

ELSBETH  
AND THE  
CALL OF THE CASTLE GHOSTIES



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*The Cape Cod Witch Series*  
BOOK III

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## The Story of ElsBeth Amelia Thistle, Cape Cod's Youngest Witch

When their ancestral home is threatened like never before in battles past, three ancient Highland ghosts need one of their clan from the living world.

Calling on the Winds, they summon the young Cape Cod witch across the sea to the old country.

ElsBeth has her own calling to protect the natural world, and a need to find out more about the family mysteries, but soon finds she is in well above her magic level.





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## Chapter One

### The Call

#### *Present Time, Scottish Highlands – The Castle*

Durst wasn't upset about being dead. He'd been a ghost far too long for that.

But he *was* upset. Mightily so. Clan lands were threatened!

While past threats had come from fierce soldiers he had fought with fiery spirit and honor, this new danger came in smooth words and slippery smiles. And though Durst was now a dead-cold ghost, the enemy known as "Gorgeous" chilled him.

From his rough-cut cavern beneath the castle dungeon, Durst's vaporous form rose up and up, until he was high above the tower walls.

Below him the grey stones gleamed in weak moonlight. A low fog half-hid the rocky cliff overlooking a restless sea. An owl swooped past in search of prey. A lone wolf howled. And other creatures of the night went about their quiet business.

*These lands must not be destroyed!*

He lingered a while in the crystal air before fading back to his solitary chamber belowground.

He took up his stone knife and for a time just rubbed the flat edge back and forth against his pale blue-painted cheek. Done then with thinking, he stabbed the blade overhead and a single crash of thunder quaked the Highland dark, summoning the two other unearthly guardians of the castle.

In their own times and in their own ways each of the ghosts had devoted their living days to protecting these lands—the proud mountains and their valleys of sweet purple heather, the bottomless clear lakes.

The three shifted in the small space, uneasy together. They were not friends. But they were bound by a love of these lands that could not be bounded by their short earthly lives.

Now they needed one of the clan from the living world. One with the purpose, and the magic, to protect this rare, wild place.

Durst took up a length of sapwood from the sacred alder tree and carefully carved the old symbols. Then with the knifepoint he cut the notches of a simple flute.

The three touched, a spark flew, and it grew until their shimmering forms blazed in a bright, cold fire.

Durst's ghostly lips met the still-living wood and a sharp but sweet note carried into the night, where it reached the Four Winds and was carried farther.

His command was clear: "Carry here the youngest of the clan, the youngest Thistle."

A future was cast.

And far away across the sea, at that moment and in no time at all, ElsBeth's world began to change.



*The Sacred Alder Tree*

*Present Time, Cape Cod – The Library*

ElsBeth Amelia Thistle caught two-year-old Winston as he ran past and lifted him high in the air. He laughed and reached over into her thick, dark-blond hair. His fingers stuck, and she didn't think the stickiness was from

something in her hair. But she laughed, too, and took in his strawberry-and-sweat, little boy scent before setting him down to join her friends.

Having survived their weekly morning at Library Story Hour, the four exhausted volunteers waved to Mrs. Wattle, the librarian, who kept a gentle but firm hand on the wickedly grinning, two-foot-tall Mr. Winston Nickerson, everyone's favorite toddler terror. ElsBeth blew him a kiss good-bye.

She and her friends stepped down the warming cobblestones in a bubble of chatter, but a sudden cold breeze chilled her, and ElsBeth felt a shift in the space she thought of as her world.

She stopped and glanced back at the library. The cheery, salmon-pink, sea captain's mansion had disappeared and in its place sat a bleak castle, veiled in mist and backed by a darkening sky. She had the idea of an evil there, *someone* evil, and at the same time . . . "gorgeous."

ElsBeth jittered. She was used to her perceptions of the world sometimes being quite different, and they didn't exactly ask her permission to come in on her. And she certainly didn't always understand them. But this wasn't just different or strange. Something felt *wrong*, like some danger had just sailed into her world and dropped anchor.

She blinked twice, and when she looked back this time there was only the familiar, weathered-shingle library precisely where it was supposed to be.

She sighed and felt the solid ground beneath her feet,

then lifted her face to another glorious end-of-summer day on the Cape—pale blue skies and puffy white clouds above sparkling blue-green waters. The air smelled salty-fresh.

ElsBeth shook the remnants of the castle image from her head and caught up with her friends, waiting for her under the gold-lettered street signs at the corner of Main and Sea.

“I’m going to the beach,” Amy said. “I need to lie in the sun for a while. Then I want to get some more shells and sea glass for bracelets. Want to come?”

Amy looked like a golden beach herself with long yellow hair, tan skin and pink blossoms on her dress, just like Cape roses on the dunes. Amy was terribly sweet, but in a good way.

“No, Amy. *Shopping*,” Veronica said. “Think about it. There’re only a couple weeks left before school.” Hands on hips, Veronica looked at Amy more like she was from an unknowable alien race than one of her best friends since kindergarten.

Amy flushed pink, matching the roses on her dress, but just for a moment. She wasn’t thrown off long by Veronica’s sharpness, which came with the territory. Veronica’s beauty could sometimes make you forget her fierce honesty, but that would be a mistake. Amy smiled, raised a hand in a half-wave and skipped off.

Lisa Lee pushed square glasses up on her nose and set a smile on her face. ElsBeth could tell the last thing Lisa Lee wanted to do was go shopping.

“The marsh ecosystem changes every day,” she said to the space between ElsBeth and Veronica. “I need to take notes.” Her shiny, straight black hair waved good-bye as

she turned and made her own way to the shore.

Some people felt Lisa Lee was a know-it-all and didn't like to hang around with her. But she pretty much *did* know everything, and that, ElsBeth had found on more than one occasion, was incredibly useful.

ElsBeth grabbed Veronica's hand. "Come on. Not everyone loves shopping the way you do."

"That still doesn't mean they're *right*." Veronica grinned and gave ElsBeth's wild hair a quick tug.

But ElsBeth ignored her. A strange funnel cloud had formed up ahead, swirling together some sand, a few salt-water taffy wrappers, and a cardboard clam roll holder. Slowly at first then faster and faster. A dozen squealing seagulls circled above, beaks snapping. The pale cloud whipped around and rushed straight at them.

Veronica squawked and flapped her arms and the screeching gulls took off. "Nasty things," she said. "By end of summer they're so used to people-food they have no fear."

ElsBeth just stared. Something unnatural was definitely in play.

She shook her head again, uneasy now, and walked down the street with her friend toward the village center and the sea.

## Chapter Two

### Boys Versus Girls

Not far away, Robert Hillman-Jones and the boys were also out and about this fine morning.

Hillman-Jones turned the corner, shook longish brown hair from his eyes and frowned. He threw out his arm to halt the others. “Guys, it’s Veronica and ElsBeth.”

“We’d better take the other way to the marina,” said Johnny, his Wampanoag friend. “Those two will want to know everything we’re doing.”

“Yeah, and they’ll want to be involved.” Robert squinted at them. “My plans definitely don’t include any girls. Come on.”

The pack of wild boys raced down Crescent Drive to Quahog Way, over to Queen Anne Road, and had just turned back toward Main Street when . . . smack. Robert ran dead into ElsBeth.

She bounced off him and hit the brick sidewalk. Hard.

“Oh, sorry, ElsBeth.” Hillman-Jones was so surprised he was actually polite for once.



Tired from chasing Winston Nickerson and starting to get hungry, ElsBeth was *not* feeling polite back.

She was often a little touchy where Hillman-Jones was concerned. They had a history.

And there was always the complicating factor that ElsBeth was a witch. Mostly always a helpful witch—at least she *tried* to be—but it would have to be said she had a bit of a temper. Which probably accounted for her charged reaction, though she carefully withheld casting any spell. Grandmother didn't allow that, and she tried to do what Grandmother said. Really.

ElsBeth stomped her foot and her hair flew out all electric. She didn't exactly shout, but her words carried the high voltage of her built-up frustration with this character.

“Robert Hillman-Jones! What do you mean *sneaking* like that? You jumped out at us on purpose.” ElsBeth was pleased to see him lean back to avoid her blast . . . and not completely succeed. His smirk, for the moment, slipped away.

But then she had the really uncomfortable feeling she was hearing Robert's thoughts. *This* hadn't happened before.

*“It's true I usually do jump out at her and I'm not going to apologize for that. But this time it was an accident—I was trying to avoid them. Which just goes to prove girls are beyond any rational understanding.”*

Veronica chose that moment to butt in. She stepped in front of ElsBeth, leaning into the boys' space. “Yes, what are you boys *doing*? You look as if you are *up* to some-



thing.”

Veronica always looked like a perfect, caramel-colored doll. But everyone knew she could set the bar for intimidating.

Most of the boys turned various shades of red.

Johnny looked up and asked the sky, “How come girls can always make you feel guilty?”

Robert recovered but could only come back with his usual cover-up. “None of your business, Veronica.”

Johnny stared at Robert—who seemed to realize, too late, that once Veronica got suspicious she’d hang on like an Atlantic blue crab to some especially tasty bait.

ElsBeth held back a giggle. She didn’t want to interrupt Veronica. This was going to be fun.

Veronica whispered to her, “They *are* up to something.” Then she swung back on Robert and tapped her foot. “Well . . .?”

The boys looked down or away, anywhere but at the girls. Some shuffled nervously.

Nelson Hamm cracked. His ears went crimson and his glasses fogged up, an always-reliable sign Nelson had lost it.

He ran his hand over his unfortunate, new-school-year haircut, which looked like a bundle of pick-up-sticks on his head. He blurted out, “We’re taking Uncle Preston’s yacht.”

All heads turned to Nelson.

“Awww, Nelson,” Hillman-Jones moaned in disgust.

“Sorry, guys,” Nelson said. “Veronica got to me.”

ElsBeth nodded to herself. Veronica *did* have that effect on people. Then it sunk in.

“You’re *stealing* your Uncle Preston’s *yacht*?” ElsBeth’s felt her eyebrows shoot up like twin peaks.

“We’re just going to sail around the islands. Uncle Preston had to go to New York and my parents are in Europe. Nani will think we’re out playing around all day. No big deal.”

Robert had that figured out, but she heard his thoughts skitter in his head again.

“*Will the girls rat on us? I don’t think ElsBeth will, but I’m not sure about Veronica. She’s a wild card.*”

ElsBeth felt him make a snap decision, like he stood on the brakes.

“OK. You can come with us.” Robert tried to sound friendly but didn’t.

ElsBeth crossed her arms and eyeballed Hillman-Jones. He continually surprised her. He invited them along and seemed to think that made it OK to take his uncle’s yacht!

But he *did* have her attention.

She had to think. Taking the yacht wasn’t exactly honest. And she knew it was of the utmost importance for a witch to be honest. Dishonesty, she knew personally, was a fast road to losing one’s magic. Still, Uncle Preston *did* always host the annual summer sail to Martha’s Vineyard for all of Robert’s *guy* friends. And it would be great if the *girls* finally had a chance to go.

Before ElsBeth could complete her struggle with the rights and wrongs of this opportunity, Veronica settled it.

“We’re going. Amy and Lisa Lee are coming, too.”

ElsBeth lost contact with Robert’s exact thoughts but felt a cunning new plan twist through his mind, while a twisted smile crawled across his otherwise bland face.

“OK. The marina dock, five a.m. tomorrow. No cell phones. You know I hate those things at sea. And don’t be late, or we sail without you.”

Chapter Three  
The Launch Party



Four-thirty the next morning at Six Druid Lane, Elsbeth sprawled half-asleep in her cozy captain's bed. The moon still hung fat in the sky.

From somewhere far away, but not entirely in a dream, a hollow voice sang a curious song.

*Grave dark has fell on our fair land,  
And though the youngest of the clan,  
You're called to lend your spirit bright*

*And magic to our goodly fight.*

*You'll need to make your way alone,*

*Through earthly storms, with heart your own.*

*The gifts you gain and yourself give,*

*Will make it true, "Clan spirits live!"*

ElsBeth opened heavy eyes and reached for the dream book she kept by her bed. Dreams could be important and ElsBeth always tried to write them down. Moonlight reflected off the silver bat that dangled from the ribbon she used to mark her page.

She knew there was something she should write in her book this morning, but now she couldn't remember what it was. Sleep had only left her with the feeling she must be extra wide-awake today.

Outside her window a shadow flicked by. Professor Badinoff, her familiar, teacher and closest friend, still flitted about in the pre-dawn dark. She wanted to ask the insightful bat if he thought it was OK for her to go on the trip today. But there wasn't time, and he'd probably just say, "Think for yourself." He was always encouraging ElsBeth to think things through on her own.

And as much as she wanted to be good at that, she knew thinking about things wasn't her strongest point. She preferred action. She liked to just start . . . and then keep going.

ElsBeth slipped out of bed and padded down the creaky, curvy staircase, while up the stairs rose smells of cinnamon, and honey, and enchanted baking.

Odd. She hadn't expected Grandmother to be up this early.

She stepped through the dark front hall, past the old paintings of the sea in its every mood, past the herb drying cabinet against the wall in the corner. She heard contented humming and saw light under the kitchen door. She cracked it open.

"Good morning, ElsBeth dear."

It was unnerving. She had planned to just scoot out. But you could never successfully disappear past Hannah Goodspell.

To the local folk her grandmother was a much-loved, somewhat eccentric gardener, who always had a healthful remedy, or a funny story, or a sweet smile for anyone who ailed, depending on what was needed. But in the simple truth she was the oldest, most capable witch on all of Cape Cod.

"Grandmother, what are you doing up?"

"I wanted to make sure you got a decent breakfast before you went off sailing for the day." With her back to ElsBeth she continued putting together delightful things to eat on the old slate counter.

How did Grandmother know? ElsBeth had been so careful to avoid the subject last night—without lying, of course. She'd focused her thoughts on little Winston Nickerson sliding down the library's three flights of stairs on his plastic sled. There was plenty of distracting material to talk about with little Winston, but something had obviously slipped though.

ElsBeth pulled out her favorite kitchen chair, the one with the frog face carved on the back, and sat down to a

cup of steaming hot chocolate. Between sips she managed to get out, “Oh, um, yes, Grandmother. We’re going with the boys on Uncle Preston’s yacht. Just sailing around the islands.”

“I know, dear. You don’t have much time. They’re going to try to leave early. But before you go, have some yogurt I made.” Her grandmother set down ElsBeth’s blue bowl, the one with the sea creatures that floated and swam around the sides. “I added some dried cranberries and sunflower seeds, and a taste of Mister Bottomley’s Bog Honey.”

ElsBeth realized she was hungry and dug in. But wait a minute . . .

“What do you mean they’re going to leave early?” she spat out, along with a cranberry. A couple of sunflower seeds also slid down her chin.

“Well, you know the boys,” her grandmother explained as she pulled a pan of scones from the wood-fired oven. “They don’t exactly want you and the rest of the girls with them when they’re out adventuring. They plan to leave early so they won’t have to take you.”

ElsBeth steamed and came to a boil. Her hair was a bit of a mess to start but now stuck out like a wheat-colored dandelion puff.

Grandmother’s green eyes twinkled. “Getting angry *rarely* helps, you know, my dear. Why not just finish up so you can get there in time and beat them at their own game? Much more fun, don’t you think?”

That did sound like fun. ElsBeth took two more big bites, kissed her grandmother on a flour-dusted cheek, stuck a cinnamon scone in her mouth, mumbled good-bye,

and grabbed the bag packed for her lunch.

She narrowly avoided stepping on a sleeping Sylvanas, who opened one big cat eye and promptly fell back into slumberland. He smiled a toothy smile and resumed a satisfied snore.

ElsBeth figured he was probably dreaming about platefuls of homemade, cream-and-raspberry-filled doughnuts, favorites of his.

She winked at Grandfather Clock on her way out. He winked back, and with suitable ceremony clanged the quarter-hour. She dashed into the cool morning and picked up her old red bike. She called for West Wind, her reliable friend, to give her a little push, which he happily provided, whispering back he had nothing particular to do at the moment—early morning was his slow period.

And she was off.



ElsBeth arrived at the dock a few minutes later, just as the boys made ready to cast off. Even before she came to a full stop she shouted up to Robert, “Not so fast. You promised to take us.”

“Too bad. You weren’t here on time. We can’t wait for a bunch of slowpoke girls.”

“That’s not true, Robert Hillman-Jones. You said five and it’s not five yet!” Grandmother’s advice about not getting mad wasn’t much use now. ElsBeth glared up at him.

Veronica sped in on her perfectly clean new bike, perfectly dressed in crisp navy and white, perfectly prepared for a day at sea. In other words, perfectly Veronica.

“I thought they might try something like this so I came



early.” She dismounted gracefully and pushed her kickstand in place. “Relax, ElsBeth.”

Veronica called up to Robert in a quiet but somehow menacing voice. “You boys can’t leave without us. We’ll yell our heads off, and the people at the marina will stop you. And if they don’t, I’m calling the Coast Guard.” Veronica could threaten with the cold calculation of a Las Vegas poker player.

Thank goodness for cable TV. There was so much you could learn. ElsBeth sometimes watched championship poker at Veronica’s house. They particularly liked to practice bluffing and Veronica was really good.

Robert was silent and a staring contest began.

Amy straggled in looking sleepy and a little confused. Lisa Lee followed, looking at her watch. ElsBeth had a perfect sense of time and knew it was exactly ten minutes before five.

Frankie Sylvester skidded in next, dramatically spraying sand all over the girls.

“Sorry, guys,” he hollered up to the boys on the yacht, ignoring Veronica’s howls at the sandstorm. “Mom wouldn’t let me leave until I finished my breakfast—sour-dough pancakes with maple syrup and whipped cream. I ate as fast as I could. Honest.” Bits of white creamy froth flecked the corners of his mouth, clear evidence of his speed-eating.

ElsBeth’s eyes were on Frankie but she was pulled inside Robert’s thoughts again. She *really* wished this wasn’t happening.

*“If I let Frankie on, I’ll have to let the girls on, too. But what if . . . It’s a hasty plan . . . but I’m going with it.”*

“Come aboard, shipmates,” he said charmingly . . . which ElsBeth realized later should have been warning enough.

She started up the plank.

“No! Frankie, you first.”

Frankie shouldered his oversized backpack, no doubt filled with his mother’s delicious Italian and New England edibles. He easily pushed his big-boned frame past ElsBeth, who followed a step behind.

Just as Frankie got his weight on deck, Robert kicked the plank into the water.

ElsBeth hung suspended, from nothing, a long moment. A really long moment.

ElsBeth had recently discovered—and unlike hearing thoughts in her head, this was something she liked about being a witch—she could slow down time.

She couldn’t control this well, it mostly just happened. But when it did, she could see and do a lot more in the same time than others could. Though this, of course, was also something she didn’t talk about.

So, in a long, slow moment, ElsBeth looked back and saw that Lisa Lee had trailed behind to examine some barnacles and had just put one foot on the plank. But with lightning reactions, no doubt from her years of training in karate, she twisted mid-air and pulled herself back onto the dock.

Veronica and Amy, though, were right behind ElsBeth. So when the plank flew out, after a *brief* moment of suspension—with horrified and kind of funny looks on their faces—they all fell into the chilly water.

“Robert Hillman-Jones, you are in *so* much trouble!” Veronica gurgled and tread water fast, trying to keep her perfect hair from getting further messed up—all the while chewing Robert out with a mouth full of seawater.

ElsBeth sputtered, too.

But Amy had worn a long, pink summer dress and was wrapped up in her skirts, sinking fast.

“Amy’s going under!” Nelson yelled, and like a skinny superhero he jumped in. But weighted by sneakers, jacket and all, he promptly began to sink, too.

When he bobbed up, ElsBeth saw he’d lost his glasses. Without them everyone knew he couldn’t see a thing. Then he disappeared again.

ElsBeth decided Nelson was in worse trouble than Amy and dived after him.

But before she touched the water, ElsBeth sensed motion above on the yacht and had time to see Johnny Two-feathers kick off his boat shoes, toss his windbreaker aside, and leap from the ship’s rail in a smooth swan dive like a young Aztec god. A moment later he surfaced with Amy and her volumes of dress securely under his arm.

Lisa Lee took up a lobster pot pole and fished Veronica out.

ElsBeth knew all the others were safe when she finally caught hold of Nelson. He fought her blindly but she dragged him to the surface.

“Amy! I can’t find Amy!” Nelson couldn’t see that Amy was already up on the pier, looking worriedly down at him.

“She’s safe, Nelson,” ElsBeth said, but he didn’t hear.

He continued to splash and hit out at her. They both went back under and sank fast into the dark.

The air in her lungs screamed. She wasn't ready to break the rules and use magic just yet, but almost. She dodged Nelson's kicking feet, got beneath him and pushed up. They both broke through.

ElsBeth gulped all the air she could while Nelson continued to thrash weakly, gasp and spit seawater.

