

# Excerpt -- Isabel of the Whales

By the time we'd been out on the water for over two hours, some of the kids had started getting fidgety. I looked out at the sea, which was empty of anything but foamy swirly waves and rudely screeching sea gulls. The sun was getting hot.

"I wish there was a place to buy drinks," grumbled Tommy MacCarthy. "I could really use a soda. I can't go the whole day without soda."

"Why didn't you pack one in your lunch, then?" asked Patty.

"I thought you could buy it at the snack bar on board," said Tommy. "Like on the ferries to the islands, you know."

"Here," I said. "You can have some of mine."

Tommy looked at the can I was holding out to him in surprise. "No thanks," he said. Some of the other boys giggled. Tommy started sniggering too. You'd think I had offered to kiss him, or something. Those boys act so dumb around girls, I swear. I didn't even particularly like Tommy! I was just trying to be nice!

Corinne was kicking the bench we were sitting on. "Stop kicking, please," I implored. I had this knot in my stomach that kept moving up higher. What if we didn't get to see any whales?

"This is boring," Corinne whined. "I'm hot. Mr. Peake, I don't see any whales. When are we going to see some whales? Are you sure we're going to see some? Promise?"

"Shut up, Corinne," I hissed.

I felt sorry for Mr. Peake, taking such a bunch of whiners on an adventure they didn't even deserve. No wonder we hadn't seen any whales yet. I was worried he'd get mad, and tell the captain to turn back.

But Mr. Peake wasn't paying any attention to Corinne's whining. He was looking through his binoculars. Suddenly, he jumped up.

"Thar she blows!" he shouted. We all turned to look. There, in the distance, was a faint fountain of what looked like steam, spouting into the air.

"Is that one?" I squeaked, my voice tight with excitement. "Is that really a whale?" I was on my feet, jumping up and down.

Mr. Peake grinned. "It sure is. A beaut."

My first, real live whale! I ran over to the railing, breathless.

Captain Segal yelled, "Hold on tight, everyone. We're on our way!"

He swung the boat around, and we started barreling toward the whale. The waves slapped loudly at the hull, as if the sea was trying to stop us from going that way. Mr. Peake turned to us. "See, kids?" he said. "Oh, ye of little faith!"

Therese, the whale researcher on board, picked up her microphone and started announcing to the rest of the passengers that a whale had been spotted. "Note the double blow-hole," she shouted, "see how the spray comes out in two jets? And do you see those knobby bumps all over the head and flippers? Those features tell us it's a humpback whale. In a minute, if it will do the favor of turning over, you'll get a view of the long white flippers they have. Humpbacks have the longest flippers of any sea mammal. Yep, that's a humpback all right."

The whole class made a beeline for the top deck, where you had the best view. I barreled my way through the crowd to the railing and managed to capture a good place at the front. People were pressing against me from the back. "All right, all right, don't push!" I yelled, elbowing somebody out of my way with one arm and shielding my eyes against the sun with the other.

As we steamed towards the spouting whale, I could suddenly see three or four more black backs slapping against the foaming waves.

"Ladies and Gentlemen, I think we have more than one out there!" called Therese.

"There's another one in back of us," Nick screamed, from the stern. "Look, everybody!"

I saw Molly struggling with her camera, and suddenly remembered that I had Alex's camera around my neck. I unslung it, and took the lens cap off. My fingers were shaking. "More whales over there!" Mr. Peake called from somewhere behind me. "At nine o'clock! What do you think, Therese? Those aren't humpbacks, are they?"

"No-Sir, those are finbacks," Therese announced over the mike. "They're a mixed bunch, all right!"

"Oh my God!" screeched Corinne. "Look over there! Look, Mr. Peake! More whales!"

It was happening so fast I just didn't know where to look. Everywhere you turned -- in front of us, behind us, on either side -- you could see whales swooping, surfacing, swimming majestically towards us, whooshing and blowing their spouts loudly, like trumpeters in a giants' marching band.

"This is so — unbelievable!" I gasped.

"Unbelievable," whispered Mr. Peake, but there was an edge of uncertainty in his voice. It gave me a chill.

"Ladies and gentlemen, this is unprecedented," came Therese's voice over the loudspeaker. "I have never witnessed this many whales all in one place!"

Everyone was quiet suddenly. There was a fishy taste to the air. A stinky mist was raining down us — the steam from dozens and dozens of blow holes. We all stared out at the sea, so calm just a few minutes ago, now a bubbling, snorting mass of great gray, black, and white-bellied bodies rolling gently together.

"What -- what does it mean?" asked Kristen, in a high-pitched voice.

