

## CHAPTER 1



The dream came to me again.

The one that often wakes me in the grey, pearl light before dawn.

In that quiet time, when only the earliest rising birds shyly begin their songs, I lie, eyes wide, alongside my sleeping sisters in the cramped box bed, my father and brother snoring and snuffling in the small room next door. And always I feel as comforted by my mind's nightly wanderings as if Mother's cool hand had stroked my brow.

But sweet as it is, I have no time to laze and think on my dreamings this morning. Something quite wondrous is happening on the island today and the sudden remembrance of it makes me turn and shake both Ishbel and Effie from their slumbers.

"Wake up! Wake up!" I call out, scrambling and wriggling from between the stirring bodies on either side of me, as if I am some skittish small child instead of a grown girl of twelve.

And with much haste and high spirits, we are all soon dressed and fed and about our usual early morning chores. Apart, that is, from Ishbel, who is already gone to the Big House, quite primped and preened, to help with the preparations for the Laird's visitors.

Oh, I cannot wait to see old Mr Menzies' relations! What a thing it is to have fancy folk from a great southern city like London come to our plain little island.

They are taking a Highland tour of course, which is quite the fashion for rich English and Lowland Scots these days, Father says, ever since Queen Victoria herself sang the praises of this northerly part of Scotland. But there must be finer islands for the tourists to see, for none have graced Tornish until now.

So, this day I shall surely always remember, since it is to be unlike all the other *endless* days here that are filled with nothing but chores and school and the same faces whichever way I look, whether they belong to family, neighbours, chickens or cows...

"Again; please!" I hear my younger brother's cries from inside the cottage, as Father rattles off a quick trill on his new tin whistle, bought from an Irish pedlar on the mainland this spring.

For a moment, I glance up from the stool I am squatting on here in the dry dirt yard and look at Lachlan and Father through the open front door. They are both infected by the coming day's excitement,



Lachlan jumping around – which risks the fabric of his too-small good jacket splitting, I fear – while Father laughs as he lowers the long whistle from his lips. He is very smart himself in his tweed jacket, waistcoat and trousers. He even had Effie trim his wiry dark red hair and beard last night. But then we are *all* to look smart today, *all* in our Sunday best though it is the middle of the week.

“*Ist, now!*” says Father, using the short, sharp Gaelic hiss of a word to try to quieten and steady my brother. “You’ll hear enough music when Mr Menzies’ guests arrive.”

Turning back to the wooden bucket wedged between my knees, I find it hard to keep my mind on either the Laird’s never-before-sighted relatives or the dishes that need finishing before I change from my work clothes into my good things too.

Instead I idly gaze up at the towering mound of the Glas Crag, which the sun practically perches upon. A yearning to clamber and climb to the very top of the Crag grips me hard; for surely there, at the very summit, so close to the sky and the clouds and the sun itself, I can look out for a distant sighting of the ship! It must be setting off from the mainland soon, and I might see the faintest dot of it, as it begins its slow journey towards our humble harbour.

And with that thought, I am away, as quick and quiet

as I am able. For the short while I am gone, I will not be missed, I tell myself, as the hard, stamped earth of the yard turns to the stubbly long grass that surrounds our cottage and those of the neighbours in our township. Father, Effie and Lachlan; they will perhaps suppose me off at the burn, fetching more water, I persuade myself, as the harsh grass turns to the softer green grazing of the slope, where some cattle idly watch me hurrying by, skirts held high, dirty knees on show.

Now the swoop of soft grass melds into hard, craggy stone dotted with scratchy heather and gorse, and I am breathlessly, happily scampering barefoot from rock to rock, with the sun seeping warm through my unravelling knitted shawl and the rough cloth of my work shirt.

I smile to myself as I gaze up towards the summit of the Crag, the final jags of glinting stone set against the blue summer sky and the white clouds that jostle and tumble over one another.

This far up, the herring gulls caw-caw and whirl around me. It seems the sight of a scrawny girl trying to join them is fine entertainment indeed.

“Little Bird!”

I hesitate for a second at the sound of my name and then turn, neatly, in the narrow path between prickly bundles of gorse bushes, with their strange mix of sun-yellow blossom, fierce thorns and whispers of wool they have stolen from the sheep that have passed this way.

“Am I too fast for you, Will Beaton?” I call down to the boy who has suddenly appeared and now struggles to keep up with me.

“Only here, Bridie MacKerrie,” he baits me.

Will is right of course. On this rocky outcrop of a hill I am like every other person that might come this way. No one can see a limp when every surface is off-kilter and uneven and needs thought. But I have climbed the Craggs so often it needs no thought at all.

Just to show Will how sure and fleet I can be, I turn and bound up the last few boulders, to the Glas Craggs’ highest point; the flat place of stone, with a patched blanket of heather and moss tucked in its crevices.

And ever and always what I see takes my breath away.