Johnny tossed a life ring from the pier that perfectly lassoed Nelson, and ElsBeth guided him safely out of the water.

With one look at his blindly blinking eyes ElsBeth knew she had to go back for his glasses. So she dived back in and, OK, she broke the rules a little, and using her sixth or seventh sense, or whatever it was, she grabbed them away from a curious lobster.

Limp from her struggles, she barely managed to pull herself up on the pier, drop Nelson's glasses in his lap and flop onto her back. Above her, Robert frowned down from the yacht. He seemed surprised and genuinely puzzled by the commotion beneath him. And, oh no, she could hear his thoughts again. Loud, angry thoughts.

*"I should be away on open water by now and searching for treasure! Instead I'm stuck dockside, with a bunch of wet girls to deal with. And Nelson."*

He never let enter his scheming mind that *he* had caused all this.

ElsBeth stood up dripping but ready to give him an earful. Robert looked out to sea, his thoughts still churning, but finally said, "You girls can come aboard."

That Veronica had carried on with ever more fearful

threats, and that the sun was coming up in the sky on a day made for treasure hunting, had probably urged him toward this most sensible decision.

So—some wet, some dry, some mad, some even madder—the Cape crew was off.

But what was that black streak that crossed the plank just before it was pulled aboard?

Frankie swore he saw something. But when they all looked, there was nothing there.

## Chapter Four

### Storm Off the Vineyard



ElsBeth's hair started to frizz along with her mood. The rest of the drenched girls did not look at all pleased about the launch party, either. Even most of the boys looked uncomfortable that the girls were upset.

Hillman-Jones did not seem to care one bit about any of this. As they left the marina, he stood tall and looked completely content in command of his Uncle Preston's made-for-racing yacht, the *Sea Charmer*. He snapped out orders to raise the sails.

ElsBeth could see that Frankie wasn't just uncomfortable, he was upset, too, and her attitude softened—though she quickly found out his upset had nothing to do with the mean prank Hillman-Jones had pulled in the marina.

“Man, I saw a Boston cream pie in the kitchen this morning,” Frankie said to Johnny. “Some of that should have been in my lunch, but look . . .” He opened his backpack. “All I got is whoopie pies. My brothers will have first shot at the Boston cream, and I'm *sure* they won't leave me any. Some things can really get to a person.”

Johnny nodded, his expression carefully serious.

But ElsBeth had to laugh. Something about Frankie was just plain funny, no matter what else was going on. And it wasn't just his crew cut.

The sun rose warm and full and so did their spirits, and attentions on board turned to the pleasures of a sail in the bright Cape waters.

Lisa Lee opened her pack and took out an antique brass instrument covered with strange symbols. She said it was an astrolabe, used for finding a ship's position at sea. She showed them how it worked and explained in detail, painful technical detail, how she'd restored it with her father that summer.

Veronica rolled her eyes. ElsBeth poked her and whispered, “Don't tease. Lisa Lee likes science, you like fashion. What's the difference?”

Veronica whispered back, “You've got to be kidding.”

ElsBeth laughed quietly and Lisa Lee looked up, hurt.

“I'm sorry, Lisa Lee, but I'm not laughing at you. I'm laughing at her,” ElsBeth said, nodding at Veronica, who turned her head and rolled her eyes again so only ElsBeth

could see.

Across the deck Frankie practiced shadow boxing—he had ambitions of prizefighting like his Uncle Vittorio. Between rounds he tucked into his whoopie pies. ElsBeth was glad Frankie was part of their crew. You could count on Frankie.

They were well underway in the stiffening breeze between the Cape and Martha's Vineyard when Johnny said to Robert, "This sure is a beautiful ship."

"Yeah, she's just under forty feet and fitted for ocean travel. Custom modified for racing, of course."

"But what happened to the navigation and communication equipment?" Johnny asked.

"Oh, you know Uncle Preston. He always has to have the newest and best. The old equipment was pulled out so new stuff can go in next week."

"No problem. On a day like today only a blind man would need any help navigating." Johnny chuckled at his own joke, while the friendly morning sun beamed down on his bronze face.

But ElsBeth shivered. The castle she saw yesterday, and the strange funnel wind, and the dream she had, all nagged at her. *Her* radar was on high alert, and there was no way she could turn it off.

Other things niggled at her, too. Like Grandmother teaching her about their responsibility as witches to care for the natural world—but that castle, and the gulls and that wind, they certainly weren't natural, and she had no idea what to make of them.

Her thoughts continued to drift.



Her family . . . she still didn't know much about her family. Except Grandmother, of course. And Sylvanas, he was family. Her parents . . . well, that was a big, dark empty place. She didn't know what happened to them since just after she was born. Grandmother wouldn't tell her. Not yet anyway.

She *really* hoped she found out more soon, though. She was growing up, after all, and she could feel that her family history was important to her future.

These darkling thoughts rose up on her personal horizon, while Martha's Vineyard rolled closer every minute, but she began to feel better as she listened to what the others wanted to do on the island.

"I want to visit the Historical Museum," Veronica said, "and find out more about Cape fashions in the old days. There might be some interesting styles I can update and bring back."

Amy sat cross-legged, her dress almost dry. "I hope there'll be some street music today. And maybe some mimes. I love mimes."

Nelson's eyes hung on Amy, looking like he hoped he could just hang out with her for the day.

ElsBeth turned to Johnny Twofeathers. "I want to look for wild plants Grandmother can use in medicines."

Johnny said he'd heard of some marshes that might be good for that and he was up for exploring them, too.

Robert had obviously heard enough of this chatter. "Look, I don't care *what* you want to do. What we *are* going to do is search for treasure."

"What?" Veronica cut in. "That's ridiculous. You said we were going to Martha's Vineyard."

“Not exactly. I said we were going to sail *around* the islands. We’re not going *to* Martha’s Vineyard. We’re going to some out-of-the-way spots I mapped out.”

Robert pushed back his Black Dog cap. “So if you girls want to get off, you can take the dinghy. We have more important things to do than go sightseeing like a bunch of stupid tourists. We have work to do. Right, men?”

Frankie stopped inhaling his whoopie pie and nodded, but Nelson and Johnny looked embarrassed. They’d clearly forgotten “the plan” when talk had turned to fun on the Vineyard. “Right,” they added weakly.

Veronica huffed and puffed. She looked about to explode with some powerful arguments, and she could be a mighty arguer. Then the wind picked up.

They all watched as hills . . . then cliffs . . . then mountains of dark grey clouds swelled on the horizon and marched toward them. Fast. *Extremely* fast.

The yacht felt smaller and smaller under the covering sky.

Onboard no one moved.

Then, “Life jackets, everyone. Now!” Johnny yelled. Johnny knew weather. He’d been out on the tribe’s fishing boats since before he could walk.

Lisa Lee looked into the black swirl ahead and called out precisely in her flat, unemotional way, “Force 7 winds.”

Johnny Twofeathers grabbed some rope and tied it to the mainmast. Nelson followed Johnny’s lead, Frankie helped, and ElsBeth and Veronica joined in. Competent fingers, working quickly, tied ropes to the mast, and to each other.

~

With the activity on deck, the silent black form in the cabin below yawned to life and stretched. “Well, well,” Sylvanas purred. “As I thought. Trouble. And I’m just the cat to get us out of it.”

Sylvanas hadn’t yet examined the situation in depth, but he wasn’t worried. He’d seen too much and been through too much to get worried too quickly.

Someone had left a meatball sub on the shelf by the bed. Sylvanas pulled it over and began to chomp, to give himself strength. But mid-bite he flopped down and promptly fell back asleep.



Above, the ship twisted and crackled in the tossing sea. The wind snapped off the tops of white-capped waves and shot the spray into their bodies like bullets. ElsBeth braced herself and tried to slow down time, to make herself a quiet point in the middle of the wild.

Lisa Lee peered into the roiling water and shouted her grim calculations over the wind. “The yacht’s probable survival is about zero point five percent, based on projected wave size, wind velocity and the overall likelihood of being bashed against some rocks.”

Lisa Lee could be alarmingly negative at times in her cool, logical way.

“I don’t understand it,” Robert yelled to Johnny. “The forecast was for clear skies. Perfect for treasure hunting.”

“Yeah,” Johnny yelled back. “Our shortwave radio at home said it was going to be an ideal sailing day.”

As a witch ElsBeth had her own particular sense of the weather, and this wasn’t at all natural.

She forced her way against the wind over to Johnny. Johnny's grandfather was a Native American shaman (a word he said his tribe preferred to "medicine man"). In any case, sometimes there were things they both just "knew."

She held the rail with one hand and grabbed him with the other. They shared a look, and she could tell Johnny felt it, too—there was something supernatural behind this storm.

They'd also both been taught the only way to handle a scary situation with anything supernatural was straight-ahead, dead-on. They held tight to the rail and bent into the wind.

The salt spray stung but ElsBeth forced her eyes open, then wider when she recognized South Wind. Sylvanas had joined her on deck to look around and they silently agreed they had to find out from South Wind what was going on. But a wave pushed the *Sea Charmer* hard, and Sylvanas scampered below. The deck slipped away, and a wall of water crashed over them.

ElsBeth was tied to the mast but was still washed half-over the rail. She pulled herself up and scanned the deck. Hillman-Jones was at the helm, lashed in, but was bent over and holding his side. The wheel must have knocked into him.

Frankie and Nelson boxed Amy and Veronica between them. Everyone was soaked. Lisa Lee huddled under the mast, now yelling something technical about this "impossible course change." But Johnny . . . where was Johnny Twofeathers?

There. Behind a rolled sail, on the deck, unmoving.

ElsBeth shouted to Hillman-Jones but her words were

swallowed in the wind's roar. She needed a little magic. It was *really* not OK to use magic with other people but this was an emergency.

She sent a silent streamer of pure intention to Robert with the thought, "Hold on tight, but get Frankie and come forward. We have to get Johnny to the cabin."

Robert's head whipped around and their eyes met.

Robert was clearly hurt but he scrambled over to Frankie and pointed to the bow. Nothing could be heard over that wind, and ElsBeth hoped Robert didn't wonder how she'd gotten through to him—but there was no chance to wonder long or very much in this storm.

The boys struggled to carry their friend below.

~

ElsBeth led the way into the cabin. Frankie was about to put Johnny's head on the bunk when a lump under the blanket moved. Frankie froze. He stared spellbound at the shifting shape and started to back away.

ElsBeth now heard *Frankie's* thoughts in her head.

*"This is sinister! Maybe it's a headless seaman—like a headless horseman but at sea."*

Frankie's thoughts were out of control. His body was, too. His heart boomed and he quivered like Jell-0.

Robert was holding Johnny's legs and he couldn't see why they'd stopped. He tried to push forward. But Frankie was a big guy and he wasn't going anywhere.

A rough black form crept from the covers and aimed a slanted green eye straight at Frankie.

Frankie squealed.

Sylvanas turned a lazy head and smiled white teeth at the paralyzed boy.

ElsBeth was embarrassed when she saw Frankie trying to hold himself from wetting his pants—which were already soaked, so at least no one would notice.

Thankfully Frankie finally focused and saw—it was only a cat, even if it *was* Sylvanas.

ElsBeth looked down at Johnny. He didn't look like he was breathing and panic clawed at her. Then she remembered what the lifeguards taught them on Beach Safety Day.

“Robert, help me roll him over.” They tugged Johnny onto his side and ElsBeth pounded his back. She whacked him hard, over and over.

“Are you trying to kill him?” Hillman-Jones howled.

Johnny's chest heaved, and a great gout of seawater gushed from his mouth and onto Robert's expensive boat shoes.

“Eww, that's disgusting,” Frankie said.

Johnny coughed and spat, but he was breathing. ElsBeth was so thankful she'd paid attention at Beach Safety class. This was as good as magic.

But it was all too much for Sylvanas and he jumped off the bunk. He snagged a bag of turkey jerky on his way down and set out to investigate the goings-on. At his own pace.

ElsBeth knew Sylvanas wasn't going to rush into anything. Unless it involved doughnuts, or a few other select items.

“How did that cat get aboard?” Robert asked.

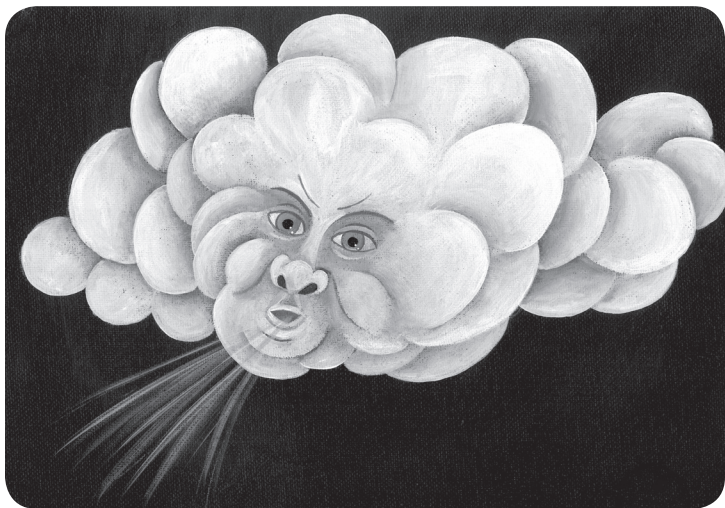
ElsBeth said nothing. She could see that Sylvanas was on a mission and was not to be interrupted, by her or anyone. She was just glad he was here with them—even if he was someone else to worry about.

ElsBeth took a deep breath, and had a new thought. She was just a young witch and this weather was a powerful enchantment.

She looked again at Johnny and took another deep breath.

But if anyone used magic and one of her friends got really hurt . . . she was *not* going to put up with it. She *had* to get to the bottom of this.

She climbed back into the stinging storm, more determined with each step.



## Chapter Five

### Magic and Science

Back on deck ElsBeth looked South Wind square in the face. “Why?” she demanded, and two very different things happened at once.

One was an earsplitting crash, which could have passed for thunder but ElsBeth knew better. It was some kind of magic. The other was her grandmother’s voice, carrying lightly through the storm on its own breeze. “ElsBeth, remember. Sometimes it’s OK to break the rules.”

*These* were followed by an echo that sounded like her familiar, Professor Badinoff. “Think, ElsBeth. We can’t be with you now. You must think for yourself, just as I taught you.”

And if she felt before that she was only a young witch, alone against potent magic, she felt even more at sea now.

ElsBeth really wanted to talk with Grandmother, and Professor Badinoff, but that was not going to happen. So just to let them know she was OK, she thought the loudest thought she could, and sent it to them as directly as she could, “I HEARD YOU.”



Now she had something serious to think about. Her grandmother had never before said she could do magic by herself—that was the “Big Rule.”

Most of the time this had been fine by her. ElsBeth knew magic could be tricky and you could make a real mess of things if you didn’t know what you were doing. The “Big Rule” didn’t seem so Big now, though, and didn’t even seem like a Rule.

She *wanted* to think for herself. She knew this meant more freedom, and was how she’d be able to make her own future. She just didn’t expect more freedom to feel so much like . . . more responsibility. And she thought her future was supposed to be . . . in the future.

ElsBeth got herself wound up in all this and for the moment she forgot about the strange thunder-like sound from the sky.



Sylvanus, however, had not forgotten. When he was up on deck in the storm he’d felt a ghostly presence behind South Wind. Then disaster had struck. Sea spray had splashed his beautiful black self.

He vowed horrible revenge on the being behind all this. Sylvanus would not let anyone who dared get him wet go unpunished. They would be sorry. Oh, yes, they would.

He stalked the ship, searching for signs of magical interference, but had trouble focusing. He felt a little “off,” and he began to wander and weave from rail to rail.

The turkey jerky, he realized, was full of preservatives. “I’ve been poisoned,” he moaned, and negative thoughts whirled through him. He wasn’t used to artificial ingredients and he wondered how he could survive the day with-

out Hannah Goodspell's excellent cooking.



ElsBeth tried again to reach South Wind but could not get through. One of her best skills, though, was calming the winds in storms near the Cape, to protect the fishing boats and the fish. She'd practiced this with Grandmother from the widow's walk on the roof of their home.

So she did the best thing she could. She turned away from her friends, and "singing" a little above the range of sound, she cast a spell that settled the raging wind for a few feet above the deck and made them all safer.

A short moment later Lisa Lee called out, "I calculated the probability of this unusual new wind pattern and found it more than ninety-nine percent improbable. This means," she added, to be clear, "it's basically beyond any accurate scientific measurement or explanation."

ElsBeth smiled.



The crew was quiet now, catching their breath from the shock of the storm and the strange sudden calm on deck.

Lisa Lee stood up. Her glasses glistened with drops of seawater as she glanced around and announced, "I think we're following the Gulf Stream north."

Maybe worried that someone would make fun of her, she quickly continued. "Did you know Benjamin Franklin tried to get the English to use the Gulf Stream, after the Revolutionary War, to speed up mail ships from England to America?"

She got a few curious looks but no reply so she answered herself. "Yes, and American mail ships could save

two weeks on each trip over to England—when they used water temperature, water color, and the speed that bubbles travelled in the water, in order to follow the Gulf Stream.”

Veronica, who’d been staring at a broken fingernail, seemed to come back to life. ElsBeth knew Veronica liked history, and secretly liked science. It did seem odd, though, coming from Veronica, who pretended interest in nothing but fashion and boys, when the words “What do you think about using ocean energy to replace a lot of the oil we use?” escaped through her pretty mouth.

Lisa Lee looked at Veronica like a long lost sister. “My favorite subject.” She pushed her glasses up on her nose and began to explain the unique designs she’d come up with to use the tides for power.

So while serious science was discussed below the mainmast, ElsBeth worked her simple magic to keep the ship steady, though this only made the *Sea Charmer* go faster. They were heading up the New England coast, as far as she could tell, like a high-speed train but on the ocean—while the strange weather hovered just above them.

Magic and the “real world” were different, of course. Magic, ElsBeth knew perfectly well, had its own rules, and you could *feel* the difference.

Magic was a little more “alive” than just alive, in her opinion. A little more exciting, sometimes even a little more dangerous. The natural world could be incredibly beautiful and had its own grace, but could seem a little more tame, more predictable at least.

In any case ElsBeth was drawn to the magic in the wind. She let herself feel the wind all around her, and she could tell the wind wasn’t evil. There was some evil *con-*

*nected* with the storm, and some danger. But that seemed more to do with what was up ahead of them, and with “the land” rather than with being at sea.

She could also feel that the storm was anchored to the yacht by a strong magnetic field. This *did* worry her, and worried her a lot. A magnetic field had its own complications.

She knew people would be searching for them soon, if they weren’t already. But in this storm, and with the interference of the magnetic field, and no communications equipment, she wasn’t sure even the Cape Cod Coast Guard could find them.

Magic and science had almost certainly made them invisible.



Hours passed, and it wasn’t as dangerous on deck now. But with control of the ship apparently in other hands—though exactly *whose* hands was still a mystery—the Cape sailors began to get bored and hungry. Grandmother called this “the most dangerous combination.”

ElsBeth had already shared her sandwiches. The acorn butter with beach plum jam was popular. So was the cheddar cheese, garden tomato and sprouts with Grandmother’s amazing oatmeal bread. But those were gone hours ago.

“I’m not going to share my food with you guys,” Hillman-Jones said, “especially you, Frankie. You had a backpack full this morning and now it’s completely empty.”

“I thought everybody brought food.” Frankie clearly felt bad, but Hillman-Jones wasn’t going to make it easy for him. The most immediate danger, ElsBeth thought, might be a fight breaking out.

She had to get attention off boredom and hungry bodies—and off the not-much-talked-about-but-constant-worry that their parents didn't know where they were.

She said, "Maybe we should split up into watches and take turns handling the ship."

"Yeah," Nelson said. "When we go out for a week fishing we take four-hour watches. All the best crews do that."

ElsBeth was about to volunteer when a head appeared from below. They all turned as Johnny stepped up on deck.

"Johnny, you're OK!" ElsBeth was relieved, though he still looked pale.

"Yeah, I don't know what happened. A big wave hit, and I held my breath as long as I could. The next thing I knew I was spitting up seawater all over Robert. Then I was out again."

"Grandmother says when you've been through a lot you need to sleep, and most of the time that will get you better all by itself," ElsBeth said.

"My mom says vitamin C will cure almost anything," Veronica added. ElsBeth agreed, but since they didn't have any vitamin C she didn't see how it helped any to say that.

"Ya . . . so, you guys are assigning watches?" Johnny asked.

ElsBeth knew Johnny didn't like paying much attention to being sick or hurt. He said his grandfather told him once, and it had always worked for him, "Helping is the best medicine. If you don't feel good you should find a way to help and you'll soon feel better." ElsBeth had tried that and it worked for her, too.

"I can spell Robert at the wheel," Johnny said.

