

UNCORRECTED BOUND PROOF

1927: When Fred Lawson takes a summer job on St Kilda, little does he realise that he has joined the last community to ever live on that beautiful, isolated island. Only three years later, St Kilda will be evacuated, the islanders near-dead from starvation. But for Fred, that summer – and the island woman, Chrissie, whom he falls in love with – becomes the very thing that sustains him in the years ahead.

1940: Fred has been captured behind enemy lines in France and finds himself in a prisoner-of-war camp. Beaten and exhausted, his thoughts return to the island of his youth and the woman he loved and lost. When Fred makes his daring escape, prompting a desperate journey across occupied territory, he is sustained by one thought only: finding his way back to her.

The Lost Lights of St Kilda is a sweeping love story that will cross oceans and decades. It is a moving and deeply vivid portrait of two lovers, a desolate island, and the extraordinary power of hope in the face of darkness.

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ELISABETH GIFFORD

THE
LOST LIGHTS
OF
ST KILDA



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For Douglas Gifford

Surveyed by John Mathieson F.R.S.
(late of H.M. Ordnance Survey)
Assisted by A.M. Cook

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Thieson F.R.S.E., F.R.S.G.S.
(*M. Ordnance Survey*)
L.M. Cockburn B.Sc.

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Ordnance Survey, 1928.

CHAPTER 1

Fred

TOURNAI PRISON, 1940

Five days in darkness deep as a pit and my mind begins to play tricks. I hear the silence as singing, a faint choir in a distant room. Gaelic? English? Not Jerry, that's for sure. Sometimes, it's the darkness itself, blooming into images that swell and fade on the air, fuelled, no doubt, by the throbbing in my hand. Two nails gone, pulled out by the Gestapo. Worst of all is when the air becomes solid and I gasp, heart hammering, sweat on my palms. Then the only escape is to hold my mind steady and stand on my island again, looking out at the Atlantic and the curve of white sand around the bay. Slowly, very slowly, I turn in a half circle to see the crofts and the rise of the hills beyond like a comforting arm sheltering the village. A thin veil of cloud rises over the summit of Conachair, evaporating away as it starts to pour down the hillside, and high above, a sky that's pure blue and endless. I breathe in deeply, the air clean and sea-blessed. Concentrating now so that the scene before me does not flicker or fade, I take a step, and another. Blades of grass, oiled and bright with sun, pass beneath my feet, the turf sprinkled with white daisies and tormentil as I move towards the line of bothies along the curve of the shore. A dog barks a greeting. Mary Gillies sits in front of a cottage spinning, the squeak of the turning wood as she lets the thread in and out, singing something in Gaelic as she works, but she does

not raise her head as I pass by. Halfway along the row of cottages, I take the narrow path between a bothy and a byre, moving up past the burn race with the familiar irises and their spear-shaped leaves, yellow flower heads fluttering. One step at a time, I rise beyond the village towards Conachair, the fine webbed clouds over its summit. And now, standing on its heights, dizzy with the wind on my face, the air hazed with a moist brightness, all around is the ocean, a vast disc of rippled glass beneath an infinity of sky. I drink in the purity of so much blue. Some eight miles away, the islet of Boreray and her sea stacs like the hump of a whale guarding her two calves. I stand there, rocked by the wind, and a deep peacefulness comes to me. Nowhere in the world that's as true or as home. Then my eyes scan back down to the village, my vision magnifying the dear houses below.

And there we are, sitting outside the bothy, Archie smoking, both of us reading in the evening light. But where is she? If I could see her one more time. That way she had of teasing and putting us in our place, two students from Cambridge who thought we knew it all.

I hear the rattle of bolts being shot back. The island fades. The iron door of a Tournai prison cell opens, squealing its pain. Just enough light creeps in to outline the barrel-shaped tunnel, ten feet long to the end wall. Damp brick scratched with graffiti, names from the boys of the 51st. No window. I wait for the guard to put a bowl of barley swimming in water on the floor, but instead a man is pushed in. He staggers and falls. Behind him, the guards drag in a body, the head slumped between shoulders pulled up in their sockets like a chicken on a butcher's hook. A boy. They leave him on the cold concrete, face against the filth. I have just enough time to register the first man's grey hair, gaunt, a civilian shirt and grey trousers, before the door slams shut. The darkness floods back. The bolts rattle back in place. I can hear the older man shuffling about. His voice.

‘Kenneth, Kenneth, will ye wake now,’ patting him on the cheek, urgently. ‘Come on now, man.’ There’s a groan of pain in reply. ‘That’s it now. I’ll bide with ye, Kenneth. That’s it, man. Breathe now. You’re all right. We’ll see the light again.’

‘Donal?’

‘Aye, I’m here, Kenneth.’

‘Are we dead now, Donal?’

‘No. We’re back in the fort, in the cellars.’

‘Dead would be better.’

‘We’ll come through. One day you’ll be home, standing in the lane before your own wee house.’

I flinched at this. What were the odds, really?

‘You sleep a while now, Kenneth.’

A shuddering sigh.

‘Caught escaping?’ I ask in a whisper.

‘Aye.’

‘Fred Lawson. Cameron Highlanders. I’d shake hands but they’ve left them a bit of a mess.’

