

Chapter 1

PERSUADING ELIZABETH

ISLANDS DON'T JUST APPEAR, hovering up greenly out of the sea like the back of some monster of the deep, giving a long, slow heave. Beverley knew that. She knew the island had always been there. It was just that she'd never taken all that much notice of it before.

As a general rule, Beverley did notice things. She liked to take a mental snapshot of her surroundings, wherever she was, and file it all away for future reference, and she'd done exactly that with Tranarone the first day they arrived, a week ago. She didn't think much of Tranarone, actually. It wasn't much of a place. Or maybe she was just growing out of seaside holidays. When she was small, she used to love them, when they all went on holiday together as a family and had fun in a family sort of way, playing frisbee on the beach and poking in the rock pools and trailing flimsy pink fishing nets on bamboo stems along the sea floor and never catching anything more interesting than a few broken shells and a length of slimy green seaweed and having sandy picnics when the sun shone. All that had changed since her older brothers had grown up and gone off to boring old university and left her behind to go on dreary holidays alone with her parents while they went Inter-Railing across Europe for the summer. To make things worse, her

parents were going through one of their sticky patches at the moment, squabbling, scoring points off each other, being perfect pigs.

On the day she really noticed the island properly for the first time, Beverley was mooching slowly along the cold beach – it was often quite cold in June, though sometimes you got these tantalising flashes of hot weather that made you think maybe there was going to be a summer after all – dragging a long, damp, rather unpleasant-smelling piece of brown seaweed, like a broad leather belt, which she'd picked up half-heartedly and now felt illogically guilty about dropping, as if it were a piece of litter. There wasn't much to see on the beach, and she'd been over it all a hundred times before, collected all the different sorts of shells there were and classified them and noted them down neatly in her Seashore Habitat notebook, examined every last rockpool endlessly, though she knew perfectly well that there was only ever one sort of sea anemone on Irish beaches – the translucent red kind that looked like a half-melted raspberry fruitgum – and clambered over all the rocks and tried, unsuccessfully, to pick limpets off them.

The sun was shining very brightly, though it wasn't giving much heat, so brightly that when Beverley raised her eyes from the beach and glanced out to sea, she was forced to put her hand up to her forehead in a peak to protect them from the glare of the sun. Perhaps it was because she squinted under the visor she made of her hand that she focused more intensely than usual on the island, lying quietly out there in the bay. In any case, whatever the reason, the island seemed at that moment to catch her attention, almost as if it had moved, or waved at her.

It was an ordinary enough little island, if islands can ever be

counted ordinary, not very large, but a good size all the same. It wasn't the rocky and uninviting sort of island you sometimes see jutting aggressively out of the sea. In fact, it looked a bit like a piece of the mainland that was somehow left over. It was as if some giant child had put it aside in puzzlement, unable to find a place for it in the enormous jigsaw of the west coast of Ireland.

Beverley shook herself, like a wet dog, as if to shake off this silly idea. Islands weren't bits of jigsaw puzzles. They were perfectly explicable natural phenomena. That's what they were. Yes. You could read about them in geography books. They were caused by continental shifts or they were the tips of undersea mountains or something.

And yet this island didn't look a bit like a phenomenon in a geography book. It looked like a lost, homeless, thrown-aside bit of the countryside. It seemed to Beverley that it longed to be visited, as if it were lonely out there in the sea, cut off from its rightful place in the world. She shook herself again. What was coming over her?

All the same, she reasoned, it would be nice to take a trip out to the island. She could explore it, map it maybe. Perhaps there would be more interesting rock pools out there, or caves, or the sort of beach pebbles you saw in colourful books about the seashore that when you split them open turn out to have semi-precious insides you can polish to spectacular effect, or sea-urchins, maybe, or starfish – all those pretty things you never did find on real seashores no matter how hard you looked.

You wouldn't need a boat or anything. You could wade out to the island at low tide. The island was only a short distance offshore, a splashy, squelchy paddle-walk.

But this trip wasn't going to be just a walk. This was going to be

a proper expedition, an investigative journey, a voyage of exploration. In her excitement, Beverley dropped the piece of seaweed she had been dragging, and set off away from the beach towards the village, such as it was – two shops, two pubs, and a small restaurant with a takeaway window.

