pots. Salt and fish and something else. The ham hock we'd had for our supper. There was her day in her red, clammy skin, in her thick hair brown as the caulk of the boats she loved to watch. This poor girl in my arms. I pressed my cheek against hers.

I told her it was done now. She was safe, my girl. My poor girl.
Mathilda.

To speak true, we owed the girl debts, we being Anna Drake and me, and I wanted to repay her, truly I did.

Mathilda thrashed and I held tighter, but it was no good. I could feel the muscles in her neck tighten and then her head was shaking. I tried to prise open her lips. On my fingers, a warm wet. Even without the light I knew what it was. Tonight's dreams were bad.

'Anna!' I shouted. She'd have heard the screams already, her room being next to ours, and put the pillow over her head. 'Anna, please!'

I fought Mathilda's wild arms and with a thump we tumbled to the floor. My hip was dull with pain but at least now I could get her on her side so she wouldn't choke on her blood, and then the door opened and there was light.

'There's only so much of this Mrs Yeo will put up with,' Anna said, setting down her candle.

'Never mind that – Mathilda's going to bite her tongue clean off!'

'Where's the bar?'

'On the window ledge,' I said. 'No – the other side.'

The whites of Mathilda's eyes rolled, there was sweat above her lip, and I thought of the pony I had seen drown in the marsh. A long time ago. Another life.

'Quick! Hold her arms.'

Anna scrambled onto the bed next to me and her robe grazed my hand – a slink of cool, fine silk. She pinned Mathilda's arms behind her back and I got two fingers into the corner of the girl's mouth, as my father had done to horses to make them take the bit. The clamp of Mathilda's jaw eased for a heartbeat and I slipped the small bar of much-chewed wood we kept for such purpose between her teeth. All at once she ceased her jerks and thrashes

and went limp as if dead in my lap. The bar of wood rolled free of her mouth and landed on the floorboard with a wet tap. It left a smear of blood.

For a moment neither Anna nor I spoke, just watched the still-sleeping girl and let the work of our own panic ease from us. It was Anna who broke the silence. It often was.

‘To see what Mathilda saw,’ she said, and tucked a strand of Mathilda’s hair behind her ear. ‘And she’s so young. It’s been more than six months now. Will she ever be free of it?’

I thought of my own terrors. They’d been with me far longer than Mathilda had had hers. I knew she wouldn’t be free for a fair time to come, if at all, but what use was it to say? Anna didn’t like me to speak of my losses. There was nothing to be done but to keep eating bread and breathing and going to sleep.

‘Let’s get her back in bed before she catches a chill,’ Anna said.

Together we hauled the sleeping Mathilda to her feet and then onto the bed. She was shivering now as her sweat cooled, so Anna fetched her blanket and added it to the one I shared with Mathilda.

‘Is it too early to get up or too late to go back to sleep?’ Anna said.

I pushed aside the curtain. The harbour of Boscastle was still dark save for a lamp burning here and there on the boats with night business.

‘Neither,’ I said. ‘Mathilda has woken us in the true middle of the night.’

Anna gave a little smile. ‘That must be some kind of talent. How to sleep after that? You go back to bed, Shilly. I’ll see—’

‘We’ll light the fire, will we?’

‘I suppose we—’

‘And I’ll get the paper.’ I was making for the door before she had a chance to say no, Shilly, it’s too late, no, Shilly, you’ll never learn. No, Shilly, I don’t love you.

‘Shilly, wait.’

‘You promised you’d teach me, Anna, and it’s been months and I’m still so slow. I’ll light the fire and make the tea, and there’s some of Mrs Yeo’s cake. Not much left, but you can have my—’

‘Your hands, Shilly. Look.’

I looked. My palms were bloodied.

‘Let me fetch a cloth,’ Anna said. ‘I doubt our landlord will welcome blood upstairs as well as down.’

She was speaking of the butcher’s shop. Our rooms were above it.

Anna took the candle and I followed her into the little room she liked to call a parlour but that was more than it earned. Two rickety chairs and a stool. A table that sagged. A patch of damp by the window, shaped like a swan. Still, it was ours, for now at least. I held up my palms to keep the blood from touching anything.

‘You look like a martyr in a painting,’ Anna said.

‘A what?’

‘Someone who dies for others.’ She set to cleaning my hands with a wet cloth. The fire was glowing embers and all the room was kind to me in that moment. Anna, holding my hands.

‘Murdered?’ I said, but soft as embers turning over. Like *murdered* was a good word.

‘I suppose you could say that. But not the kind of murders we concern ourselves with.’

‘We haven’t concerned ourselves with many of late,’ I said.

It was a poor thing to say. Her hands stilled.

‘There’s only a bit left,’ she said. ‘There – your thumb. You can do the rest. I’ll stir up the fire.’