"I have no idea," said Mr. Peake. "Somehow we have stumbled upon a great congregation of whales."

"A congregation of whales!" I whispered dreamily.

"By God, we're surrounded," boomed Captain Segal. He had switched off the engine. "I have never seen this happen. Have you ever heard of this happening, Therese?"

"Never," said Therese. She sounded confused and a little uncertain. There was a silence. Then she went on, her professional announcer's voice coming back. "Ladies and gentlemen, whales don't usually travel in packs. The big whales, for the most part, are loners. And the species don't often mix, although there is evidence that they are able to communicate with each other cross-species. But these, look -- minke whales, I believe, over there; at three o'clock you can see a whole tribe of finbacks. Those smaller ones jumping over there are pilot whales. I think I saw a couple of grays just a minute ago -- I'm sorry, I'm having a hard time identifying them, there are so many! Usually all we see when we go out here off the Cape are the humpbacks. They're on their way to their feeding grounds, up north. Wait -- over there, behind the others, see it? That big one. Oh my God, it's enormous! Must be at least a 90-footer, if not more. Can that be a blue whale, Captain?"

"I'm not sure, but you may be right," the captain said slowly. "I've never seen a blue in these parts before. That's a rare sight. Very rare."

They were both quiet for a minute or so.

"Well, get out your cameras, class. Might as well document this. We'll have quite a story to tell when we get home!" said Mr. Peake.

"If we ever get home," muttered one of the ship's crew standing behind him, a scruffy sailor in stained gray sweats.

"What shall we do?" said Mr. Peake, turning to Captain Segal, who was giving the sailor an angry stare.

"There's no need to panic, anyway," the captain said. "We'll have to stay put, for a while. Until they decide to leave. There's no way out."

"Wouldn't they get out of our way if we restarted the engine?" Jameel suggested.

"I don't know. I wouldn't want to risk alarming this lot," said Captain Segal.

"I want to go home!" wailed Corinne.

"Shhh!" said Jameel. "Let's all stay real quiet. We don't want to make them mad; they might attack the boat."

"Could that happen?" whimpered Kristen, removing her sunglasses and rubbing her eyes. "I mean -- do you think they're going to attack the boat?" Molly, who was standing next to me, shuddered and hugged me, giggling with excitement.

"Let's stay calm, everybody," said Mr. Peake. "We'll just observe them quietly, and hopefully they'll get bored and leave us alone."

I couldn't understand the fear and panic in the others' voices. What was there to be afraid of? I only felt elated, and awed, as if I were a witness to some great miracle.

Just below me, I saw an eye, a great big eye, looking up at me. It belonged to a humpback -- about half the length of our boat. I leaned over the railing for a better look. My whale came in closer.

"Watch it, Iggie!" Molly squealed.

"Don't lean out so far, Isabel," warned Mr. Peake.

"I don't know, Mr. Peake, I think they're trying to communicate with us," I said to him over my shoulder. "I don't think they mean us any harm." I was proud that unlike the others, I was brave. I leaned out some more, as if to prove my fearlessness, and stretched out my arm. I had this urge to touch its slick knobbly head.

What I felt was surprisingly soft, smooth, and cool. It felt so much like human skin, it scared me. I snatched my hand back, my heart pounding. But the whale stayed close to the boat, as if waiting for me to do it again. It was now lying on its side, one of its great white flippers pointing up to the sky, and I saw its big soft round eye again. I could have sworn it was trying to tell me something.

I leaned out again, and reached my arm toward the flipper. Mr. Peake yelled "Isabel!" again, but I ignored him. I was standing on tiptoe on the bench, the rail digging into my stomach. Grandly, slowly, the flipper waved at me, and my whale backed off, swimming a few lengths away from the boat. Oh, don't go, don't go! I prayed, fumbling with my camera. At least let me take your picture! I brought the camera up to my eye. The automatic focus started making its tiny whirring sounds.

Suddenly the whale turned. Half lifting itself out of the water, then coming down with a thundering crash, it blew a great hiss of steam high into the air, and came racing back to where I was perched. The kids around me started shrieking; the salty spray rained down on our heads, drenching us. Before I could figure out what was happening, the great creature reared up out of the water like some glistening black torpedo, its side smacking the side of the boat, its huge grinning head towering over me.

I screamed, and the camera slipped out of my grasp. In awesome slow motion, I saw Alexander's prize Minolta sail through the air.

"NO!" I cried, lunging for the camera with both arms outstretched. In the same horrible moment, there was a second jolt as another whale rammed the boat from behind.