‘Donal MacIver, Seaforths. Three of us. The other man shot. And Kenneth here’s taken a very bad beating.’

‘Is he going to pull through?’

‘He’s still strong in spite of the past months, but it’s the will he needs now. The boys came into this war with such determination and now...’

‘And now here we are, left behind to rot in a German prison, the Queen’s own Highlanders. Not what we planned.’

‘But we’ll come through yet. We’ll come through.’ I heard the man shift and exhale with pain. His voice came again in the dark, fainter now. ‘But will you excuse me now, son. I may just shut my eyes for a while.’

Both of them out cold. The only clue that they were still there

was the intermittent sound of breathing. I found myself straining to make out the particular sound of Kenneth's breath, faint and wetly ragged – ready to crawl over there if it stopped. And do what in this blackness? Give him a talk on wanting to live?

So many like Kenneth in the German prison camps. When the call went out in '39 the boys came in droves from the Highlands and Islands to join the Camerons, the Black Watch, the Seaforths, and the Gordon Highlanders, the Argylls, and the Sutherlands; descended from the men who had once fought alongside Wallace and Bruce, or battled to the death on the fields of Culloden. Along with the regiments from Aberdeen and Dundee, they become the 51st Highland Division – famous in the Great War as the men who never gave up. The fighting 51st.

So how bitter it was when the order came to put down arms and surrender alongside the French army, finally overrun by Hitler's panzer divisions. The Gordons, fighting a rearguard action in the woods of Normandy, had to be issued the order twice. They couldn't believe a command to surrender. Nearly all of them little more than boys.

I was older than most when my call-up papers came, a good few years past thirty. I'd been working as a drilling engineer for mining companies overseas. I was straight in as sergeant, assigned to the radio signals division. And since I was born in Uist, I was attached to the Cameron Highlanders. It was good to hear the Gaelic spoken again after so long. There'd not been much call for it during my years out in South America and Malaya.

Maybe it was hearing the old language again, but you came back to me so clearly then. I'd catch sight of you standing in the doorway as I sat alone on my bunk polishing my boots. Waking in the morning, as the barrack room came into focus, I'd see you, standing near my bed, the breeze from the hills come with you, and each time it would pierce me through with such a longing for days that were gone.

I'd refused you from my mind for so long, stubborn in my anger, but now I was a man wakened from a dream and I saw how I'd let the years slip by. All I longed for was to see you again, just one more time.

I asked a boy from Harris if they'd heard any news there from the folk on St Kilda. He looked at me with surprise.

'And where is it you have been hiding yourself to not know that there is no one on the island of St Kilda now. Not one living soul.'

The blood drained from my legs. I sat down on a chair. 'What are you saying? You're not saying they starved one winter?'

'No. But they came close enough. They were taken off the island after a very bad winter. Did you no see it on the newsreel in the cinemas? Ten years back. Nineteen thirty, it must have been. They live on the mainland now. I dinna' ken where.'

I hadn't followed the news from Europe. I couldn't remember what I'd been doing ten years ago in the sticky heat of Malaya's dusty towns and scrubland jungle of tepid beer and brief evenings with Malay girls. Nothing I wanted to recall with any pride. And now it came to me, a dawning realization of the chasm between us. All those chances to turn back and find you long gone. I had no way of contacting you now. No idea where you were living. Too many years sacrificed to my pride and my anger.

It was your face that had stayed with me as we fought in France. It was you who'd sustained me when we were hungry and without sleep for nights as we fought the retreating action back towards the Normandy coast. We had to smash equipment as we retreated, the radios and the boxes of transmitter valves thrown out of the truck and shattering on the asphalt like summer fireworks. But we still hoped we'd make it home. We'd heard the army north of us had been taken off the beaches at Dunkirk by boats and by a miracle were back home to England.

At St Valery we were told to make our way down to the beach where boats would evacuate us too. But as soon as we got there, I saw we were lost. We stood on the top of cliffs three hundred feet high; at the foot, a narrow strip of beach strewn with bodies. The Germans had set up gun emplacements on the cliffs across the bay and were picking off the men as they went down the steep paths single file. A rolling fog had come in. There was no way a ship could navigate its way in. A boat that had come in earlier had already sunk under fire.

No one was coming to take us home.

We turned back to the town, now blazing and exploding like a giant bonfire, the shelling constant. By morning, the French officer had ordered a white flag to be hoisted from the church spire. We had surrendered. In the town square there was a huge pile of rifles.

You could hear men's guts creaking from emptiness as the Germans marched us east. They wouldn't let us break ranks to fetch water. In front of me, a man fell, faint from exhaustion. The guard ran down and cracked his head with a rifle butt, shot him when he failed to wake up. At night we were herded into fields surrounded by rolls of razor wire that the Jerry had gone on ahead and got ready for us. 'You can't fault them for how organised thee buggers are,' said Tom from Dundee. He let the potatoes he'd grubbed up roll out of his pocket onto the floor and we all shared what we had from our quick foraging in the wide flat fields that ran along each side of the road. A marvel how a good a raw potato tastes when you're starving hungry. The next night we collected wood to make a fire as soon as the guard was further up the line, managed to cook them, but by the third night the French farmers had got wise to the threat of ten thousand men raiding their field and stood with sticks to defend their crop, and we didn't blame them.

