

Chapter I

September 1857

Shrieking split the leaden sky and Audrey looked up to see a host of birds, their wings ink-black against the grey.

‘Storm coming, d’you see? They know the wind’s changing.’ The man gestured upwards, but his eyes were on Audrey. ‘They feel it long before we can tell.’

Audrey nodded, but did not reply, for she was too tired now for conversation. It had already taken them an hour from Kyleakin and she was wet through with the fine rain and the spray from the sea, her carpet bag and its contents soaked. All around, she heard the monotone of the men singing a Gaelic lament as they rowed: a low, insistent sound, like the washing of the waves against the little boat. Behind her, an old woman in a sodden bonnet was grumbling over her damaged possessions – a bag of meal and a basket of paper roses. Apart from the man, the only other passenger was a girl in blue who sat hunched forward at the stern of the boat, her face bone-pale, her eyes

squeezed shut, her narrow shoulders tensed as though in pain. Audrey watched her, wanting to help but suspecting she wished to be left alone.

‘Is it far you’ve travelled?’ the man persisted, chewing the tobacco in his cheek.

‘From London.’ She glanced briefly at him and then away. Three days it had taken her: first the overnight train to Glasgow, then a steamer to Oban and a boat to Kyleakin. She who had never travelled alone in all her life.

The man continued to watch her out of the corner of his eye. After a minute or so, he said, ‘It’s fair cut off, Skye. Not much goes in. Those that can, leave.’ He pushed back his hat. ‘Strange place for a young lady from London to be visiting this time of year.’

Audrey looked towards the emerald water as it seethed into the darkness. She could have given him many reasons: this is the island my mother loved. This is the island where my mother died. I have come here because I needed to get away.

‘I am expected there,’ she said.

The girl was leaning forward now, over the side of the boat, clutching a poor bit of fabric about her shoulders. Audrey watched to see if anyone would offer to help. She, after all, was a stranger, a Sassenach. But no one moved.

She forced herself to rise, her body aching with cold and cramp, and moved alongside the girl. She spoke quietly. ‘Can I help? Are you ill?’

The girl, when she turned to her, seemed startled, dark eyes shining. Audrey removed a small silver flask from her

cloak, uncorked it and held it out. 'It's brandy and water. It might do you good.'

'That's kind of you, miss, but no.' She spoke in the soft Highland English Audrey had heard in Oban.

Cold water sprayed across the boat as they reached rougher waves, and the girl shook violently. Audrey removed her own shawl and wrapped it around her thin shoulders, over her damp blue dress.

The girl smiled then, her lips ghost-pale. 'It's just the sea, that's all it is. I never liked the sea.'

There was no conversation for the remainder of the journey, only the raging of the rising winds, the rush of the water, the slap of the oars. They passed numerous caverns, echoing arches hollowed out by the waves, and the Isle of Pabay, flat and barren. As the autumn dusk descended, the coastline withdrew into formless gloom. Then came lights, a pier and, further off, a line of trees with the turret of a house rising above it, like some enchanted castle spiralling into the sky. Beyond the house and the pier loomed the red hills, their outlines vague and ominous in the growing dark.

The boat drew up to a pier and Audrey saw a few figures standing, arms folded, waiting for the vessel to come in. A boatman in the stern tossed a coiled heaving line ashore and two men on the pier seized it to haul them in. Others moved forward to help bring the boat alongside the landing jetty, and there was laughter from some of the men: a surprising sound after the quietness of the journey. Audrey

should have been exhausted, but the chill of the night air and the strangeness of the place made her mind keen, her senses sharp. The air smelt of salt, seaweed, woodsmoke.

The boatmen helped the women to disembark, Audrey first, then the girl, who removed Audrey's shawl, folded it and handed it back. 'Thank you, miss, for your kindness.'

Audrey smiled. 'I only hope you feel well soon.'

The girl nodded, turned and walked up the pier, her movements awkward and slow.

'You've someone to meet you, have you?' It was the man with the tobacco.

'Yes,' Audrey said quickly. 'Yes, I'm sure they're sending someone.'

She had no idea, in fact, whether anyone would come to greet her. The letter had simply given her the address and instructions on where to catch the boat.

The man looked at her curiously. 'Someone from the big house, is it now?'

Audrey met his gaze. 'The big house?'

'Lanerly Hall.'

'Yes, Lanerly. I'm here at Miss Buchanan's invitation.'

'That so?' And then, when she did not respond: 'Well, all the best to you, miss.'

He walked up the pier together with the other men. Audrey was alone in the falling rain. She picked up her bags and started in the direction of the village.

'Miss Hart?'

The voice seemed to emanate from the darkness. As she

looked more closely, Audrey saw a figure in outline. A tall, broad-shouldered man stepped forward. 'You're Audrey Hart, are you?'

A flare from a torch lit his face momentarily: his white forehead and dark brows. There was a severity about him that made Audrey shrink back, but he reached forward and took hold of her bag. For a moment, she froze, unsure whether to release it, and there was a brief, awkward tussle, ending in the man's favour.

