

The Billow Maiden

by James Dixon



Chapter	Summary
One	<p>Ailsa is twelve years old and her mother is ill and spending every day in bed. She phones Uncle Nod who arrives in his truck to take Ailsa and her mother to his island home. Ailsa enjoys exploring the island's coast with Moxie, the big Shepherd dog. They discover a strange smelling cave and as Ailsa enters it, she is filled with an inexplicable sense of sadness. She hears something moving inside the cave but she is distracted by Uncle Nod calling for her and warning her about the encroaching tide.</p>
Two	<p>Ailsa eats a meal of freshly caught fish with her Aunt Bertha and Uncle Nod. A Doctor arrives to see her mother. Ailsa and Moxie head out to the beach and they pass a grand house belonging to the Galach family. Ailsa feels drawn to return to the cave and she is overwhelmed by the smell of death and decay. Inside the cave a strange woman is lying half-submerged in a rock pool. She is grey and pallid, covered in slime and shells. Sadness seems to radiate from her. The woman asks Ailsa who she is but Ailsa is frightened so she runs away.</p>
Three	<p>After a bad night's sleep, Ailsa visits her mum who is very fragile and in a deep sleep. At the docks, Ailsa chats to fishermen and hears them complaining about the Galach family. She tries to talk to both her mum and her uncle about the woman in the cave, but she is unable to get the words out.</p>
Four	<p>Mrs Tomlinson, a neighbour, gives Ailsa some chocolate brownies and shows her a collection of starfish. Ailsa and Moxie return to the cave which is cold and full of the same sense of sadness. The strange woman is still in the rock pool. Ailsa offers to help her but the woman gives away very little about herself, though she does ask for cocoa and sugar. Ailsa concludes that the woman is magical and has been in the cave a long time. She resolves to help her, despite being told to go away.</p>



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Five	<p>Ailsa meets Camilla Galach but Uncle Nod warns her that the Galachs are a family of gangsters. Mum is still asleep in her room and Ailsa leaves some brownies by her bed. Unable to sleep due to turbulent dreams, Ailsa returns to the cave by moonlight. The strange woman says that she is, '<i>nothing and nobody... just a memory</i>'. Ailsa feeds her chocolate brownies and the woman eats them eagerly but then tells Ailsa to go away.</p>
Six	<p>Camilla tells Ailsa that she has been reading Norse myths and she recounts a story about Yggdrasil, a giant tree upon which the wellbeing of everything depends.</p> <p>Ailsa and Moxie explore the island. They splash around in the sea and Ailsa ends up badly sunburnt. Her Uncle tells her off but provides her with soothing lotion. They talk about her mother who Nod describes as being both tough and delicate. Ailsa visits her mother who manages a faint whisper.</p>
Seven	<p>Ailsa wakes up in pain as a result of her sunburn. Aunt Bertha applies sun lotion to her burning body. Camilla takes Ailsa to a hidden beach and an old lighthouse. They swim, relax on the beach and chat. Ailsa talks about her mum's illness and previous holidays they enjoyed together. Camilla explains that she attends an expensive boarding school. They spot some ravens on a rock and Camilla compares them to ravens from a story about the Norse god Odin. The girls agree to spend more time together.</p>
Eight	<p>Camilla tells Ailsa more about Odin, the king of the gods, and his ravens.</p> <p>In the cave, the strange woman tells Ailsa to go away until she is presented with chocolate biscuits. The woman describes herself as an 'Angel of the water'. She says there is nothing for her outside of the cave, only foolish people. Ailsa tells her about her friend who is clever and tells stories. The woman recognises the name Galach and wants to meet Camilla.</p>