And she let go of my hands and turned away, only for the poker, only bending low to the grate but I felt the loss of her keenly. It was between us always. What had been once – me and Anna had

lain together. What might be again? When we had first come to Boscastle I said to myself, Shilly, if you wait. If you wait and let her see you're not doing the bad things any more. That you are good and work hard at your reading. If you just wait. My God but it was hard not to touch her, to tell her. Some days I wanted to claw my skin from my face it was so hard.

‘What about this cake, then?’ she said, and I nodded and that was that. Our life together.

For now.

TWO

I went to the little room next to the parlour where we kept our few plates and cups and the teapot. Mrs Yeo, our landlady, had brought us the seed cake the day before. Anna had said we should keep some for another day, make it last, and that I couldn't fathom, for we had money now, plenty of it. We could eat fresh cakes every day, eat them until we were sick and still have money for more.

Our riches were thanks to Mathilda. She had *in hair i tance*. That was the money of the dead, gifted to Mathilda because she'd been a lady before she met us, in a place called *ger man ee*. Anna said that was far from here, so far that people spoke a different tongue. It was *across the sea*. I liked the song of that. *Ger man ee, a cross the sea*. Mathilda had come to Cornwall for a sad purpose, and found only more sadness here, for in the woods where she'd made her home there was darkness waiting for her – people who wished to do her harm, and she the sweetest creature I had ever known, who wanted only to be loved.

It was a bad business, and Anna and I had saved her from this. Afterwards, when it was over, Anna said Mathilda should give us her money, that it wouldn't be spending but saving, for

Anna and I were detectives. We were to start the agency and Anna said Mathilda was an *investor* and she would get *returns*. I didn't know what that meant but Mathilda did, and she'd agreed to Anna's plan. I had many new words all to do with money since meeting Mathilda. One thing I did know, I wasn't poor now. I didn't have to go back to milking cows, which was my work previous and hateful.

But now I asked myself if my thinking was wrong, for even with Mathilda's money, Anna was all for being careful with our spending. Too careful. I poked the leftover seed cake. It was dry. Some things were better enjoyed at once. There was too much went stale in life.

I took what was left of the cake to the parlour, which was now a room of light for Anna had gathered our candle ends and set them round the table we used for lessons. My heart turned over with joy at the sight of the papers. My papers. For writing and for reading.

Life had changed much since I had first met Anna Drake. That meeting was close on a year before this though I was not wise about the keeping of time so it was her that told me of dates and such. She had come to the moor, where I was living then. It was a bad reason that had brought her – the death of someone I had loved. But goodness had come from it. She had taken me from that place where I had no one, nothing, and given me a new life. Had we done the same for Mathilda? Anna Drake was a great collector of women.

'I'll leave the door open,' I said, 'to hear Mathilda's screams.'

'How restful,' Anna said. 'Reading first, then cake. Where did we get to?'

I sat at the table and looked over the pages I had written. That *I* had written! I had taken to reading easier than writing, truth be told. My writing was not careful, and the ink was devious

in getting places it had no business being, where there were no words. But on this page now before me there were words in the middle of the whiteness, and I had made them with my own hand. And Anna's help, of course. That was the bargain we had struck. If I could keep from the drink, she would help me learn reading and writing.

I put my finger under the first word at the top. '*To day.*' I stopped and looked at her.

'Keep going.' She wrapped herself tighter in her silk robe and settled back in her chair.

'*To day ma tild da and shi lie saw three boats.*' My finger plodded along the page as Anna had told me to do when reading, and she was my teacher so I did everything she said. '*The su san. The me rry ma . . . ma . . .*' My mouth was hardening tallow.

'Merry Maiden,' Anna said.

'*Me rry may den.*'

'Good. And the next—'

We both stiffened at a noise from the room where Mathilda lay. A moan. The bed creaking beneath her. I waited for the scream, but nothing more came. As if we were one body, Anna and I let our shoulders slump.

'Would that we were merrier ourselves,' she said.

'I wouldn't want to be the Merry Maidens proper,' I said.

'Why not?'

'Well, they're girls turned to stone. For dancing on the Sabbath. You can't be very merry if you've moor stone for a body.'

'A fair point,' Anna said.

This pleased me for it meant I was being useful. Anna was a detective and she had asked me to join her in this, to be a detective alongside her. It was a word I hadn't got to spelling yet. It was tricky enough to say, and I was still finding my way with the

work. Some days it was better than milking cows, but others it was worse. Much worse.

‘Shilly?’ She was staring at me, her thin features made narrower still with worry. ‘You were muttering again.’

‘I wasn’t.’

‘Are you feeling it, the need to—’

‘No! No, Anna, I promise.’

She put her hand on mine. I took it, but too quick, too eager to press it against my lips. She pulled away. She had loved me once. I had made her cry out with the goodness of my hands and of my mouth.