'I'm Murdo Maclean,' he said, as if she should know. 'I'm the factor for the Buchanan estate.'

He began to walk with her bags in the opposite direction, away from the village, and up a path that ran along the sea ledge. Audrey rushed to try to catch up with him, her wet skirts clinging to her legs. In the near-darkness, she stumbled over stones, once turning her ankle and holding in the pain. The man walked briskly past a gate and a sign that read, 'PRIVATE LAND', then past a large stone outhouse, and onwards to a house where lights flickered in an upstairs room. Audrey gazed up at it, hoping to see some friendly face within.

'That isn't Lanerly, if that's what you're thinking,' Murdo said. 'It's Corry House, where I live.'

'I see.' Audrey winced at the pain in her ankle. 'Very pretty.'

Murdo continued on the path, which ran now along the shore. The wind pulled at Audrey's hair, the rain stung her face. At the edge of the land they reached two stone gate piers topped with griffins, marking the entrance to a long

gravel drive. As they walked along it, the dark shape of the mansion rose out of the gloom before them, a wide, imposing grey-stone building, two flights of steps running up to the door. This must be the house she had seen from the boat, but at this distance it seemed not so much a house as a fortress: the turret appearing to swell into the darkness. There was something oddly familiar about it too, like a picture in a storybook she had read as a child.

Murdo must have caught her expression in the torch-light. 'Not what you were expecting, eh? Takes a bit of getting used to.'

He set down one of her bags before the door and pulled at a scallop-shaped knocker. Eventually there came the sound of footsteps and the great oak door was opened a crack.

'You might show us a warmer welcome, Effy,' Murdo growled.

The door was opened further, revealing a young woman with a snub nose and a frilled white cap. She looked at Audrey appraisingly, taking in her wet skirts and sodden hat. Her manner was so unlike that of the servants at home that Audrey wondered for a moment whether this might be the daughter of the house. Murdo, however, more or less pushed the girl out of the way as he walked through with the bags, and she dropped at last into a grudging curtsy.

'There's a fire lit in the kitchen,' she said abruptly, moving in front of Murdo and leading them through a wide, dimly lit hallway to a whitewashed door. Beyond was

the kitchen, an immense room with a flagged floor. Hams and game birds hung from the ceiling, a fire blazed in the grate of the arched fireplace, and the warm air was rich with the scent of oats baking.

The maid pulled a worn horsehair-seated chair towards the fire and gestured to Audrey to sit in it. 'You'd best be getting out of those things or you'll catch your death. It's rightly cold for September.'

Audrey was grateful to take the weight off her sore ankle. 'All my possessions are wet through. Perhaps your mistress . . . ?'

The maid stared at her for a moment, running her eyes over her. Whatever she saw, she found it inadequate. 'There's clothes as belonged to her niece. I'll fetch you some. Mr Maclean, there's tea brewing, or you can pour yourself a dram. Mairi,' she added sharply, 'make yourself useful.'

Something stirred in the corner of the room. What Audrey had taken to be a bundle of clothing on a chair was in fact a young girl, who had evidently been asleep, her legs tucked up under her. She rubbed her eyes, untangled her limbs and walked over to the stove.

Murdo took up a bottle and poured himself a thick measure of whisky, knocking it back in two gulps. He refilled his tumbler and sat on a chair to Audrey's right, placing his feet on the fender. 'You're here to collect fairy stories for Miss Buchanan, then.'

This seemed more of a statement than a question.

'Well, I'm here to be interviewed for the position of her

assistant, but I may not be quite what Miss Buchanan is looking for.'

Murdo stared at her for a moment. 'I'd wager you're exactly what she's looking for.'

There was something unpleasant in his tone and Audrey made no response. They sat for a minute or so, not speaking, the only sounds the crackling of the fire and the rattle of china cups as the girl brought over a tray. Audrey was pleased to see that it held a plate of cakes. She had eaten nothing since a meat pie at an inn many hours earlier. She took one of the cakes in her hand and bit into it; it crumbled against her tongue – oats, honey, currants. The girl poured her a cup of tea. She was dark-haired, sharp-chinned, almost elfin. Mairi, Effy had called her. *Mah-ree*. She could not have been more than fifteen years old.

After a few minutes, Effy returned, some clothing over her arm and a lamp in her hand. 'I've lit a fire in your room, miss. If you'll follow me.'

Audrey stood, ready to leave. 'Well, goodbye, Mr Maclean.'

Murdo glanced at her but made no move to get up. His eyes were back on the fire when he said, 'I'd wish you luck with your interview for the position, Miss Hart, but you might not thank me for it.'

Audrey followed Effy along a hallway and up a spiral staircase, the lamplight glowing yellow against the ornate wallpaper. They came upon another hallway, dark-panelled,

with several doorways along it, each painted a different colour. Effy opened a door to her right. 'The Green Chintz Room,' she announced.

