



MISS PEREGRINE'S

HOME FOR

PECULIAR CHILDREN

BY RANSOM RIGGS



CHAPTER THREE



Fog closed around us like a blindfold. When the captain announced that we were nearly there, at first I thought he was kidding; all I could see from the ferry's rolling deck was an endless curtain of gray. I clutched the rail and stared into the green waves, contemplating the fish who might soon be enjoying my breakfast, while my father stood shivering beside me in shirtsleeves. It was colder and wetter than I'd ever known June could be. I hoped, for his sake and mine, that the grueling thirty-six hours we'd braved to get this far—three airplanes, two layovers, shift-napping in grubby train stations, and now this interminable gut-churning ferry ride—would pay off. Then my father shouted, "Look!" and I raised my head to see a towering mountain of rock emerge from the blank canvas before us.

It was my grandfather's island. Looming and bleak, folded in mist, guarded by a million screeching birds, it looked like some ancient fortress constructed by giants. As I gazed up at its sheer cliffs, tops disappearing in a reef of ghostly clouds, the idea that this was a magical place didn't seem so ridiculous.

My nausea seemed to vanish. Dad ran around like a kid on Christmas, his eyes glued to the birds wheeling above us. "Jacob, look at that!" he cried, pointing to a cluster of airborne specks. "Manx Shearwaters!"

As we drew nearer the cliffs, I began to notice odd shapes lurking underwater. A passing crewman caught me leaning over the rail

to stare at them and said, “Never seen a shipwreck before, eh?”

I turned to him. “Really?”

“This whole area’s a nautical graveyard. It’s like the old captains used to say—‘Twixt Hartland Point and Cairnholm Bay is a sailor’s grave by night or day!’”

Just then we passed a wreck that was so near the surface, the outline of its greening carcass so clear, that it looked like it was about to rise out of the water like a zombie from a shallow grave. “See that one?” he said, pointing at it. “Sunk by a U-boat, she was.”

“There were U-boats around here?”

“Loads. Whole Irish Sea was rotten with German subs. Wager you’d have half a navy on your hands if you could unsink all the ships they torpedoed.” He arched one eyebrow dramatically, then walked off laughing.

I jogged along the deck to the stern, tracking the shipwreck as it disappeared beneath our wake. Then, just as I was starting to wonder if we’d need climbing gear to get onto the island, its steep cliffs sloped down to meet us. We rounded a headland to enter a rocky half-moon bay. In the distance I saw a little harbor bobbing with colorful fishing boats, and beyond it a town set into a green bowl of land. A patchwork of sheep-speckled fields spread across hills that rose away to meet a high ridge, where a wall of clouds stood like a cotton parapet. It was dramatic and beautiful, unlike any place I’d seen. I felt a little thrill of adventure as we chugged into the bay, as if I were sighting land where maps had noted only a sweep of undistinguished blue.

The ferry docked and we humped our bags into the little town. Upon closer inspection I decided it was, like a lot of things, not as pretty up close as it seemed from a distance. Whitewashed cottages, quaint except for the satellite dishes sprouting from their roofs, lined a small grid of muddy gravel streets. Because Cairnholm was too distant and too inconsequential to justify the cost of running power lines

from the mainland, foul-smelling diesel generators buzzed on every corner like angry wasps, harmonizing with the growl of tractors, the island's only vehicular traffic. At the edges of town, ancient-looking cottages stood abandoned and roofless, evidence of a shrinking population, children lured away from centuries-old fishing and farming traditions by more glamorous opportunities elsewhere.

We dragged our stuff through town looking for something called the Priest Home, where my dad had booked a room. I pictured an old church converted into a bed and breakfast—nothing fancy, just somewhere to sleep when we weren't watching birds or chasing down leads. We asked a few locals for directions but got only confused looks in return. "They speak English, right?" my dad wondered aloud. Just as my hand was beginning to ache from the unreasonable weight of my suitcase, we came upon a church. We thought we'd found our accommodations, until we went inside and saw that it had indeed been converted, but into a dingy little museum, not a B&B.

