



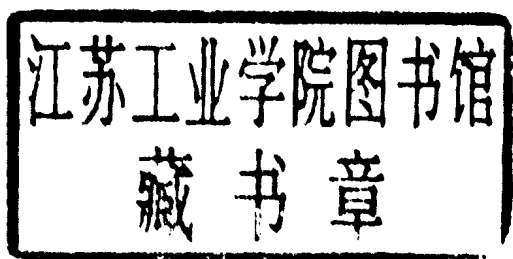
The *Seal Cove*

HELEN DUNMORE



CHOLASTIC

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The Seal Cove

She'd been down a long time – too long –

Just as I began to panic, Zillah's wet head shot up from the water. She shook her hair out of her eyes and swam up close to me.

"Listen, Katie. Don't ever call her a witch. People don't like that. Just say we're going up to Granny Carne's if anyone asks you." She said it very quietly, almost in a whisper, as if someone might hear. But we were completely alone. There was only the empty, sparkling water, a few seagulls, and Zillah, and me.

Look out for the other books in this trilogy:

The Lilac Tree
(previously published as *Zillah and Me*)

The Silver Bead

Also by this author:

Snollygoster

Praise for Helen Dunmore's books:

The Lilac Tree

"well-written, funny and sad too"
Ella Fraser-Thoms, 12, Daily Telegraph

"two utterly believable child characters whose
emotions leap off the page"
Daily Telegraph

"Dunmore is a wonderful storyteller"
Observer

The Silver Bead

"a novel about friendship, courage and change"
Independent on Sunday

"lively and thoughtful"
Sunday Times

Snollygoster

"Concise. Beautiful."
Daily Telegraph

"beautifully crafted"
Books for Keeps

Chapter One

It all began on a perfect summer day. Not a cloud in the sky, no worries, just the sun on my back and the sound of the sea.

Hmm. That's not *quite* true, is it? No worries at all? Not when Zillah had just told me that she was going up to see Granny Carne, and she wanted me to go with her?

I'd better tell you about Granny Carne first, or all this will sound completely crazy. I wouldn't get nervous about going to see a granny with pictures of her grandchildren on top of the TV, and a big tin of toffees for visitors. Granny Carne, however, is not like that at all. She's not related to Zillah at all, and she is the least cosy person in the whole of Cornwall. In fact she's a –

Better not say it. Better not even *think* it. Granny Carne looks as if she can hear your thoughts. She's very tall and she stands as straight as a tree so that she looks even taller. When she strides down the hill from her cottage with her coat blowing out

behind her, she's like a bird of prey swooping on us.

Granny Carne has tough, outdoor skin and white hair. Sometimes her eyes are clear, piercing blue, and sometimes they're stormy, like the sea. I've seen her lots of times, but I've never talked to her. Once I met her in the lane. She was bending down by the hedge, picking leaves and putting them into a brown paper bag. I thought I might be able to get past without her seeing me, but she straightened up and her eyes swept over my face as if she could read it. I wanted to say hello, but nothing came out. Then she nodded, as if she'd found out all she wanted to know about me, and went back to picking the leaves. I wanted to run, but I wanted to stay, too. I wanted to say something to her, maybe ask her something. . .

"Katie? Katie? Hello?"

"What? Oh, sorry, Zill. I was thinking -"

"You will come with me, won't you, Katie?"

I rolled over on my beach towel so I could see her face. She looked fierce, determined, and very Zillah-ish.

"But Granny Carne doesn't even know me," I said. "She won't want me to come up to her cottage."

"Are you scared?"

"Scared?"

"You know. Of her."

"Course I'm not," I said, much too quickly.

"You are," said Zillah.

"Why should I be scared? She's just an old lady, isn't she?"

Zillah glanced round quickly, as if someone might overhear us.

"I'm scared, even though I've been up there loads of times," she said. "Even though I've known her all my life."

"Have you really been up there loads of times, Zillah? You never told me."

Zillah sat up, hugging her knees, and stared out to sea.

"I used to go with my Great-aunt Zillah, and then when she died I went on my own," she said. "You go up to Granny Carne's when you can't see your way clear ahead. When you want to know how things are going to be, or what you ought to do. You can ask her any questions you like."

"You mean she can tell you what's going to happen? She can really see into the future?"

"I don't know. People say she can. Some of the things she told me -" Zillah stopped suddenly, as if she'd said too much.

"What things?"

But Zillah wouldn't say. She shrugged and looked secretive.

