

Operation Accordion

When Alex Spencer disappeared during the Regatta, I had my suspicions about what had happened to her.

It wasn't until she didn't show up for breakfast we realised she'd gone. Alex and I had always been close. I slept on her bed every night and I was the one she shared all her thoughts and dreams with. But even I couldn't have anticipated the events that unfolded that day.

On the morning in question, I'd already been up for hours: I liked to watch the dawn break over the water and complete my morning patrol of the streets and alleyways of Falmouth before the hubbub of the day began. With so many visitors in town, someone had to keep them in line.

I strolled in through the cat flap to hear Alex's mum calling Alex and Ben down to eat. "I've made blueberry pancakes," she shouted.

A noise like thunder shook the house, but it was only Ben, Alex's older brother coming down the stairs.

"Awesome, thanks, Mum. I'm starving." He sat down at the table and started filling his plate.

"Alex, breakfast!" her mum called again.

"Never mind, Mum. I'll eat Alex's too," Ben mumbled.

His mum flicked him with a tea towel. "What have I told you about talking with your mouth full?"

I slunk past her and ran up the stairs. There was no sign of Alex anywhere. The window in her bedroom was open and a gentle sea breeze made the curtains ripple, like waves on the sea. Wrinkling my nose, I sniffed the air. It had a salty tang to it. Change was coming, carried in on the wind like the Tall Ships. I could feel it in my whiskers.

Alex's bedroom walls were covered with maps. A row of model boats that she'd painstakingly put together and painted sat on a shelf above her desk. Next to them was

huge shell from somewhere tropical, the kind you can put to your ear and listen to the sea. There were dozens of postcards from Uncle John from his trips around Australia, the West Indies and the Azores.

More than anything else in the world, Alex had always wanted to learn to sail. The sea was in her blood. Ever since she was tiny, her grandfather, her father and her uncle had told her tales about their adventures on the high seas. But since her father's accident three years ago, things at home had changed. Alex's mum worried about everything, and she wouldn't let Ben or Alex do anything she thought might be dangerous, particularly sailing.

"She's not here up here, Ben." Alex's mum had followed me up.

The house shook again as Ben crashed up the stairs and poked his head around the door. "She's probably just popped out to see one of her friends."

"But there's no note, Ben. She knows to leave a note."

"Don't worry, Mum. I'll text her." He pulled his phone out of his pocket and pressed a few buttons. "Can I have her pancakes now?"

"I can't believe she's disappeared, today of all days!" She sat down on the bed. The frown line in between her eyebrows was back and she looked pale. I rubbed up against her legs and told her that everything would be OK, that I'd find Alex, but I don't think she understood.

I turned my attention back to the task at hand: look for clues. Alex's favourite blue and white striped jersey was no longer hanging on the back of the chair, and her red backpack wasn't in its usual place in the corner of the room. Her accordion had also gone.

I had to get down to the harbour before it was too late.

The streets of Falmouth were already filling up. I wove my way between people's legs, pushchairs and bikes, jumping out of the way to avoid colliding with Ross, one of Ben's

friends, who was attempting to ride a unicycle. “Whoops! Sorry, Charlie! Still getting the hang of this thing!”

It would be almost impossible to find Alex with all these people. I stopped and sniffed the air again. There were too many smells and too much noise. I’d have to enlist some help. I drew myself up tall and sounded the alarm. A few seconds later, a crow landed on the pontoon next to me. “What’s up, boss?” he asked.

I didn’t recognise him: he had to be one of the new recruits. “I’m looking for Alex,” I said.

“Who’s that?” He winked at me. “New lady friend?”

I shook my head. “No, she’s a girl.”

“You’re going to have to be a bit more specific than that.”

“The one who plays the accordion on the roof.”

“Oh, that girl,” he said. “Why didn’t you say?”

“Have you seen her? I think she might be on one of the ships.”

“I’ll ask around. Back in a mo.”

I’d only just reached the agreed meeting point near the Maritime Museum when someone called my name.

It was Tinker, a West Highland Terrier who lived two streets away. Cleo, a ginger and white striped cat came running over to join us.

“I got the message,” Tinker said. “What’s up?”

“Alex has disappeared. Her mum’s frantic.”

“We’ll keep an eye out. Usual signal?”

“Yes. I think we’re going to have to call everyone in on this one.”

“What’s the codeword?” Cleo asked.

I thought for a moment. “Operation Accordion.”

“Right you are.” Tinker started barking. Two long barks followed by two short ones.

Grrrrruff! Grrrrruff! Woof! Woof!

I heard another dog take up the call close by, then another further in the distance.

Hounds howled.

Cats yowled.

Gulls squawked.

The people on the streets of Falmouth looked around, their mouths big Os of surprise. Most of them had no idea what went on right under their noses.

Within moments, I was surrounded. “Excellent response time, team. Well done. Now, we have a situation on our hands. My human, Alex Spencer, has gone AWOL. I believe she’s run away to sea.”

I quickly ran through the evidence and described Alex to those who didn’t know her.

“You can count on us,” said Cleo, as the group dispersed throughout the harbour.

If I could find Alex before she set sail, I felt confident I could convince her to stay. But if she was already at sea... Well, that didn’t even bear thinking about. Unless I could grow wings, I couldn’t even reach her.