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Nine	<p>On the hottest day of the summer so far, Ailsa visits Camilla who has drawn the Viking tree, Yggdrasil. Ailsa tells her that her mum is also good at drawing. They agree to meet secretly, later in the evening.</p> <p>Mrs Tomlinson gives Ailsa an aloe plant and shows her how to use the sap to treat her sunburn. Ailsa asks if the aloe gel could also be used to treat sores.</p>
Ten	<p>Ailsa takes Camilla to the cave. When she first sees the woman, Camilla is frightened but she becomes intrigued by her. The woman calls Camilla a '<i>dronning</i>,' which means 'Little Queen', but she is vague about how she knows the Galach family. The girls pull the woman out of the rock pool and apply aloe sap to her sores. They notice that her legs and feet are damaged and her eyes are sad but incredibly beautiful. Camilla says that she knows somewhere the woman can go to heal and get her strength back. It is not safe in the cave as the cliffs are crumbling.</p>
Eleven	<p>Camilla shows Ailsa around her home and tells her about her family's history. They plan to take the woman to the lighthouse. Ailsa has one of her recurring dreams about drowning. She visits her mother before sneaking out to meet Camilla. The woman is scared to leave the cave but she agrees to be transported to the lighthouse in a wheelbarrow. They carry the woman up to the top of the lighthouse and they leave her there.</p>
Twelve	<p>Uncle Nod takes Ailsa out on his boat and tells her about different interpretations of the story of King Canute. He then complains about people not taking care of their boats. Moxie whines at a seal beneath the boat and Ailsa thinks she sees something else in the water, watching them.</p>



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Thirteen	<p>The girls return to the lighthouse which now smells and feels a bit like the cave. The woman seems happier and she is singing a wordless, beautiful song. She is warmer towards the girls and offers to answer their questions. She still mostly avoids giving straight answers, instead talking in intriguing riddles, but she does reveal her name – Hefring, and that she is one of nine magical sisters known as the 'Billow Maidens'. The sores on her skin have begun to heal.</p>
Fourteen	<p>Heavy rain causes mudslides and subsidence around the cliffs. Mum has taken a turn for the worse and in mum's bedroom, Ailsa feels the same sense of sadness she felt in the cave. At Camilla's house, Ailsa shares stories about dressing up as a mermaid with her Mum. They read about the Billow Maidens in one of Camilla's grandfather's books. They discover that Hefring was named after the rising tides.</p>
Fifteen	<p>The fishermen at the docks are gossiping and complaining about Mr Galach and his men. Ailsa and Camilla argue: Camilla accuses Ailsa of hating her family. Later they make up and Camilla confesses that it is sometimes hard being in the Galach family. Her parents are arguing. Uncle Nod invites the girls into the house for cocoa.</p>
Sixteen	<p>Camilla stays the night with Nod, Bertha and Ailsa. They teach her how to play a card game, which she wins. While chatting in bed, Camilla tells Ailsa that she thinks Nod and Bertha's house is much nicer than her own. Ailsa dreams about her mother drowning again and she wakes up with a strong sense that they need to go to Hefring. The girls run through the rain and when they reach the lighthouse, they find it more cave like than ever. Hefring is beginning to regain her old strength. She sings a beautiful and powerful song, the song of the sea, full of both sadness and joy. She explains that the song is dying.</p>



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Seventeen	Ailsa and Camilla explore the Galach's loft and they discover a locked trunk and boxes of books on mythology. Camilla tells Ailsa about the role that ravens have played in different mythological stories. They are believed to be special because they exist between life and death. Some people think that ravens are the bringers of bad news. Aunt Bertha arrives with the news that Ailsa's mum has got worse and has been taken to hospital on the mainland.
Eighteen	Ailsa slips in the mud whilst helping Bertha in the yard. She shouts at her aunt and gets very upset; Bertha comforts her. Camilla explains that she visited the lighthouse again and it has transformed even more - it now resembles an underwater reef. Hefring has told Camilla that Ailsa's mum has a lot of strength left but she is ' <i>cut off from her song</i> '. Mrs Tomlinson arrives with a hamper of goodies. Ailsa visits her sedated mother in hospital.
Nineteen	At the lighthouse, the girls find Hefring looking almost as ragged as when they first met her. She tells them that we can only live if we are strong and we can only be strong if we live. She claims that Ailsa's mother needs to listen to ' <i>the world's song</i> '. She then tells the story of a how her own sea-skin was stolen by a man long ago. Camilla realises that the man was her grandpa and Ailsa believes that Hefring's sea-skin is in the locked trunk in the loft. Camilla, despite being visibly distressed, agrees to help return the sea-skin. Hefring explains that she was ready to give up on life before meeting Ailsa, who has set her free
Twenty	Ailsa visits her mum in hospital. She tries to listen for her mum's 'song' and she asks her to come home. Camilla is dealing with a dilemma. She wants to help Hefring but she does not want to betray her family. Ailsa tells her that they will steal the sea-skin together. They agree to do it the next evening while Camilla's family are out of the house.