We passed into Belgium. They shipped us onto empty coal barges, crammed us down in the sooty hold so you could hardly breathe. Then back to walking again.

The first real food we saw was spread out on trestle tables as they marched us into a station. We had our photo taken in front of it with the Red Cross nurses in uniform standing behind the tables ready to serve it out. As soon as they had their picture they packed all the food away without it crossing our lips.

We were herded towards cattle trucks. They started loading us in forty at a time. I knew there'd be little chance of coming back once we were on the trains. A prison camp in the east, labouring for the Reich. I was standing in a group next to the great black engine breathing with its clouds of steam and soot. I sidled to the back of the column. When a fight broke out, I saw my chance, stepped back into the steam cloud and away along the tracks in the fading light of evening.

I made it as far as the coast, living on the handouts that the farmers gave me, risking their lives to invite me in for a meal. One night, a couple insisted that I have their bed while they slept in the kitchen. I'd found civilian clothes by then, buried my uniform, keeping nothing but my compass. So when I was picked up on the heavily guarded Belgian coast, trying to find a boat to get home, I was interrogated as a spy. They gave me the full treatment, plus a month in the Tournai punishment cells.

In the darkness, I listened to the breathing on the other side of the cell. One slow with a wheeze, the other more uneven, a pause as if the next breath might not come. Perhaps I slept. When the door opened next, a faint grey light trickled in as the guard put the bowls down. I could make out the two forms against the distempered brick. The older man, Donal, slumped against the wall. The boy was tipped over, a jacket under his head against the cold of the concrete, a patch where he had dribbled a dark spool of blood. Then the black loneliness that filled our cave came down once more.

The boy began to cry. 'I can't do it. I can't do it any more.'

I could hear the sound of a head banging and banging against the concrete. The scrape of Donal reaching across to muffle Kenneth's sobbing into his chest.

'We have to hope, Kenneth. Think of all the things you want to see again. They are still waiting for you, and you will see them again. Don't you have a girl, Kenneth?'

This made the sobbing more intense. 'Jeanie. Her name's Jeanie. I told her we'd be married when I came home.'

'Can you see her now, Kenneth, in the garden, waiting for you?'

'It's too dark in here.'

'You'll see her. You must hope on it. Just as I turn in my mind's eye now to see my Barra, with the little church waiting for me there on the hillside looking out towards the fishing boats. That's where I'll be again one day. And you Fred Lawson, don't you have something you hope for as you sit here in the dark, something you believe in?'

'I'm not a man who goes to church.' And then I stopped. That wasn't what he was asking me. 'There is an island,' I began. I paused, searching to find the words.

The boy shifted, perhaps turned his head, both of them listening.

'It's a small island, far out in the Atlantic, a hundred miles away from the rest of the mainland, the most remote place in the British Isles, a place almost from another time. When I first set eyes on St Kilda, I'm guessing I was the same age that you are now, Kenneth. I was barely more than twenty.'

He grunted, a small sound of pain, but it was there, his wanting to hope on something.

CHAPTER 2

Fred

ST KILDA, JULY 1927

Dear Lachlan,

I doubt that I can find the words to adequately describe this place to you, but I will try. You warned me I might find it tedious it here, the isolation, so far away from civilization, and it is true that this is considered such a harsh posting for the nurse or the missionary that they are generally only assigned for twelve months. But hardship to be here in the middle of such beauty! A lonely and very windswept beauty, yes, but I am already grieving that I shall have to leave at the end of summer and go back to Cambridge.

So what is this island of St Kilda, or islands to be more exact, as I know you will want me to be? I can see you now, wiping your hands on an oily rag as we stare into the greasy parts of some engine that has ceased to run, me knowing full well that your mind has already taken the structure to pieces and found the problem. Pin it down, man, you'd tell me when making a diagnosis of what ails the motor. Go to it logically. In fact, I have been helping the minister's wife repair her wireless this afternoon, which she relies on for news from the mainland. A radio's not so different a proposition in principle to an engine, though the parts are finer and its paths run through the

air. I've been able to blag my way through and pick up how it works pretty quickly, following your method of stripping back a problem to the underlying logic. The look on her face at being back in contact with the world was thanks enough.

But back to the island itself. I will stay away from my more misty-eyed descriptions of St Kilda, even though it does encourage just that, and try to concentrate what I am here to understand – the underlying rock formations – and so return to Cambridge with enough information in the bag for my final paper.

St Kilda is in fact a group of four islands and various sea stacs, the largest of which, at some four square miles, is Hirta. If you were to walk up from the tiny village on the bay to Hirta's highest point, what you'd see is an ancient volcanic crater, a bowl of green that lies half dipped in the water as if some giant is scooping out a drink with a pan, one side lost under the water and the other rising high to make a semi-circle of steep hills, leaving a green amphitheatre around the village with its half-moon of white sand and its line of low cottages in a curving line a short walk up from the beach. Standing in the village on a fine day in such a sheltered and benign spot one is tempted to believe in a god of blessings behind such loving creation, but climb up to the top of the encircling hills and the shock is deadly. The land ends, falls away into cliffs with a drop of one thousand and three hundred feet, where men fall to certain death. Where, coming to the edge, you must drop to the earth and cling on with fear at the way the wind comes at you with such force, knocking the breath out of your lungs, a fortress of the highest sea cliffs in Europe.

