

## Chapter 13

### The Lily

Jim didn't dare ask where he was going, or whether he would be coming back, or if he could just run back to the cottage to say goodbye to Rosie. He was quite sure that Grandpa would tell her nothing. He imagined her hurrying out to him in the morning with a mug of tea and a chunk of her solid bread, trying the locked door, calling out to him. He imagined Shrimps swinging his boot-laces over his head, dancing in the streets without him, waiting. He hung back, wanting to dodge into the shadows and run off, but as if he could read his thoughts Grimy Nick swung out his arm and grabbed him by the collar. Jim hurried beside Nick, stealing quick glances up at him. Nick never returned his look, but stumped on, his boots sparking now and then where the cobbles were dry. He took him through the narrow, dark alleys that threaded backwards and forwards between wharves. Rats scuttled away from them. Skinny dogs started up from their sleep and settled down again.

At last they came to a large warehouse with a row of carts lined up outside and Best Coals of Cockerill and Co. painted on them, the letters gleaming white out of the gloom. A man was leading a cart-horse out of a barn, and grunted to Nick.

'Thought you weren't coming no more,' he said, his voice hollow still with sleep.

'Damn you,' said Grimy Nick. 'You'd think the worst of the Angel Gabriel, you would.'

He took Jim round to the front of the warehouse, where it overhung the river, and jumped onto the deck of a lighter that was moored there. It was a flat-nosed boat about eighty-foot long. Jim had seen plenty of them working their way backwards and forwards with the tide, loaded up with tons of cargo from the big ships. It had the name Lily painted on its side. It lay in the mud, deep in the stench of the raw sewage that piled against the banks at low tide.

'Get on,' Nick growled, and Jim jumped onto the narrow coaming boards that ran round the side of the boat, and looked down into it. Covering one end were planks of wood used for hatch boards, and across these was a long oar. Swinging from the oar was a lantern, casting a dim light into the huge hold, which was piled high with coal. A large, yellow-eyed dog rose on its haunches as soon as Jim jumped onto the hatch, squaring itself to leap. A deep growl rumbled from it and its teeth shone wet. Jim started back from it. Nick swung round, took him by the shoulders and pushed him face down towards the dog. He could smell its sour breath. The dog flattened its ears back and whined.

Nick let go of Jim. 'Now he's smelled yer, he'll never forget yer,' he said. 'Never. He'll know you belong on here, see?'

'Yes,' whispered Jim.

'Which means,' said Nick, 'that if yer tries to run away, he'll be after yer, and he'll probly eat yer alive. The faster yer runs, the faster he runs. See?'

Jim nodded again.

‘So yer’d better not try. Just let him taste yer, to sharpen his smell.’ He pushed Jim’s arm down towards the dog. ‘Bite!’

The dog snapped his jaw so his teeth rested round Jim’s wrist. He would have sunk his teeth right in if Jim hadn’t held himself steady, though every nerve in him was screaming out.

‘Leave!’ Nick said, and the dog sank back onto his haunches again, snarling. Jim nursed his arm. The teeth had just punctured the skin, and little points of blood were oozing there.

‘He’s quite friendly,’ Nick said. ‘Just so long as you’re friendly to me. See?’

Jim nodded. He was too afraid to speak.

‘Well, we’ll get along very well, in that case,’ Nick said. He straightened himself up, took hold of his lantern and held it up, swinging it slowly from side to side. High up in Cockerill’s warehouse a shutter opened and a white face peered out.

‘Don’t tell me you’re ready!’ the white face shouted. ‘If we don’t get this load out we’ll have lost tomorrow’s tide as well as today’s.’

‘I knows that,’ Nick shouted back. ‘I’ve been training my new boy.’

The white face disappeared and a door opened next to the window. A large wicker basket that was roped to a winch was lowered slowly down, creaking as it came. Nick jumped down into the hold on top of the coals.

‘Lantern,’ he grunted, and Jim passed it down to him. ‘Well, get in.’

Jim scrambled down beside him, his feet slipping on lumps of coal as he landed. The inside of the lighter was like a black cave, gleaming with heaps of coal. It smelt of damp and sulphur. Nick thrust a shovel at Jim. The basket hovered just above the hold and Nick eased it down, steadied it, and started shovelling coal into it, his body swinging into a deep, easy rhythm. Jim stabbed at the coals with his shovel. He had to lift it nearly as high as himself before he could tip it into the basket, and the few coals he managed to lift slid off and bumped against him. He gave a little yelp of pain and Nick stopped shovelling for a moment. He whistled in contempt.