We found the part-time curator in a room hung with old fishing nets and sheep shears. His face lit up when he saw us, then fell when he realized we were only lost.

"I reckon you're after the Priest *Hole*," he said. "It's got the only rooms to let on the island."

He proceeded to give us directions in a lilting accent, which I found enormously entertaining. I loved hearing Welsh people talk, even if half of what they said was incomprehensible to me. My dad thanked the man and turned to go, but he'd been so helpful, I hung back to ask him another question.

"Where can we find the old children's home?"

"The old what?" he said, squinting at me.

For an awful moment I was afraid we'd come to the wrong island or, worse yet, that the home was just another thing my grandfather had invented.

"It was a home for refugee kids?" I said. "During the war? A

she wasn't just waiting for someone to bring her a drink.

We squeezed our bags through the doorway and stood blinking in the sudden gloom of a low-ceilinged pub. When my eyes had adjusted, I realized that *hole* was a pretty accurate description of the place: tiny leaded windows admitted just enough light to find the beer tap without tripping over tables and chairs on the way. The tables, worn and wobbling, looked like they might be more useful as firewood. The bar was half-filled, at whatever hour of the morning it was, with men in various states of hushed intoxication, heads bowed prayerfully over tumblers of amber liquid.

"You must be after the room," said the man behind the bar, coming out to shake our hands. "I'm Kev and these are the fellas. Say hullo, fellas."

"Hullo," they muttered, nodding at their drinks.

We followed Kev up a narrow staircase to a suite of rooms (plural!) that could charitably be described as basic. There were two bedrooms, the larger of which Dad claimed, and a room that tripled as a kitchen, dining room, and living room, meaning that it contained one table, one moth-eaten sofa, and one hotplate. The bathroom worked "most of the time," according to Kev, "but if it ever gets dicey, there's always Old Reliable." He directed our attention to a portable toilet in the alley out back, conveniently visible from my bedroom window.

"Oh, and you'll need these," he said, fetching a pair of oil lamps from a cabinet. "The generators stop running at ten since petrol's so bloody expensive to ship out, so either you get to bed early or you learn to love candles and kerosene." He grinned. "Hope it ain't too medieval for ya!"

We assured Kev that outhouses and kerosene would be just fine, sounded like fun, in fact—a little adventure, yessir—and then he led us downstairs for the final leg of our tour. "You're welcome to take your meals here," he said, "and I expect you will, on ac-

count of there's nowhere else to eat. If you need to make a call, we got a phone box in the corner there. Sometimes there's a bit of a queue for it, though, since we get doodly for mobile reception out here and you're looking at the only land-line on the island. That's right, we got it all—only food, only bed, only phone!" And he leaned back and laughed, long and loud.

The only phone on the island. I looked over at it—it was the kind that had a door you could pull shut for privacy, like the ones you see in old movies—and realized with dawning horror that *this* was the Grecian orgy, *this* was the raging frat party I had been connected to when I called the island a few weeks ago. *This was the piss hole.*

Kevin handed my dad the keys to our rooms. "Any questions," he said, "you know where to find me."

"I have a question," I said. "What's a piss—I mean, a priest hole?"

The men at the bar burst into laughter. "Why, it's a hole for priests, of course!" one said, which made the rest of them laugh even harder.

Kevin walked over to an uneven patch of floorboards next to the fireplace, where a mangy dog lay sleeping. "Right here," he said, tapping what appeared to be a door in the floor with his shoe. "Ages ago, when just being a Catholic could get you hung from a tree, clergyfolk came here seeking refuge. If Queen Elizabeth's crew of thugs come chasing after, we hid whoever needed hiding in snug little spots like this—priest holes." It struck me the way he said *we*, as if he'd known those long-dead islanders personally.

"Snug indeed!" one of the drinkers said. "Bet they were warm as toast and tight as drums down there!"