Within that, the hills slope in towards the Village Bay. To one side, the hills continue in a circle of blasted skerries, jagged points sticking out of the sea like a broken jawbone or the rusted-away edge of the giant's bowl dipped into the sea. They were once part of the island but are now cut off by a channel forced through by the pounding sea.

After that there is nothing but open water, all the way to America. Your eye then finishes the broken circle and travels back to the land at the other side of the bay.

Into this natural harbour the deep-sea trawlers run for shelter in storms, unless the wind is from the west, in which case the Village Bay is useless against the gales that blow straight in, any boat thrown up against the rocks. The only hope in such weather is to shelter in the glen over the brow of Mullach Mòr that forms a mirror to Village Bay, though it is a place devoid of any human features other than some basic stone beehive huts, still used by the girls who go to milk the cows in summer and which may date back to antiquity, if Archie is to be believed. I have not gone so far as to see the glen myself yet, but I am told it is there.

I have read this letter back and see that the above does nothing to describe the place adequately. I should have first mentioned the light. For we float on it in the sea's reflection, the damp air luminous. The light encircles us, the far horizon all around us nothing but a deepening blue line of shadow where the water has ended and the sky begun. How the light shivers and shakes over the barley heads, or glistens off the swathes of silver blue plantain leaves on the slopes by the sea. How the light brightens and darkens in racing patches across the land as the wind shifts the clouds across the sky. And the hundred shades of glassy light in the sea, dark petrol blue to faint jade, or the china blue over the white sand of the bay.

By now you are probably thinking that being cast so far out into the Atlantic, I've begun to lose my marbles – and perhaps you're right. This place never lets your senses be still, always waiting for the next trick of the weather, your head always filled with the din of birds and the wind.

Did I mention that the sky is alive with bird wings? The black-tipped bent spikes of the great gannets' wings, the flutter of scissor-

beaked kittiwakes, fulmars, skewars, puffins, petrels – the same birds that supply most of the islander's primitive diet.

Even more birds reside on the two daughter islands, Soay and Boreray, and more still tumble and skirl in the skies around the black rock stacs that rise up out of the water like ancient relics – the head of a massive prehistoric shark, nose to the sky, another in the shape of a Neolithic hand-held axe – ancient and violent eruptions of lava plugs from before time. I will long remember our first sight of them from the tossing boat as we arrived, how they seemed to come to us, pitching and moving with the horizon across the sea like animate beings, and all the while the outlines of first Boreray, and then Hirta beyond, solidified and became green hills and slopes shattered all around with massive cliffs. Arriving here is almost the entry to a legend.

And now back to where we are lodged here in the village. We are snug enough in the minister's house for the time being, though as you can imagine it's hardly Archie's ideal set-up to be under the eye of the minister's wife. He is even now planning for us to move out into one of the abandoned cottages in the village. There are two or three homes standing empty since the population here is not what it was some twenty years ago, and I sometimes feel a poignant sadness to think that I may well be witnessing the end of a unique and rare community that still lives as people must all have lived long ago. Cars or towns with their shops are unknown to them – even a bicycle is a foreign item here.

Archie is away arranging for one of the village women to sweep out an abandoned bothy and hopefully for one of them to come in each day to make some food for us, though we intend to lead a very frugal existence here, all porridge and hard work. I know you have told me to not be carried along by Archie, coming as he does from a very different background, one with a certain expectation of life, whereas I am mindful that my own future relies upon much hard work. But

it's thanks to him and his family that I'm here and able to collect the research I need. Archie has been a true friend through these past two years at Cambridge, and you can see how much the natives here love him – though they can scarce do little else since it is Archie's father who owns the place. Lord Macleod, who has covered all of my expenses in getting here, says he'll be happy just to read my geological survey of the island in recompense. His father has not said as much but I can see that this is where I am to return some of the favour, in trying to keep Archie's nose to the grindstone. Archie is to carry out an archaeological survey here for his dissertation, and if my task is to keep him out of trouble, I anticipate being rather busy.

There's a chance that you may see me back in Edinburgh before this letter gets to you, given how irregular the mail is going out from the island. And now here's Archie coming along the path with the woman who is perhaps going to be our maid this next few weeks, a slip of a thing – though from the way she's listening to him, arms crossed, eyes sharp on his face, I'd say she has the measure of Archie Macleod nicely, thank you very much. The native girls here are very scenic, rather fetching – ruddy cheeks, black hair – and they all wear the same homespun style of full skirts and turkey-red scarves that would not look out of place in Victoria's reign.

Now Archie is saying I need to get this in the mail sack. The Hebrides is due to return to the mainland within the hour, leaving us to our adventure as castaways.

I remain, dear uncle, more grateful than I can ever say for all the care and affection you have shown me over these years. My own parents, had they lived, could not have been kinder. I look forward to seeing you at the end of summer.

Your loving nephew,

Fred

CHAPTER 3

Rachel Anne

MORVERN, SCOTLAND, 1940

My mother says I am her whole world, and she is mine, but all the same I would still like to know at least the name of my father.

This much I know: that I was born on an island far from here, a place called St Kilda, although we left there before I could form any useful memories, so the island is doubly lost to me. My mother doesn't like to talk about St Kilda. 'There's no use in looking back, Rachel Anne,' she says. 'This is our life now and we must make the best of it.'