Veronica patted her hair, which mysteriously looked perfect again despite the wind and spray that left everyone else looking like drowned animals. “I’ll take over after Johnny,” she said.

Amy, ElsBeth and Nelson agreed to take turns as look-outs—watching for land, boats or other obstacles.

Frankie was taking a long and necessary bathroom break after eating a full dozen whoopie pies and he temporarily missed out on an assignment.

“I don’t need much sleep,” Lisa Lee said. “I’ll keep track of our location. We’ll need to know where we are when the wind dies down. And how we’re going to get back home.”

A problem, ElsBeth thought, that was getting more difficult by the hour.

Chapter Six  
Greenland (Or Save the Polarbears)

ElsBeth watched the purple-pink dawn break up ahead of the *Sea Charmer*, while the thick storm cloud still held right over them. They found the yacht handled nicely as long as they didn't try to steer away from the wind. Veronica had the helm, grinning like a pirate. For all her girly ways Veronica had the heart of a bold adventurer.

And despite her worries ElsBeth relished the brisk passage, until angry clicks and whistles erupted from a pod of startled whales just a few feet off the bow. The largest one arched his enormous grey back out of the choppy sea and groaned, "You should be more careful, you might have hit us. We're endangered, you know."

Another whale surfaced and boomed, "What's the *rush*, little witch? You're supposed to protect us!" He blew a waterspout high in the sky, like an exclamation point to their rant.

ElsBeth didn't generally take criticism well and the whales' scolding annoyed her. Hadn't she led the class discussion about safer fishing practices to protect the sea ani-

mals? Didn't she get the whole village to help with beach cleanup this summer? Hadn't she and Grandmother enchanted the wind and waves to keep a whale from beaching last year?

It wasn't *her* fault the ship was racing along like this. She was doing all she could to keep everyone safe. ElsBeth sulked, feeling wrongly accused, until Nelson popped up from the cabin where he'd had a turn sleeping. Then she couldn't stop the giggles that bubbled out of her. One side of Nelson's hair stuck straight up and the other side was completely flat. Even Amy, who was always kind to everyone and hated to hurt anyone's feelings, couldn't hide a smile.

Nelson was flustered by the attention and dazed in the morning light. Until Amy walked over and smoothed down his hair—then Nelson went into a different kind of daze and floated around smiling and patting his head.

Amy's kindness had put ElsBeth in a better mood, too. Then Robert showed up.

Last night when they'd been talking, Robert said his Uncle Preston wouldn't be mad at him for taking the yacht. In his family it was considered "high-spirited" to "borrow" someone's "personal transportation." His parents wouldn't be angry, they never got angry with him. Nani would be worried, though, and he hated to get her in trouble. And at least he was thinking about somebody other than himself for a change.

But he'd apparently woken up grouchy this morning—maybe it finally came to him he wasn't going to be doing any treasure hunting—and he growled at ElsBeth when he saw her smiling.

The uncomfortable quiet on deck that followed in the



wake of Robert's bad mood was broken by a yell from below. Frankie ran up from the hatch. "I found food!" His arms held jar after jar of peanut butter.

"That must be Uncle Preston's stash," Hillman-Jones said. "He loves peanut butter, especially this kind. He says it's the very best organic brand. We're saved. We won't starve even if we don't hit land for days." Robert's mood shifted like a windblown cloud.

Frankie opened a jar, and with a group sigh of relief they crowded around for fingers-full.

"I hope you know this isn't sanitary," Veronica said, as she stuck a well-manicured fingertip in, too, the peanut butter contrasting nicely with her red, white and blue nails.

"That's open to debate," Lisa Lee said. "Some theories say our superior hygiene in the United States is weakening our immune systems. Those scientists might argue we're better off slobbering all over each other's peanut butter."

"Whatever," Frankie said, swallowing with his eyes closed in the joy of the moment.



The days eased into a rhythm. Watches were held. Meals of peanut butter were licked up. Stories were told. Sometimes Nelson sang one of his favorite Beatles songs and Amy and Veronica joined in, sounding really good together. It was kind of like unsupervised summer camp at sea.

But the idea there was something unnatural, and important, behind the wind continued to haunt ElsBeth, and that night she tried again to get through. All she got for her trouble this time was a distant, though not unfriendly, laugh. She vowed again to get to the bottom of this, but she

nodded off and did her worrying in her sleep.

“ElsBeth, wake up. It’s your watch.” Johnny shook her gently.

She rubbed her eyes and sat up. “Sorry, Johnny. Any news?”

“We still seem to be traveling along the Gulf Stream. Lisa Lee thinks we may hit the Northern Drift soon.”

“What’s the Northern Drift?” ElsBeth yawned but was interested.

“Well, the Gulf Stream is like a river in the ocean. It runs up along the east coast of the United States, heads across the Atlantic just south of Greenland, and then splits. Part of it goes south toward Spain and Africa, and part of it, the Northern Drift, goes north. Lisa Lee thinks we’re going to hit the Drift.”

“Are we going to the North Pole?”

“Not likely.” Johnny smiled. “Maybe closer to Greenland.”

Johnny seemed to know what he was talking about but he didn’t say any more except, “I’m off to sleep now. See you later.”

ElsBeth stretched and looked at the sky. The storm overhead still blew near gale force. Lisa Lee said it was about thirty-five miles per hour, which was hard to believe because on deck now it just felt like a gentle, smooth pressure at their backs. Moving toward the bow was easy, if you didn’t wear a big jacket that could turn you into a human sail.

They almost lost Nelson that way the first afternoon. The wind caught his too-big nylon jacket and he sailed

up to the top of the mast before they could get him down. Thank goodness they were still tied together then.

Nelson was tied to Frankie, who acted like an anchor. Lisa Lee turned Frankie around and around, winding him in the rope until he looked like an Egyptian mummy, and Nelson was pulled back safely to the deck. “Like a winch for winding down the sails,” according to Lisa Lee, who tried to explain the science of this, but talk turned to how the others wanted to go for a ride, too.

ElsBeth moved to the rail. The stars ahead winked in the night and the familiar moon seemed to want to let her know everything was going to be OK.

She wasn’t so sure. They couldn’t live on peanut butter forever. And what magic was pushing them toward Greenland, anyway? And why?

ElsBeth didn’t think many people lived on Greenland. She remembered in geography class the island was named “Greenland” by some clever Vikings who wanted people to think it was a wonderful, green place to live—while most of *them* lived in Iceland, which was really much *greener*. This was a little confusing but mostly just didn’t seem honest.

ElsBeth took hold of her wandering thoughts and forced her mind back to what was behind the wind.

Sylvanus joined her on deck again. ElsBeth noticed his belly was significantly larger than at the start of the cruise and she wondered how many jars of Maranatha Organic Smooth Peanut Butter the clever cat had managed to get into. She watched him carefully clean his paws of some last bits. At least he seemed fortified, and she hoped he would now add his attention to the magical dilemma.

“Sylvanus,” ElsBeth said, “for some reason I think it’s a ghost behind the wind.” And just as she finished these words, a deep eerie “*Ooooh*” came out of the clouds.

Whoever was out there was making fun of her! She shouted at the sky, “Come down here and show yourself!”

Frankie called from the helm, “Who are you yelling at?”

ElsBeth cringed. “Sorry, Frankie, I didn’t mean to bother you. Just yelling. You know how it is.”

Then out of the sky came a booming laugh.

“It sounds like two different beings. What do you think, Sylvanus?”

The shrewd cat narrowed his brows and purred, “*Twoooo.*”

This time ElsBeth thought-yelled at the sky, “I want to talk to you. Come here!”

A *third* voice then quaked like thunder. And all together they teased the little witch, “*Commangetussss.*”

“This isn’t funny one bit,” ElsBeth thought-shouted back. “People are worried about us. And you are cowards.”

No reply, but ElsBeth felt a shift in mood from whoever they were. Maybe she was getting through. She hoped so.

They had to reach land soon. They needed some real food, and they *had* to let their families back home know they were all right.

ElsBeth settled into her watch and listened for any other messages from the sky, but soon again drifted off into deep dreamless rest.

ElsBeth came closer to waking and knew she wasn’t

dreaming now. Her body wasn't awake but her *mind* woke up. And she realized—this is a *call*.

The wind was calling the ship across the sea. But the ghosts behind the wind were calling *her*.

There was *another* spirit, too. A most ancient spirit, older than the three ghosts. Connected *deeply* with the natural world. This spirit also called her, and ElsBeth felt *this* pull right through to her bones.

She came even closer to waking, but not quite.

She felt light, lighter than air. And like a kite catching the wind, she lifted out of her body and up through the clouds, into the pretty night sky over the ship. She knew the air was cold, but she didn't feel cold. The stars were clearer than she'd ever seen. She went up and up, and as she did she felt ever more calm and more safe.

There was snow-covered land on her left to the north. Behind her was another large landmass, which looked like the east coast of the United States. She could see Maine and Cape Cod jutting out into the ocean. In front of her, where the yacht was headed, she saw two islands that looked like Ireland and England on the map they had in the classroom last year.

This was a great way to learn geography, she thought.

She began to glide lower while she still moved north. She flew faster and faster. She didn't see any roads, just snow and ice. She thought this must be Greenland.

She went lower still, and finally came upon a well-crafted, lodge-style home in the middle of an endless snowfield. A small, old, wrinkly-faced brown man with bright almond eyes stood outside the dwelling. He was clothed completely in fur and patted a fluffy animal, which looked

more wolf than dog. As if agreeing, the animal gave a soulful howl.

The man looked straight at ElsBeth, and though she didn't have her body with her, he seemed to see her OK.

"Young witch," he said. It didn't seem like he was speaking English but she understood him fine. "I want to show you something."

He smiled at ElsBeth and she realized he must have left his body, too. Because his body stayed with the dog and his smile took off ahead of her and led the way. They flew over snow and glacier for miles and miles and miles.

ElsBeth wasn't sure where they were going or why, but Grandmother said there were people in life we could learn from. People who had seen things that needed to be seen. Things that couldn't be seen with a short look. Things that needed a long look.

ElsBeth found she was surprised, but pleased, to be having these deep thoughts.

"There." He pointed to the edge of the ice. It was breaking into the ocean.

What a beautiful sight, she thought, as a blue-green wall of ice split off and dropped slowly into the blue-black water.

"No, look closer," the old man urged.

She did. On a small iceberg she saw a polar bear with two cubs. They were too thin. The mother looked up at them and crowded closer to her cubs.

"They don't look well," ElsBeth said.

"They are not well, little witch."

"Can we help them?"

“That is why I called you here. Soon you will have a chance to change things in the world, and I want you to remember what you see here, and understand.” The old man’s smile faded, his voice grew serious.

“Poisons are increasing in the ocean and on earth, and all life suffers for it.”

ElsBeth knew a lot about pollution. Grandmother worked hard to keep it from Cape Cod.

The man spoke quietly, sadly, then angrily. “There is an imbalance between what some men want and the natural world. Something *can* be done. But it will take strong people, who take the long look. You are young but you are strong.”

His smile returned. “All change begins with just one person—a person who takes the long look, and then decides to do something.”

The long look . . . and ElsBeth looked. She looked at some of the big questions she had in her own yet short life—about her family, and the importance of caring for the natural world, about thinking for herself, and being called by the wind and the ghosts.

She didn’t understand any more about these things, but felt now she *could* understand them.

She wanted to talk more with the old man. But he had drifted off, and then sailed away to the east. Just as quickly, ElsBeth was pulled back to the *Sea Charmer*.



“Wake up, ElsBeth, wake up.” Amy’s yellow-blond banana curls hung in her face. “I think you were having a nightmare,” she whispered. “You kept mumbling, ‘They’re starving’ and something about ‘the long look.’ What did

you mean, ElsBeth?”

“The polar bears are not well.”

“I *know*. I watch *Animal Planet* all the time! But what can we do? We’re just kids.”

ElsBeth looked at her friend. “We *can* do *something*, if we take the long look. And *together* we can do even more.” ElsBeth stopped. She realized she was thinking for herself, just like Professor Badinoff had taught her.

“I’m not sure what you mean, ElsBeth. But I *really* want to help the polar bears. And the whales! And all endangered species.”

Amy had a big heart, and it was as pure as her golden curls. But ElsBeth knew a big heart alone would not be enough. They were going to have to do something and it probably wasn’t going to be easy.

The girls sat together a while longer and watched the stars, which shone in front of the clouds that still clung darkly overhead.





## Chapter Seven

### Creatures of the Night

The next morning the crew was edgy and determined to complain.

Veronica said, to no one in particular, “I’ve been wearing the same outfit since we left the Cape and I like to change at least twice a day. I wish you guys would get us over to land. Any land, at this point, as long as they have a shower and a place to go shopping.” She looked sharply at Johnny, who now held the helm.

“I keep trying, Veronica, but every time I go against the current and the wind, the yacht creaks and groans like it’s going to come apart. *Then* where would we be?” Johnny filled in his own answer. “In the middle of the Atlantic Ocean on a life raft. And I don’t think we’d last long. At least we have peanut butter, and no one’s been lost overboard. Considering the winds, it’s a miracle.”

Amy tried to smooth the waters. “As soon as we get ashore, we can get some new clothes. Lisa Lee says we’re bound to land soon. Maybe even in Europe, where we can get different styles than we have at home.”

Veronica allowed a small smile. She often fussed she didn't get a chance to shop off-Cape that much.

Hillman-Jones was surprisingly positive this morning, but unsurprisingly thinking only about himself again. "You know, we might find some treasure yet. We're sure to pass some islands, and it's just a matter of time before we come across an island with some pirate gold or silver. It's a well-known fact a high percentage of islands have buried treasure."

"You just wait a minute, Robert," Veronica said. "If you hadn't wanted to go treasure hunting in the first place, we'd all be back on the Cape right now, eating regular food and getting ready for school."

Frankie perked up on "regular food." But on "school" he and Nelson looked around like, well . . . this wasn't *all* bad.

ElsBeth had her own thoughts about school, and not all of them happy or nice. She couldn't blame their situation on Robert's treasure hunting, though. She knew *she* was the reason the wind had taken them. But she couldn't exactly talk about that, either.

Lisa Lee crouched over her notes, ignoring the chatter. Then she stood up in front of the others. "I've done the calculations, and we're getting close to Ireland. If we continue on this heading we may reach land sometime today."

Cheers exploded.

And with excitement in the air they set about cleaning up the yacht. They were from Cape Cod, after all, and took pride in their vessel. They even took turns scrubbing out the empty peanut butter jars for recycling.

Johnny said he wasn't sure they recycled in Ireland.

“Europe is definitely ahead of us on that,” Lisa Lee said. “They don’t have all the space we do so they had to work out how to handle their trash long before we did.”

“Necessity sparks innovation,” Veronica added smartly. ElsBeth wondered where in the world she got some of her ideas. But once all was shipshape, the crew lined the rails to look for land.

Then—the sun went out.

“Fog bank,” Johnny said. “Never seen one come on so fast and thick, though.”

“Probably a nearby landmass,” Lisa Lee said matter-of-factly. “There will be islands and rocks, and the probability of smashing into something is greater than eighty percent. I’m sorry I cannot be more precise.”

ElsBeth’s irritation at Lisa Lee’s logic-based negativity finally burst. “Just because the odds are against us doesn’t mean that’s what’s *going* to happen. We’ve made it this far, and we need to believe in ourselves. No matter what *usually* happens.”

Lisa Lee looked stunned, and wounded, and ElsBeth realized she couldn’t ever remember getting upset with Lisa Lee before.

“You may be right, ElsBeth,” Lisa Lee said quietly. “Probability does not predict things correctly all the time. I should think more about how my conclusions could affect others.” A tear laked in the corner of her eye and then overflowed onto her cheek.

Now ElsBeth felt bad. Lisa Lee’s calculations were probably just her way to try to keep a safe distance from having to face a scary reality straight on. ElsBeth hugged her friend and whispered, “I’m sorry, Lisa Lee. I think

we're all probably pretty scared."

The fog *had* really spooked them, but ElsBeth wasn't going to give up. "Let's use the sounding poles to test how deep the water is and keep the ship away from rocks and shallows."

Johnny agreed. "We can take turns."

They worked hard, but at the speed they were traveling they couldn't take soundings. Nelson lost the first pole right away, and Frankie lost the second soon after. Even ElsBeth began to think it was impossible to keep the yacht from crashing.

Johnny kept his head and said they should wear life jackets at all times. Using the ship's whistle they practiced over and over sprinting into the life raft.

The peanut butter stocks were low, too. Frankie got lots of suspicious looks but claimed innocence, and he didn't look any bigger than at the beginning of the trip. Sylvanus, on the other hand, now looked like a furry black basketball with legs.



On and on, blinded by the fog. Sometimes they heard the swish of waves, like they were passing land or another vessel, or something big was in the water. There were other noises, too, like cries or howls, and these were the worst.

It seemed like evening, though it was hard to tell in the fog, when South Wind eased. ElsBeth asked him what was happening. Not out loud, of course. She was careful not to do that now. She thought the question at him, and didn't really expect him to answer but he did.

"You're on your own," South Wind sighed, and he slumped off tiredly and fell away.

Right away they all felt the change. “I can handle the ship now,” Johnny said, “I’d feel better if this fog would lift, though.” His words skated across the now quiet water, and as if in reply the fog did begin to slowly rise.

Frankie said, “I don’t think we’re in Kansas anymore.”

“Not funny,” Robert said.

As the fog continued to lighten, huge rock walls appeared on both sides of the *Sea Charmer* and towered over them. “I can’t believe it,” Lisa Lee said. “But I think this is the northwest coast of *Scotland*. We seem to be headed down a wide inlet. They’re called ‘sea lochs’ here, ‘loch’ meaning ‘lake.’”

“I don’t care right now if it’s Jupiter,” Veronica said. “It’s land!”

The loch went on and on ahead with no end in sight. Johnny said, “I wonder if there are any towns around here.”

“I don’t even see a house,” Nelson said, scanning the cliffs.

“Unfortunately, the northern part of Scotland, if that’s where we are, is pretty empty and wild,” Robert said. “Last summer my family toured Edinburgh and Glasgow, down south. But the Highlands,” he added with a smile, “aren’t anything like Main Street Hyannis in the summer.”

“No grocery stores? No fast food? I’m going to go crazy,” Frankie said.

“Don’t freak out, Frankie,” Veronica said. “All we have to do is find one house, ask to use their phone, and get hold of our families. They’ll take care of getting us somewhere we can shop and have a nice dinner.”

“It’s about dinnertime now,” Amy said. “Maybe they’ll

invite us in and share. My dad says most people like to help strangers, if they can.”

Nelson sighed. ElsBeth loved this sweet girl, too, but she didn't feel quite as hopeful about what might lie ahead.

What she *did* feel, and the words came to mind like a neon sign: “This is where I've been called. This is where I will face what I have to do . . . and the enemy.”

Strange, because other than Hillman-Jones, and of course her dreaded teacher Ms. Finch, she had never thought of anyone as an enemy.

Fear began to crawl in on her, and she watched its determined progress. Then she felt a flash of shame and decided—Grandmother taught me better than that! She was from a long line of witches, and they didn't just fold up and fly away when the situation got rough.

ElsBeth hung back toward the stern, away from the others. She listened to her friends with half an ear but concentrated on the magic here. Different forces were at play. She could feel the presence and the moods of different beings, but nothing clear. She gave herself over to the place—and the tiny hairs on the back of her neck stood up straight.

A piercing wail shot down the seawall. A porpoise breached the surface beside the yacht. A seal slipped off a rock ledge and something else, small and smooth, splashed nearby.

What beautiful creatures, she thought.

“We *are* beautiful,” chirped the porpoise. “But watch out for the seals! Some of them are selkies, and they can be terribly temperamental. I wouldn't trust a selkie. Ever.”

“What's a selkie?” ElsBeth asked.

“You must not be from around here.” The porpoise went on patiently. “Selkies are seals that sometimes turn into humans. They’re always beautiful when they’re people, and they can sing sweet songs that enchant. They love their human forms, but they love the sea better and they always return.

“My advice is never trust a selkie.” The porpoise was quite definite on that point, but ElsBeth still wasn’t completely clear about all this.

“Are there magical beings here other than selkies?” she asked.

“What do you think *I* am?”

Every creature had *some* magic, of course. ElsBeth knew some just had more than others. And now she’d insulted her first new friend in this place.

“Of course. I’m sorry. I meant people with magic. Like witches, or maybe ghosts.”

But when she said “ghosts,” the porpoise dived under and swam away, and ElsBeth felt muddled and all wrong.

Johnny joined her at the stern rail. He took her shoulders and turned her to face him. “I know you’re distracted, ElsBeth. I feel something, too. But we need to get the yacht to shore while we still have some light, and we need all eyes on watch. Help us look, OK?”

“You’re right, Johnny. Of course.”