‘Get on with it!’ he shouted.

Jim panted, trying to slide his shovel under the lumps of coal again, and Nick threw his down and swore at him. He banged his hand across the back of Jim’s head and came to stand behind him, reaching round Jim so his hands were gripping the haft just above Jim’s own, forcing Jim to swing into his own level rhythm of shovelling and lifting, shovelling and lifting. When he let go Jim’s hands were burning. Jim did his best to keep up, lifting just two or three coals at a time to Nick’s shovelful, bending and lifting, bending and lifting as if this was all there was to do in the world. At last the basket was full. Nick yelled up to White-face and the bucket creaked away from them as it was winched upon its rope to the top storey of the building.

Nick swung himself up on to the hatch boards, and somehow Jim pulled himself up after him, rolling well away from the dog. Day had come, grey as pigeons.

The man picked up a pail and emptied water out of it into a cooking pot on a small iron stove. 'Get some more,' he said to Jim. 'There's a pump in the yard.'

As Jim jumped across to the planks of the landing stage he heard Nick say to the dog, 'Watch him, Snipe.' The dog loped after him, skulking round his legs as he ran, nipping his ankles. From the back of the warehouse he could hear the rumble of the coals as they slid down a chute onto the waiting cart. The empty basket creaked down again towards the Lily.

Jim pumped water into the pail and ran as steadily as he could back to the lighter, the water slopping out against his legs as Snipe nosed against him. Nick had lit a fire in the stove and he poured some of the water onto a mess of gruel in the cooking pot.

'Stir that,' he said to Jim. 'And don't take all day.'

Jim watched over the gruel until it was beginning to thicken, then lowered himself down into the hold again and swung painfully back into Nick's rhythm. His stomach was beginning to growl with hunger. When the next basket was full they went back up and Nick ladled the gruel into two bowls. They ate it fast, squatting on their haunches by the heat of the stove, and when the basket was lowered down again they left their bowls and set back to work.

They spent the entire day shovelling coal in this way. There were tons and tons of it. From time to time the white face would appear at the window and shout down to them that the cart was full and that they would have to wait for another. At these times they both stretched themselves full length on the hatch boards of the Lily, cold though they were. Jim would fall asleep immediately and would be kicked awake by Nick, or roused by a shout from White-face that the basket was coming down again. His bones seemed to set while he slept. He could hardly kneel or stand, but he was so afraid of Nick and of the yellow-eyed dog that he lumbered up like an old man and hobbled to his job.

A long time after dark, White-face shouted down that he was going home and they could finish for the day. Jim could hardly crawl by then. His shoulders felt as if they had knots of pain in them that would never undo. Nick put some potatoes in the pot and passed Jim some water to drink. He gurgled it down, his throat dry and parched with coal-dust, and dozed off again until the potato was ready. He ate it clutched in his palm, burning his skin, peeling it with his teeth the way Nick did. He was glad of it, and of the heat from the fire. He saw that Nick ate meat with his potato and that he tossed what he didn't want of it to Snipe. During the entire day he had only spoken about a dozen words to Jim.

When he had finished his meal Nick belched loudly and climbed off the lighter onto the plankway. Jim could hear him trudging past the warehouse and up the alley, and guessed he would be making for one of the alehouses behind the wharf. He was glad. All he wanted now was to go to sleep. There was a wooden locker with two benches, and he guessed that these were to lie on. He rolled himself up in his sacking. He was so tired that he fell asleep at once. Somehow through his sleep he heard Nick coming back, full of ale and good cheer, saw him tousling Snipe's head and slipping him more meat from his pocket. He didn't take the bench next to Jim but lowered himself down into the hold of the lighter, and Jim was glad of that too.

Far out on the river tug-boats hooted. Beside Jim, the yellow dog snuffled into its paws and groaned.

When Jim fell asleep again he dreamt of his first home, the cottage. Only it was made of coal, its walls and floors and ceilings were black and gleaming, reflecting the orange glow of the brazier. Each side of it his mother and father sat with their hands stretched over the fire for warmth. His mother was just as he remembered her, pale and quiet, her dark hair smoothed back. But his father, whose face he never saw in his dreams, looked just like Grimy Nick. He had a gap between his teeth and a frothy beard and grey thatchy hair, and his face was black with coal-dust, his eyes white rings like lights. Jim didn't mind, in his dream, because it looked like a proper home, even though it was made of coal. And it had a name, he was sure of that. It was called the *Lily*.