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Twenty-one	<p>Camilla and Ailsa manage to unlock the trunk and retrieve the sea-skin. It is beautiful, shimmering, scaly and incredibly fine, like silk. Unfortunately, Camilla's parents arrive home unexpectedly. Ailsa takes the sea-skin home and discovers that her mum has returned. The doctors at the hospital can do nothing else for her. She visits her mum's bedroom and opens a window, begging her mum to listen for Hefring's song. She finally manages to tell her mum, in a whisper, that she found a strange woman in a cave but she is no longer afraid.</p>
Twenty-two	<p>Neither of the girls have had much sleep but they return to the lighthouse, which looks and smells like it is beginning to rot. They find Hefring barely conscious but she begins to change as soon as they present her with the sea-skin. She transforms into a powerful, youthful and vibrant being. The lighthouse transforms too and everything is bathed in beautiful brightness. The aching sadness is replaced with joy. Hefring thanks the girls for helping her and promises them that her song will always play for them. The world seems to wake up and join in with her song. Incredible music fills the air and Hefring adds her own voice to the song of the sea – a song of all things. Hefring throws the sea skin around her shoulders and walks into the sea. She is swept away. The wind howls and the girls walk home.</p>
Twenty-three	<p>Moxie comforts Ailsa, as a great storm rages throughout the night. Ailsa again asks her mother to listen for Hefring's song and she climbs into bed beside her, sleeping peacefully for the first time in a long time. In the morning Ailsa discovers that the storm has destroyed the Galach's trawlers and half of the Galach's house has fallen into the sea. She goes to visit Camilla but passes her being driven away in her mother's car. Mr Galach is arrested, as the police have discovered criminal things in his office. Ailsa is delighted to discover her mother sitting at the kitchen table when she returns home.</p>



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Twenty-four	<p>Mum is still frail but she is smiling and pleased to be out in the sunshine. The doctor is amazed that his patient has rallied so quickly. Mum wants to spend every possible moment outside. She tells Ailsa about a strange dream she had, involving a song that made her feel lighter. Ailsa considers telling her mum about Hefring but decides not to.</p>
Twenty-five	<p>The next day Mum continues to show signs of improvement so Uncle Nod suggests that they all go out for a picnic. They spot Camilla sitting on a nearby wall. Ailsa feels awkward as she greets her but Moxie bounds up to her and the girls soon end up laughing, hugging and sobbing. Uncle nod invites Camilla to join them for the picnic.</p>
Twenty-six	<p>They find a beautiful spot for the picnic and they sit in the shade so that mum's delicate skin is protected from the heat of the sun. Ailsa enjoys a lovely afternoon and for a while she falls asleep. Uncle Nod and Aunt Bertha assure Camilla that everything will be OK in the end, as insurance money will allow for a fresh start for her family.</p> <p>Later Camilla and Ailsa discuss Hefring and they agree that the collapse of the Galach's house and fortunes must be connected to her. Camilla acknowledges that she loves her father but she understands who he is. She no longer wishes to work for his firm when she is older. Ailsa reflects on how her mum struggles with life sometimes but it doesn't change who she is. Her eyes are shining with the thrill of being alive.</p>

