



HILARY MCKAY

*Becoming
Grace*

Illustrated by
Keith Robinson

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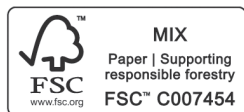
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For Jim and Meg, thank you.

*Barn owls in the castle walls,
paw prints on the sand.*

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Chapter 1

Salt Water

It was May, but the north wind blew icy cold over the sea. Will and Job, the big boys, had got the boat out and were taking Grace and Robbie fishing, for a treat. All three boys were cheerfully barefoot, wearing shirts and shabby jackets, but Grace had been made to wrap up warm. Grace wore a petticoat, a woollen dress and a red shawl tied on tight. Also thick stockings, her worn-out winter boots and a brown knitted hat.

Grace's hat slipped into her eyes so often, she took it off and sat on it.

Later, she was glad she'd done that.

They rowed to a small rocky island that was Will and Job's favourite place to fish. It had a rough stone jetty where they could tie up the boat, and a little shingle beach.

"You two can explore round here," Will told Grace and Robbie. "Job and I won't be far away. There's a really good spot we like to fish from, just over those rocks."

Then they gave Grace and Robbie cheese and hunks of homemade barley bread to munch, and lots of instructions.

"Don't go wandering off," said Will. "Robbie, look after Grace. She's only eight."

"Yell if you need us," said Job. "Grace, look after Robbie. He's ten, but you'd never guess it."

"Be good," said Will.

"Stay dry," said Job.

“And don’t,” they called together as they left, “come bothering us!”

The first thing Robbie and Grace did when the last bite of bread and cheese was eaten was go bothering Will and Job. They got in the way, went too close to the edges of steep drops and tangled the fishing lines. Then they were told they were pests and marched back to where the boat was tied.

It was a big wooden coble – a sort of rowing boat. Other families might have a horse for transport, or a donkey and cart. But Grace’s father was a lighthouse keeper, so they had their old coble.

Robbie had never been allowed in it alone.

“I could be captain,” he said hopefully, “and Grace could be crew, and we could very carefully—”

“Rob,” said Will, “you unfasten that boat or touch those oars and I swear I’ll never take you anywhere again. Just stay on the beach and behave.”

Robbie looked unimpressed at the bit of shingle beach beside the jetty.

“We can paddle,” said Grace, and began to untie her boots.

“No paddling,” said Job. “Look for shells or whales or something. I once dropped a penny here. Look for that.”

“I’d rather look for proper treasure,” said Robbie.

“Do that then,” said Will, “but don’t wander off. We haven’t got long. Be ready to go back.”

There was no treasure on the beach.

Nor shells that weren’t broken.

No whales out at sea.

Robbie looked across to Will and Job. They were concentrating on their fishing and were half hidden by the rocks.

“They’ve forgotten us,” said Robbie, pleased. “Come on – let’s get into the boat to be ready to go back.”

“I don’t think we should untie it,” said Grace.

They didn’t untie it, but they did push it round. Now it swung out to sea instead of lying against the jetty.

Then Grace hung over one side and Robbie hung over the other.

The water was so clear that it was like looking into glass.

“I can see a little fish,” said Grace.

“I can see a sword,” said Robbie. “Silver, with a golden hilt.”

“I can see a crab,” said Grace.

“I can see a crown with jewels. Beside a skeleton. He’s a lost sailor king.”

“I can see Job’s penny,” said Grace. She sounded so surprised that Robbie forgot his lost sailor king. He also forgot that even a tied-up boat needed to be balanced. Robbie jumped up and flung himself down beside his little sister.

The boat rocked and tipped ... and into the sea went Grace.

The cold numbed her. The weight of her clothes pulled her down. The tide tugged Grace backwards helplessly. She was dragged, deeper and deeper.

She felt squeezed tight by the huge weight of the sea.



Drowning, thought Grace.

Suddenly, she banged her elbow hard. She gasped and choked on salt water. Something caught her from behind and pulled her up.

Up and up, and then sky!

It was Job! He was in the water with her. There was Will as well, hanging on to the collar of Robbie's jacket. With his other hand, he reached out an oar.

"Grab!" Will shouted.

Grace grabbed. Job boosted her towards the oar. Will lifted it from the boat. And then Grace was in the coble, and the sunlight was astonishing. The wind and the slap of waves, the voices of her brothers and the blue sky overhead – it was all so alive.

Will and Job stripped off Grace's wet dress and shawl and petticoat, and wrapped her in their jackets. There was a sack in the bottom of the boat, and they put that around her as well. They pulled on her brown hat. All the time this was happening, Robbie sobbed.

“I’m only wet,” said Grace between chattering teeth. “Do we have to tell?”

Her brothers looked at each other and then down at their little sister. They had promised to look after Grace. She had promised to be good. Neither of these things had happened.

“We’d better,” said Will. “It would be different if it had been Robbie in the sea.”

Grace knew it was true. Her brothers could tip in the sea as easily as ducklings and very little fuss would be made. But they were boys. She was a girl. And anyway, she’d lost a boot.

So they rowed back to the island where the little lighthouse stood, and a great deal of fuss was made, not just by Grace’s parents, but by her three big sisters and her little twin brothers as well.

Robbie never forgot that penny. For years and years, he looked for it.

Grace never forgot what it was like to know you were drowning. The dragging pull of the water and the cold and the fear.

And she never forgot what it was like to be rescued. To find yourself back in the world again.

Thank you, thank you, thought Grace as she fell asleep that night.