

Chapter 15

Josh

Grimy Nick stood with his long oar dipping into the water and guided the *Lily* out, and along with her came a flock of barges and sailing boats. The watermen shouted abuse at each other, all racing to find work first. To Jim the *Lily* was like a water bird edging her quiet way along the brown river. Even Nick's swearing and whistling didn't take away from him the excitement he was feeling. He looked back and saw the city, with its black pall of smoke hung over it, and he saw the arms of the bridges looping across it, and the slow traffic of sailing boats like dark swans. He heard the sheesh! of water against the sides of the *Lily*, and the steady splash! splash! of Nick's long oar and above him, the heckling of gulls. Nothing, not all the misery of the last year, not the pain of the last two days, not his fear of Grimy Nick and Snipe, could take away from him the thrill of the journey. It felt like a new beginning.

At last they came to where the big ships lay at anchor. They pulled up alongside a huge coal-carrying boat called *Queen of the North*, and there Nick pulled in his oar, whistling loudly till a rope ladder was dropped down to him. The *Lily* lay bobbing on the water while Grimy Nick shinned up the rope ladder and went on board the big boat. Jim gazed up after him, longing to follow him. Nick shouted down to him to pull back all the hatch boards. A basket brimming with coals swung out from the boom of the *Queen of the North* and was slowly lowered down. Nick shinned down the ladder again and whistled. 'Drop!' he yelled, and the basket creaked down. When it reached Nick's grasp he and Jim swung it round and tipped the contents into the hold of the *Lily*. Jim spluttered in the clouds of black dust.

'That's your job for today, and tomorrow, till we get the hold full,' Nick told Jim. 'We've got eighty tons to load, and the quicker we gets it done the quicker we gets back. See we don't lose any coals overboard. And keep the dog out of the way. And keep moving.'

They worked through the day and into night again. They slept till dawn and set to work again, and at last the hold was so full that Nick had to scramble out of it, coughing and spitting out the coal-dust he had swallowed. His face was black, and under the blackened jut of his hair his eyes gleamed with red rims. His lips shone wet and pink when he opened his mouth, and his few teeth were as bright as polished gems.

'Put some hatch boards across,' he ordered, 'I'm going for some food.' He scrambled back up the ladder, hawking up black spittle as he went.

Jim heaved down the hatch boards and lit the stove, squatting by it for warmth. The afternoon wore on into evening, and a grey gloom settled over the sky. The water glowed with the setting sun, and then faded into the dark. One by one the boats around him had their lanterns hung over their sides. It was as if there were hundreds of small fires dancing on the water. Jim guessed that nothing would move now until the next tide.

From the *Queen of the North* came occasional bursts of laughter and shouts of singing. Jim could smell tobacco. He felt quite happy now that the work had stopped and he could rest. Soon, he knew, Grimy Nick would come swearing back down again and shout at him for something, but at least he would be bringing him food. Jim swilled out his mouth with the last of the water. Snipe lay watching him, his ears sharp, mean points of malevolence, his eyes yellow holes of light. Jim gazed out across the black water. He could hear it breathing, like a huge, waiting beast.

‘Hey, below!’ a voice called down to him.

Jim jumped up. ‘Who is it?’ He held up the lantern, and watched as an unfamiliar pair of boots swung down the ladder towards him. Snipe growled and then settled down again as the owner of the boots jumped onto the lighter and stroked the dog’s head.

‘Come to see how Benjamin is,’ the man said, in a strange accent.

‘I don’t know him,’ said Jim.

‘The other lad that comes with Nick. Big, clumsy lad,’ the man said.

Jim remembered what a boy had said to him outside The Waterman’s Arms. ‘I think he might be in hospital.’

The man whistled. ‘Well, I’m not surprised. He looked bad last time I saw him. I’ve been worrying about him. And I’d say it was Nick that got him that way.’