"I'd take warm and snug to strung up by priest killers any day," said another.

"Here, here!" the first man said. "To Cairnholm—may she always be our rock of refuge!"

"To Cairnholm!" they chorused, and raised their glasses together.

Jet-lagged and exhausted, we went to sleep early—or rather we went to our beds and lay in them with pillows covering our heads to block out the thumping cacophony that issued through the floorboards, which grew so loud that at one point I thought surely the revelers had invaded my room. Then the clock must’ve struck ten because all at once the buzzing generators outside sputtered and died, as did the music from downstairs and the streetlight that had been shining through my window. Suddenly I was cocooned in silent, blissful darkness, with only the whisper of distant waves to remind me where I was.

For the first time in months, I fell into a deep, nightmare-free slumber. I dreamed instead about my grandfather as a boy, about his first night here, a stranger in a strange land, under a strange roof, owing his life to people who spoke a strange tongue. When I awoke, sun streaming through my window, I realized it wasn’t just my grandfather’s life that Miss Peregrine had saved, but mine, too, and my father’s. Today, with any luck, I would finally get to thank her.

I went downstairs to find my dad already bellied up to a table, slurping coffee and polishing his fancy binoculars. Just as I sat down, Kev appeared bearing two plates loaded with mystery meat and fried toast. “I didn’t know you could fry toast,” I remarked, to which Kev replied that there wasn’t a food he was aware of that couldn’t be improved by frying.

Over breakfast, Dad and I discussed our plan for the day. It was to be a kind of scout, to familiarize ourselves with the island. We’d scope out my dad’s bird-watching spots first and then find the children’s home. I scarfed my food, anxious to get started.

Well fortified with grease, we left the pub and walked through town, dodging tractors and shouting to each other over the din of generators until the streets gave way to fields and the noise faded be-

hind us. It was a crisp and blustery day—the sun hiding behind giant cloudbanks only to burst out moments later and dapple the hills with spectacular rays of light—and I felt energized and hopeful. We were heading for a rocky beach where my dad had spotted a bunch of birds from the ferry. I wasn't sure how we would reach it, though—the island was slightly bowl shaped, with hills that climbed toward its edges only to drop off at precarious seaside cliffs—but at this particular spot the edge had been rounded off and a path led down to a minor spit of sand along the water.

We picked our way down to the beach, where what seemed to be an entire civilization of birds were flapping and screeching and fishing in tide pools. I watched my father's eyes widen. "Fascinating," he muttered, scraping at some petrified guano with the stubby end of his pen. "I'm going to need some time here. Is that all right?"

I'd seen this look on his face before, and I knew exactly what "some time" meant: hours and hours. "Then I'll go find the house by myself," I said.

"Not alone, you aren't. You promised."

"Then I'll find a person who can take me."

"Who?"

"Kev will know someone."

My dad looked out to sea, where a big rusted lighthouse jutted up from a pile of rocks. "You know what the answer would be if your mom were here," he said.

My parents had differing theories about how much parenting I required. Mom was the enforcer, always hovering, but Dad hung back a little. He thought it was important that I make my own mistakes now and then. Also, letting me go would free him to play with guano all day.

"Okay," he said, "but make sure you leave me the number of whoever you go with."

"Dad, nobody here has phones."

He sighed. "Right. Well, as long as they're reliable."

Kev was out running an errand, and because asking one of his drunken regulars to chaperone me seemed like a bad idea, I went into the nearest shop to ask someone who was at least gainfully employed. The door read *FISHMONGER*. I pushed it open to find myself cowering before a bearded giant in a blood-soaked apron. He left off decapitating fish to glare at me, dripping cleaver in hand, and I vowed never again to discriminate against the intoxicated.

“What the hell for?” he growled when I told him where I wanted to go. “Nothing over there but bogland and barmy weather.”

I explained about my grandfather and the children’s home. He frowned at me, then leaned over the counter to cast a doubtful glance at my shoes.