I was not much more than two years old when some thirty of us left the island. We had lived together all our lives in one village, sharing what little we had, but after the evacuation we were scattered across the mainland. It wasn't long before many of the old ones and the children faded away from the TB or from broken hearts, among them my grandmother. So now the loss of the island and our dear ones is too great for my mother to brook any questions from me.

But everything is different since Hitler turned the world upside down. Since many of the men from round here have gone to join the 51st Highland Division, my mother goes off early each morning to manage the dairy on Brockett's farm. She herds the cows into the yard with a stout stick tall as herself, calmly counting them in. She knows their names, sets up the milking parlour and sees to the milk churns. When I went over with her on the first day, Mr Brockett came

to make sure she knew enough about the beasts. ‘You don’t need to worry,’ she’d told him. ‘On St Kilda, we used to walk miles each day to tend the cows. Wasn’t I raised on a croft where every stalk of barley had to be wrested from the weather?’

‘Aye, and you’d had to leave there for want of food. Well, we’ll give you a trial, Mrs Gillies, see how things go.’

By the end of the week she’s laughing about how he’s so keen for her to stay on. “‘Never seen the cows give so much milk,’” she says, imitating his Morvern accent. “‘What do you do, Mrs Gillies, to make such a difference?’” ‘What does he think?’ she says. ‘I know them each by name. And all of them different.’

So with mother away I am left here alone through the long summer days, instructed to practise my piano pieces. It was my mother who first taught me to play, my hands on hers, walking me over tunes she brought back from the island. She learned by ear and she thinks it a great thing that I am learning to read sheet music at school, taking the grade exams and so on. But there’s only so long you can play a piano in a day and so it is that I have taken to searching through the house for a scrap of information on my father, growing bolder in my search each day, until I stand on the threshold of her silent room. I walk in on the balls of my feet, as if she might hear me away on Brockett’s farm, gently slide open sleeping drawers, turning over her folded clothes and linens.

Finally, I find something, hidden between the layers of an old rough blanket in her kist from the island. Pictures of antique-looking people in long, full-skirted dresses and men in flat woollen bonnets and thick mufflers, standing in front of a row of cottages – my grandparents and aunts and uncles from before the island was emptied. I think I may have seen these pictures before. I recognize my grandmother Rachel Òg, who came with us to this house. By her side, a man who must be my grandfather. I know well

my mother's stories, how he was famous for his skills in dancing sideways across the faces of the highest cliffs in Europe, his brother above holding the rope firm as my grandfather caught the fulmars and gannets whose feathers and meat kept the islanders alive. In the photograph, he stands solidly next to my grandmother. I memorize each detail and put them back, but as I smooth down the blankets, I feel something else tucked away at the end, an empty cocoa tin gritty with spots of brown rust. When I shake it, something moving, light and muffled moves inside. I twist off the lid. It's not been opened in a long while, the lid sealed with rust and damp. Inside, wrapped in a piece of pale ginger tweed and curved around in the shape of the tin, there's another photo. I've never seen this picture before. It's grey rather than the sepia of my grandparents' photo, a blurred snap of two young men, arms around each other's shoulders. Not island men, but visitors. They're sitting on a hillside, the breeze ruffling their hair, a dog alert and panting by the side of one of them. I sit back, wanting to glean every detail, for I know with a conviction, feel it in my bones, that one of these men must be my father. I'm the spit of my mother, with dark hair and blue eyes, but all the same I'm disappointed that neither of them look anything like me. The conviction remains, however. Why would she have kept this, hidden it away, if it didn't mean something?

But the one person who can tell me is the one person I can never ask. The afternoon is fading. She'll be back soon. My hands, like quick little liars, hurry to put everything away.

Desperate as I am, it's hard not to blurt out questions when she comes home. The ticking of the clock above the fire, the calls of the birds outside, grow louder and louder as she moves about the kitchen, saying little other than to ask about my day. More than ever, I want my mother to tell me about Hirta and the other little islands that

make up St Kilda: Boreray, Soay, Dùn and the great rock stacs around them. But she won't. I know that much.

So I take my search elsewhere. Telling her I have homework to do in the library, the following Saturday I wait for the bus that twists and tosses over the narrow roads to Lochaline. And I am not disappointed. Is there anyone who has visited the island and not written a book about it? I read myself up and down the slopes of St Kilda, inside houses that are no longer homes, until I feel I must surely be remembering more of the island – though is only the memories of Mr Martin, or Mr Sands or those who went to the islands in their fancy yachts, coming back with mouth-gaping tales about the last hunter-gatherers in the British Isles. 'The natives are dirty but hospitable and wear bird skins on their feet. . .' or 'St Kilda, a simple utopian community from another century where money is unknown. . .'

I go back week after week. When I've read everything I can from the shelves, then I ask for books mentioned in the bibliographies that the library does not stock but must order in from Edinburgh or Inverness. As the librarian stamps a two-week lending date in yet another book, I glimpse the pity and curiosity in her face. She knows. She's realized I was one of the ones taken from the island, displayed for all to see in newsreel cinemas across the land, the last of the savages. I bend my head to hide my burning cheeks and I hurry away.

