



# The Shell Keepers

Truly Johnston

Chicken  
House

2 Palmer Street, Frome,  
Somerset BA11 1DS  
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*To Anthony and Thida  
for bringing me back to storyland.*



## CHAPTER ONE

### *What Treasure?*

**I**t emerged from the mud gleaming and glorious. Corrine's heart stopped. Could this be the birthday treasure Siya had promised?

They had spent the morning mudlarking on the Thames, and she was yearning to find a gleaming bracelet or an ancient coin. But this looked even more special.

'Siya, I've got something!' she called.

Her grandfather looked up with interest. 'Not another plastic spoon? All these things that people throw away.' He frowned and picked his way across the grey mud, carefully side-stepping chunks of red brick and flint.

Corrine held the large shell out to him, cradling

it in both hands. It was like the periwinkles she had found at the beach, but much, much larger, a sweeping curve that filled her hand. One side had the familiar grooves and ridges of a beach shell, but the pink and tan stripes seemed to glow. The other, smooth side was iridescent. It threw out sparks of shimmering rainbow colours, even on this cloudy day.

‘Is this it? Have we found treasure?’

Siya tutted and gave a knowing smile. ‘Treasure isn’t just gold, Corrine. It’s all the things we love.’

Corrine rolled her eyes. She had heard this from him before. ‘I know, I know. But shiny things are nice too.’ She grinned.

His expression changed as he lifted the shell from her palm. Eyes wide he turned it over, holding it far away, then close, feeling every bit of it. Then he lowered himself to the ground as if he couldn’t hold the weight of his body.

Corrine gasped. ‘You’re going to get all muddy!’

She sat down next to him and carefully took the shell. She had never seen him so serious before; he was always so bright and solid. She was jiggling with excitement, but when she looked into his old, watery eyes, she became still.

‘What’s wrong?’

‘It reminds me of a very special shell I found back home. A type of conch, like this.’

‘What, at Whiteshell Bay?’

‘No. My first home. In Sri Lanka.’ He had never lost the soft lilt of his accent. Even after more than fifty years, the long vowels of his birthplace remained.

The pale blue frame of Tower Bridge nestled in the far distance, the spires, tower blocks and trees across the water, the grimy walls of the embankment behind her – they all seemed indifferent to the treasure she was holding. But somehow it felt like time had stopped. The clouds were still and the sunlight hazy. The shell glistened as if it were still a part of the rushing river.

Siya took a deep breath. ‘I promised we would find treasure, but I didn’t think it would be this.’

Corrine ran her finger into the fold of the shell and felt notches carved into the smooth side. ‘How did it get here?’

Her grandfather gave her a curious look. ‘Shells travel in lots of ways.’ He sighed deeply, and lifted his forefingers and thumbs to form a frame in front of him. ‘I see a picture in this – the place we found the shell.’

‘Why are you sad, Siya?’

He put his arm around her. 'I'm not sad. Well, a little bit, but I can't really explain it. I've been looking for something like this for a long time.'

'Maybe a sailor dropped it hundreds of years ago?'

'Or maybe it found its own way. Maybe it's a sign.'

'What does it mean?'

'That there were once different types of people here, many years ago.'

'Like the people who smoked the pipes?' Corrine had found five stems of old clay pipes in the mud that morning. Siya had said they were more than a hundred years old.

'No, different people.' He smiled, and Corrine noticed the fine lines around his eyes. What did he mean?

'Please, Siya, tell me,' she pleaded.

He raised one silver eyebrow in a high arc and ruffled her hair. A passenger boat passed by, creating ripples that edged up the bank. Siya shook his head as if to shake out a thought.

'No, my Corrie Kela. You learn best by discovering for yourself. And this isn't the place to do it.'

He eased himself up, his trousers and hands covered in mud. 'Chips?'

Corrine jutted out her lip in protest, but she didn't argue. She carefully put the shell in her finds

bag, vowing to keep it safe. ‘Well, this is the best birthday treasure I could have ever found. I can’t wait to show Anthony. He doesn’t think there’s anything interesting about London.’

Siya looked at her strangely. ‘Oh, yes. I think he’ll find this very interesting for sure.’ He winked, then took her hand to help her up. ‘There’s more beneath the sand and sky than human eyes can spy . . .’