Nelson now had the wheel. He started the engines and they went farther into the loch. They divided into teams and ElsBeth paired up with Veronica on the starboard side. “You look for buildings or people,” Veronica said gravely. “I’ll look for rocks.”

It was getting dark fast and they were all straining to see. “If we don’t spot something soon,” Nelson called out, “we’re going to have to drop anchor. It’s getting too dangerous to keep going.”

ElsBeth caught a glint of something high on the steep rock wall. It was moving fast toward what looked like the top of a castle—a round stone turret topped by a staff and pennant.

This place seemed familiar. *This* was the castle she’d seen back on the Cape at the library! And she had the inexplicable feeling like this was “home.”

Another cry wrenched her attention back into the darkness.

A low laugh, and a *swoosh*, and a crack. Something heavy bumped the ship.

Amy’s teeth clattered. Nelson tried to calm her by saying, “Must be some unusual birds around here.”

“Yeah,” Hillman-Jones said roughly, apparently trying to calm himself.

ElsBeth didn’t know if they should keep going and try to find a safer place, or stop here. She knew this was where she’d been called, and part of her really wanted to stop—but that part of her then got scared silly.

When she realized she was becoming afraid again, she *really* made up her mind. Grandmother always said, “Don’t give in to fear or it will turn you into a mouse.”

ElsBeth never understood if Grandmother meant she’d turn into a *real* mouse, or what. But this was not the time to find out. She calmed and pointed. “I see a building. At the top of the hill.”



“It’s beautiful,” Amy said. “It looks like a fairy castle.”

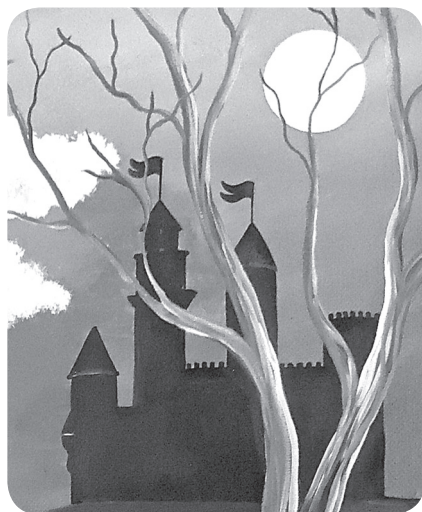
Lisa Lee adjusted her glasses. “Norman keep, probably built in the 1200’s. Added to in the 1600’s, and looks modernized this century. Oh, ‘keep’ is just another name for the main tower of a castle.” Lisa Lee’s vast knowledge didn’t surprise anyone anymore. Still, it was pretty impressive she could tell all that in the almost-dark.

“I see a floating dock just ahead,” Nelson called out, “next to a tiny rock beach. It’s nearly completely hidden in that small cove. Looks like someone wants this place to be invisible.”

That sent another shiver down ElsBeth’s spine.

Nelson carefully pulled the yacht alongside the dock. He took his job at the helm seriously. “We should tie up,” he said, “and take extra precautions. Frankie, drop anchor.”

And, with a plop, their adventure, ElsBeth thought, had probably just begun.



## Chapter Eight

### A Swim with a Selkie

Sylvanus was catnapping when Veronica came into the cabin for a last check and cleanup. She tried to smooth the blankets but it was Sylvanus, again, making a lump.

Sylvanus preferred a happy chaos to uncomfortable order, and felt roughed up and abused by all this neatening up of his sleeping quarters. He stretched resentfully and waddled up on deck, where he found the crew about to go ashore.

Johnny, without doubt the most responsible seaman on board as Sylvanus saw it, asked Robert, “Shouldn’t someone stay with the yacht?”

“Do you see anybody around who’s going to take it, Johnny?” Nervousness seemed to make Hillman-Jones more bad-tempered than usual, and Sylvanus filed this observation in his crafty mind for possible later use. It was always good to know how to annoy those who annoyed you, and Robert was a first-rate annoyer.

“No, but let’s face it,” Johnny said. “That was an powerful wind, and we can’t count on the weather to stay

calm. Don't you think your Uncle Preston would want us to watch her? She's a beautiful craft."

"Uncle Preston's going to be so happy to hear we're all right he won't give a second thought about the yacht."

Johnny stepped back and looked at Robert like that totally didn't make any sense at all and really wasn't smart, and Sylvanus agreed. But Johnny just shook his head and joined the others going ashore.

~

ElsBeth was right behind Frankie when they stepped off the *Sea Charmer*—and a sharp shriek again tore the still darkness. Frankie jumped straight up and came down in his most aggressive boxing stance. From fear to fierce in less than a second.

"What *is* that?" Amy whimpered.

ElsBeth turned to her friend, but Nelson was right there and said, "Don't worry, Amy."

Nelson was as white as the moon himself. His glasses had fogged up and his skinny body vibrated in the damp cold. No doubt to make *him* feel better, Amy said, "Thanks, Nelson. I'm glad you're here."

The next scream was even closer and Amy started to cry. "I wasn't scared when we were in that terrible storm. But I'm scared now. This place is so creepy."

They crowded together on the small rocky beach, facing the steep cliff wall. They couldn't see much in the late evening light. But ElsBeth was surprised, now she was here, that she wasn't *that* scared.

She *was* worried. There was an enemy here, a "gorgeous" enemy she thought again, whatever that was. But

if she was really honest, and she knew she had to be, she didn't know if she was smart enough to know or figure out what to do.

She was particularly worried about her friends. She knew they were her responsibility, and that bigger worry made her feel even less smart.

She knew *some* magic, and everything Grandmother had taught her. She had her friends, including Sylvanus. And . . . ready or not . . . she knew for sure there was something here she *had* to do.

She felt the stones beneath her feet, looked again at the rock wall . . . and noticed, a little way off down the loch, green lights that wavered and flickered just above the land.

Lisa Lee saw, too, and said, "Will-o'-the-wisp. That light is swamp gas. Must be a marsh nearby. Superstitious people think it's caused by fairies and elves, but it's only gas made by decaying plants. In certain weather it appears to light up."

"You mean like the swamp is farting?" Frankie said.

"Frankie, that's disgusting," Veronica said. "Don't talk like that around me."

Another wail, louder and closer still, and they huddled tight.

ElsBeth, though, found the sad call strangely comforting, an ancient spirit reaching out to her. She had her worries. But she did not feel completely alone.



Sylvanus, now fully awake after his nap in the cabin, had a flash. He always liked to come to his own ideas about things, all on his own. That way he knew he was sure

to be right.

And he had finally figured out the target at which to direct his anger for all the abuse that he and his friends had suffered at sea and now on shore. It was a banshee that was tormenting them! It was probably responsible for getting him wet on the ship earlier, too. In fact, he was *sure* of it. And he'd *had* it with this banshee.

With a few quick runway-steps and a graceful leap, the round cat left the ship's rail and landed heavily ashore. He recovered his poise and took off in pursuit. In hopeful pursuit, anyway, as he had no real idea where he was going.

"Sylvanus!" ElsBeth yelled.

"Don't worry," Johnny said. "He'll be back when he's had a look around. No one's going to mess with Sylvanus."

"Indeed," the magical cat said to himself, and on down the path he strode, under the eyes of the night, till he faded to black.

~

It was fine with ElsBeth that Hillman-Jones wanted to lead, that way she had a chance to look around. The boys went first, and one by one they set out from the known world of the *Sea Charmer* toward a mysterious castle in the wild Scottish Highlands—into the middle of absolute nowhere.

Worn stones, slick from the earlier fog, formed a winding path up into the clouds that clung to the edge of the loch cliff.

"Quit bumping me," Frankie threatened, after about the fifth time Nelson ran into him.

"Quiet, you guys," Robert said, who was the real rea-

son the boys behind him kept colliding. Whenever he heard a squeak here or a screech there, he stopped short. He was jumpy, though ElsBeth knew he'd never admit it.

But there was no denying these weren't Cape Cod sounds. These were weird Scottish Highland sounds. The smells were different, too. Rich damp earth fused with light flowery herbal scents.

"It's only an owl," Johnny said to Robert. "I know they sound freaky, but they're just hunting."

"I'm not scared. I'm taking my time to make sure the path is safe. We have girls with us, after all, and it's a known fact that girls are uncoordinated and have bad night vision."

ElsBeth wound up to blast him but Veronica was faster. "I heard that, Robert! I don't know where you get your 'known facts'—from comic books maybe?"

ElsBeth snickered. But a snort, like a half-swallowed laugh, burst from the bushes right next to the Cape troop. They all jumped.

"What was *that*?" whispered Veronica.

"I'm not sure," Johnny said. "It didn't sound like any animal I know." Even Johnny sounded rattled, and that was not good news. They'd all need Johnny at his best, whatever was ahead.

Then a scream, a hiss, and a crackle, each from a different direction, echoed off the rock walls and all around them. They scrambled up as fast as they could.

~

Almost at the top of the path, Sylvanus eyed Robert catching his breath, hands on his knees, Johnny right be-

hind him. Sylvanus appreciated a moment to catch his breath, too—when a dark shape shrieked from the sky, wheeled right at him, and ducked away mere inches from his nose. It pivoted sharply in the air and zeroed in on him again. Sylvanus took a stand and hissed back.

“That owl doesn’t know what he’s in for,” Johnny said, gripping a shaky arm attached to Robert’s petrified body. “It’s Sylvanus.”

Sylvanus puffed up his already plump self and snarled. He stood on his fat hind legs and raked the air with intimidating front claws. But the peanut butter had done him in. He fell over, his legs pumping up and down, and he couldn’t get up.

The owl let out an almighty *screeeeech* and dived, but pulled up short—poised mid-flight, yellow eyes fixed, cruel talons flared. A strange sound shot from its ugly beak—a shriek-laugh.

The owl laughed at him! Never in all his notable existence had anyone dared laugh in his formidable feline face. The humiliation cut deep, deeper than one should ever have to bear.

Sylvanus fumed, and he must have fumed furiously, because the owl simply squawked a good-natured goodbye and took off.

Impressed by powers to strike fear he didn’t even know he had, Sylvanus cooled, and returning dignity smoothed his ruffled fur. Johnny rolled him over.

Sylvanus had to admit this was not the banshee he was looking for. But he listened to the wisest words he knew—his own.

*Though more seems here*

*In this strange land*

*That's not yet met my eye,*

*All soon will fear*

*That here I stand*

*Under the ancient sky.*

“I told you it was an owl,” Johnny said to Robert. This was no sooner spoken than another chill cry ripped the night.

Johnny and Robert grabbed each other, then roughly pushed away.

And Sylvanus, restored by his own comforting words, now led the way up the path.



Lower on the steep cliff path, ElsBeth looked back and saw Amy falling behind. ElsBeth also saw movement in the waters below, and unkillable curiosity bit her deep. She had to help her friend, and she had to know what it was in the water.

She ran back, gave Amy a push up, and dashed farther down the slippery path.

“Come back, ElsBeth,” Amy whispered, nearly out of breath.

But ElsBeth sped on toward the loch—way too fast. Near the bottom she slipped, windmilled her arms to try to stay up . . . but no use. She fell.



She knew that the thump and the pain in her side was her body hitting a rock. She knew that she bounced, and she tumbled, and that her head cracked against something hard. She faintly felt herself slide across some stones, and even more faintly felt wet cold creep up around her. But that was all. Then it was black.



ElsBeth dreamed. At least at first she thought she was dreaming, and then she wasn't so sure.

She was looking down from high above the rock wall that overlooked the loch, and near the cliff edge she saw a young man with a blue-painted face, who had twisted his body to take on the shape of a tree, hiding.

Behind this figure the moonlight passed through an enchanting, translucent being. Its delicate face was weighted with sadness, but curiosity also flickered over the fine brow of this ancient spirit as it watched the blue-faced one hide.

ElsBeth drifted through the sweet evening air, over the cliff face and down toward the loch. She slipped into her body that had slipped into the clear cold water. She began to swim with a selkie seal.

The selkie told her, "You must go back to the land. You aren't a selkie and you can't live in the water. You need to go to the castle. The ghosts want you."

ElsBeth felt sad. She loved the water. She loved swimming with the selkie seal and wanted to play with the salmon and sea otters.

It was near black underwater but she could see. Her pupils opened wide and she had all the light she needed. But something was wrong. She had to breathe and she couldn't.

She pulled herself up toward the moon glow that shone

from above and broke through the water's surface. The selkie nudged her to shore.

"You saved me," ElsBeth gasped. Then she started to shiver. She was terribly cold and couldn't move, and so very tired and sleepy.

The selkie pushed across the stones, and ElsBeth watched her seal skin slide off her perfect human form. Long black wet hair lay on luminous white skin. The selkie stood and stretched . . . and lifted her arms like she wanted to dance in the moonlight.

Then she grew serious, pulled ElsBeth farther up the rock beach and shook her.

"No need to be rough," ElsBeth murmured. The human selkie was beautiful but did not seem, in truth, a gentle sort.

"Look," the selkie said, "I really don't like saving people, and I don't want to have to do it again." She lifted ElsBeth onto the dock, then into the yacht, and whispered, "Your friends need to come help you now. I have done all I can and must go back to the sea."

Just before ElsBeth knew she really did fall asleep, the selkie returned to her seal body, barked loudly, and disappeared into the black water.



"ElsBeth, wake up!" Johnny shook her. He stood her up and tried to walk her around the deck.

Robert raced aboard and almost ran into them. "What's wrong with ElsBeth? Why's she all wet?"

"I don't know. I heard a noise from the loch and saw something near the ship. When I got here she was on deck

soaking wet. Maybe she fell in and got back onboard somehow before she passed out. I don't know."

"Maybe a screaming banshee got her!" Robert howled.

Johnny thought Robert might be losing it, but simply said, "Find something to wrap her up in. We've got to get her warm, and up to that castle. They've got to help us."

Robert grabbed a blanket from the cabin and bundled her up. ElsBeth opened an eye. "You're not a selkie."

"Of course, I'm not. I'm Robert Hillman-Jones. And I promise I won't be mean to you if you just stop acting weird."

"Robert? You won't be mean to me? I doubt it," ElsBeth said dreamily.

"I don't like the way she's talking, Johnny. Is she going to be all right?"

The rest of the Cape crew had scampered down the cliff and now crowded around in silence—until the loud clomp of footsteps on the ship's plank caused them to turn all together like one scared-stiff body.

A tall blue-faced figure in a dark kilt marched toward them, bagpipes slung off one shoulder, his forehead furrowed like he meant business.

But he spoke gently. "The wee thing will be a' right. Give her here and follow me." He swept ElsBeth from the deck, tramped off the ship and bounded up the near vertical cliff.

"Wait!" Johnny called. "Where are you taking her?"

"Just follow me, laddies," he said over his shoulder without slowing, bagpipes squeaking every few steps.

With no real choice, they did. As they climbed through

the shadows cast by the moonlight, Johnny heard again that strange sad wail, and it seemed to him they all trailed that lonely call, too.

## Chapter Nine

### Cairn Castle

ElsBeth couldn't feel her body on the tall boy's shoulder, but she floated along comfortably enough just above the squeaking bagpipes, up the uncertain path.

They cleared the cliff and she took in the scene. In the soft moonlight, through a few wisps of remaining fog, she could just make out a grey stone castle standing tall at the end of a long gravel drive.

The castle. Somehow, again, ElsBeth had the feeling of "home." She had several other feelings she couldn't quite put her finger on (as if she used a finger to figure out what her feelings were, though she was quite sure she didn't). Still, it was good they were all on land (though in fact she was actually in the air).

The Cape squad stuck close together, keeping their distance a few paces behind the blue-faced fellow. Frankie repeated, more darkly this time, "I don't think we're in Kansas anymore."

Most of her friends looked frightened or at least uneasy, but not Veronica, who stared intently at the teenager car-

rying ElsBeth's body. Then she heard Veronica's thoughts.

*"He's actually quite good looking in a blue-faced, red-haired, Viking sort of way. So romantic."* Veronica began to daydream about being carried across the castle threshold . . . and ElsBeth quickly left her friend to her private thoughts.

Wide stone steps led up to the castle's broad oak doors. A brass, wolf's-head doorknocker with open jaws and pointy teeth looked down at them. "Ooooh!" Amy squealed. Then "Oh, sorry. For a minute I thought that thing on the door was alive."

Just before the blue-faced young man reached the top step, the massive doors swung open from within, and hundreds of candles lit a vision that caught their collective breath: a tall teenage girl, dressed all in white, with white-blond hair and silver-grey eyes, and pale, pale skin. It was hard to tell if she were a ghost or an angel or flesh and blood. But she was undeniably beautiful.

The boys sighed. Whether phantom or dream or alive they were enthralled, even Nelson. ElsBeth felt Veronica's thoughts turn instantly jealous, whoever or whatever she was. Amy and Lisa Lee and the boys just gawked.

The young man looked closely at the pale girl and some nearly invisible communication passed between them. The Cape Codders stood still as stumps. They hadn't been invited in. No one seemed to know what to do.

From behind them Sylvanus bounced up the stone steps. The pale girl fixed her grey eyes on him, and she grew even paler if that were possible. She glanced behind her quickly at an old painting on the entrance hall wall. ElsBeth saw it was a picture of a small black cat. The pale

girl looked back toward the doorway, her eyes opened wider, and she haltingly asked, “Syl—va—nus?”

The cat stepped in, like he was just coming home for supper.

The spell the girl’s beauty had cast was now broken, replaced by confusion.

The girl turned from Sylvanus to the Cape crew. She looked hard at them, seemed to come to some decision and smiled. “Welcome to Cairn Castle.”

No one moved.

“Well, aren’t you coming in?”

They did, through the long entrance hall and into the great room.

The blue-faced young man set ElsBeth’s cold body on a couch behind a tapestry screen, in front of the warm flames of a brightly lit fire. ElsBeth *almost* felt like hanging around with her body again, but not quite.

“We should get these wet clothes off her,” he said to the tall pale girl.

“Of course. I’ll get towels and a robe and get her dry.” She went out.

The young man spoke to his visitors, who were still speechless. “Your friend looks like she took a swim with the selkies. She has hypothermia.” Their confused looks deepened.

“That means her body is too cold. We need to warm her up, slowly. I’m going to put her between the dogs.” When he said “dogs,” two huge creatures across the room rose up and slowly turned their enormous shaggy heads.

Frankie stiffened. “Those are *dogs*?”

“The big one is Beastie and the smaller is Braveheart,” the young man said. “They’re Scottish deerhounds.” When their names were spoken, the dogs stood to full height and shuffled to the couch by the fire.

Frankie inched backward. Nelson pushed Amy behind him. Only Johnny stepped forward. He took Braveheart by the neck and looked him in his eyes. “You’ll help her, won’t you, boy?” Braveheart whined agreeably and Johnny scratched Braveheart’s wiry coat behind his ears.

The hounds took up some acreage on the floor before the fire and ElsBeth’s cold limp body was placed between them. She hovered above and felt safe.

The young man led his guests to the sitting area at the other side of the great room. On the way Veronica whispered to Lisa Lee, “I’m not convinced this lying-between-the-dogs thing is a good idea. They *cannot* be clean.”

Lisa Lee opened her mouth to speak but seemed to think better of it.

As her friends chose seats, ElsBeth drifted around the room, detached but content, her body snuggled between the two blue-grey mountains referred to as “dogs.”

She was a little concerned about Veronica, who was always aware of how pretty she was and didn’t seem altogether pleased she might not be the prettiest girl around right now. But that was a small matter compared to what they’d been through crossing the ocean!

The pale girl returned. She nodded toward ElsBeth’s body and asked in a light Scottish lilt, “What’s her name?”

Robert jumped at the chance to take charge. “ElsBeth Amelia Thistle.”

The teenage boy and girl both jolted. They looked at



Robert, at each other, and then at ElsBeth.

“What’s her mother’s name?” the girl asked.

Nobody answered. Nobody knew.

“Her father’s name?”

Silence again.

Hillman-Jones *had* to say something. “She lives with her grandmother, Hannah Goodspell.”

The girl breathed again. “Ah, I see. That’s a’ right then.”

ElsBeth was fascinated by the pale girl’s fascination with her name, and was glad she had a chance to just watch and listen for a while and find out all she could about this place.

Robert’s thoughts cut in on ElsBeth again.

*“Girls are usually trouble but this one seems different, and I can tell I’m impressing her. Johnny, Frankie and Nelson look totally lost. I better say something else so she doesn’t think we’re all brainless.”*

“We need a phone, actually,” Robert said. “We were caught in a storm at sea for days and days, and our parents don’t know if we are alive or dead.” Robert tried to sound dramatic. He combined some suffering with a sickly call for sympathy, but he must have not had much practice with his manipulation skills this summer because he failed miserably.

The girl in white stared at him evenly. “Where are you from?”

Robert laid on his obnoxious, stuck-up, Boston-blue-blood attitude. “We’re from Cape Cod.”

“Ah,” the blue-faced young man said, friendly but not impressed, like that explained it.