At home I carefully hide my finds away under my bed. My mother hates to have the island pulled about by visitors and tourists in the books they write.

But above all, when I want to feel I am back on the island again, I play the old tunes she taught me, trying to call up faint and jumbled memories from a small child, yellow irises by a deep stream, the silky coat of a puppy, of creased and kindly faces, of a lamp carried across the grass between dark bothies. I run my hands over the keys, over

the hills and the slopes or Hirta. And sometimes I think I see those two smiling boys from the photograph, sitting there on the hillside.

And I wonder, where are you now? Do you know about me?

I'm listening to the wireless in the kitchen. We listen to every BBC bulletin about the war. Terrible news of late, the British forces pushed to the sea by Hitler, the men trapped on the beaches. My mother comes in and I'm about to tell her but she walks over to the wireless and turns it off, her face like stone. In her hands, I see the faded reds and greens of the library books.

'Why are you reading these?' she shouts, her face white. 'These people know nothing about the island. You are taking these back to that library.'

I've never defied her before, never raised my voice, but now I shout back. 'Why should I? I won't. I might as well have been found in a ditch for all I know about where I come from.'

She holds the books against her chest. The back door is open and she suddenly goes out as if she needs to breathe the cool air. I follow, standing a little way behind her. She sinks down on the back step, the closed books on her knees. In front of us, the forest is already turning dark against the last brightness in the sky. I sit beside her on the stoop. A swift is swooping back and forth across the meadow, sewing the air together with its flight. I can hear the shushing of the pine trees beyond the paddock. She stares at them for a while.

'Do you recall when we first saw trees, Rachel Anne? We'd never seen a single tree before we came here. You were afraid of them.'

'Perhaps,' I say, begrudgingly. More a feeling than a memory. I sit very quiet and still. Something is beginning.

'Rather, it's the bigness of the sky I miss. The island never felt small to us who lived there. Up on the cliffs, you could look out across the sea to the very beginning of the world. Or at least, it seemed that

way to a child.' She turns and looks at me so sadly. 'You are right, Rachel Anne. I should tell you all the things that will be lost if I do not. Our people. You remember my mother a little perhaps, but my father, you never knew him. Such a kind man – though I gave him enough trouble. Just like you, I was never a child to be told.'

The evening falls, and the step is cold. But we are no longer here. We are a hundred miles out into the Atlantic.

CHAPTER 4

Chrissie

ST KILDA, 1910

By evening, the whole village was searching for little Christina, calling her name against the wind that had risen up with the darkness, voices hoarse with the hope of finding her. She must be found, for it's an island that has already lost too many children. No trace of a child in a blue woollen dress, not in the Village Bay, not in the Great Glen over the hill. Her mother even began to ask herself, could it be that a small boat had slipped in unseen at the edge of the bay, taken the child from where she slept as the women worked and gossiped?

She didn't want to think of a child being blown by the wind from the cliffs, the long drop, a small body flying like a bird, the sea below, so far away.

'Christina,' she called out on the top of Conachair's cliffs. 'Christina.'

And her father yelled her name into the wind on the hillsides and as he lifted his lantern to peer into caves hidden in the slopes beneath Mullach Mòr. The stones echoed back nothing but a muffled thrum, her name erased by the wind.

All afternoon her grandmother had stumbled among the shore rocks and along the burn race of Tobar Childa, looking for – and hoping never to see – the long black hair and the folds of blue cloth twisted into the water's flow that came down icy from the hills. She

stood and prayed in Gaelic in the fading light, the old prayers against fairies and spirits.

Where had the child gone?

When Christina woke, some hours earlier, and looked out of the window she saw whirling flecks of white rising and drifting across the croft land. Snow or feathers? She'd only seen snow once before, little white clumps that drifted and rose against a blue light, the distance blurred by their swarm. If you stood out in snow it tickled your cheek, like Mother's eyelashes when you held her tight to kiss her nose. Snow you could catch on your tongue, feel it sharp and melting, your hands pinched by the cold.

If it was feathers, on the other hand, then the sea and the sky stayed solid and bright. Feathers made you cough and smelled burned and oily. The sun was coming warm through the window glass, the grass a deep green. Feathers it was then, the downy little ones from the breasts of fulmar petrels. The women would be sitting with Mother somewhere plucking at the fledgling birds, the beaks and soft heads dangling from the women's knees as they worked in a cloud of down.

Christina knew she should wake Granny in her chair so they could go to the women now, but it wasn't fair: the men had gone to get the birds from the cliffs and Father had taken Norman with him. The first time her brother had been allowed to join in with the climbing.

'And me. I can come too,' Christina had said, running to fetch her shawl.

Father had smoothed her hair but he had left her behind and gone out of the door to discuss the day ahead with the other men. She saw them talking in a group on the cobbled path. They were up by number three, Neil Ferguson's house, some of them sitting on the low wall with their backs to the bright sea, smoking pipes, sharing out the rough horsehair ropes, the jute ropes and the tackle, Norman

holding a coil. Christina had sat on the step and burned to know what they were saying until Mother came out with a tin jug to tell her to fetch water from the pump.

When she came back with the jug, the men and Norman were gone and now she had to go and find them up on Conachair, never wanted anything more, so fiercely could she see herself roped along with Father and Norman, bringing home fat armfuls of white birds. 'Why, Chrissie, you've enough here to feed the whole village all winter,' Mama would say.