"You'll have to see for yourself, Katie. You come with me. See what Granny Carne tells you."

It was a perfect summer day. There wasn't a cloud, or a breath of wind. There was nothing to be afraid of.

"She's not ... she's not a sort of ... witch, is she, Zillah?" The minute I'd said it I wished I hadn't. Saying things makes them real. And anyway, it sounded so stupid. Zillah would just laugh at me.

But Zillah didn't laugh. She frowned, and dug up a handful of sand, then let it trickle away through her fingers before answering. "There've always been witches round here," she said. "We're famous for them. But she's not a witch the way you mean."

"No spells? No cauldron?"

"And definitely no black cat either," said Zillah. "But Granny Carne knows things other people don't know. She can feel the future coming. She says that the past and present and future aren't really separate. They're all joined up, and if you know how to do it you can move from one to another and back again. She says time's like a long carpet, some of it rolled up, some of it spread out. All she has to do is unroll the part of the pattern that's been rolled up and hidden. But I don't know how she does it."

A prickle of shiver ran over my back and down my legs. It all sounded witchy enough to me.

“Does she tell you the bad things that are going to happen? I mean – if someone’s going to die or something—”

“No,” said Zillah quickly. “She won’t tell you anything like that.”

Zillah must have guessed that I was thinking of Dad. Dad had died in the middle of an ordinary Saturday morning more than a year ago. No one had known the accident was going to happen. I remember someone at the funeral saying, *“It came out of a clear blue sky.”*

“But – if she did – maybe people could avoid the bad thing that was going to happen to them –”

I thought about my dad fixing up the ladder Mr Riordan had lent him. Doing the catches up wrong, and hoping they were right. Starting to climb up the tall ladder into our lilac tree –

What if Dad had been to see Granny Carne? She might have been able to give him a warning – stop him from doing it – tell him to keep away from ladders –

But Dad could never have met Granny Carne. He’d never even been to Cornwall. If Dad was still alive we would still be living in London. I’d never have come to live in Cornwall. I’d never even have met Zillah – we wouldn’t be talking about Granny Carne now...

It was running round and round in circles inside my head. I was beginning to feel dizzy.

“Katie?” Zillah was looking at me anxiously. “Are you all right?”

“I think she ought to tell people, if it could help them. Suppose she knew that someone was going on an aeroplane that was going to crash, and she didn’t warn them.”

“I don’t think it works like that. Granny Carne says she can see the pattern, but she can’t change it. She can unroll the carpet but she can’t weave it differently. She never told my Great-aunt Zillah that she was going to get ill and die.”

Zillah’s great-aunt died nearly three years ago now. It was before I came to Cornwall, so I never knew her. But I feel as if I do, because of the way Zillah talks about her. Her great-aunt looked after Zillah all the time when she was little, while her parents worked on the farm. Zillah really loved her great-aunt. . .

“D’you want half this KitKat?” Zillah asked.

“Mmm, thanks –”

I always eat my chocolate bars straight away, but Zillah can keep hers for ages. Sometimes she even forgets about them, which I would never do in a million years. Once, when I was looking for my trainers, I found a whole Mars bar which had fallen down the side of her bed. *Zillah hadn’t even bothered to look for it.*

“You don’t have to come with me, Katie. I’ll go on my own if you don’t want to,” said Zillah.

"I do want to, in a way. It's just that I've never talked to a witch."

"Everyone round here goes to Granny Carne. They keep quiet about it, but they all go. When they've got a question about the future, it doesn't matter what it is, they go up to Granny Carne's. She can't always help them, though. There are some people she can't help at all."

A picture floated into my mind. I saw Susie Buryan from our class, with her bouncy curls and her neat Guide's uniform, plodding up the path to find out about her future.

"Does Susie Buryan go?" I asked.

"You're joking. Anyway, she's too young. You have to be about sixteen before Granny Carne'll see you."

"But she sees you."

"That's because my Great-aunt Zillah was friends with Granny Carne. I always went along. She won't mind you coming either, because you're my friend. But Susie Buryan most definitely isn't. Mind, I've seen Susie's mum go up there."

Another picture replaced the picture of Susie in my mind.

Mrs Buryan, big and square and sensible in her waterproofs, jolting her Land Rover up the steep track to Granny Carne's cottage to have her fortune told.

"She doesn't, does she, Zillah? She looks much too - I don't know - too *practical*."