ElsBeth was not surprised when Robert decided to challenge his host. “Do you even know where Cape Cod *is*?”

Johnny interrupted before Robert could be really rude and embarrass them all. “Sorry, we should have thanked you for helping our friend.”

Robert glared at Johnny, marking him for revenge for talking when he, Robert Hillman-Jones, was in charge.

“Why don’t you all go to the kitchen for something to eat,” the pale girl said. “I’ll just go see that ElsBeth is OK.”

ElsBeth decided to float along with her friends to the kitchen and wasn’t surprised to see Frankie first at the table, looking around expectantly. Their host turned to him and asked, “How about some haggis?”

“Great,” Frankie said, obviously relieved to be eating soon.

“Frankie, do you know what ‘haggis’ is?” Lisa Lee asked.

“No. But it sounds pretty good.” Aware that Lisa Lee knew something about just about everything, though, Frankie became a little unsure. ElsBeth could feel Frankie’s second thoughts poking through.

“It’s sheep’s heart, liver and lungs mixed together and cooked in the sheep’s stomach,” Lisa Lee said.

“That is not funny, Lisa Lee.” Frankie’s face dropped in horror.

“She’s right, laddie,” the young man said.

Frankie’s thoughts now popped clearly into ElsBeth’s

mind as he tried to take this all in.

*“I’m Italian. We eat veal Parmesan, spaghetti, lasagna. This isn’t natural!”*

“I’ll just have some ice cream, please,” he said politely.

Their host laughed warmly. “I’d like some ice cream, too, boyo. But the electricity has been out for a week. When our parents left they stocked us up with basic supplies. We have potatoes, peas, turnip, apples, cheese and peanut butter. And we have whatever the MacFinches in the cottage next door bring us. Tonight it was beef stew and apple tart,” he went on. “I was only kidding about the haggis.”

At the mention of beef stew and apple tart Frankie’s stomach, and others’, rumbled. Loudly. “Yes, please,” Frankie said, back to his happy eager self.

“OK. Why don’t you get plates and silverware from the cupboard there.” ElsBeth noticed the plates had an elaborate blue thistle pattern, and the silverware had the same design. Just like Grandmother’s plates and silver on the Cape!

They got back to their seats in an orderly fashion, mostly. Except for Robert, who bumped Johnny kind of meanly. And Frankie, who rushed excitedly and bumped several people and things accidentally.

Johnny said the stew was *amazing* and everyone nodded while they ate and ate. Even Frankie finally looked full. He rubbed his belly and grinned.

After the meal Veronica asked, “Can we call our parents now, please?”

“I’m sorry, your families must be mad with worry,” their host answered. “But the phone lines went down with

the power, and we don't have mobile coverage out here. We're quite isolated, and right now we're pretty much cut off, I'm afraid."

"Can you drive us into town?" Veronica asked.

"My sister and I are only fifteen and don't have our licenses yet. Our parents took the car when they went to the airport anyway." The long faces must have prompted him to quickly add, "I'll ask the MacFinches if we can borrow their buggy tomorrow. It's miles to the nearest village and the pony is small, so it will take most of the day to get there and back."

"Did you say 'pony' and 'buggy'?" Robert asked. "*No one* uses a horse and buggy anymore. This is *weird*."

Johnny shot Robert a warning look and ElsBeth felt tensions rise. But the young man laughed again. "I wouldn't say that to the MacFinches, if I were you."

Veronica seemed to decide there was nothing to do but make the best of things. "I'm Veronica," she said to their host in her sweetest voice.

The Cape boys stared at her. Frankie leaned into Robert. "What's up with Veronica? Is she sick or something? I've never heard her sound like that before."

Veronica probably heard this but continued undisturbed. "What's your name?" she asked shyly.

Robert replied to Frankie, "I don't know. But it's a well-known fact Veronica is *not* shy. Something's not right."

Veronica smiled through this, too.

"Baird," the young man replied. "It is a pleasure to meet you, Veronica."

Veronica preened. Then she lowered her eyes. "Baird,

why is your face blue?”

“Oh, it’s a Celtic thing. My ancestors wore blue face paint in battle, to scare the enemy. It helps me get in the mood when I . . . hunt.”

He blushed under his tinted skin and changed the subject. “Sorry I didn’t ask your names earlier but I wanted to do what we could for your friend, and you all being starved like unto death.”

They finished the round of introductions and Robert asked, “What’s your sister’s name?”

“My twin is Effie, short for Euphemia but everyone calls her Effie, of course. Our parents are rather traditional and gave us traditional Scottish names.”

“Aren’t you worried about being alone and so far away from everything?” Amy asked. “And where *are* your parents?”

Baird shifted awkwardly. “No worries, really. We have all we need. And they are in Tibet,” he said, looking at the table.

He looked up at Effie as she rejoined them. “Why don’t we all go look in on ElsBeth, and you can show everyone their rooms and help them get set for the night? I’ll see Mr. MacFinch about the cart for town tomorrow.”

Several heads nodded, some in agreement and some as if nodding off to sleep. They left the dining room, dishes forgotten.

ElsBeth thought the two teenagers seemed edgy. Baird didn’t want to talk about their parents, and Sylvanus had rattled Effie when he arrived. And what was Baird doing out hunting—at night, with bagpipes?

Despite these niggling questions she settled slowly into her body and burrowed down peacefully into her deerhound lair, but still aware of the people and room around her.

“I think she’ll be fine,” Baird said. “It’s like going into a short hibernation. Her body shut down from the cold, but she should be good as new in the morning.”

Effie bent down. A slight frown creased her perfect brow as she watched ElsBeth’s body a long moment. Eyes turned to her and the room got quiet. Effie must have felt the attention and quickly brought a dazzling smile to her face. “Yes. She’ll be just fine, don’t you worry.

“I’ll show you your rooms now,” she continued. “Rooms are something we have plenty of. We stay in the newer part of the castle. Don’t stray to the Norman keep, the older part. It isn’t . . . safe.”

ElsBeth relaxed further into her body, into the deep warmth between the dogs in front of the fire, comforted that her friends were well fed and safe at last.

Well fed, at least, she thought, and she slept.



## Chapter Ten

### Big Ideas

Effie gave them each a candle in a holder and lit them, and led them up the sweeping staircase. At the top Effie pointed. “This is my room, and this one is Baird’s. And this is the blue room. I thought you might like this, Nelson.” She opened a large room with a king-size bed. Crossed swords trimmed the wall above the headboard.

Nelson beamed. “Gee, Effie, thanks.”

Effie showed Veronica to a pale yellow room. A cross-bow and full quiver of arrows hung ready for use, but Veronica only had eyes for the hand-painted dressing table topped with a long oval mirror.

Veronica crossed the room, looked in the mirror, and brushed her fingers along the curves of the intricate flowers and vines carved into the frame. “Thank you, Effie,” she said. “This is wonderful.”

Effie was pleased that Veronica now seemed more at ease in the castle and with her.

In the next, smaller room there were no weapons, and the curtains and canopy bed were pink. “I’m sorry it’s so

small, but I thought of you for this room, Amy.”

Amy walked in and turned around slowly, her eyes and smile widening as she took everything in, including three small paintings of fairies and roses above the bed. “It’s so much bigger than my room at home. This is a room a princess would love. Thank you so much, Effie.”

“You’re a bright one,” Effie said. “This room was decorated for a young Irish princess who visited long ago. The wee lassie loved it so much the lord of the castle promised never to change it.”

Down the hall they went. Effie found a suitable room for each of them, and she laughed. “Finally, a use for all these rooms.

“Fortunately, the coal furnace heats the water so everyone can have a bath. There’s one at the end of the East Hall,” she pointed, “and one in the West Hall. You’ll just need to take a candle to light the way.

“I’ll leave you girls a change of clothes and some night-ies. They’re ones I outgrew but at least they’re clean.”

The boys showed not the least interest in baths and, energized by the meal and opportunities for new adventure, headed downstairs with talk of plans for tomorrow. Effie stayed a while, amused by the girls’ earnest negotiations for use of the baths. She laughed again when Veronica gave up discussion in favor of action and practically ran Amy over to get to one first.



Downstairs Johnny silently surveyed the family portraits that lined the great room walls. He observed Effie when she came in and sat beside her brother, who’d finally scrubbed his face clean of blue paint. Baird was pale



like his sister, but broad where Effie was slender, and despite the differences Johnny saw clearly the family line ran straight and true.

Johnny noted the furniture, the pieces of art, the architecture of the room and all he could see and feel, and took in each of his Cape mates with the same eye.

Robert sat comfortably, sideways, his legs over the arm of a big leather chair . . . a bit too comfortably for a guest, Johnny thought.

Frankie examined the weapons on the walls. There were long hatchet-like things, spears with curled pointed ends, and chains with iron spiky balls. Frankie studied these while he nosed about, possibly looking for candy in the bowls on the sturdy medieval furniture.

Nelson hummed and tapped his foot to a tune that played only in his head, while he checked out the antique weather instruments on the far wall.

Then they all spoke up pretty much at once.

“Anybody hungry yet?” Frankie asked.

“Do you use this barometer?” Nelson was inspecting closely a huge brass and glass instrument, with curlicue markings and ornate hands on a colorful painted dial.

“Ever heard of any buried treasure on the islands around here?” Robert asked.

“Interesting coat of arms,” Johnny said, sitting down in the red leather seat across from Baird.

To which Baird responded, “Yes, the stoat, a fearless hunter that looks like a large weasel, goes way back in the symbology of my family.”

“I see the thistle plant there, too,” Johnny said.

“Yes, that’s an ancient Scots symbol,” Baird said. He shifted in his seat a little nervously, Johnny thought.

“Do you have a family crest or motto?” Baird added quickly.

“No, but I always liked: *‘In scientia veritas, in arte honestas’*—in science truth, in art honor,” Johnny said.

“*‘Arte non vi’*—by skill not force,” replied Baird.

“What’s this mumbo jumbo you’re talking?” Robert said.

“It’s Latin,” Effie answered. “Baird loves showing off. We Scots have historically been a well-educated people. And since our parents took us out of school we’ve been following in that tradition.”

“*Hunh?*” Robert said. “That doesn’t make any sense at all.”

“Well, look at Johnny’s tee shirt.” Baird pointed to “QUESTION AUTHORITY” written in bold letters across the front.

Johnny cooperated and turned around. “*Think for Yourself*” was written in script on the back.

Robert frowned but Baird went on anyway. “Our parents always asked us what we learned in school. One day last spring they asked me to explain a Shakespeare quote, and asked Effie to give ten uses for mathematics. We just stood there.”

Robert smirked and made a mocking face.

Baird did not look amused and Johnny understood all too well—Robert was his best friend, but he could take some getting used to.

Baird settled into his chair and seemed to settle on

Robert like a big cat stalking a mouse. A game was afoot.

“Mother and Da are always involved,” Baird continued, “and they expect us to think for ourselves and be involved in what’s going on in the world, too. I don’t know if those are ideas that are thought about much on Cape Cod.”

Robert missed the insult and his eyes began to glaze over. Baird dialed up his volume a bit and inched further into Robert’s space.

“Education is their latest cause. Our education. They announced they were taking us out of school and they started us on home study this summer.” Baird glanced over at Johnny. “It was kind of humiliating to be told you’re not making it on your own.”

Johnny nodded.

Back to Robert, Baird said, “So Effie and I decided we would study hard and learn everything we possibly could—so we could go back to school this fall and play sports with our friends.”

“And go to dance class, and act in the school plays,” Effie added. “But that plan didn’t work. You know what happened next?” she asked Robert.

“I have a guess,” Lisa Lee said, descending the stairs.

Everyone looked at a transformed Lisa Lee, floating down the stairs like an Asian angel in a flowing, white lace nightgown. “They quizzed you again, and you still couldn’t explain things or give practical uses for what you’d studied.”

“How did you know?” Effie said.

Lisa Lee curled up next to her. “Pretty much the same thing happened with my dad and me. He asked me what

I'd learned at school and I could tell him everything. Perfectly. And I got the highest scores on tests."

Johnny knew Lisa Lee was not exaggerating. She always aced exams, probably since kindergarten.

Lisa Lee sighed and continued. "But my dad wanted to know what I *understood*, not what I had memorized." Lisa Lee looked down, embarrassed.

Frankie stopped wandering around and joined in. "My Aunt Sophia is a teacher. She complains about all the stuff teachers have to do that make it hard for them to get any real teaching done. She even sometimes buys supplies with her own money."

Effie, Baird and Lisa Lee all nodded. Lisa Lee said, "My dad told me what Socrates said, maybe the wisest teacher ever, 'I cannot teach anybody anything. I can only make them think.'"

"This is so *weird*," Hillman-Jones said, his eyes rolling up into his head.

But Johnny liked what Lisa Lee was saying. It made sense.

He looked around and saw that Nelson had stopped humming and now just nervously tapped a foot. Frankie had gone back to studying the swords on the wall.

Effie touched Lisa Lee's hand and leaned closer. "I always thought grown-ups knew everything. I don't *blame* them or anything. But there are a lot of things in the world that really don't make sense—like pollution, and whole populations that can't read. And beautiful countries, with wonderful natural resources and great people, that somehow think they're bankrupt. That's a weird idea to me."

"Do you mean our teachers don't know everything?"

Nelson asked, as if on shaky ground.

“I know for a fact they don’t know the tides and the weather as well as my grandfather,” Johnny said.

Lisa Lee shook her head sadly. “Even my hero Albert Einstein . . . he was a genius, but we know now he made mistakes, too.

“We’re going to have to think for ourselves and figure things out when we’re adults,” Lisa Lee said. “And if we don’t start getting good at this now, we’re not automatically going to be good at it when we stop going to school.”

Robert shuddered. “This conversation is *way* too serious for me. I’m only going into seventh grade.”

Lisa Lee and Effie turned to each other and started to giggle. Almost at once they both said, “No better time to start.”

But their laughter was interrupted by a whispery voice. “My motto is: ‘*Ventis secundi*’—by favorable winds.”

The room froze. “What was *that*?” Johnny said.

Effie peeked at Baird. “Just the TV, I guess.”

Johnny’s eyes narrowed. “I thought the power was out?”

“It is,” Effie said. “I wasn’t thinking. It must be the radio—it’s solar powered.”

“Cool,” Frankie said. The others were as silent as the shadows.

Baird yawned. “Well, I think it’s time to turn in.” He nudged Effie.

“Yes, I’m exhausted,” she said, “and there will be a lot to do tomorrow. I’ll check on your friend ElsBeth once

more before I go up and get some of Baird's clothes for you boys."

Lisa Lee and Johnny followed Effie over to the dogs warming Elsbeth by the fire. "She seems to be sleeping peacefully," Johnny said.

"Yes," Effie agreed.

"OK, goodnight," Lisa Lee said quickly. Then she took Johnny's arm and pulled him to the stairs.

"There's something strange going on here, Johnny," she whispered as they stepped up the grand staircase. "Effie and Baird seem nice, but they have secrets."

A lot of things hadn't made sense to Johnny since they began their day sail toward Martha's Vineyard. But all he could say now was, "Ya, something's not right."

## Chapter Eleven

### Night Games

Warmed by Braveheart and Beastie and the fire, ElsBeth slept deeply and dreamlessly. Then it moved in on her. There was something she was supposed to do.

“Righto, ye wee witch. Somethin’ ye are supposed to do, indeed. We did nae trick the South Wind ta bring ye all this way ta have ye tak’ a swim an’ nearly drown wi’ th’ selkies!”

ElsBeth’s eyes snapped open. Above Beastie’s shaggy blue-grey head loomed a great red head of wild hair and bushy beard, and the biggest eyebrows ElsBeth had ever seen. The eyebrows stuck straight out and rose up into little furry points. She looked down and saw a faded, blue-green tartan kilt. She looked back up and saw crossed arms and a fierce scowl.

And she could see right through him.

“Of course ye can see right through me, I’m a ghost. Th’ cold water must have got ta yer wee brain.”

ElsBeth rose up on one elbow, but Braveheart leaned

over and pushed her back down.

“Ye dinnae have ta get up now. Save yer strength. Tomorrow ye will meet th’ rogue tryin’ ta tak’ our lands. Ye need ta be ready ta fight th’ good fight.” The ghost began to pace before the fire, getting himself all worked up and becoming a little more solid in the process.

ElsBeth was comfortable with most ghosts and this one seemed particularly interesting. “Excuse me, sir. Perhaps we should start by introducing ourselves.”

The spirit frowned. “Not a bad idea. I’m yer great-great-great-great Uncle Mackenzie Artair Cahoon Primrose. Folks call me Mac. I know ye are ElsBeth, from th’ Thistle side of th’ family.

“Normally th’ Primroses an’ th’ Stones dinna see eye ta eye wi’ th’ Thistle side. But occasionally—like when someone’s after th’ land—we know th’ sense ta march together.”

Mac looked down on ElsBeth. He acted like he was looking down on her for being a Thistle, too, and ElsBeth found this both distracting and disturbing.

But it was clear she’d just been insulted. Worse, her family had been insulted. And she wasn’t about to take that lying down—even if she was, of course, lying down.

She’d been polite, as Grandmother had taught her. But Grandmother had also taught her to stick up for her rights.

“Wait a minute, you big bunch of mist! I’m a Thistle, and I’m proud of it. My grandmother is Hannah Goodspell. And even though she hasn’t told me much about my family yet, she always said I should be proud of my line. So don’t you talk like that!”

Mac huffed and puffed, and his pasty face turned as



red as his hair. But just as quickly he calmed down. “Ye’r right, wee ElsBeth. We need th’ Thistle magic. I’m a plain man, an’ never much held wi’ magic. But we need ta pull together.

“This is an emergency. Yer teenage cousins here at th’ castle, Baird an’ Effie, have not yet learnt their magic, an’ two’s not enough anyway.

“Just like th’ old days.” Mac fired himself up again, jumped in the air, and stomped silently twice. “Highland clansmen against outsiders tryin’ ta tak’ our birthright!”

He paced again, making no sound. His broadsword swung with each step.

“Th’ Vikings tried it, th’ Normans tried it, an’ th’ English tried it. But this piece of th’ Highlands is ours. An’ we’ll fight anyone who makes a claim otherwise!” He thrust his sword overhead dramatically.

ElsBeth softened toward this hot-tempered ghost. Nobody wanted their homeland stolen. “What do you want me to do?” she asked.

“Well, I dinna know exactly, mah wee lassie. Ye’ve got ta use yer wits an’ stop him, that’s what!” The ghost looked frustrated trying to explain. He looked like a man . . . er, ghost . . . of action, not words.

“I see. OK, I’ll try.”

“Of course, ye will!” Mac bellowed as an order.

ElsBeth wasn’t impressed by the ghost’s manners, but figured he might not have had many people to talk to for maybe hundreds of years. Grandmother said a ghost’s life could often be lonely.

Mac began to fade away. “Got ta go. Can only hold

mah molecules together fer so long. But I'll be here if ye need me."

"Wait," ElsBeth called. "Who is the rogue?"

But Beastie shook his great head as if to say, "No use. He's gone."

ElsBeth cuddled back into the warmth to think this all through, but instantly was back asleep.

~

A noise disturbed Frankie, and the big-boned boy sat up quickly. The moon outside shined enough light on the bedside table that he could see the old wind-up clock, just after two a.m., and he was starving. Time for a little after-midnight snack. Maybe there were some molasses cookies.

He lit his candle and slipped out of bed, bare feet touching the stone-cold floor. This slowed him a bit but not long. He was a man on a mission.

~

Robert's eyes opened. He'd heard a sound, and thought it might be a ghost. Castles were well known to have ghosts. Maybe it was a ghost with a hidden treasure. Castles were also well known to have hidden treasures. And with these motivating thoughts, he lit his candle and rose from bed.

~

Lisa Lee had set her watch alarm for two-fifteen a.m. She firmly believed one needed at least four hours sleep. But beyond that, the deep of night was a great time for exploring—for looking at the stars, observing the behavior of night birds and other animals, or just thinking one's own thoughts undisturbed. She pulled back the covers and got up.

~

Johnny Twofeathers was a light sleeper, and he was nervous about ElsBeth. This *whole place* made him nervous. He felt restless spirits about.

He woke, took up his flashlight, and went to check on his friend.

~

From his convenient perch on the ceiling above the stairs, Bellicose Stone, the Laughing Earl, watched. The stocky boy was first, a candle in front to show his way. “Out for a midnight snack, that one, I’d bet,” he chuckled.

The Earl found plentiful humor in the twists of earthly events and human behavior. He was especially familiar with greed, including his own. He well remembered prodding his English cousin Baron Fitzwalter, back in the year of our Lord 1215, to rebel against King John of England—while *he*, Bellicose Stone, stayed safely in Scotland.

The Earl knew that if King John lost to the rebels, his own Scottish King Alexander would take huge tracts of English lands for Scotland—and that would be good for the *Earl*, whose own lands would be safer. He might even get some of that English countryside for himself, too. Ha, ha.