“I s’pose Dylan ain’t too busy to take you,” he said, pointing his cleaver at a kid about my age who was arranging fish in a freezer case, “but you’ll be wantin’ proper footwear. Wouldn’t do to let you go in them trainers—mud’ll suck ‘em right off!”

“Really?” I said. “Are you sure?”

“Dylan! Fetch our man here a pair of Wellingtons!”

The kid groaned and made a big show of slowly closing the freezer case and cleaning his hands before slouching over to a wall of shelves packed with dry goods.

“Just so happens we’ve got some good sturdy boots on offer,” the fishmonger said. “Buy one get none free!” He burst out laughing and slammed his cleaver on a salmon, its head shooting across the blood-slicked counter to land perfectly in a little guillotine bucket.

I fished the emergency money Dad had given me from my pocket, figuring that a little extortion was a small price to pay to find the woman I’d crossed the Atlantic to meet.

I left the shop wearing a pair of rubber boots so large my sneakers fit inside and so heavy it was difficult to keep up with my begrudging guide.

“So, do you go to school on the island?” I asked Dylan, scurrying to catch up. I was genuinely curious—what was living here like for someone my age?

He muttered the name of a town on the mainland.

“What is that, an hour each way by ferry?”

“Yup.”

And that was it. He responded to further attempts at conversation with even fewer syllables—which is to say, none—so finally I just gave up and followed him. On the way out of town we ran into one of his friends, an older boy wearing a blinding yellow track suit and fake gold chains. He couldn’t have looked more out of place on Cairnholm if he’d been dressed like an astronaut. He gave Dylan a fist-bump and introduced himself as Worm.

“Worm?”

“It’s his stage name,” Dylan explained.

“We’re the sickest rapping duo in Wales,” Worm said. “I’m MC Worm, and this is the Sturgeon Surgeon, aka Emcee Dirty Dylan, aka Emcee Dirty Bizniss, Cairnholm’s number one beat-boxer. Wanna show this Yank how we do, Dirty D?”

Dylan looked annoyed. “Now?”

“Drop some next-level beats, son!”

Dylan rolled his eyes but did as he was asked. At first I thought he was choking on his tongue, except there was a rhythm to his sputtering coughs, —*puhh*, *puh-CHAH*, *puh-puhhh*, *puh-CHAH*—over which Worm began to rap.

“I likes to get wrecked up down at the Priest Hole / Your dad’s always there ‘cause he’s on the dole / My rhymes is tight, yeah I make it look easy / Dylan’s beats are hot like chicken jalfrezi!”

Dylan stopped. “That don’t even make sense,” he said. “And it’s

your dad who's on the dole.”

“Oh shit, Dirty D let the beat drop!” Worm started beat-boxing while doing a passable robot, his sneakers twisting holes in the gravel. “Take the mic, D!”

Dylan seemed embarrassed but let the rhymes fly anyway. “I met a tight bird and her name was Sharon / She was keen on my tracksuit and the trainers I was wearin’ / I showed her the time, like Doctor Who / I thunk up this rhyme while I was in the loo!”

Worm shook his head. “The *loo*?”

“I wasn’t ready!”

They turned to me and asked what I thought. Considering that they didn’t even like each other’s rapping, I wasn’t sure what to say.

“I guess I’m more into music with, like, singing and guitars and stuff.”

Worm dismissed me with a wave of his hand. “He wouldn’t know a dope rhyme if it bit him in the bollocks,” he muttered.

Dylan laughed and they exchanged a series of complex, multi-stage handshake-fist-bump-high-fives.

“Can we go now?” I said.

They grumbled and dawdled a while longer, but pretty soon we were on our way, this time with Worm tagging along.

I took up the rear, trying to figure out what I would say to Miss Peregrine when I met her. I was expecting to be introduced to a proper Welsh lady and sip tea in the parlor and make polite small talk until the time seemed right to break the bad news. *I’m Abraham Portman’s grandson*, I would say. *I’m sorry to be the one to tell you this, but he’s been taken from us*. Then, once she’d finished quietly dabbing away tears, I would ply her with questions.