‘I don’t know.’ Jim was afraid of saying anything in case this was a trick. Nick might be half-way up the ladder there, dangling in the dark and waiting to pounce on him.

‘Beats you too, does he?’ the man asked him.

Jim said nothing.

‘Think they own you, some of these masters. Think they own you, body and soul. But they don’t. Not your soul. Know what your soul is?’

‘No, mister,’ said Jim, though in his head he imagined it to be something white and fluffy, like a small cloud maybe, floating round his body.

‘Well, it’s like your name. It comes with you when you’re born, and it’s yours to keep.’ The man puffed out his lips, as if it had been hard work thinking that out. ‘And my name’s Josh, and I don’t mind telling you that for nothing.’

Jim was silent. He half-wanted to tell this man about Rosie and Shrimps, and how he used to be known as Skipping Jim, but he kept it to himself. He didn’t feel much like skipping any more. He didn’t suppose that he would, ever again. Josh settled down next to the brazier of glowing coals and held out his hands over it as if he would be quite pleased to stay there for the night. He told Jim that Nick was fast asleep on the *Queen of the North*.

‘He’s stuffed his belly so full that he can’t stuff any more in it,’ Josh said. ‘So don’t expect him down for a bit. Not till the tide comes in, I’d say.’

‘Where does the tide go to?’ Jim asked, a bit timid. He was still wary of Josh, but he liked him, he knew that. He’d never known any man like him before, who spoke kindly to small boys.

‘Go to?’ Josh puffed out his lips again. ‘Well, it’s just there, isn’t it? It’s pulled over one way, then it’s pulled over another, but it just keeps coming in and out, day after day after day, and it always will. Where there isn’t land there’s water, lots of it. And you can only see the top of it. There’s more of it underneath. Miles and miles of it. Imagine that!’

Jim tried to imagine it, but he was tired and hungry and thinking was difficult. ‘Do you live in that boat?’ he asked Josh.

‘No more than I can help. I’ve got a proper home. As soon as you lighters take our coal off us we go home. We sail up the coast of England from here, right up to the north. And that’s not the end of the sea, you know. If you just stayed on water you could go right round the world.’

‘I wish I could do that,’ Jim said.

Josh laughed. ‘You’re a funny one, you are. What would you want to do that for? It’s big and empty, the sea is. Lonely.’

‘I might find somewhere nice to live.’

Josh laughed again and shook his head. ‘You don’t like living here, then?’

‘No, mister, I don’t. It’s cold and it’s hard and I don’t get enough food.’ Jim lowered his voice. ‘And he shouts and screams so much.’

‘Not much of a life for a boy,’ Josh agreed. ‘I’ve got a little lad like you. I’m glad he’s tucked up in bed with his sisters and his mam, and not stuck out here.’

Jim riddled the coals in the brazier. He could feel his cheeks blazing hot and his eyes smarting. He had a new idea inside him, a little feverish will o’ the wisp idea. He poked the coals again, easing them round to let the ashes sift through the grid.

Josh stood up and stretched. ‘Well, I’ll be getting up on deck for some sleep. We’ll be off with tomorrow’s tide.’ He swung himself onto the ladder.

‘Josh.’ Jim’s idea burst out of him, taking him by surprise. ‘Can I come with you?’

Josh looked down at him. His face was in deep shadow. ‘Come with me?’ His voice was soft. ‘Why?’

Jim lowered his head and shrugged. His cheeks were burning again. He couldn’t find his voice properly. ‘I think it would be better, that’s all,’ he whispered.

‘Nothing gets much better,’ Josh said. ‘Not till you’re dead.’

He hauled himself quickly up the rope, whistling tunelessly between his teeth. Jim sat for a long time with his legs crossed and his arms folded across his knees. The moon was out, bright and round as a mocking face, and the river was billowing up to it, and beyond was blackness. There was no other world but the blackened heart of the lighter and his own small bench space. This was his home. He had to accept it.