The Earl, however, got nothing, except his death by cold, when his third wife, Fiona the Fai, tired of his endless troublemaking and fooling around, and locked him out of the castle one frigid winter’s eve.

He’d had plenty of time since to develop a healthy sense of humor for the foolish games man often played.

He pulled his fur cloak tighter. The cold still bothered him, ghost or no, and he watched the next nightwalker ap-

pear at the top of the stairs.

“A purposeful lad with a swagger. That one’s set for adventure, I’d wager,” talking to himself—as he often did, rarely moving much now from his spot above the stairs, which severely limited the number of those with whom he could converse.

Soon after a pretty Asian girl appeared and stepped intently down the stairs. “That one isn’t sneaking about like the others. Wonder what she’s up to?”

A copper-skinned fellow with deep eyes, and a flashlight, arrived next. “That one looks like he’s always prepared. I bet he’s got a pocketful of practical stuff. And he’s a quiet one. ‘Still waters run deep.’ Ha, ha.”

The Earl hadn’t made himself visible. That was just too much work. He only did that now on *very* special occasions.

The Earl was not entirely silent, however, and as the young man with the flashlight went down the stairs, he paused and looked up. He seemed to make up his mind about something, and he winked up at the Earl.

“Ha, ha, a sense of humor, too. I could have used such a one as he at my side with my plotting years ago.”



Frankie found some scones and milk and happily munched away at the kitchen table. Happily, that is, until he heard a creak from the hallway door behind him.

A bite of scone stuck in his throat and blocked a rising scream. But he had to look. Pale fingers wrapped around the edge of the door, a dark head floated forth . . .

“Robert! You scared me half to death!” Frankie

coughed and crumbs of scone sprayed over the table.

“Quiet, Frankie,” Robert said. “We’re going to explore the Norman keep. That’s where the gold is. I know it.”

“What are you *talking* about, Robert? Effie said it wasn’t safe. I’m not going there. Especially at night.”

“Frankie, you’re my best friend. How many times have I saved you some of Nani’s homemade cream pies? Come on, we’re talking treasure. I need my best pal in on this.”

Frankie thought about Nani’s cream pies. Not just any-one got those. Robert *was* pretty generous, sometimes. “OK, Robert, but we’re going to be careful, right?”

“You know me. I’d never get us into trouble we couldn’t get out of.”

Frankie thought about this for a minute, too. Robert got them into plenty of trouble. But they *had* always gotten out of it. At least so far. “OK, I’m with you.”

“Me, too,” said Johnny, who’d silently entered the kitchen.

Robert and Frankie shot up in shock, right off the floor. “Don’t sneak *up* on us like that, Johnny,” Frankie said.

“I didn’t. You guys just didn’t hear me.”

“Anyway, I’m glad you’re here,” Robert said.

Johnny moved closer to them. “I’m not sure we’ll find hidden treasure. But I think there are secrets here.”

“I’m *sure* there’s treasure,” Robert said, taking a step straight at Johnny.

Frankie knew Robert didn’t like anyone disagreeing with him, so he quickly took another scone and said, “Let’s go,” before his friends could get into an argument.

They stepped out the kitchen door, into the back garden and the crisp night air. Johnny said, "I checked on Elsbeth. She's sound asleep between the giant dogs. If anyone tried to bother her, I'm sure those deerhounds would attack in a second."

"Excellent," Frankie whispered.

Robert walked on ahead, too set on making his way to say anything.



In the garden Lisa Lee sat on the grass and looked at the stars, noticing the differences from the Cape sky at home. Everyone said she had incredibly sharp night vision for someone who was a near-sighted girl. Her eyes had adjusted well in the bright Highland dark.

She noticed movement by the castle and saw three boys sidling along. I wonder what they're up to? she asked herself.

She stood up and answered, I think I'll find out.



Sylvanus prowled the grounds, getting the feel of the land and looking into things. He noticed a band of nightstalkers, and he was never one to be left out of things. *His* was the most important presence in anything going on, and he added his squat black shape and dazzling personality to the parade.



The Laughing Earl's curiosity was finally sufficiently aroused to get even him into action, and he pushed off his spot on the ceiling above the stairs. Floating through the castle wall, he sailed along after Sylvanus, his faded-crim-

son, fur-lined robes wafting behind. “Not been this much going on since we stirred the pot for old King John. Might be worth a laugh to see what they’re up to.”

~

Mac’s ghostly form began to pull together, bit by bit, starting with his tartan and broadsword. “If th’ Earl is in on it, somethin’ important must be happenin’. That lazy ghost only leaves his ceilin’ a couple times a century. But, drat, it takes a lot of energy to pull mah molecules together.”

~

Robert had trouble keeping his candle lit and finally gave up on it. Johnny took the lead with his flashlight.

An owl hooted and the boys stopped. A brilliant white stoat appeared on the path, barring their way.

“What’s *that*?” Robert said.

“A stoat,” Johnny whispered. “Remember? Baird said it was like a weasel. I’ve never heard of a white one in the summer, though. There’re always brown now. And don’t let its small size fool you. They are ferocious fighters.”

A sharp quick whistle made the stoat to turn his head. He bent to listen, and sent back a questioning trill. Another whistle, and the stoat disappeared.

“*Whaaat* was *that*?” croaked Frankie.

“I don’t know,” Johnny said. “We’ve got to stay close. It might be dangerous.”

“Don’t be a couple of girls,” Robert said, brave again now that the white weaselly thing was gone. “We need to find the treasure in the castle before everyone wakes up.”

He pushed ahead past Johnny—into the dark, without a light, only greed lighting his way.

Chapter Twelve  
Durst, The Ancient Warrior Ghost

While the Cape boys moved steadily ahead above ground, deep below a shadowy figure sat in stillness. Silver and gold hung from his neck under a blue-painted face. In his own time he had been the one called Durst.

The stoat reported to him on the boys now coming this way. Durst hugged his harp in one hand and rubbed his stone knife in the other. He listened carefully.

“I see. Someone *else* dares disturb my home,” he growled. “There will be a *price*.” He stood up from his carved oak seat in the airless cavern at the lowest level of the old Norman keep.

The keep was built on a spot where many small rocks had once been piled together—a cairn made by Durst’s ancient people to honor him.

Durst wasn’t upset about being dead. His was a proud free life as a warrior, poet, musician and healer of his ancient people the Picts, the “Painted Ones.”

His years were filled with grand adventures and grim battles. He helped people here and there, caused glorious



mischief when he liked, and was feared throughout the Highlands and as far as Ireland. Then, in the way of all living things, he passed from the earthly life.

When his time came to pass, his people made a beautiful cairn, a mound of most special stones, to mark his place in this world. And over the years many visitors added to these, until a monument grew into the rough shape of a man.

No, Durst wasn't upset about being dead. But he had loved his cairn.

He loved to watch the faces of those who came to add their chosen stone. Some were thoughtful, some reverent. And some, afraid no doubt, wanted to be sure he would never rise up again to raise havoc.

Then came those Vikings. Drinking and brawling and "making merry." They littered his cairn something awful. That was bad enough, but at least they didn't mess with his stones. A few of the Vikings even drunkenly contributed to the shrine, until it looked like a wild, dancing man. Or that, at least, was how Durst liked to think of it.

But in the course of time the Normans came. How Durst hated the Normans!

That day was etched in his mind. The day that Norman nobleman rode up to his glorious spot overlooking the sea, and said to his men, "Here, where sits this pile of stones, here will rise my castle. You will build it so I will wake to see the sun break over the water, and so none can attack up these cliffs."

This "nobleman" and his men then did the unthinkable. They threw the beautiful stones of his cairn into the sea!

Durst now cried again the ghostly tears he cried each

time he remembered that most awful day.

He called to his stoat. “Trueheart, my magical beast, my last friend, you tell me now there is a new threat? Some small foreign men march again on my land?”

He grew to his full warrior height, and beyond. He burst up through the dungeon roof, out through the castle walls, and into the crystal-black Highland night sky.

And he roared, “*This shall not be!*”

~

“What was that?” Frankie said, bumping into Robert.

“Probably a ghost trying to defend his treasure,” Robert said.

Frankie shivered.

“Just kidding,” Robert said. “I think it’s the wind making funny sounds again.”

Frankie wasn’t convinced, but Johnny kept walking, and he had the flashlight. Frankie ran to catch up. Anything was better than being alone in the dark in this creepy place.

~

ElsBeth lay between the dogs. Her eyes were closed and her body asleep. But a commanding ghostly presence in the old section of the castle stirred her. Still asleep, but using some perception she couldn’t even explain to herself, she looked out into the night.

She looked closer, and watched a blue-faced ghost carefully settle a film of dust over some loose rotten boards, setting a trap. A luminous weasel waited to one side.

Three small men approached, outside the old keep, about to enter. One figure came into focus.

“Johnny!” her mind screamed . . .



Robert stopped. “I heard something.”

“Me, too,” Johnny said. “It sounded like ElsBeth. We better go back and check on her.”

“*I’m* not going back,” Robert said.

“OK, then stay right here. Frankie and I will go and be right back. And Robert, I mean it, don’t go in without us.”

Robert didn’t answer. He looked away, then finally said, “OK.” It was solid black behind the crumbling door of the old castle keep. He couldn’t see anything so he figured he’d have to wait anyway.

Frankie and Johnny took off.

Bored, Robert kicked some stones and heard a clink. He got down on his knees and scraped the pebbly ground with his hands. He felt cold metal. He dug down fast and pulled something up. He brushed it off, and in the pale moonlight it looked like . . . a helmet. A pointy one. He put it on. It fit.

Bolder in the helmet, Robert peered again into the castle darkness, and now saw something that was not quite as dark, a small lighter patch of something, moving.

He heard a voice . . . from inside the helmet. It sounded French, like his Uncle Francois who lived outside Paris.

“Catch eet!” the voice said. “Dat creature eez a menace to all Normans. Catch eet and keel eet!” The voice sounded really upset, in a French sort of way.

Robert started talking to himself or, more accurately, to the voice in the helmet. “Why should I catch it? What is it?”

“Just do eet, you stupid boy!”

“I don’t take orders from just anyone. I’m a Hillman-Jones.”

“I know nothing of theez ‘Hillman-Jones.’ I am a nobleman, Charlemagne LeBlanc-LaCoeur. You must do as I say!”

Who did this LeBlanc-LaCoeur think he was? And to show this Frenchman that *he*, Robert Hillman-Jones, was in charge, he took a step into the keep to warn the white creature that he could now faintly see that a crazy Frenchman wanted it dead.

“Here little kitty, kitty,” Robert said.

“What are you doing, you silly boy?” squeaked the helmet-voice. “You are going to make eet very mad if you call eet a kitty.”

Robert laughed at the voice. “Are you afraid of a little white kitten?”

At that, the little white kitten-looking thing snarled and leapt onto Robert’s head.

With his own screams and those of the Norman ghost-voice ringing throughout the helmet, and the sharp claws of the little white kitten-looking thing batting on the metal outside, Robert reeled. He staggered farther into the keep.

~

From deep below Durst looked up. A grim smile cut across his stern blue face. “Here comes my enemy,” he seethed, “right where I want him. Just one more step . . .”

~

Johnny Twofeathers, with Frankie right behind, raced

through the kitchen and into the great room, though carefully quiet not to wake anyone. Johnny crouched next to Beastie and Braveheart.

ElsBeth lifted her head. “Johnny, you have to get back to Robert. He’s the one in trouble. I’m OK.” ElsBeth shook, and Beastie nuzzled his large head across her. “It’s a ghost, Johnny,” she mumbled, half-covered by the furry hounds.

Johnny and Frankie didn’t wait or even think about this. They shot out into the garden and back to the old castle keep.



Robert staggered forward and teetered on some rotten boards. The wood groaned, his foot broke through and ... something heavy slammed onto his back and hurled him across the opening.

His head plunked on the stone floor, the helmet twisted, and he couldn’t see out. Something tugged him one way, something else tugged him the other. Snarls and hisses raged in a battle on his back, and lots of little knifepoints dug into him.

A sharp, short whistle. Then ... nothing.

Was he dead?

Robert wasn’t sure how you knew if you were dead. That ridiculous French ghost-voice didn’t seem to know *he* was dead. Maybe it was just one of those things—some people knew and some people didn’t. Robert wasn’t big on philosophy. He decided to take the helmet off and see what he could see.

Things were blurry. But a dark vague shape crept toward him. He closed his eyes and screamed.

When nothing else happened after a while, he opened his eyes again.

Lisa Lee sat in front of him, Sylvanus in her lap.

“Sylvanus saved you,” she said. “I saw the stoat attack and jump on your head. Before I could get to you, Sylvanus flew out of nowhere onto your back and pushed you to safety. Amazing how fast a cat that fat can move.”

Sylvanus, who’d been purring contentedly, bristled and stalked off.

The helmet lay on the ground, squeaking out static-like noises.

A flashlight beam flicked over them, and Johnny and Frankie joined their friends.

“ElsBeth thought you were in trouble, Robert,” Johnny said.

“He was,” Lisa Lee said. “A white stoat attacked him—which is strange because stoats are never white in the summer. Anyway, I think he’d have fallen into this old well if Sylvanus hadn’t shoved him to safety and fought the creature off.”

Frankie picked up the helmet and turned it around in his hands. “Weird. It’s making little scratchy sounds.” He started to bring the helmet to his head.

“No! Mine,” demanded Hillman-Jones.

Frankie handed it over.

Lisa Lee looked at Johnny, “So, Elsbeth was awake?”

“Yeah, she seemed OK.”

“That’s great,” Lisa Lee said. “But let’s get out of here. Effie was right. This place isn’t safe.”



About fifty feet belowground, in the dank dungeon near the bottom of the well, Durst sat slumped and disappointed with his defeated and now low-spirited stoat.

“I know you could have taken him, Trueheart. But the cat had magic. We don’t want to get into that kind of contest until we know the enemy’s strengths.

“That fool LeBlanc-LaCoeur. Nobility, bah! Nothing but a Norman upstart. My line goes back to the mists of time. My ancestors were children of the gods, not some prancing Frenchmen.

“If only we’d stayed true to the land and our magic, we’d still today have all the power and promise of those centuries past. But these are dark days.”

Durst felt a mournful song swell in his breast. Trueheart began to back away.

“Don’t go, my dear friend. Stay and sing a song of old times with me. Remember when I could hurl a lighting ball into our enemy’s camp? When I could pluck a tune and make a mighty king fall in love with a plain country maid? When I could channel nature’s powers and heal a deathly wounded soldier?”

Durst started to sing, and with the first lonely notes from his lips, Trueheart melted into the shadows.

*In this dark day  
I've been afraid  
That I might drift away.  
My sad heart aches  
Of all that's lost —*

*Our name, our pride,  
Our country wide,  
I cannot count the cost.*

*I love this land  
Where once in might  
We lived and took our stand.  
Like summer sky  
In brilliant blue,  
Like stars on Earth  
This was our birth,  
But now in darker hue.*

*Where now the light,  
The heart, the love?  
All gone from us in fright?  
No more this shame!  
There's work to do.  
Trueheart, to me!  
We'll see them flee  
Before this play is through.*

~

Outside the old Norman keep Mac groaned. “Ach, it’s  
Durst singin’ again.”



“Ah, yes,” the Laughing Earl said. “When he gets in that mood, there won’t be peace around here for days.”

“It’s just as well,” Mac said. “As long as he’s singin’, he will nae be tryin’ ta kill our wee guests.”

“There is that,” and the Earl smiled. “It looks like the excitement’s over for tonight, though,” and he and his crimson cloak floated away.

Mac heard chuckling drift back to the newer part of the castle. He let his molecules disperse, and he, too, went his way.

Only the beautiful banshee remained in the shadows, her love of this land even more ancient than Durst’s, her sad wail her only song of that love.

She watched and she waited. For Man, and Man’s ghosts, and their magical creatures to each play their parts. Hoping against hope they might save the land. And thereby heal her heart.



## Chapter Thirteen

### Night Games, Part Two

Amy opened her eyes. She heard a noise. A small clawing sound. Then terror again shut her eyes.

She couldn't remember where she was. She felt the soft down comforter. This wasn't home. This wasn't the yacht. Oh, she was in the castle. Those nice teenagers had helped them, and they'd stayed the night. If only there weren't any scary sounds, everything would be fine.

She heard scratching again. Hysteria gnawed at the edges of her mind.

She knew she had to face her fears. Elsbeth did. Veronica wasn't afraid of anything. Lisa Lee was brave most of the time. She had to be more like them.

She made up her mind. She was going to find out where the sound was coming from. And if it really was a mouse, or a ghost, or something equally horrifying, she was going to . . . she was going to . . . run like mad and get Johnny Twofeathers to deal with it. He was only a few doors down.

She carefully set her foot on the floor. No furry rodent jumped out and ran up her leg. The scratching stopped.

Good. She'd just get a glass of water and go back to bed.

It was chilly, so she put on the ivory-colored shawl Effie had left on the bed for her. She wrapped it over her head and shoulders and tiptoed to the door. She gave herself another pep talk, opened the door, and . . . screamed at the top of her lungs.



Trueheart, the white stoat, had been roaming the castle hallways, looking for mice that were foolish enough to be out on a night when he was hungry. He heard some mouse-like noises, and was about to go under a door when the girl opened it and screamed.

Trueheart wasn't bad natured. He only bothered those who bothered Durst or, of course, anyone he didn't like. These weren't many, really, and he certainly wasn't interested in scaring wee girls.

He stepped aside and watched her run down the hall, her white nightgown and shawl billowing behind.



From his roost above the stairs, the Laughing Earl watched the copper-skinned young fellow, the stocky boy, and the lad with the squeaky helmet. They were silently making their way up toward their rooms when the ghost-like figure in white, and her scream, ran down the hall and started down the stairs at chased-by-a-nightmare speed.

"Ghosts flying about Cairn Castle tonight. Even live ones. Ha, ha." His invisible round belly bounced up and down.

Directly below the Earl's spot, the stocky boy stopped on a step and clapped his hands to his face, a screech built up to bursting inside of him.

The lad with the helmet tried to shrink to nothing and fade into the wall.

Only the copper-skinned fellow dared face the winged wraith that headed toward them. “He’s a bold one. A one who can help our cause with the troubles at the castle, I’d wager.”

The Earl watched a calm recognition dawn in the boy’s eyes as the shrieking apparition shot straight at him.

The Earl smiled.



Johnny waited for the “ghost’s” well-announced arrival. He held out his arms to catch her—though he did still *half-wonder* if he might only be catching cold mist.

Another “phantom” then appeared at the top of the stairs, also all in white.

And when *that* one saw the fluttering, flying, shrieking thing on the stairs, *she* screamed.

Johnny caught the first “ghost.” “Calm down, Amy.” He held her shivering but very real shoulders.

“Amy?” Frankie said, peeking out through his hands.

Robert apparently got brave enough to sneak a look and saw it was Amy, too. He turned to the top of the stairs and also realized who the other white ghost of the night actually was, and called up to her—like it was no big deal and he’d known what was going on all along. “It’s OK, Veronica. It’s just Amy.”

Then a larger, ghostly shape appeared behind Veronica—and Robert let out the loudest scream of all.

Veronica didn’t move. Two pale, pale hands reached out and settled on her shoulders . . . and Effie said, “What

in the world is going on here?”

The tension cracked like icicles and fell on the floor.

Robert looked around as if searching for the source of the last scream—no doubt so Effie wouldn’t think *he* was the screamer.

Johnny turned the shaking Amy so she could see Veronica and Effie upstairs.

Veronica relaxed enough to slowly turn around and see Effie behind her. And Amy and Veronica both sagged with relief.

Frankie examined the shadows, possibly looking for any other ghosts.

Baird, in blue-green tartan pajama bottoms, joined his sister at the top of the stairs.

“Well, if everybody’s up, we might as well get going on the day. Here at the castle we usually start before the sun is up.”

Baird’s cheerful greeting made Johnny like the Scots boy all the more.

Nelson shuffled up behind Baird, rubbing sleep from his eyes. When he caught sight of the “night visions” in white, he jumped back—and breathed again only when he took a second look.

Always reliable at stating the obvious, Nelson said, “Geez, you girls look like ghosts!”

Robert tried again to recover his pack-leader status, with sarcasm this time. “Right, Nelson, I’m *sooo* scared. Veronica, Amy and Effie are *sooo* spooky.”

Johnny frowned at Robert and then spoke to the still trembling Amy. “What scared you?”

“It was a long skinny giant mouse with really pointy teeth and long whiskers,” she rushed. “I was just going to get a glass of water and it was waiting outside my door.” Amy could barely contain herself.

“Was it white?” asked Baird. Johnny saw Effie scowl at her brother when he asked this.

“Why, yes,” Amy said, relieved. “Have you seen it before?” Effie jabbed an elbow into Baird’s ribs.