She would need to plan this expedition. Beverley believed in doing things properly. She never just launched into a project. She liked to write things down, make lists, approach things logically. She wouldn't be rushed. Thinking how very admirable an approach to adventure this was, what a very organised and wholly sensible person she was, Beverley turned her sandalled feet, blue with cold and gritty with sand, into the Spar-shop-cum-post-office, which, together with the poky little old-fashioned, beer-and-ham-smelling pub-cum-grocery next door, served the daily needs of Tranarone's holiday visitors and local people.

They kept things like pens and paper at the back of the shop, near the post-office section, next to an unbelievably awful selection of birthday cards, all roses and kittens for the ladies and fishing rods and sports cars for the gents. There wasn't much choice in the pen and paper department either: Bic ballpoints in red or blue; A.W. Faber pencils, yellow, HB, with the tops already pointed so that they were like vicious little ice-picks; plastic pencil-parers, also red and blue, like the ballpoints; Belvedere Bond writing paper, but only in the small size, and lined; rather enticing-looking thin airmail envelopes, like tissue-paper, with green and orange edging and a picture of an aeroplane in the corner and Par Avion/Aerphost printed underneath, but no matching airmail paper. Beverley flicked through the lined writing paper speculatively. This wasn't really what she wanted. But there weren't any notebooks, just school copybooks, squared for sums and

red-and-blue-lined for practising joined-up writing. She poked around a bit more, hoping to find something more suitable.

Her hand, burrowing under the copies, closed over something that was the right shape. She pulled it out. It was nice and stout and it had a handsome red cover with a watery look, like a taffeta dress Beverley's older cousin had worn to her Debs, but when she opened it, it was the wrong sort of notebook, with vertical red rules, for doing accounts or something of that sort. Irritably, she tossed it aside.

'Hey, there! No need to break the place up!'

The words were cross, but the tone of voice was amused, teasing. It was Kevin, the shopkeeper's eldest son. Beverley knew him to see. He was nearly always in the shop, helping his mother, or else you could hear his voice coming from the living quarters at the back, where he was minding the younger ones, cooking them their tea or shouting at them to get into their pyjamas. He was tall, and wore a leather jacket, and thought he was just It. That's what came of being the eldest and being looked up to all the time.

With a sigh, Beverley picked up a sum copy and walked to the cash register, pointedly ignoring Kevin.

Mrs Mulrooney was busy packing a cardboard box with groceries, and totting up the items as she went, reading half-aloud from a grubby little list and shaking her head disapprovingly. Beverley looked around to see whose groceries these were, but there were no other customers in the shop. Mrs Mulrooney must be making up an order.

'Ninety-five,' muttered Mrs Mulrooney. 'One-oh-six. Thirty-six. Seventy-two. Six jars of honey (six jars this time? hm) at ninety-five pence, five pounds seventy. Forty-five.'

Beverley could see she was going to be ages. She started to tap

her foot impatiently, flapping the copybook up and down in time with her irritation. Suddenly, on an up-flap, she felt the copybook being taken out of her hand. She swirled around, to see Kevin at her elbow, copybook in hand.

‘I’ll take for this,’ he offered. ‘Save you the wait. Twenty-five pee please.’

Beverley despised people who said ‘pee’ for pence. She twitched her nose and handed over the money without a word. Kevin was already on the other side of the counter and was rolling up the copybook into a tube to stuff it into a thin white plastic bag.

‘I won’t be needing this,’ said Beverley disdainfully, shaking the copybook out of the plastic bag again, and hoping she was getting a whole lecture on green economics into her voice.

‘That’s all right,’ said Kevin cheerfully, as if she had apologised for something. His teeth were remarkably straight and even, and his dark hair was flicked to the side so that you could see the expensive layering in it, each hair apparently individually cut and arranged. ‘Getting ready for going back to school already? You must be a very keen student.’

Ha-ha.

‘No,’ said Beverley coldly, not explaining why she wanted the copybook.

‘Ah well!’ Kevin shrugged his shoulders. His underlip puckered as he spoke. It was a deep rose colour. Then he smiled, for no apparent reason, and Beverley could see a flash of those even teeth, very white against that rosy underlip.

‘I was looking for a notebook, actually,’ Beverley relented.