Zillah laughed. "Loads of people aren't as practical after dark as they are in the daytime." She brushed the sand off her legs. "You going to swim again?" she asked.

The sea was blue, but it was early in the year and the water hadn't warmed up yet. In fact, it was completely freezing. You had to plunge straight in because you would never, never manage it if you went in slowly. It was so cold you couldn't even scream. But if you swam really hard, kicking and thrashing and gasping, it began to feel as if you weren't going to die. And then suddenly it was wonderful.

"OK," I said.

We swam a little way out, but not too far. The sea's not tame round here. It's wild and fierce, and there are currents even on the calmest day. Zillah's taught me that. She says you've got to treat the sea right, if you want it to treat you right. You've got to show it respect.

I trod water, kicking hard to keep warm. Zillah dived down, deep into the purple and turquoise water. Down, down, down. . . I watched her shadow under the surface, twisting as she swam. Or was it Zillah? It didn't look like her any more. It looked like a seal, sleek and graceful, cutting through the water.

There are plenty of seals around here. But where was Zillah? She'd been down a long time – too long –

Just as I began to panic, Zillah's wet head shot up from the water. She shook her hair out of her eyes, and swam up close to me.

"Listen, Katie. Don't ever call her a witch. People don't like that. Just say we're going up to Granny Carne's if anyone asks you." She said it very quietly, almost in a whisper, as if someone might hear. But we were completely alone. There was only the empty, sparkling water, a few seagulls, and Zillah, and me.

Chapter Two

That was yesterday. It's not beach weather today. A thick white mist has come rolling in from the sea, and everything's hidden. I'm lying on my bed with the duvet curled around me, because it's cold with the mist and the damp clinging to everything. The foghorn down the coast is lowing like a cow that's lost her calf.

I know about things that like that now: cows, and foghorns. A year ago, when we were still living in London, I wouldn't have known why the foghorn booms like that. It's to warn the ships about the sharp black needles of rock that run out from the cliffs around here, underwater. If a ship runs on to those rocks, it won't have a chance. It'll be ripped open, and then it will sink.

There have been hundreds of wrecks all down this coast. Mum showed me a Wrecks Map in the museum, which was covered with dots where ships had gone down. The name of each lost ship was written in beautiful, tiny handwriting, next to each dot.

"All those lives lost," Mum said. "All those stories no one knows any more."

I glanced at her quickly, but her face wasn't sad. Although it's more than a year since Dad died, sometimes it doesn't seem like a minute.

"Think of the people waiting for them to come home," said Mum. "All those wives and children."

But I didn't want to think of them. I wandered away from the map, and after a while Mum stopped looking at it, too.

Mum's a painter. She used to illustrate children's books as well, but since we've lived here she's painted the sea, and the cliffs and rocks, and the weather coming. The weather comes in fast here, and it changes all the time. Mum paints the sea when it's flat and glittery, and she paints it when it's so wild that slabs of foam break off and slap on to the rocks. On days like that you can taste salt in the wind.

People from cities come here and they want to buy some of the wildness. But they can't do that, so sometimes they buy one of Mum's paintings instead. Mum has sold five paintings, eight charcoal drawings and four little collages since we came here last October. I keep the accounts for her, because I'm good with money. She has to pay Robert's commission (he's the gallery owner, and he sells Mum's paintings for her). Robert's commission is a third of the selling price. So...

Mum's work has sold for £4,500 altogether, Robert has taken a third of that, which is £1,500, and that means we've had £3,000. We're doing really well.

Robert thinks Mum's prices could go higher now. I think Robert's commission could go lower, but Mum won't let me say anything about that. She says it's very fair, because most dealers charge fifty per cent. Fifty per cent! Can you imagine that? Mum sweats for weeks over a painting, then someone else gets *half the money* just for putting it in his shop and selling it. A third is bad enough. Robert can't even paint.

But Mum's grateful to Robert.

"Katie, Robert's been very good to me. If it hadn't been for his support, I'd never have sold any paintings at all."

Hmmm. Whenever I'm in St Ives I go into Robert's shop. There are always people looking at Mum's work, and asking about it. More people than there are looking at anyone else's. And Mum's work always sells quickly. Is Robert doing Mum a favour, or is Mum doing Robert a favour? But I don't say anything. I'm waiting for the right moment. Mum isn't so good with money, but I am. I'm planning to become her manager.

I don't like fog. It's the only weather I don't like. It makes me feel ... uneasy. As if something's about to happen, and not something good.