“Just guessing,” Baird said.

Effie stepped forward. “Let’s light some candles and head to the kitchen.”

Johnny started for the kitchen with the others, but now he had even more secrets to think about.

Chapter Fourteen  
“The Prince of Darkness is a Gentleman”  
(William Shakespeare)

As the sun’s rays climbed through the window, Elsbeth entered the kitchen, braced by Braveheart and Beastie, who stood all the way to her shoulder.

No one noticed her. She felt invisible and out of place. She looked down to see if she was invisible. She wasn’t, but she remembered last night at dinner she *had* been invisible, when she was floating around and her body was resting between the dogs.

The pale teenage girl Effie stirred a big pot of oatmeal on the peat-burning stove. She tapped a vent to adjust the airflow. “This old thing comes in handy when we lose power,” she said to the Cape crew at the kitchen table. “We can always have a nice cup of tea and a hot meal.”

Lisa Lee stepped in the garden door and began jabbering the technical details of her night of Highland stargazing. And though many of her friends looked a little tired, there was a hum of excitement, and Elsbeth remembered they were going to contact their families today.

The hungry adventurers added honey and wild berries

to their Scottish porridge and chatted and chewed.

Finally ElsBeth said, “Hi, everybody.”

She was greeted with a group squeal of “ElsBeth!” and each talking over the other asking how she was.

“I’m fine,” she said, though she still shivered some. She fixed on the striking twins Effie and Baird and began to introduce herself, but was cut off by the echo of a sharp knock at the entrance doors.

Spoons hung suspended above bowls, except the one that Effie dropped, which clanged on the stone floor. “I’m sorry,” she said, picking it up and glancing at Baird. “We’ll see who it is.”

Baird scraped his chair back and got up.

Even the dust motes held still in the sharp yellow light—until Frankie said, “This oatmeal is delicious. Could you pass the honey, please, Johnny?”

Spoons again then dipped and chimed against the crockery and conversations resumed. Except for ElsBeth, who sensed she needed to be at the door when it opened.

She slipped out, escorted in silence by the deerhounds.



Effie and Baird stopped and whispered behind the big front doors, until another knock. They looked quickly at each other as if to gather strength. Baird grabbed the black iron door handle and pulled.

Two immense Doberman dogs loomed into view.

Beastie and Braveheart leaned forward. A low growl seeped from Beastie’s powerful jaws. The twins tensed.

When the door stood wide open, and with her view



backlit by the early morning sky, ElsBeth's first impression was—it's just an ordinary man. But a continued deep rumble from the deerhounds cautioned her to look more closely.

He was handsome—on the outside. Tall, with perfect teeth, and expensive clothes and boots. But his dead, empty eyes were frighteningly at odds with the almost pretty features of his smiling face. ElsBeth felt ants crawl under her skin. *She knew him.*

“I don't believe we've been formally introduced,” the man said in a crisp English accent, and he graciously bowed. “You, my lovely young lady, must be Euphemia Primrose. And you, dear boy, must be Baird.” The man took a step as if to come in.

The twins stood their ground—whether stiff with fear or boldly brave, ElsBeth wasn't sure.

Through clenched teeth Effie said, “I'm sorry, sir, but we have guests today.”

The man looked behind him at the vacant gravel drive, and back at Effie and Baird. He chuckled smugly and asked, “How'd they arrive, then? By broomstick?”

ElsBeth understood when someone was trying to intimidate. That was *something* she'd learned, at least, from her time with her horrible teacher Ms. Finch. The difference was this man was pretending to be nice and Ms. Finch never took the trouble to pretend to be anything other than what she was.

ElsBeth moved forward. The twins shifted aside in surprise.

“Excuse me, but our hosts are needed in the kitchen,” ElsBeth said, pleasant but firm. “They've left everyone at

breakfast and I was sent to get them.” A little fib but a larger truth was served. And surely Frankie would want more oatmeal by now.

The man wriggled back a bit, the Dobermans backed up some, too.

“Well, I certainly understand the requirements of entertaining,” he replied. “Perhaps later?” He arched a brow, with the hint of a threat.

Effie and Baird were silent, and ElsBeth didn’t think they were going to say anything.

“Perhaps,” she said, arching her brow to mimic him.

He frowned briefly then put on a broad smile. “Well, that’s that, then. Good day to you.” He turned neatly on the toes of his fancy leather walking boots and stepped away.

Only then did ElsBeth notice the posh fellow carried a shotgun. She shivered, and the deerhounds moved in closer.

ElsBeth leaned into the heavy door and pushed it closed. She turned and looked up at the twins. “Hi,” she said. “I’m ElsBeth Amelia Thistle. Nice to meet you. Now, can someone please tell me what is going on here?”

They stared at her a long moment. Effie finally said, “Ah, let’s go back to the kitchen.”



With the door closed at least for now on that distressing visitor and his dogs, ElsBeth was glad to rejoin her friends.

The crew had just begun clearing and washing up the mounds of dishes from last night and this morning, all except for Frankie. “I’ll help in a minute,” he said, small

gobs of oatmeal hanging from his open mouth as he spoke.

“Don’t talk with your mouth full, Frankie. It’s revolting,” Veronica said.

“Somebody has to teach these boys some table manners,” she said to Amy, holding back a giggle that would otherwise spoil her scolding.

ElsBeth almost laughed, too, happy to be with her friends. She was just about to ask again what was going on when the kitchen door creaked.

Washing up and joking stopped. The door opened, slowly, but no one was there. A narrow foot hooked around, and a pencil-thin, pinched-faced man in a rough-wool sweater and brown pants emerged. He stepped through, carrying a wooden tray heaped high under a linen cloth.

ElsBeth gawked. He looked just like a male Ms. Finch! A dead ringer for their terrifying teacher back home. The same big black glasses. Even his short, black, spiky hair was the same. She watched in horror as he scowled the exact same way her teacher had scowled through several almost unbearable school years.

“Hello, Mr. MacFinch,” Effie said.

“Mr. Mac*Finch*?” ElsBeth’s voice came out in a strangled squawk.

The other Cape Coddors were speechless.

The man screwed up his eyes at each one in turn. But when he came to ElsBeth he looked like he’d bitten into a lemon.

“What’s *that* one doing here?” he asked Baird, who looked uneasy but said nothing.

Frankie broke in. “What’s that wonderful smell?”

Mr. MacFinch's bitter face transformed to sweet. "Ah, laddie, me and the missus thought you might be hungry, so we made some of our special honey oatcakes."

"Fantastic!" Frankie popped out of his chair and helped Mr. MacFinch with the platter.

The old chap was now in better spirits but didn't linger. He frowned again at ElsBeth and turned to Baird. "I almost forgot. Little Biscuit is lame, so there'll be no going into the village today.

"I don't understand it," he said. "The pony was fine last night, but this morning she can't set her front right hoof down. I'd swear someone interfered with her." He cast a black look at the Cape crew again, though only blank faces looked back at him.

Robert said, "*We* didn't have anything to do with it."

ElsBeth knew this had to be true, but just by speaking up Robert *seemed* guilty. MacFinch's scowl hardened.

Baird stepped forward. "I'll come with you and take a look," and they left.

"Oh, no," Veronica said, slumping in her seat. "This means we can't call our parents. Or do any shopping. And I don't have *anything* to wear."

"Did you see the clothes I set out for you on the dresser?" Effie asked.

"I'm sorry," Veronica said, color rising to her cheeks as she straightened up. "I meant nothing of my own."

"I understand. I'm never comfortable in someone else's things, either."

But when Effie saw the heavy disappointment in them all, she said, "If we can't take you into the village today,

maybe we can show you some of our little part of Scotland.”

Grumbles about not being able to reach their parents gradually gave way to murmurs of interest in a ramble on a sunny day in this fairytale place.

Only ElsBeth was unexcited. She had that nagging feeling there was something she needed to do. Though any idea what that might be had flown out of her head with the shock of seeing the virtual twin of her horrid teacher.

A formless Mac whispered in her ear. “Yer right. There is somethin’ ye need ta do. Yer a Thistle. Get ta it!”

“Get to what?” ElsBeth said. But since Mac was invisible, her friends looked at her worriedly again.

She wasn’t supposed to talk to ghosts aloud with others around, of course. Grandmother told her most people didn’t see ghosts, and even the idea of ghosts made some people uncomfortable. Grandmother said it was best to be especially polite, too, when you did talk with them, because they could be easily upset in their current condition, especially when people walked right through them.

Maybe she was still a bit out of it from hitting her head and being in the water. In any case, she knew she was making stupid mistakes. “Brain must still be frozen,” she said. “ ‘Where do we want to get to?’ is what I should have said.”

ElsBeth felt a prickly look from Effie but the others were sympathetic. Amy touched her shoulder. “You’ve had a rough time, ElsBeth.”

“OK,” Effie said. “Some of us need to get dressed. So let’s meet back here in fifteen minutes. Let me know if you don’t have good walking shoes. We have quite an assort-

ment in storage.”

Effie turned to ElsBeth. “Come with me. I’ll find you something to wear.”



ElsBeth sat down in a pretty, carved oak rocking chair in Effie’s bedroom. The teenager turned stiffly to the little witch and without further comment said, “Why are you here? There hasn’t been a Thistle in Cairn Castle for a *long* time.”

“*What?* I don’t *know* why I’m here. Mac keeps telling me I have to *do* something. But every time he’s about to get specific, he disappears.” ElsBeth blushed and her hair frizzed up. She’d gone and talked about the ghost out loud after just telling herself not to do that.

Effie looked at ElsBeth a long while. “Don’t worry,” she finally said. “I know about Mac. He’s my great, great, great, great uncle. He’s really a dear ghost. He’s just never been able to move on. The castle is the family home, and I think he can’t give up his vow to always guard it.”

“Wait a minute,” ElsBeth said. “He said he is *my* great, great, great, great uncle.”

“He is, you ninny. We’re cousins. My twin Baird and I are your cousins on the Primrose side. My mother and your dad were half-brother and half-sister.”

ElsBeth couldn’t get her wits around that right now, even though she remembered Mac mentioning something about her cousins last night. And her attention stuck on something else, too. She asked in a small voice, “What do you mean ‘were’?”

“Well, your dad was Brodie Thistle. You must know this, and what happened.”

ElsBeth barely found breath to speak. “Grandmother hasn’t told me.”

“If Hannah Goodspell hasn’t told you, there must be a reason. So I won’t say anything either. I don’t think anyone really knows for sure, anyway. Except that he and your mother, my Aunt Faith Goodspell Thistle, disappeared about ten-and-a-half years ago.”

ElsBeth begged. “You *have* to tell me.”

“It’s only rumor, too, so it wouldn’t be right. Your grandmother will tell you what she knows when the time is right.”

ElsBeth’s lip quivered. “I understand,” she said.

But she *didn’t* understand. She didn’t understand how she had family here in the old country. She didn’t even understand why she thought of it as “the old country.” She didn’t understand why the castle felt like home, or how Effie had recognized Sylvanus, or why the pattern on the plates and silverware were the same as Grandmother’s, or . . .

ElsBeth pulled herself back from this whirlpool of confusion and looked at her newfound cousin. She tried to be positive and put on a brave smile for Effie. ElsBeth felt better when Effie smiled back.

“OK. Come on, then,” Effie said. “Let’s find you some clothes that will fit.”



Meeting at the foot of the stairs ElsBeth thought Nelson and Johnny looked good in the kilts Effie had found for them, except maybe for Nelson’s knobby knees. Frankie and Robert had apparently decided it was better to wear dirty clothes than “go native.”

Baird joined them. “MacFinch is right. Little Biscuit isn’t going anywhere.” Baird turned to Effie. “There’s a nail in her hoof and we have no idea how it got there.”

“I’ll pull the nail and make a poultice,” Effie said.

“What’s a poultice?” asked Amy.

Lisa Lee jumped in. “I read about that this summer. A poultice is a soft, damp mass of clay or herbs wrapped over a wound or sore to help it heal.”

“Sounds witchy,” Robert said.

ElsBeth felt Baird and Effie go still. A sensitive point, she thought.

Johnny Twofeathers came to their rescue. “My grandfather makes poultices with native Cape plants. Lester Killfish, one of the tribe elders, swears a poultice saved his leg when he cut it in a whale rescue.”

“I use healing plants I gather wild,” Effie said proudly. “Many of them only grow here in the Highlands.”

Johnny spoke with a quiet passion. “This is important. We talked about this at tribal council. Too many medicinal plants have disappeared entirely.” He paused. “Sometimes big farms that only grow one kind of crop can kill off the wild plants in an area.”

Lisa Lee tuned in to this conversation like an antenna receiving a signal. “There are more than fifty-thousand different kinds of plants that can help heal, but at least fifteen-thousand of these are at risk of extinction. Did you know that eighty-five percent of the different apple varieties we used to have are totally gone from the planet? And that’s just apples.”

ElsBeth didn’t know how Lisa Lee had jumped to ap-



ples, but Nelson said, “Wow, you guys are scary smart.”

“It’s not so much ‘being smart,’ Nelson,” Lisa Lee said. “It’s just— if we don’t realize what we’re doing, we can lose the living things that help keep us healthy and make life interesting and fun.”

“This happens with animals too,” Baird said. “The wolves in Scotland were killed off in the late 1600’s. And since then the deer population has gotten out of control. The deer are beautiful. But there are so many of them now that lots of our native plants, and even whole forests, are dying off. The Highlands aren’t in balance anymore.”

ElsBeth felt extra alive. Her friends loved the natural world, too, and protecting it was her personal calling. This is what she was meant to do with her life.

She remembered what the old man in Greenland said about the planet being out of balance, and the long look, and somehow this all had to do with why she was here in the Highlands . . .

But another sharp knock interrupted everything.

## Chapter Fifteen

### Bad Intentions

With that knock on the door ElsBeth went back on alert, and they moved silently as one to the front entry.

On the steps the same “gentleman” oozed a syrupy smile. “I’m awfully sorry, but you see we’ve been out walking.” He looked down at his two Dobermans. “I’ve been unable to find any water for the poor things, and it’s quite some way back to my place. I was wondering if I could beg the use of your well and a bowl for the suffering creatures.”

The dogs hung their heads and looked like the pitiful things their owner claimed.

The sun dimmed a little on them all. But Effie said, “Of course, I won’t be a moment.”

She left for the kitchen and the man began to follow. Beastie and Braveheart, however, closed ranks, blocking him with low growls.

Baird looked grateful for the dogs but gave an apologetic shrug to their unwelcome visitor. “I’m sorry, sir. It’s best that you and your dogs stay outside.” He leaned over

and patted Beastie. “Our deerhounds are quite protective.”

The man stepped back and arranged a smile on his face. “Only wanted to help the young lady,” he said with a too-easy charm.

Always attracted to animals in need, Amy ducked under Baird’s arm and stepped down to comfort one of the sad-looking Dobermans.

The animal lunged at her, teeth shining, drool dripping.

“Down, Hyde,” the man called, and he yanked the heavy chain around its neck.

Nelson rushed out, grabbed Amy and pulled her back.

“I wasn’t going to hurt him,” Amy said. “I just wanted to make him feel better. Dogs usually love me.”

“Well, that dog would have loved you for breakfast,” Veronica said.

“I’m completely embarrassed,” the man said. “They have had quite some exercise this morning and almost certainly are hungry as well as thirsty. Still, no excuse. I’ll punish him when I get home, rest assured.”

“You mustn’t punish him,” Amy said, horrified. “I’m sure I approached him too quickly and he was just scared.”

Before the two could continue to blame themselves, one of them sincerely and one of them definitely not, Effie came back with two bowls and headed to the outside well.

Johnny pulled ElsBeth aside. “There’s something wrong with that man.”

“I know,” she said. “He’s all smiles and manners but look at his eyes. The lights are out. There’s no one *home*.”

Effie put down two full water bowls but the dogs didn’t

drink. The man nudged them with a knee and one bent down, had a quick lick and turned away.

“They don’t look too thirsty to me,” Johnny whispered to ElsBeth.

ElsBeth was locked in on the man and barely nodded.

With no comment on his dogs’ odd behavior, the man looked up at the twins and said, “Sorry we didn’t have a chance to chat earlier. You were occupied with your . . . guests.”

ElsBeth had to admire his smoothness, if nothing else.

He grinned and said, “Gorgeous Banks, at your service.”

ElsBeth felt lightning strike. *Gorgeous, the enemy, the evil she had perceived at the library back on the Cape.*

“Yes, I know it is a funny name,” he carried on. “Mother took one look at me when I was born, I’m told, and promptly pronounced me ‘Gorgeous.’ Father tried to talk her out of it, mind you. But Mother is very determined.”

ElsBeth watched, intrigued, as different emotions played through him like winds through the leaves of a tree. He winced when he mentioned his mother.

“So there I was ‘Gorgeous Banks’ all through school. The girls were all right with it, of course, but I did have my share of rough times with the other chaps.”

He stopped. “But that ship has sailed, hasn’t it?” Then he added brightly, “And now the world’s at our fingertips.”

ElsBeth heard Robert’s thoughts ring loud and clear in her head.

*“I don’t know what he’s going on about. But being called ‘Hillman-Jones’ has caused me trouble. And I feel*

*the world is at my fingertips. I can relate to this Gorgeous Banks.*”

ElsBeth could see how Hillman-Jones would identify with this nasty character, and that was a scary thought.

But now that he'd watered his dogs, or at least pretended to, her friends were impatient to get on with exploring. Banks was in no hurry, though, and seemed to be waiting for something.

Frankie broke the awkward silence. “What should we pack for snacks on the trip?”

“You're going on a trip?” Banks asked. “How lovely. Where to, might I ask?” Banks beamed at them like they were his own beloved children. ElsBeth instantly felt sick at her stomach.

Nobody said anything at first. Then Amy, always polite, said, “We're going out to walk the hills. Would you like to join us?”

Effie moaned.

“Oh, I shouldn't,” Gorgeous said. “You probably want the day to yourselves.” He went on briskly before anyone had time to agree. “But I'd love to. We were just having a walkies day, traipsing around the countryside, seeing my new property.”

Banks chatted on to the group while Baird moved closer to Effie, and ElsBeth heard him whisper, “No one else lives anywhere around here. You know this whole area for miles and miles belongs to the three families. The Primroses, the Stones and the Thistles have held these lands for centuries.”

Effie whispered back, “Is he the one Mother and Da warned us about?”

“Maybe,” Baird said. “We can’t be letting Mr. Banks in the castle, for sure. We promised them not to let any strangers in and we’ve already made an exception with the Cape Cod kids. But if we spend the day with him, we might find out more, and maybe learn what he means by ‘my new property.’”

Effie nodded, and finally replied to Frankie, “I’m going to put together a bag with sandwiches and snacks. You want to help?”

“Sure,” Frankie said. “I don’t know how to cook yet but I’m excellent at packing food supplies.”

Effie looked intently at Baird. “Why don’t you show everyone the animals?”

Baird seemed to get it that his job was “distraction,” and that *no way* was that man to get into the castle.

~

ElsBeth wandered out into the barn with the others, wondering what was going on here with this Gorgeous Banks and the castle.

Baird was sitting on a stool under a reddish-brown cow. A squirt of milk binged into a tin pail, which was filling up quickly.

“This is why our milk is so good,” he said to them, patting the cow’s side. “Fresh each morning.”

Frankie stepped into the barn and stopped sharp. “You mean *that’s* where our milk came from?”

“Where did you think milk came from, Frankie?” Veronica said.

Frankie was thrown off a second. “I know it comes from a cow. But I didn’t think it came so . . . directly. I’m

not sure I want to know all the details of how my food gets to the refrigerator.”

Baird laughed. “Well, did the milk taste good this morning?”

Frankie thought about that. “It was actually the best I ever had.”

“Not so bad then, is it?”

“I . . . guess . . . not.” Frankie said. “But I definitely don’t want to see anybody make bacon. I don’t want to begin to think about that.”

Baird laughed again. “Don’t worry, friend. No pigs on this holding.”

And despite the unsettling presence of this Mr. Banks, ElsBeth was glad they could still have some fun.

Effie came into the barn. “I brought the poultice for Little Biscuit,” she said. “It will just take a minute and we’ll be ready to go.” She went over to the pony and set to work on the hoof.

Banks then came in and lurked behind Effie, flanked by his two monster Dobermans, Jekyll and Hyde. ElsBeth felt sick to her stomach again, and Little Biscuit snapped her head around and whinnied hysterically.

“You’re scaring her with the dogs,” Effie flashed at Banks. “Please take them out of the barn. Now.”

It was hard enough caring for an injured animal without making the poor creature feel threatened. And ElsBeth saw Effie felt threatened, too.

Banks and his dogs dropped back. But a sly grin crept across his face before he turned away, and ElsBeth got it—he’d been the one that hurt Little Biscuit! He’d probably

cut the power to the castle, too.