‘Oh, sorry about that,’ said Kevin. ‘We ordered some yesterday, but they won’t be here for another day or two.’

Well, he was trying to be nice. At least he was civil. Beverley

ventured a small smile as she pocketed her change. She shouldn't have. He took advantage of her good nature and gave a distinct wink. Beverley turned away quickly to hide her hot cheeks. How dare he! She ran out of the shop, the door clanging dementedly behind her.

She raced along the unevenly tarmacked road till she reached the holiday cottage. By the time she arrived, her cheeks were burning with exertion instead of embarrassment. She flopped onto her bed and took some deep breaths before she opened the sum copy and began to write.

This is what she wrote on the smooth, clean surface of the first page:

Purpose of expedition: To explore Lady Island under the following headings: geography, geology, flora, fauna, ecology, miscellaneous.

Explorers: Beverley Wilson (leader); Elizabeth Ryan; Gerard O'Connor.

'Requirements,' she wrote next, and went on to list everything she could think of:

Torch and batteries

String

Notebook and pencil

Matches

Penknife

Provisions

Rug

Warm jackets and spare socks

Chocolate

I should've been a boy-scout, she thought with satisfaction and wiggled her cold toes inside her sandals. Flares, she thought. We could do with those, for emergencies. But what exactly were

flares? What did they look like, and where did you get them? She shrugged, but added this item to her list anyway. She'd think of something.

She closed the sum copy and slithered off her duvet. Now to find Elizabeth, who'd moved into one of the horrible holiday bungalows up the lane last week. Elizabeth would be sure to think this was a great idea.

'I don't know,' said Elizabeth Ryan, slowly, shaking her long pale plait so that it swung from shoulder-blade to shoulder-blade.

The two girls were sitting at the round, brown, Formica-topped table in the bungalow, eating raspberry ripple ice cream out of breakfast cereal bowls with vacuous pink flowers on them, like no flowers that had ever existed in the wild or in a garden.

'Why not?'

'I don't know,' Elizabeth repeated, licking her spoon thoughtfully and squinting at the inverted image of herself in it. 'There's something about that island. I don't know what it is. Someone lives there, I think.'

'So what, if someone lives there? It's hardly a crime to go and have a picnic there just because someone lives there. I mean, people live on Inishboffin and the Aran islands and all. That doesn't mean you can't go and take a look.'

'Well, it might be private property,' argued Elizabeth. 'It might be trespassing.'

'Oh trespassing! Who cares? I don't think you can really be prosecuted for trespassing.'

'Prosecuted? You mean, court and that? God, I never thought of that.'

‘No, dumbo, I mean not court and that. I mean, I don’t think it actually is a crime to trespass, but anyway, that’s not the point.’

‘What is the point?’ asked Elizabeth, gazing at Beverley. ‘I forget.’

Elizabeth was such a dreamer! She couldn’t concentrate from one end of a sentence to the other.

‘The point is,’ said Beverley, with exaggerated patience, ‘are you going to come with me to explore the island or not?’

‘But what if they don’t want us there? Suppose they have a Doberman.’

‘Here we go a-gain,’ sighed Beverley. ‘Suppose they have a tiger! Or a herd of elephants!’

‘They couldn’t – could they?’ Elizabeth’s mouth was opened in a big round O.

‘Of course they couldn’t, nitwit. Where’s your spirit of adventure? Are you coming or not?’

‘Well ...’

‘OK,’ said Beverley bossily, taking this for a Yes. ‘Now, the thing is, do we take Gerard or not? I think we’d better have a boy, even if he’s only a little squirt, for doing the dirty work, you know.’

‘Oh yes,’ Elizabeth agreed. She didn’t have a high opinion of her cousin Gerard either, and she was quite happy to see him in the role of dirty-worker. Even as she said this, she realised that she had implicitly agreed to this expedition. Oh well, perhaps it would be fun. It would be better than sticking around cold and uneventful Tranarone anyway.

Elizabeth picked up her cereal bowl and started to lick the last of the ice cream off it, with long pink licks of her tongue. Beverley stared at her in wide-eyed disapproval for a moment. Then she

picked up her own bowl with a giggle and started to do the same. It tasted better than off the spoon for some reason. Now, what could the scientific explanation for this be she wondered.