"Iggy! Isabel!" I heard screaming behind me. "Hold on!"

But it was too late. The next thing I knew, I was hurtling through the air. I was falling, down, down, with nothing to hold onto, the wet wind sucking at my hair and the foamy water speeding toward my face. "Man overboard!" I heard from somewhere above me.

The cold seawater struck me with such force it took my breath away. I felt the air being pressed out of my body, as if my chest was getting wrapped up in giant rubber bands.

The heavy water closed over my head and began pushing me down toward the bottom of the deep. I could feel, rather than see, the light above me getting fainter, and the darkness coming closer. I tried to struggle, but the weight of the water pinned my arms to my sides, and I sank like a stone.

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Alex is going to kill me...

So what, I'm dead anyway, and he'll be sorry. He'll cry, and wish he'd been nicer to me when he still had the chance.

Why did I have to do it? No one else on board leaned out too far. No one else was a show-off like me. Serves me right.

I'm too young to die. But this is it. I'm drowning, aren't I? And I can't do a thing about it.

Oh my god, this is so bad. The sea is so cold, and so huge, and so deep.

I'm so alone. I can't breathe.

Suddenly, I realized that none of it was true.

I wasn't drowning. At least, I didn't think so. I felt as if a giant balloon was being blown into my belly and my chest and my back, and it was pushing out the panic, making room for calm. All of a sudden I felt lighter than air. No need to be afraid. The water didn't feel so cold anymore either -- it felt pretty comfortable, as a matter of fact, and I could move my arms and legs again. One kick of my legs and I stopped falling. I was now floating horizontally, feeling my heart recover from the jackhammering panic of a moment ago.

I wasn't alone, either. I saw bodies, lots of bodies, large, mottled, gray and black and deep blue bodies, above me and below me. The whales! They were everywhere I looked. They looked different down here, below the surface. They seemed longer, slimmer than I'd expected. They moved with the utmost grace, in a slinky, slow-motion glide. They were aware of me. They all stared at me with their dark, calm eyes. And there were even more of them behind, hovering in the misty distance. Weird as it might seem, I wasn't afraid of them at all. One of them came up and nuzzled me gently. I didn't draw back, but let it sort of sniff me all over, front to back, like a dog greeting another dog. It felt nice, like a caress. Another one came over and did the same thing. And another, and another.

And all this time, I was feeling very happy, thinking, This is great, wait till Alex and Jacob hear about this, they never got this close when they went on their whale watch...

Then it dawned on me that I'd been under water a pretty long time. Shouldn't my lungs be bursting? I looked up, at the green light far above me, and decided I'd better go up for air. I kicked my legs, and without too much effort I rose steadily to the surface. Five or six of the whales rose right alongside me, and I couldn't help grinning. I couldn't get over how friendly they were.

My head broke through the surface, all churning with foam, bubbles spitting and sizzling all around me. The whales that had surfaced with me were merrily snorting steam from their spouts. I was getting drenched, but of course I was wet to start with. I felt like laughing out loud.

I saw the Explorer rolling in the waves at some distance, and a lifeboat bobbing a few lengths beyond it. Mr. Peake and a ship's crewmember were standing in the bow, anxiously scanning the water. "Over here!" I yelled, but at the same time there was a whale sound, like the boom of a foghorn, in my ear. I tried to clear my throat, and called again. Again my voice got drowned out. "Hey you guys," I muttered at the whales, "Give me a little room here. And shut the heck up for a minute."

"Isabel."

I turned around. I was sure I'd just heard someone call my name.

But the boats were still far off, too far for them to hear me.

The whales seemed quieter now. They had formed a sort of protective circle around me. No wonder they couldn't see me, from the boats.

"I-zz-abel".

I heard it again. A nice, booming sort of voice. Neither male nor female: resonating and low.

"Where!" I called.

"Here."

I turned around again, and searched the waters. But all I could see nearby was the foam and the whales.

"Who are you?" I gargled. My mouth was full of water.

"Friends," I heard. "We are your friends. We are the whales."

"Oh, come off it," I sputtered. I must be going nuts! I was imagining that I could hear the whales talk. Give me a break!

"It is hard for you to understand. We know that."

This was really too ridiculous. I had to stop listening to the voices inside my head and start doing something to attract attention from the boat. They still hadn't spotted me. "I've got to yell real loud," I thought, "and wave my arms above my head."

I tried to wave my arms, but it was a very strange feeling, wrong somehow. Before I knew it my body was lifted out of the water, way out, and then I was falling like a stone. I landed with a loud smack. It stung like anything.

"Wohw," I gasped. What was going on! I decided I'd better not make another move.