Slowly I spin, arms out, and there ... *there* is the endless circlet of sea that sways and ebbs around our island, the colour of iron for the most part, merging with an eye-dazzling turquoise on the far shore.

If I let my arms drop and my gaze settle due east, the looming mass of the mainland of Scotland greets me, a ragged jumble of rocks and headlands closest to us, while in the far distance snow-tipped mountains rise towering and immense.

Now I turn around and stare westwards, where the sea has the grand name of the Atlantic Ocean. Its vastness stretches to the horizon ... and on and on and *on* it goes till it crashes up against the shores of America.

Can you imagine?

It’s not just the sea and the far-off land that fill me with wonder. From up here there’s the weather to watch too, and the birds swirling and soaring in praise of it or in spite of it.

“I *let* you beat me,” says Will, as he finally joins me.

Between gasps, his broad grin shows off the space where a tooth was lost to him years ago, the time he fell on the Craggs as we searched about us for gull eggs. I remember that Will and I worried wildly at all the blood. But after we scrambled down from the hill and I washed his face clean at the burn with the corner of my shawl, Will caught sight of himself in the water and could not stop laughing.

And always he is laughing, and always I laugh with him – unless he is taunting me, as he is now.

I am not bothered by Will’s teasing. I tease him all the more. For the way his light hair stands up, I am always calling him a thistle-head. And if not that, I tell him often that he is as handsome as the goat his mother keeps, or that even a potato grown on his croft is more bonny than him. Oh yes, Will Beaton might be able to out-run me down on the flat moors, but he can never catch up with my tongue when I let it loose...

“Are you quite well, William?” I ask my friend as his chest heaves from the climb. “The last time I heard a noise like that was when the cow was calving.”

Laughter bursts from Will's chest, but I try to keep my countenance and gaze into the newly quiet sky. The gulls are gone – a sea eagle must be about, a winged giant on the hunt for its dinner.

At that thought a shadow passes over me ... the sea eagle itself? I spot the flash of fanned white tail and the arc of brown wings as it swoops out across the choppy waters – and I remember I am here to catch a glimpse of the steam ship that will bring the Laird's guests.

But alas, the dancing, shifting carpet of silvery waves is still empty.

“So what are you doing up here?” I ask my friend.

“I called in by for you, just as your father and Effie and Lachlan were setting off,” he tells me. “Your father saw you heading up here. He said he would be grateful if I found you and told you to hurry up!”

“I'll have time enough,” I say, smiling at the thought of Father watching me go, and probably rolling his eyes in fond exasperation.

But I don't think Will is listening.

“Ah, see now; John Mackay's boat is at the harbour,” I hear him say. “I hope my brother George took his bagpipes with him, for he cannot walk home and back in time to play at the welcome.”

“Ha! Well, I suppose the Laird's folk will have to hold their noses while they listen to your brother's reels,” I reply merrily, as I consider the London ladies in their

dainty muslins and lace, with the smell of the morning's catch in their delicate nostrils.

As I speak, I need not look down towards the harbour; I can very well picture Will's seventeen-year-old brother and John Mackay and the other fishermen landing creels of lobster on the flagstones at the harbour.

And I need not turn as Will is doing now, gauging the distance from the harbour to his own township. For I know that mine is just back down the way we came, ten low cottages nestled together, and that Will's lies further on, tucked into the sandy bay, near the cove where the smaller rowboats are moored. There are two townships more, on the far side of the island, beyond the moor and the lochan and the forest and waterfall. Both face the nothingness of sea, with the promise of an invisible America in the impossible distance.

Should I care to gaze off towards the south of our small island – and I do not – I'd see the woods and the Big House, where the Laird's staff, including my sister Ishbel, will be bustling in readiness for the guests.

I need not gaze down to know that close to the harbour is a little school that stands empty of its pupils today. And close by is the church and its small graveyard, where Mother lies at her rest in the ground, keeping company with the brothers and sisters that never lived long enough for the rest of us to know.

For whenever I am standing here high on the Glas

Crags, I choose not to look at island life below – I know I am peculiar but I prefer to look up and away and beyond...

“Oh!” I gasp, as something so strange happens in that still moment.

Will’s hand has brushed against mine!

No – I will not have this. Swiftly, I lift that same hand to my brow and take a few steps forward, making that I am searching for the ship that is not due for two hours at least.

“Little Bird? Bridie?” says Will, not knowing what he has done wrong.

Perhaps he thinks I did not wish him to touch my weakened hand – as if that would bother me! – or perhaps he thinks my cheeks are hot with shyness, that I am coy at the thought of his touch meaning we might one day be sweethearts and not just friends.

But here’s the truth that rages in me; instead of shyness, I am full to the brim with a secret that can’t be shared or spoken of.

How can I tell Will that it makes me heart-sore to think of Ishbel settling for whichever of the doting, handsome Matheson boys she should prefer (Donal, I am sure), because everyone expects it? Just as they expect fifteen-year-old Effie to marry Will’s brother George, by-and-by?