‘I know you’re trying,’ she said, ‘and I know the effort it must be.’

‘Then why can’t we—’

‘You didn’t tell me the third boat.’

‘What?’ I said.

‘The third boat you saw today. You’re keeping your end of the bargain, Shilly, so I must keep mine.’

‘Yes,’ I managed to whisper, and tried to send from my thoughts the memory of her sharp hip bones and the taut skin between them. My finger sought the last words in the line I had written. ‘*The per ince of Way uls.*’

‘Very good,’ she said.

‘Very slow, you mean.’ I helped myself to cake.

‘You’re too hard on yourself, Shilly. These things take time.’

‘How long did it take you to learn writing?’ I said.

That set her thinking. Her long thin nose, her thin bloodless lips, were tight with considering. I heard the sound I knew to be her thinking sound, just soft, on the edge of hearing. The *tap tap* of her false teeth knocking about. You had to know it to hear it, and I did know it for we spent much time together thinking, Anna Drake and I. That was our work. There were other things I’d rather be doing with her. Wait, Shilly. Wait.

‘I don’t know,’ she said. ‘I don’t remember learning.’

‘That’s because you were young,’ I said. ‘I don’t remember learning the things I learnt then.’

‘Such as?’

‘How much water pigs drink in summer. Where the blackberries grew best.’

And how to slip free my father’s fists I thought but didn’t say.

What I did say was, ‘Who taught *you* to write?’

Anna picked up the poker and stirred the fire though it was burning fine enough. She didn’t like questions about herself but that didn’t mean I wouldn’t ask them. Working together meant knowing each other. That was hard going with Anna Drake. Harder than writing. She was easier being her other selves, the ones fashioned from wigs and paints and clothes with padding sewn inside to give her new bodies. When she was stripped back like this, her own cropped yellow hair showing, she was more a stranger. And a little-seen one at that, for Anna Drake was only like this first thing in the morning or late at night for that was when others wouldn’t see her. These were the best times to turn detective on *her*, when she had no one to hide behind.

‘The butcher and his wife who took you in,’ I said, to help her, ‘when you were left on their doorstep. The first butcher’s shop you lived in, not this one. It was them that taught you writing?’

She nodded.

‘And then you went to school,’ I said.

Her breath had shortened. Her cheeks were pink. ‘My mother – my adoptive mother, she . . . Well, she didn’t enjoy good health. She liked to have me with her, so there was no mention of school. You and I have that in common, Shilly.’

‘What was the matter with her?’

‘This cake is rather dry. Some tea, I think.’

And that was the end of that *in ves tig ay shun*.

She stood up. 'I'll make the tea. You write a new line.'

'What about?'

'Whatever takes your fancy,' she said. 'What happened after you saw the boats. The weather. Remember what we talked about – say the words aloud before you write them down. Your mouth must make each sound separately.'

She hung the kettle over the fire and went to fetch the teapot. I thought about what to put. There were so many things I wanted to write down, words to own there on the page in my own poor hand, but I wrote so slow and badly that none of them ever got there. I decided to write a line I had been practising – *my name is Shilly Williams. I am nineteen years of age.*

The first part wasn't true but that didn't matter. Anna was all for false names. I wasn't even sure *she* was really called Anna Drake but I'd stopped asking her about that for it made no difference and I had to call her something. The second part, about my age, was as true as I could know, not having any family left to ask and being none too certain of the truth when my father had signed me into service at the farm the year before.

That was where I had met Anna, and then together we escaped. We met Mathilda after that, in the woods, and we had a terrible time, Mathilda the worst of it, for people had tried to kill her – a stranger, it was, that first tried to take Mathilda's life, and then someone who shouldn't have been a stranger to my poor, sweet girl. And the birds there, in the woods . . . I shook such thinking away. If I let myself remember that time, then I'd be as wretched as poor Mathilda, biting off my tongue. Anna would have two of us to care for and wouldn't have any time for detecting, if a case should come to the door. We had got away from the woods and the birds and all the hatred at last. We had escaped, the three of us,

and now we were in Boscastle which was a good place and we had no need of escaping.

But we did need some work. Anna said we did, to live on, even though we had five hundred pounds from Mathilda. That was hard to fathom. Five hundred sounded plenty to me.

‘The notice is still in the newspaper?’ I asked Anna while we waited for the kettle to boil.

She nodded.

‘And it’s the same one as before, that you showed me?’ I said.

‘It is. Mathilda did a fine job of it.’

‘You mean her drawing?’

‘It’s more draughtsmanship, Shilly. It means—Never mind.’

The notice was placed when we had first come to Boscastle, before I had started my reading proper, so I hadn’t been able to tell the letters then, but I had seen the smart lines Mathilda had put around Anna’s words.