"I-zzabel."

"What!" Leave me alone is what I meant.

"You are a whale now," came the voice.

"Are you talking to me?" I whispered. I'd had my eyes closed tight since my belly flop. I didn't want to open them.

"I-zzabel. You. One of us. You are one of the whales."

Oh my God.

"You must not be frightened. You are the Chosen One."

I still refused to open my eyes. But I realized I did feel -- different. Very different. For one thing, I couldn't seem to spread my legs. When I moved them, they moved in unison, as if they were tied together at the knees. And there was no denying that either the whales had shrunk, or I had grown. A lot. And then there was that light feeling inside my chest and back. And my eyes were playing tricks on

me too. Instead of seeing the world in one picture in front of me, it was as if I'd been seeing two different pictures -- one on one side, and one on the other.

I opened my eyes. Just to check.

Oh my God. My eyes were still doing it. The two separate pictures. And the whales were still all around me, staring at me.

I twisted my body around, to bring my legs into one of the pictures -- the picture on the right.

I didn't see any legs. I saw a wide flat tail. Two flukes. A whale's tail!

I started to whimper. I wanted this dream to end now. Now! I wanted to be back in the boat, or, better still, back in my own bed. Where I was sure I must be lying that very minute, dreaming this horrible dream.

"Don't be sad. Please. It is meant to be."

"How can it be?" I was so confused. Things like this didn't really happen. People don't just turn into whales. What was going on?

The voice seemed to be reading my mind. "You are not the first. You are one of the Chosen. It is not the first time."

The voice was coming from the humpback who first sniffed me, down below the water. He was the closest to me. Or maybe it was a she. How could you tell?

"I am Onijonah, and I am a female. I am your friend."

It freaked me out, the way she read my mind.

"Come now. The others are waiting to greet you."

Wait a minute. Wait a minute! How about the boat? Mom, Dad? Mr. Peake? My dumb brothers? My friends?

"Your people will be sad. They will miss you. You will miss them. But there is nothing you can do about that now."

"How can you say that? I've got to tell them! If I don't come home, they'll think I've drowned!"

"It is unfortunate. But it can't be helped. It is your destiny. You are a whale now."

Slow down, slow down. This was all going too fast for me. It was pretty hard to take.

"Prove it," I sputtered. "Prove to me that you are telling the truth, and this isn't some weird dream."

She was silent for a minute. Then she said, "Listen to your heart. Your heart will speak. And your heart will tell you the truth."

I closed my eyes, and tried to listen to what my heart was telling me.

Oh my God.

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I remember being told by Onijonah to take a deep breath -- that part was easy -- and follow her. That was harder; it took me three tries, because the first two times I tried to dive, my head just sort of bobbed back up to the surface, and it wasn't until I realized I had to fling my legs (excuse me, my tail) high up in the air that I managed it, diving straight down, way back into that murky blackness that had terrified me so only a few minutes before. Now it seemed like a pleasant enough place to be. I tried to close off my mind to all the questions that were zigzagging around my head like bumper cars, like What's a Chosen One? and Why me?

When we reached the seabed, the whales installed me on top of a mass of waving seaweed, soft and tickly as feathers, with Onijonah at my side. The other whales then formed themselves into a sort of huge reception line that stretched for what seemed like miles and snaked around and around us in the most orderly way.

And then came my introduction to the whales. For what seemed like hours I was inspected and muzzled by hundreds of whales. Once in a while we'd swim back up to the surface for some deep breaths, and then we'd dive down again to continue the ceremony. I had never thought I'd ever get to see so many of them up close. Sperm whales and orcas. Minkes and finbacks. Pygmy pilot whales and snow-white belugas. Grinning fat bow-headed whales and gigantic blue whales. I'd studied them all in books, but here they were so real, so magnificent, so majestic! They looked so different, in fact, from the way they were drawn in the pictures and posters that I used to collect, that I realized no illustration could do them justice.

It seemed they all wanted to meet me. They were in very good spirits, considering how long some of them had to wait in line. Some were shy, and passed by me very quickly, just glancing at me out of one eye, then hurrying on. Others swam around me, above me and below me, or looked me straight in the eye. One or two hummed a little tune for me, and others made me laugh with their jumps and flips and jagged



moves. Onijonah stayed by my side the whole time and told me their names together with the sort of things they liked to do, like: "Bonahdiboh, lord of the ice floe," or "Fanbelly, swims with tuna".

"What did you say his name was again?" I whispered to Onijonah.

"Who?" she asked.

"That humpback who said he was your cousin," I said.