“Ahem!”

I looked up to see Midge, the crow I’d spoken to earlier. “Sorry to interrupt, boss. A couple of gulls think they’ve spotted Alex on a ship out in the bay.”

My heart sank. Was I already too late? “OK, find Sonya and Benny and get them to fly out there. We need a positive ID before we can proceed.”

I paced the pontoon while I waited for the news. Every so often I heard the cries, meows or barks of one of the team passing on information. A few minutes later two young seagulls landed on the walkway in front of me. “False alarm, Charlie.”

I sighed. “Thanks, guys. Keep looking, will you? She’s got to be around here somewhere.”

Passing a row of yachts, I heard a familiar voice. “What’s all the commotion?”

Gus, an old black Labrador lay dozing in the sunshine on the deck of a boat. He opened one eye sleepily as I approached.

I filled him in on the situation.

“Trying to run away to sea.” He let out a short bark that sounded like a laugh. “She was here earlier, talking to Mary,” he indicated his human, who was also stretched out on the deck enjoying the sunshine.

“How long ago? Where was she headed?” Finally, a real sighting.

“Over that way. I don’t suppose she’ll have gone far.”

I ran along the walkway, all my senses on high alert. Then I saw her. She was sitting alone on a bench, her head down and her arms wrapped around her knees.

I sounded the call to let the rest of the troop know everything was OK. Operation Accordion was over.

Jumping up onto the bench beside Alex, I pressed my nose against her arm to get her attention.

“Charlie, what are you doing here?” She ran her fingers through my fur and I wriggled closer to sit on her lap. She sighed. “I’m sorry I didn’t take you with me. I just had to go. Today was the day. The wind was blowing south westerly, you know. Uncle John always says that’s the best sort of wind for starting a journey.” She scratched my head between my ears, just where I like it.

“He promised he’d take me sailing when he came down for the Regatta, but he’s still not here and it’s nearly over. So I thought I’d take matters into my own hands. It turns out it’s more difficult to stow away than I thought.”

I leapt off her lap and patted a paw on the accordion case. A smile crept across Alex’s face. She opened it up, took out the shiny red accordion and began playing.

A crowd soon gathered. Midge flew past and perched in one of the rooftops nearby. Tinker crept in and lay down at Alex’s feet. A few people walking past and threw coins into the open accordion case.

A voice came booming through the streets. “*What shall we do with the drunken sailor, ear-ly in the morning!*”

Alex stopped playing. “Uncle John!”

He ran over to her and swung her round, accordion and all. “I knew that was you. I’d recognise that sound anywhere.”

“Where’ve you been?”

“We ran into a bit of trouble off the coast of France. The crew’s all fine, but my ship needs some repairs before she’ll be seaworthy again. I had to hitch a lift with a fishing trawler to get here.” He paused and grinned. “I haven’t forgotten I promised I’d take you out to sea. But first things first.” He pulled out his phone. “Lou, I’ve found her. She’s down at the harbour. Hold on. I’ll put her on.”

“Sorry, Mum. Yes, I promise I’ll do everything Uncle John tells me. Love you too.” Alex handed the phone back.

“Now, how about we test out your sea legs?” Uncle John said.

“Really?” Alex grinned. Then her face fell. “But you haven’t got a ship.”

“Ah, but I know a man who has. Come with me. And you, Charlie.” He winked at me, as if he knew exactly what had been going on.

“Permission to come aboard, Captain?” he called, as we approached one of the Tall Ships that lined the harbour.

A bald man with a white beard who looked a bit like a pirate emerged from below deck. He crossed the gangway in two huge strides, grasped Uncle John in a bear hug and kissed him on both cheeks. “Good to see you again, Johnny! It’s been far too long.”

“Alex, I’d like you to meet my good friend Kostas.”

The captain kissed Alex’s hand, making her giggle. “I’ve heard so much about you, Alex. Welcome aboard the *Kristina*.”

Captain Kostas barked a few orders to his crew and within minutes the ship had set sail.

I sat at the brow of the ship and kept a close eye on Alex as Kostas showed her how to climb the rigging. She looked happier than I’d ever seen her, with rosy cheeks and windblown hair.

“Just don’t tell your mum!” Uncle John called from below.

“It’s wonderful.” Alex shouted. “Just like I imagined it.”

Back on dry land, Alex, Uncle John, Captain Kostas and his crew all piled in to Alex's mum's house for dinner before the celebrations started. There wasn't much room, but no-one seemed to mind. Captain Kostas and Uncle John told story after outrageous story to anyone who would listen, and when Alex took out her accordion and began to play, everyone started dancing.

The party soon spilled out onto the streets. "Come on, Lou," Uncle John held out his hand to Alex's mum and they went whirling down the road.

It was the perfect evening: warm and clear. Everywhere you looked people were laughing and having a good time. Alex and I sat on the roof and watched the fireworks light up the night sky in gold, red and green. It was mesmerising: I'd never seen anything quite like it.

When the glow from the last fireworks had faded from the sky, everyone started drifting back home.

"That was the best day ever." Alex yawned as she walked up the stairs to bed.

As for me, the night was still young.