‘Much good the advertisement is doing us, though,’ Anna said. ‘Not a case to speak of.’

‘That’s not true. There was the woman up Trequite Farm.’

Anna made a noise of scorn. ‘That? You can hardly call that a case, Shilly. A farmer with shocking breath and a lazy eye thinks his much younger wife is possessed by a demon that makes her walk in her sleep. The only devil tempting that woman was lust for the cowhand in the barn.’

‘Her husband did pay us for finding that out, though,’ I said, remembering his tears as he handed me the coins. Were they from relief there were no devils on his land, or sadness at his wife betraying him? Either way, it was hard to see him weep.

‘Well yes, all right,’ Anna said. ‘Ten shillings for a night’s observation and a few traps. Not bad as a rate, but I suspect we wouldn’t even have had *that* work if it weren’t for Mrs Yeo taking

pity on us and telling the delusional farmer we could help.'

'Mrs Yeo is very kindly.'

The kettle whistled so I lifted it from the fire with the cloth we kept close by for such a purpose. It was a scrap from Anna's travelling case and I knew it to be the pattern of one of Mrs Williams' dresses. My dresses when I was that lovely creature, for Anna wasn't the only one who wore disguises. I was often in them myself.

'Do you think it's because of who we are?' I said. 'Not being men.'

'Hmm?'

'That it's because we're women we haven't had many cases, and so we can't move to a better place with a sign over the door like you said we would have. A sign painted by Mathilda.'

Anna stirred the tea with some viciousness, then clamped the lid on the pot.

'I think it must be the same trouble you had before,' I said. 'In Scotland, when the men wouldn't have you.'

'It was Scotland *Yard*, Shilly. That's where the new detective force is housed. And you might be right. I hold out no hope that north Cornwall will be any more enlightened than the streets of London, but still . . .'

I patted her hand. 'Still, we must try. It's what we're good at, and it's better work than milking cows.'

Anna smiled. 'I don't doubt it.'

'And after all,' I said, and looked at her askance, 'we're not always women, are we?'

And now she blushed. 'Quite so, Shilly.'

'Pass me your cup, then. We'll drink to better times, shall we?'

'We shall. Or at least the continuing kindness of landladies.'

'To Mrs Yeo,' I said, and raised my cup.

Anna clanked me and we sipped.

‘Mrs Yeo might not be so kindly when we can no longer pay for a roof over our heads,’ Anna muttered, taking her pipe from the shelf above the fire.

‘We’ll have to go and work in the shop downstairs, then,’ I said. ‘You must know your way around a meat hook, Anna, you growing up in a butcher’s.’ I grinned, for I was playing the game along with her. Such talk of no rent could only be foolishness. We had all the money in the world since meeting Mathilda.

I cleared my throat. ‘I know you say we must save the money Mathilda has given us—’

‘That she has *invested*, Shilly.’

‘All right, invested, for the agency.’ The smell of her tobacco made my nose prickle. ‘But we can use it to live on, can’t we? And it’s more than enough.’

But Anna wouldn’t meet my eye and I saw she hadn’t been making a game of our rent. And that made my stomach drop to a cold, dark place, because we had been so careful with money, saving, that we should have most of it left. Shouldn’t we?

‘These seeds . . .’ Anna took out her little row of false teeth and poked at them with the stem of her pipe.

I said nothing. She had shown me again that she was still the one who had the business of our earning and our spending, though she had said we were to be partners in the business of detection.

A piece of wood dropped against the fire’s grate. From the harbour, a faraway shout and then a man’s laugh. And still I waited.

‘It’s fine, Shilly,’ she said at last. ‘I’m just looking to the future, that’s all. Mathilda won’t get much for her investment if we only have unfaithful farmers’ wives to deal with.’ A black speck flew from her false teeth and shot across the room. ‘There! Got it. That would have kept me awake all night. Speaking of which.’ She got up and stretched. ‘I’m going to try to get some sleep.’

She put her hand on my shoulder. No squeeze, no stroke. But her hand there, for two breaths. Then she was gone.

I stayed in the parlour for the fire to burn out for I was uneasy. The patch of damp on the wall looked to have grown, the swan shape fattened to a goose. I'd become so used to the damp being there I had stopped thinking of it as a bad thing, that we were living poor. But now, with Anna saying we'd have no money for rent, I saw the damp anew. And I asked myself, Shilly, why are you three living this way when you have Mathilda's five hundred pounds?

Because Anna says we must. And why is that?

Surely the money was all right? It had only been six months since we'd come to Boscastle and we'd been so careful. I was used to thrift – my life before Anna had meant I'd had to be. But Anna herself . . . Who knew how she was with money? If she could be trusted. I still knew so little about Anna Drake.

Apart from that I loved her.