"Humpback?" Onijonah exclaimed. Then she laughed. "Humpback!"

"What's so funny?" I said.

"Is that what you call us?" She laughed some more.

I realized that maybe I had hurt her feelings.

"I'm sorry," I said. "That's what -- I mean, in books -- my teacher -- the researcher on the ship -- everybody calls whales that look like you. Is that wrong?"

The old minke whale to whom I had just been introduced winked at me. "They are a little touchy, her tribe," he whispered. "Some say that humans used to call them not only that, but worse things too, like 'knucklehead'."

"Who are you calling a knucklehead!" boomed a heavyside humpback behind him, giving him a nip on the flukes.

"We are called the Singing Ones," Onijonah explained to me, with great dignity. "Otherwise known as the Sirens. We are a very ancient and proud tribe."

"And so you should be," said the old minke hastily, fanning his tail from side to side.

"But I didn't mean..." I stammered.

"No offense. There is so much for you to learn," she sighed, and gave me a comforting pat on the back with her flipper. "Where were we? Oh yes, my cousin. His name is Jessaloup."

"Jessaloup," I repeated. It suited him. He was a handsome sort of whale, a deep black, with a strong jaw, a smattering of hair-knobs, and bright white-and-black patterned flukes. He had looked at me with a smirk, a cheeky "I've got your number" look. I was glad he was Onijonah's cousin. I had the feeling I would be seeing more of him.

It turned out I was a siren too. (Of course Jessaloup, who later heard of my blunder, insisted on calling me "the Hump". To tell you the truth, the way he had with nicknames reminded me a lot of my brothers.) The idea took some getting used to. I mean, sirens have a flat knobby lid for a head, a tank-like lower jaw and throat, and eyes stuck halfway down the body, just in front of those goofy-looking white flippers. It would be a while before I could appreciate the beauty of this body that was now mine. The only thing that I liked about it then was the elegance of my curvy tail.

I wasn't a full-sized siren, I was only about three-quarters-grown. That made me a pretty small whale, by their standards.

"Onijonah!" I whispered during the next breathing-break, my heart pounding because it had just occurred to me. "Onijonah, how big am I, exactly?"

She chuckled. "I would say you were about four flippers."

"I mean, in human length!"

"Human length? Hmm. I would say you were about five of your tallest men's lengths, end to end."

I couldn't help grinning. I was about as tall as five pro basketball stars. As tall as the Chicago Bulls, or the New York Knicks, standing on each other's shoulders! "Wow!" I breathed. "I must weigh a ton!"

"Probably," she said, nonchalantly. "Tons, actually. But only on land. In the ocean, it does not matter how much you weigh. Since we float, we are weightless."

"W--Wow!" I said again. I was having a hard time getting a handle on how big I was. As big as a school bus! As big as our garage! Much bigger than an elephant, bigger than two elephants, as big as three or four elephants, maybe! I felt dizzy at the thought. And yet I didn't feel that huge. I felt pretty light and nimble, to tell you the truth.

Then I got the giggles. I started shaking helplessly, unleashing streams of bubbles from my blowhole. I was thinking of my Aunt Madeline, who has this totally annoying habit of taking one look at my brothers and me, opening her eyes wide, putting both her hands to her mouth and exclaiming to my mother, "My, how they have grown, Mona!"

If only Aunt Madeline could see me now!

Onijonah said that they were all amazed by my smooth skin. Most of them had barnacles and even seaweed growing all over their tails and heads and fins, and I could see that many of the big ones had nasty-looking white and brown scars all over. "You look like a newborn calf!" one nice old female boomed as she inspected me, "so smooth!"

"Wait till you've been in this soup a few weeks," mouthed a sassy young thing behind her. "You'll get encrusted soon enough. I can show you some good rocks to scrape off the worst of it, if you like."

"Thank you," I giggled. "That's good to know." I guess! I thought. What do I know!

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In the end I got a little light-headed, laughing too much, and turning round too quickly so that I kept bumping into other whales and slapping them with my tail, and whales don't like getting bumped into like that. So Onijonah decided I should take a little nap, and that the whales should leave me alone until I got used to the idea of being a whale some more. She took me up to the surface, and explained that I would have to sleep floating near the top, so that my air hole was exposed to the air; otherwise I'd drown. I laughed at that too, the idea of a whale drowning was sort of amusing to me right then. But she didn't

think it was so funny, and when I opened one eye and found her floating right beside me, her watchful eye on me, I realized that she was going to make sure I didn't sink.

I yawned, and got a mouthful of salty water. "Thanks, Onijonah," I gurgled sleepily.

"No problem," she said.

I slept.