Granny was still asleep on the wooden chair by the peat fire, her chin fallen into the roll of woollen shawl around her neck. Christina lifted the door latch. Outside the bothy door, she didn't turn right along the wide paving cobbles towards where she could hear the women's voices singing as they sat together out on the turf, hands snatching at the white down fast as the wind. She turned the other way, walking past the old byre where featherless puffins had been left to dry in the wind, their beaks slotted between the stones of the walls, others hung in twos and threes from the ropes holding down the hump of thatched roof on the byre. Their wing feathers had been left on at the tips, fluttering in the wind as if the birds were dreaming of flying. She paused to watch a darting wren on the grass but he disappeared. All that was left of him was the whirr of his song. She'd always liked how a wren was so much louder and braver than their tiny body. A few more doors along and she'd slipped along the flagged path between a bothy and a byre, stumping determinedly up the hill. No time today to stroke the calf with his milky hay breath and his lumbering mother with her long ginger coat and horns wide as a boat.

Above the peak of Conachair she could see the birds rising, white ash over a green mound of fire, the grasses not yet cut for hay, rippling green under the hot wind. On the far side, she knew, the cliffs sheared off the back of the hill like a loaf sliced by a jagged bread knife. That's

where the men would be hunting for fulmar petrels, where Norman would be close by his father, moving along the ledges and fastening the birds he caught around his belt.

She'd watched as Father gave Norman his climbing lessons. She'd followed them to the little cliff face at the back of the village at the base of Mullach Mòr. Father and Norman roped together, Father going up first, his bare feet on the rocks like two more big hands, his toes gripping and pushing. Father said St Kildans were famous for their strong feet, their long toes. His face turned to Norman as he called, 'Up there, to your right. No, the other right, Norman. See yes, pull up now and find where your foot can lodge. Only ever let go one point at a time.'

Christina thought she would be asked to join in this game when she was big enough. When there was no one about, she had tried climbing up herself. She never got stuck. Not going up. Not coming back down. But after a time she saw that the women and the girls had different work to the men. The women went to milk the cows in the Great Glen, or chatted as they knitted and carried the peats, or sang as they turned over the earth to lay the seed potatoes. Or they sat with their red scarves flickering in the wind at the top of the cliffs, plucking a storm of white feathers while the boys wrung the birds' necks and handed them to the women. They had plenty of work. But they never did go with the men to climb the wind-filled sweeps of Hirta's cliffs where the birds sailed on the air in dizzy towers, filling the air with their cries.

But Christina would go with her brother and the men. She made her way up to the summit's crest with her short, determined legs. It took a long time, as it always did. Behind her the village became a toy, and then it was gone as she went over the brow of the hill and began the descent on the other side, her legs going faster now. There was the sea beyond the hill's curve, bright blue against green, but no sign of Father or Norman yet. She'd had stern warnings from Father not

to come here on her own, where the hillsides' slopes were suddenly broken off into a fall of over a thousand feet, the ink sea fringing white against the rocks. But he didn't need to worry because Chrissie was always good and steady on the hills. She'd only ever felt safe on the island, the sea below a blue quilt on a bed.

But the slope was pulling hard on her now, making her legs run. She slipped, grasped to hold on to the grass that tore away in her fingers, a bird flew low above her, startling her with its cries as she felt the earth tip and she was rolling and sliding down towards the edge of the land. She twisted in the air, flying with the birds, too fast to feel any fear, the sea washing over tiny rocks far, far away. Then she felt the blows of the earth hard against her side as she struck and bounced and fulmars exploded from their nests in a frenzy of harsh jabbering.

The last streaks of a red sun were going down into the ashen sea, a blanket of grey cloud smothering the last red flames.

The men were all back from the cliffs, but the birds lay forgotten in a pile of soft bodies. Where had Chrissie gone?

Dusk was falling. Lanterns all over the island, and you might think God would have helped with a bit of moonlight, but all he'd sent was his minister with his small lantern and his wife with another, calling for Christina because she's out on the hillside awfully late. But there was no sound or sight of her. Too dark now to search but the men carried on. The women gathered back in the village, not speaking their fears, hoping that first light would not show a small body floating on the water down at the foot of the cliffs.

The tides around St Kilda, as they knew too well, could keep a body close to the cliffs for days.

Down on the cliffs looking out towards the long isle, something has disturbed the fulmars and their precious one chick of the season.

They should be roosting in the dark, but they cluster in a flurry of dark wings in the air. Something they don't like.

Caught in a cleft between the crumbling cliff and a protruding rock, a blue cloth fluttering, matted hair. A bare child's foot hangs in the wind.

Christina opened her eyes. Why hadn't they come for her yet? Darkness filled with wind all around her, just enough faint light from a clouded moon to see that she was in the wrong place, the sea too loud, and no sign of Father or Norman. She should get up and go find them, climb back up, but she can't move.

It began to dawn on Christina that she was very alone. That it was very dark, and no one had come to find her.

No one knew she was there.

She began to cry. Fear is as big and lonely as the black sea soughing below. Perhaps they would never find her. When she could sob no more, she lay still and empty, staring up into a darkness that had become complete.