I followed Dylan and Worm along a path that wound through pastures of grazing sheep before a lung-busting ascent up a ridge. At the top hovered an embankment of rolling, snaking fog so dense it was like stepping into another world. It was truly biblical; a fog I

“Joking, like.”

“Well, I wasn’t.”

The boys exchanged an uneasy look. Dylan whispered something to Worm. Worm whispered something back. Finally Dylan turned and pointed up the path. “If you really want to see it,” he said, “keep going past the bog and through the woods. It’s a big old place. You can’t miss it.”

“What the hell. You’re supposed to go with me!”

Worm looked away and said, “This is as far as we go.”

“Why?”

“It just is.” And they turned and began to trudge back the way we’d come, receding into the fog.

I weighed my options. I could tuck tail and follow my tormenters back to town, or I could go ahead alone and lie to Dad about it.

After four seconds of intense deliberation, I was on my way.

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A vast, lunar bog stretched away into the mist from either side of the path, just brown grass and tea-colored water as far as I could see, featureless but for the occasional mound of piled-up stones. It ended abruptly at a forest of skeletal trees, branches spindling up like the tips of wet paintbrushes, and for a while the path became so lost beneath fallen trunks and carpets of ivy that navigating it was a matter of faith. I wondered how an elderly person like Miss Peregrine would ever be able to negotiate such an obstacle course. *She must get deliveries*, I thought, though the path looked like it hadn’t seen a footprint in months, if not years.

I scrambled over a giant trunk slick with moss, and the path took a sharp turn. The trees parted like a curtain and suddenly there it was, cloaked in fog, looming atop a weed-choked hill. The house. I understood at once why the boys had refused to come.

My grandfather had described it a hundred times, but in his stories the house was always a bright, happy place—big and rambling, yes, but full of light and laughter. What stood before me now was no refuge from monsters but a monster itself, staring down from its perch on the hill with vacant hunger. Trees burst forth from broken windows and skins of scabrous vine gnawed at the walls like antibodies attacking a virus—as if nature itself had waged war against it—but the house seemed unkillable, resolutely upright despite the wrongness of its angles and the jagged teeth of sky visible through sections of collapsed roof.

I tried to convince myself that it was possible someone could still live there, run-down as it was. Such things weren't unheard of where I came from—a falling-down wreck on the edge of town, curtains permanently drawn, that would turn out to have been home to some ancient recluse who'd been surviving on ramen and toenail clippings since time immemorial, though no one realizes it until a property appraiser or an overly ambitious census taker barges in to find the poor soul returning to dust in a La-Z-Boy. People get too old to care for a place, their family writes them off for one reason or another—it's sad, but it happens. Which meant, like it or not, that I was going to have to knock.

I gathered what scrawny courage I had and waded through waist-high weeds to the porch, all broken tile and rotting wood, to peek through a cracked window. All I could make out through the smeared glass were the outlines of furniture, so I knocked on the door and stood back to wait in the eerie silence, tracing the shape of Miss Peregrine's letter in my pocket. I'd taken it along in case I needed to prove who I was, but as a minute ticked by, then two, it seemed less and less likely that I would need it.

Climbing down into the yard, I circled the house looking for another way in, taking the measure of the place, but it seemed almost without measure, as though with every corner I turned the house

sprouted new balconies and turrets and chimneys. Then I came around back and saw my opportunity: a doorless doorway, bearded with vines, gaping and black; an open mouth just waiting to swallow me. Just looking at it made my skin crawl, but I hadn't come halfway around the world just to run away screaming at the sight of a scary house. I thought of all the horrors Grandpa Portman had faced in his life, and felt my resolve harden. If there was anyone to find inside, I would find them. I mounted the crumbling steps and crossed the threshold.

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