How can I explain to him that I know neighbours are

already supposing that in a few short years, the pair of *us* will be married and scratching a living from our own croft – and that I shudder when I think of such a thing?

For it is not the future *I* would choose for myself.

Oh yes, my sisters might think themselves blessed to spend all their days on this small patch of rough, grey rock in the choppy, grey sea, because Mother told us so. “Remember, we are the lucky ones,” she would say, and talk of the generations of hard-working Highland folk – just like us – who were evicted from their homes over the last hundred years. Father would listen and nod as Mother talked of those cruelly evicted so that their lands could become farms of sheep, with wool that would make the landowning lairds rich. Of ordinary folk whose belongings were cast out on to the road, cottages boarded up, thatched roofs set alight, sometimes with old, bedridden men and women inside!

Like my sisters, I would snivel at the sadness of these terrible truths, while Lachlan drowsed in Mother’s arms.

But a quiet, traitorous part of me listened, breath held, to stories of families gathering up their few things and heading for tall ships that would take them to the Carolinas in America, to the wilds of Northern Canada, to Australia and New Zealand on the other side of the earth.

My eyes closed, I would not think of the sorrowful reasons for my fellow Highlanders’ leave-takings and

loss, but instead let my head fill with wild imaginings. I would yearn, nay, *ache* for such adventure...

For to travel – *that* is the future I would choose for myself, if I *had* a choice. Which of course, as a girl – and one that *some* might think too feeble for the wider world – I do not. But the worst of it is the words Father muttered over Mother’s grave, when the earth was but newly patted down.

“Aye, Bridget, you often said we were the lucky ones, and so I shall see to it that myself and the children stay here always.”

So there you have it; Father’s promise to my dear, dear mother binds me tight to Tornish. And so my raging and restlessness must stay secret and stamped down inside and known to no one.

“Listen, Little Bird,” Will says hurriedly, “I didn’t mean to—”

“Leave me be for a moment,” I murmur, trying to tame my temper.

Safe away from Will, I pick a flat spot a few steps away with a fine mattress of springy moss. I’ll lie here for a moment, calming myself with a memory of last night’s dream, where my sleeping mind’s eye pictured this:

I am standing on the summit of the Glas Crag, bare feet on tiptoes, treading on the soft moss, so close to the sky that I might touch it.

Tilting backwards, arms outstretched, I am caught;

held by a cushioning of air, then borne off by wending winds...

It might well be an unsettling dream to another, but for me the sense of *freedom* it gives me is a joy. And it is a comfort too, because always, *always* as I glide there is a sense of some guiding hand slipping into mine, belonging to someone forever unseen...

“Little Bird?”

Will’s voice sounds uncertain; he sounds shy of me.

“What is it?” I answer more kindly, since my mood is not really his fault.

“Is that not the ship...?”

In an instant I sit up. The steamer is not the distant speck I expected to see, but a puffing beast appearing from behind the headland, where its journeying had been obscured.

“It is not meant to arrive at this hour!” I say, as if that changes the fact that a great, steel vessel is thundering its way towards Tornish, which it will reach in no time at all.

Scrabbling to my feet, I walk to the edge of the flat place where Will now stands and join him in staring down towards the harbour. Folk seem to be rushing to join the gathering crowd as news spreads of the ship’s approach. In that crowd will be my fluttering sisters, my excitable brother, and my father, no doubt muttering under his breath, hoping that I will not miss this most



special occasion.

Wordlessly, Will turns to me and I turn to him.

He grins and I grin back.

“I’ll get there first!” I yelp, grabbing hold of my skirt, and seeing in that moment that it is the one with the long tear at the front, with my mended flannel petticoat showing through. My better skirt is folded in the chest at home, alongside the shawl that does not have holes and snags in it.

*Ah, the grand folk from London will have to take me as I am*, I laugh to myself, as Will and I hurtle down the hill, grabbing stunted tree branches and crackling handfuls of heather to stop ourselves tumbling head over heels.

Secrets, dreams and another sudden torn shred of my skirt; I leave them all behind as I charge towards the harbour and this day I will surely never forget.

## CHAPTER 2



At the time of my birth, I arrived like a broken baby bird.

They say I came too soon, born in a bruising storm, instead of waiting a few more weeks for the warming sunshine of spring.

My mother’s cries were swallowed up by the winds from the west – from across the sea, from America, I like to think – as they battered and blustered the island, on their way east to wreak havoc on the rest of Scotland.

And then there I was.

“A poor, frail thing you were,” Ishbel likes to tell me on winter nights around the fire. “Your chest, it was heaving for breath.”

“And your wee foot all twisted,” Effie will always add, though she can’t truly recall the moment, since she was barely three years old at the time I was born.

Ishbel says Mother and Father thought I’d not last the night. But in the morning I was still there, my good hand clawing the air as if I was desperate to