It was a fair-sized room with myrtle-green walls and heavy damask curtains over lace. A small fire had been lit, but the room was still cold, and Audrey, in her wet dress, shivered.

Effy placed the dry clothing on a chair near the fireplace. 'These are some things of the mistress's niece. A nightgown and shawl, and a dress and undergarments for the morning. I reckon they'll fit you fair enough, you being so small.'

Audrey ignored this. 'And the niece? She won't mind?'

Effy gave her a look. 'I shouldn't think so.'

A bed draped with a green chintz canopy and embroidered blankets stood in the centre of the room, and on a small desk, an oil lamp flared. There was a damp and slightly sour smell to the place. It had the feel of a room that been neglected for years.

'There's water in the jug,' Effy pointed at the marble-topped washstand, 'but I'll bring you fresh in the morn.' She made to leave.

'Will I see Miss Buchanan in the morning?' Audrey asked.

Effy fixed her with a slightly contemptuous look. 'I should say so. That's why you're here, isn't it?'

She gave her reluctant curtsey again and left, shutting the door behind her.

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Audrey dressed herself in the nightgown, a strange outmoded thing made of linen, with long frilled sleeves. She shrugged the shawl around her shoulders and drew another chair up to the fire. From her case she removed a rich brown leather book, its gold-edged pages damp from the journey. It was the folklore journal that her mother had taken with her from place to place, writing down the stories and songs she heard. Audrey opened the book at the section where the Skye tales began. Marking the page was a newspaper clipping, the small black-bordered box she had first come across three weeks ago: *Lady folklorist seeks assistant. Gaelic- and English-speaking, quick-witted, level-headed. Wages moderate. Immediate start.*

For maybe the tenth time, she unfolded and read the letter Miss Buchanan had sent, inviting her to visit Skye to discuss the position. Her sentences were clipped and to the point, giving little away. It was impossible to know what kind of woman she would be, or what she would make of Audrey. What was certain was that if she did not offer Audrey the position, her situation would be precarious. She had used almost all of her savings for the journey over, and she had nowhere else to go, no one else to ask.

She closed the journal, moved over to the window and pushed back the curtains. At first, she could see only her own dark reflection, but, pressing her face to the cold glass, she saw that the view was of Broadford Bay – the full expanse of it, slate-grey and broken through with moving lines of white. She could hear the sullen murmur of the waves, breaking on the dark rocks. To her right was the

black outline of the pier where her boat had drawn in and, nearby, the wavering light of a torch. Surely it could not be another boat: it was too late and the sea too strong.

Audrey was too weary now to wonder. Her earlier exhilaration was gone and she was so tired she could not even bring herself to brush and plait her salt-matted hair. She mumbled a quick prayer, then climbed beneath the chilly sheets and drew her knees up to her chest. Despite her exhaustion, the cold kept her from sleep and for some time she lay awake, shivering, imagining what her father and stepmother would be doing now – now that they knew she was gone.

She had not told them of her correspondence with Miss Buchanan. She knew what they would think. For a young woman of her standing to seek a position would suggest to the outside world that she needed money, or, worse, that she sought intellectual fulfilment. It would confirm to society that she was unusual, unmarriageable, odd. Her father might have wanted her out of the way, but in a church, volunteering, or in a back parlour, sewing, not damaging his medical practice with her curious ways.

Audrey had told no one of her plans. She had prepared for her trip alone. She had left a note saying only that she was leaving London to become a folklorist's assistant; that she hoped they would understand and wished them well. She had left the house before dawn and made her own way, unchaperoned, to this distant island. Her father would not allow her to return to his house, not after everything else.

‘You are my daughter and you will do as I ask,’ he had said. ‘You will withdraw your comments, and you will explain that you are sorry – that you made a mistake.’

‘I did not make a mistake, Father, and I did not speak of it lightly. I will not brush this aside simply because it inconveniences you.’

‘It is you I am trying to protect, Audrey.’

‘I do not need protecting. I am twenty-four.’

‘With everything ahead of you.’

With nothing ahead of me, she had thought. You and Dorothea have made sure of that. I am like a child lost in the woods, not knowing which path to follow or which course to pursue, because everything I have done and said, everything I am, has been deemed wrong.

But she could not bring herself to say any of that. There was little point. Instead, she had packed her few books and clothes into a travelling case and left the house that was never a home. She was alone now. Well, so be it. In many ways she had been alone for years. She listened to the wash of the waves in the bay, to the spatter of rain on the windows, and the opening and closing of doors downstairs, and eventually she slid like a boat into a shallow, disturbed sleep.

Some time later, there came a shout. Audrey sat bolt upright in bed, alert, listening for more. There was nothing, however: no noise save for the ceaseless rain and the wind battering at the casements. It must have been the call of a vixen. Or perhaps, asleep, her mind had turned the

shrieking of the wind into something more human. Uneasy, her thoughts confused, she ran her fingers over the ruby ring she wore on her right hand: her mother's ring, the ring that, as a child, she had believed would protect her. She pulled the covers up to her ears. The sound did not come again.