Then a whirring in the air above. One small bird darted past in the dark air, a small body in flight alighting on the rock face. And then another, and another until the air was filled with a soft whirring sound, purring and fluttering, little home calls as the shadows of birds disappeared into their roosts between the cracks in the rocks. Storm Petrels. The little dark birds that dance on the waves like shadows and only come home to sleep when the dark falls. The air was alive, singing with the blurring of wings. The birds had come to keep her company, whispering their stories of the sea, crying out their tiny greetings. Lulled and mesmerized by their soft sounds and the little calls, she was no longer afraid.

The dark was at its blackest, the air quietened, the birds home and sleeping, her fear gone, for she could feel something she had not understood before. She was not alone: there was someone or something

who would keep her safe, who bided with her, would always be with her. Ah, but her leg hurt and she was so weary. Her eyes closed.

The dawn had drawn a ruby line along the bottom of the dark when she woke, a grey light beginning to dissolve the night in the east so that she could see the fulmars falling from the cliff above and sailing out on the wind, and oh, lanterns, coming down the cliff. Voices calling her name. She yelled back with all the force left in her, a poor dry sound. 'Here, I'm here. It's me, Chrissie.' The lanterns moved closer, and she could see men with ropes, calling out to her as they descended.

'Don't move. For God's sake don't move, child. She's here, by God. Thank the Lord. She's alive.'

So here she was on the cliff with the cragsmen, tied against Father's chest, and sorry for it now. The men above held him steady with ropes as he climbed back up the great ladder of cliff ledges. She lay against his chest, in her body the sensation of how he carried her home down the hills to their village, floating in his arms through the indistinct early light past the circular wall of the graveyard with its many unnamed little stones of babies sleeping deep among the grass and the nettles from the long years of the island losing their children to the ten-day lockjaw.

He tipped her into her mother's arms that held on so tight. They forgot to scold her as they bundled her into the box bed in the cottage and piled all the blankets on and round her. She had to promise. Never again. Never do that again.

For Chrissie was that rare thing on the island, a baby that had lived. She was, Mother said, a Reverend Fiddes baby. Old Fiddes, the missionary who had lived in the manse in the years before Chrissie was born, had grown weary of the grief of burying so many babies, each ten days old, their little jaws clamped shut, their bodies arching and rigid until their crying stopped and they went quiet for ever.

The mothers could not bear to name a child until they saw they would live. Oh, those mothers knew how to weep. It was the will of God, they repeated back to the minister as they always had. But he'd doubted it. He'd left the island to go back to Glasgow, put on an apron to train as a midwife.

Three times he had to go back there before he learned how to solve the plague of lockjaw that came down on the babes in their second week, and all the while more little souls flew up like birds into the air. He came back with a nurse. She had a tin of antiseptic powder to sprinkle over the cut cord, and carbolic soap and hot water to make sure that everything that touched the baby was innocent of germs.

The villagers resented such intrusion on their privacy. The nurse had a hard time stopping the knee woman from anointing the baby cord with a rub of oil stinking from the fulmar's stomach as she always had done, but the proof was in the loud cries of living children and finally they listened.

Christina's mother had lost eleven of her own brothers and sisters, all of them sleeping now within the little planticrue walls of the churchyard, bulbs without flowers, a whole host of unknown family members that had left the village population too small and lonely in the middle of the sea.

But Christina's forehead was live and warm under her mother's hand, and her mother breathed in the earthy smell of curdled milk and sheep wool oil that was Christina.

Christina looked up at her mother's wet face. She wanted to tell her that she didn't need to be afraid. For she knows now, she has felt how He bided close with her, comforting her through the dark night. She put her hand into her mother's rough palm. Chrissie, being small, did not have enough words to give comfort her mother, only this hand to tell her that someone loved her closely.

For even a small child can know a very great thing.

The story is finished. My mother is looking into the evening with its greenish sky and black trees, somewhere far away from me.

‘Well, that’s enough for today and long ago.’ She squeezes my hand but my fist is clenched. She can see in my face what I’m thinking, what I don’t dare to say. I wanted more, stories of him.

‘Bide patiently, Rachel. You must be patient.’

She goes in and fills the kettle, puts it on the range and turns on the wireless that uncle Callum sent us from Glasgow. He works in the shipyards there, turning out ships for the Navy. We drink our tea and listen to the big-band music from London, waiting for the news to come on. At last. She turns up the volume. Hundreds of fishermen and pleasure boats have sailed all the way across the Channel to the beaches of Dunkirk. They are bringing back the thousands of our soldiers trapped there at the edge of the sea.

‘Thank God,’ says my mother. ‘Those boys are coming home.’

It’s a few days before my mother picks up her story again. We’re washing the supper dishes, her hands in the water as she looks out at the hills with their dark green forests. I’m drying a plate with a teacloth and it takes me a moment to realize she’s back on the island again.

‘It’s hard to explain if you never lived on the island, how cut off we were in winter. How very much we longed for a boat to come by,’ she begins. ‘We could smell it in the night if a boat came into the bay, that’s how much we waited, especially that year of the great storms. I must have been about eight, I think. We were so glad when the winds let up at last and a fishing trawler from Aberdeen finally came to shelter in the bay. The men were straight down to the shore to launch our little boat, rowing out to her. How were they to know what would come of it?’