She followed Banks out of the barn, thinking all this over. Effie and Baird's parents were gone and the castle was cut off, without even a pony cart. Banks wasn't just sickening, he had some evil plan for the castle. And whatever that was exactly, it seemed to be moving forward as surely as the sun moved across the sky.

Banks stepped into that sun, and ElsBeth chilled.



## Chapter Sixteen

### Treachery and Traitor

ElsBeth, Amy and Veronica stopped on the path that ran along a narrow hilltop ridge. “I’ve never seen such an amazing place,” Amy said. “So many huge hills and really big rocks.”

“*Any* place has huge hills compared to Cape Cod, Amy,” Veronica said. “We live on a *beach*. But you’re right, it’s pretty here.”

On ElsBeth’s right the blue-black ocean faded to forever. On her left a deep valley cupped a silver-blue lake. She breathed in the pure air, with hints of heather, fresh wildflowers and salt, and suddenly ElsBeth’s small body couldn’t contain her. She felt the stone of this land like the bones of her body, the streams like her blood, the lake like her heart. And the magic of this place burst through her like the rays of the sun.



Lisa Lee was apparently mid-lecture when ElsBeth was drawn back to her friends. “Cape Cod was formed by the last glacier. It picked up sand and rocks when it moved

south, and left them behind when it melted.”

The boys had caught up. Robert was Robert and shoved past them. “*Everyone knows that, Lisa Lee.*”

She ignored him and continued. “The mountains of Scotland, on the other hand, were made when the earth underground shifted. England and Scotland ran into each other, and this land was pushed up.”

ElsBeth saw a worry form in her friends, starting deep and pushing up onto their faces.

She remembered an Earth Science lesson, and said, “Not to worry. Earth movements like these take millions, even billions of years, and they happen in *ultra* slow motion.”

She bumped into Veronica *very* slowly to demonstrate. Veronica frowned but played along and the others laughed. It was easier to enjoy the Highlands without thinking too much about how it all got here, even if it was interesting. The looks on her friends’ faces seemed to agree.

But her connection to this place, and the magic here... that was something else.



Up ahead, away from the others, Gorgeous Banks walked alongside Robert Hillman-Jones. Gorgeous asked him all about his life, a subject the posh boy obviously enjoyed, and man and boy fell comfortably in step—all according to plan. As they started up the next hill, Banks gently turned his questions to the castle and the twins.

“So, they are there by themselves, are they?” Gorgeous asked, pretending disinterest.

“Yes. Well, there are the MacFinches and the animals,

too, of course.”

“It seems so odd to leave two youngsters alone with . . . how many MacFinches did you say there were?”

“There’s just old Mr. MacFinch and his wife. And I think the parents might be gone for some time, the way Effie and Baird spoke.”

Gorgeous looked away so his smile would seem directed at the view and not at the receipt of this happy news.

“Interesting,” he said, once in control again of his features. “Have you seen much of the castle? Such fascinating architecture. Sometimes old castles have terribly interesting hiding places,” Gorgeous said, as casually as if buttering a piece of toast. “You know, like where they keep important papers.”

The boy frowned and Banks felt slight suspicion. So like slippery silk he added, “I’m a bit of a history buff, myself. My studies at university were on the inheritance of land rights from ancient times to the present. I love old documents.”

The boy relaxed, and Gorgeous sailed forth on a new tack. “What subjects interest you at school?”

“I’m not interested in school,” Robert said. “I’m interested in treasure.”

An almost-genuine warmth spread through Gorgeous. A kindred spirit.

They walked on and talked about nothing much. On the way back Gorgeous pulled Robert aside. “For some reason I think Effie and Baird have taken a dislike to me. Probably because my dog snarled at the little blond girl.

“Anyway, I really am keen on old deeds. They have no

value, of course, just historical interest. But if you could look around the castle for anything like that, I'd be ever so grateful.

"I'd just like to borrow them for a day or two, for my studies," Banks added offhandedly. "No need to bother your hosts about this while they're entertaining, of course."

Gorgeous held Robert in his gaze. "Old records, you see, are my kind of treasure." He misted his eyes with real, manufactured tears.

~

Robert turned away. He wasn't comfortable seeing a grown man cry. And wow, this guy was seriously studious, which Robert did *not* understand, but his heart went out to a fellow treasure hunter. He decided he would help Mr. Banks get any papers he could find.

~

When Robert and Banks arrived back at the castle, ElsBeth took a moment to study Banks closely. He hung around like he was waiting to be asked in. She didn't like it that he and Hillman-Jones seemed so chummy, either. Robert didn't need any help from this guy—he could cause enough trouble on his own.

Why was Banks here at the castle? What did he *want*? And what was she supposed to *do*? Mac hadn't been at all helpful about that yet.

There was odd magic all around, too. *Old* magic. Older than anything she had known existed. She felt out of her depth, in over her head.

ElsBeth didn't rely much on adults, except Grandmother, of course. But as she walked up to the castle doors with the others, she *really* wished Effie and Baird's parents

were here.

The twins collected the Cape visitors in the entrance hall and they all stood shoulder-to-shoulder in the doorway. Effie said, “Thank you, Mr. Banks. It was delightful of you to accompany us today. We wish you a pleasant evening.”

Banks didn’t move. ElsBeth watched his thoughts skip like stones off the surface of a lake, with nowhere to come to rest . . . And he couldn’t exactly *force* his way in.

His attention flicked to the cottage. A curtain twitched in a window. No doubt the peculiar MacFinches were watching.

All Gorgeous Banks could do, for now, was give a small reluctant wave, and begin the trek with his dogs across the field, back to wherever it was he called home.



ElsBeth and the others gathered in the castle great room, while Effie checked on Little Biscuit and reported back.

“The pony is doing well, but I think it may be a few days before the wee creature is ready to pull the cart. I’m so sorry. You must be anxious to talk with your families.”

Their spirits, which had been expansive from the walk, instantly fell at the mention of their families. But Robert sat up brightly and said, “Mr. Banks.”

“What?” Frankie said.

“Mr. Banks must have a phone.”

Effie looked at Baird like “you’ve got to be kidding.” But she said, “Mr. Banks *might* be an option for them.”

Another sickly feeling settled into ElsBeth but she

continued to sit quietly next to Lisa Lee on an enormous, maroon-velvet double-chair, and said nothing. What could she say?

Baird said, “I meant to ask him where his property was on the hike today. I can’t believe I forgot to find out. But he must be within walking distance.”

“He told me he lives on the old Crown’s Agent estate called Malfleur Manor,” Robert said. “About three miles by the deer path. I could try to find it tomorrow.”

With the idea of Robert going to see Banks, ElsBeth’s bad feeling got worse.

“I thought that old place was abandoned,” Baird said. “And I sure don’t want any of you out there alone in these hills.”

Johnny Twofeathers said, “I can go with Robert. I have a good sense of direction.” He grinned. “And my compass.”

ElsBeth felt *slightly* better about Johnny going, too. He could *usually* keep Robert out of the *worst* kinds of trouble. No one else volunteered so it was settled. Robert and Johnny would go first thing in the morning.

“Maybe he’ll take us into the village,” Veronica said. “And we could do a little shopping.”

“I’m not asking him *that*,” Hillman-Jones said. “He’s a busy man. We can’t ask him to take a bunch of girls shopping.”

Veronica must have been really tired. She just stuck out her tongue at him.

Yawning spread through the group like a wildfire. Veronica woke Amy, who was napping, and they all went up-

stairs.

Except ElsBeth, who didn't have a place to sleep yet. "I could bunk with one of the other girls," she said to Effie. She didn't want to cause any more trouble than she already had.

"Oh, ElsBeth, I'm sorry. Come with me, there's one room left."



Up the stairs and down the West Hall to the end, ElsBeth followed Effie until they came to a door on which hung a sprig of dried roses. *It even smelled like home.* Grandmother often hung roses up to dry. The room was violet and blue, her favorite colors, too.

And that portrait on the wall. It looked a lot like *her*, except the young woman's eyes were green, not blue, and her clothes were pretty but not a current style.

"Yes," Effie said, "that's your mother. This was her room when she visited your father here years ago. Before they married."

ElsBeth looked out the window and saw the moon. It comforted her to know her mother had seen the same moon in the same sky that she now saw.

"Won't you tell me *something* about her?"

"You know I can't."

Sadness crushed her, and a small but cherished piece of her world, which ElsBeth kept as bright in her heart as she possibly could, slipped further away.

"ElsBeth," Effie said at last, "come sit with me, and I'll tell you what I can."

ElsBeth drifted over to the bed and sat next to her cous-

in.

“You know that we witches live a long time.”

ElsBeth’s heart skipped. “You’re a witch, too?”

Now Effie sounded sad. “Baird and I are both witches, but we don’t seem to have much talent. Our parents are kind of ‘off’ magic and haven’t wanted to teach us.”

She grew serious. “Witches aren’t always welcome, you know. Magic can often be misunderstood. That’s why the families—the Primroses, the Stones and the Thistles—have tended to live off a bit by themselves.

“And there seems to have been some trouble to do with magic between the families. Something to do with what happened with your parents. Our parents never talk about it, but I guess there was some kind of accident. I don’t know any more than that.

“Anyway, our parents are protective of us when it comes to magic. Which is strange, actually . . .” She twirled a piece of hair. “Because in every other way they treat us like full-grown citizens of the world.

“I want to be with friends. I don’t want to have to live away from others. Or be misunderstood. But I also miss having magic in my life.”

Effie’s clear eyes clouded and she looked smaller, like some part of her had crumpled up.

“Our parents said that while they were away we’d be fine here with the MacFinches, as long as we didn’t let anyone into the castle. We don’t usually have many visitors anyway. But now is a time I’d feel better if I had a little magic.” Effie tried to laugh but it only made her sound more distressed.



“We can see the ghosts, of course. But we aren’t very good at talking with them. I guess I’m best at healing poultices. The animals stay healthy when I watch after them. And our garden grows like crazy.” She brightened some. “Baird is good with animals, too, but he mostly talks with the wild ones.

“So you see, we’re not really much use in the magic department. But I do really love theater, and Baird is keen on sports.” Effie continued to cheer up as she spoke.

“Grandmother says there’s magic in all of us. It’s just different with each person. Seems to me you and Baird have plenty of magic.” ElsBeth smiled. “And everyone knows a great actor can make you ‘spellbound,’ after all.”

Effie laughed lightly and took her cousin’s hand. Then she yawned. “I’m sorry, ElsBeth. I really have to get to bed. But I’m truly glad you came. We’ll talk again.” She kissed ElsBeth on the forehead and floated out of the room, her feet not touching the floor.

She has more magic than she knows, ElsBeth thought, and now feeling surprisingly more content, she stretched across the cozy bed and fell instantly asleep.



ElsBeth dreamed.

Three ghosts fluttered around like . . . ghosts.

A white weasel, a grey wolf, and a large brown owl prowled the castle grounds. A selkie broke the smooth surface of the loch and called to her. A banshee wailed sadly but sweetly.

ElsBeth wrestled with her pillow. There was something she had to do. The old man in Greenland had told her. Mac, too. Maybe the answer was in her dream. Maybe not.

~

Robert Hillman-Jones set his watch alarm for three a.m. He read somewhere this was the time people slept most deeply. He was going to try to find any old papers he could for that interesting Mr. Banks. He'd bring them when he went to see Banks with Johnny after breakfast.

He wasn't happy to put off his own treasure hunting. But after the stoat had attacked him he wasn't quite ready for another go at the old Norman keep. Not yet, anyway.

So in the stillest part of the night he lit a candle and slid downstairs.

~

The Laughing Earl watched him closely but did not laugh. He saw the boy was out to do some serious harm and that he better get Mac and that dangerous Durst involved. The Earl reluctantly roused himself. "Now seems the time has come around for some real work," he creaked.

~

Robert looked around the entrance hall and saw the door to the library. A good place to start.

He did have a sense for finding treasure. He'd always felt he had a magic touch for that. He went in, determined to find what he was looking for.

Dark wood. Sparkling, glass pendant chandeliers. Another fireplace. Just like Mr. Banks had said, it was interesting architecture.

But the library was huge. Bookshelves lined each wall, from the floor to the sixteen-foot-high ceiling, crammed tight with books of every shape and size. Sometimes two layers on a shelf, one behind the other.

How could he sort through all this? Robert stood still in the center of the room, unsure even where to begin.

~

The ghosts drew together around Hillman-Jones.

“I say kill the little Norman,” argued Durst. He was convinced after seeing Robert in the helmet that he was another hated Norman Frenchman there to steal his treasure.

“I would kill the wee traitor,” Mac said, “But Effie an’ Baird wouldna’ know how ta deal with the mess. An’ it wouldna’ solve the bigger problem, anyway.”

The Earl hung back, thinking how to stop the boy without doing *too* much, always put off by anything that looked, smelled or tasted like actual work.

~

Robert talked quietly to himself. “Mr. Banks said they would be *old* documents, so anything new is not what he wants.” He scanned the shelves for the oldest books.

~

“The little Norman pig looks right through me as if I were *nothing*. He is *for it!*” All Durst’s anger at the Normans for destroying his beautiful cairn came rushing back. And his frustration that his magic had decayed to its current pitiful level. But not even to be noticed! This was the final insult.

Durst clutched the heaviest book he could find, the ancient family Bible, and threw it.

~

Robert saw it coming and was quick—*how* it came, and from *where* it came he had no idea. But he ducked and the book landed on an old leather chair instead of his head.

“What the *heck?*” Robert whispered, still in sneaky-mode, not wanting to wake anyone.

~

Mac slapped Durst on his vaporous chest. This didn’t make a sound but it got Durst’s attention. Mac snarled, “You just gave him th’ deed!”

~

Robert saw a piece of parchment on the floor. By the look of its yellowed edges it had been tucked for ages in the old Bible that lay open beside it. He read a few words of the fancy script: “*do hereby gift and grant . . . the lands herewith described . . .*”

He didn’t bother to read more. He was sure this was something Mr. Banks would want. He put the old document under his shirt and headed back upstairs.

~

“Stop him!” Durst called. He didn’t want to admit he’d used all his available energy throwing the book at the boy. And that he had missed.

“*You* stop him!” the Earl cried, unable to shift quickly after centuries of just drifting.

Mac yelled at them both. “You two have ta stop him. I cannae hold mah molecules together any longer,” and the red-haired, red-faced ghost faded to pink, and then faded away.

And so it was, Durst brooded, that the three guardians of Cairn Castle had actually opened wide the gate for the enemy.

They had brought this little man, together with the young clan witch, from across the sea—to help *save* their

home and lands. Now this one was poised to betray them all and destroy their heritage.

Fate, that cruel trickster, had certainly played them harshly this time.

## Chapter Seventeen

### Malfleur Manor

In the morning ElsBeth followed cinnamon smells to the kitchen for breakfast with her friends.

“You look suspiciously pleased with yourself, Robert,” Veronica said, pulling out a spindle-legged chair and setting down her cup of strawberries and cream on the long table.

Between sips of his hot tea, Robert smirked. “Just excited to be able to call home today.”

ElsBeth knew a smirking Robert meant trouble.

But Johnny grabbed the snack Effie had put together for them and swept Robert out the door—off to Malfleur Manor.

“Hey, Baird,” Frankie said. “Can I help milk the cow today?”

Attentions mostly turned to another day of Highland discovery. But ElsBeth watched uneasy through the diamond-paned window as the two boys moved down the path, out of the light, and into the dark woods.



Johnny and Robert hiked along without event for some time—until the white stoat appeared again. He hissed at them, and wove menacingly side to side across the path in front of them, all the while sending and sent out sharp barks and shrieks.

It wasn't big, but in the daylight Johnny could see the sharp teeth and the fierceness of the animal that had attacked Robert.

“Back up slowly,” Johnny said. “We'll try to go around.”

They stepped back until the stoat was out of sight. Then louder snarling and squalling erupted from where they'd just been. They pulled themselves together and ran back.

The two gigantic Dobermans, Jekyll and Hyde, held the stoat at bay. The dogs thrashed their heads and sprayed spit. But the small creature fought boldly, jumping and swatting, and found sensitive flesh as it raked a claw across Jekyll's nose.

Blood seeped into the Doberman's mouth and mixed with the white bubbles of froth on his lips. Jekyll went wild and pounced but bit only into dust.

Johnny saw a flash of white twist off the ground and vanish into the woods. When the dogs realized the stoat was gone, they turned their massive bodies toward the boys. Johnny took a breath, looked into their bloodshot eyes and faced them square.

Jekyll and Hyde gazed back, unmoving, then calmly turned and walked away. Hyde glanced back once, as if inviting them to follow, and even seemed to smile. *That* threw a shiver through Johnny.

“Let’s go,” Robert said. “They just saved us from the weasel thing. They must remember us, and we must be getting close.”

“You remember,” Johnny said, “we’re not going to stay long.”

It was one thing to stick with his friend, but he sure didn’t want to hang out all day with that slimy Gorgeous Banks. And the strange things going on here, like this encounter with the dogs and stoat . . .

“Oh, come on, Johnny. Mr. Banks is all right. He’s just a successful businessman. And it’s not like Effie and Baird were very nice to him yesterday. We can’t just rush in and out and be rude. After all, we’re going there to ask him a favor.”

Johnny understood that but he was going to be extra alert. All kinds of warnings went off when he thought about that man.

They made it safely another hundred yards down the path before an owl swooped out at them from the trees and knocked Robert to the ground. It scratched at his shirt.

Without thinking, Johnny threw his backpack. It struck the bird and it flew off. Stunned and injured, with one wing bent, the owl dipped alarmingly as it crested a hill.

Johnny hated to hurt an owl. But what was it doing out in the daylight? Owls hunted at night. And why was it hunting Robert?

Johnny turned back to his friend. “Are you OK?”

Robert got back on his feet, unsteady but apparently uninjured. “There sure are some crazy animals around here,” he said with a crooked smile, trying to put on a brave face.



They were both taking a moment—when a haunting howl spooked them. Robert went rigid in outright fear. Johnny couldn't allow himself that luxury.

“That sounds like a wolf,” Johnny said. “But Baird told us they've been extinct here for hundreds of years. So . . . maybe it's a dog. Some breeds howl. Maybe it's a husky.”

What confronted them next, however, was definitely not a dog, husky or otherwise.



ElsBeth walked along the path from the castle to the loch cliff. Johnny and Robert were on their way straight to Gorgeous Banks's home, alone. That didn't feel right. She should be with them.

“Aye, ye *should* be with them, wee witch.” A weak image of Mac appeared beside her.

“You're not looking so well, Mac,” ElsBeth said.

“I'm nae feelin' so well. Th' clan suffered a horrible blow last night. That treacherous mate of yours stole th' deed ta th' families' clan lands. He's takin' it to that miserable adder, Gorgeous Banks.”

Mac was nearly invisible and his voice was faint. Even these few words seemed too much for him.

“What do you *mean*? *What* deed?” Her confusion turned quickly to worry, then fear.

Mac was gone, but with his last bit of energy he'd sent ElsBeth an image . . . Robert's face.

ElsBeth talked quietly with herself, as she often did when she tried to make sense out of something she didn't understand, which had made for quite a few conversations of this sort. “What's going *on*? What's this deed Robert

has?”

She paced. Sylvanus appeared in front of her.

“What should we do, Sylvanus? Robert’s taken a deed that has something to do with the family land. He’s taking it to that Banks man.”

~

Sylvanus knew a deed was a legal paper that said who owned a property, and he’d been around long enough to know a good many things about this castle and its land. Hadn’t he been a kitten here hundreds of years ago? Wasn’t this where he’d first realized the gift of his magic? The clan lands *had* to stay in the family. For many reasons, all of which he couldn’t explain now.

But because this was important, and complicated, Sylvanus decided to explain to ElsBeth in Cat. ElsBeth knew just about every animal language there was, and Cat was one of her most developed ones. Sylvanus could also speak People-Talk, but not as quickly or as well as Cat. So he figured the best chance for ElsBeth to understand was for him to talk in Cat.

But as ElsBeth listened she just got more anxious to take some kind of *action*, and the sooner the better—she was a witch who thought “thinking about things” was just an unnecessarily long way for her to get where she was going to go anyway.

Despite a busily tapping foot and rapidly frizzing hair, ElsBeth managed to hear him out. She nodded when he finished, and with no further discussion they were off—to Malfleur Manor.

~

Farther ahead on the path to Malfleur Manor, what

Johnny and Robert did face was for sure not a dog, but a monstrous grey wolf. Which was strange because they were supposed to be extinct. And much stranger was that Johnny could swear he could see right *through* the wolf.

Then something Lester Killfish of his tribe said came to mind. There were some animals that weren't really of this world. They were spirit animals. This must be . . . a spirit wolf.

But what had Lester Killfish said to do when you encountered a spirit animal?

Johnny sweated.

The wolf drooled.

Robert shook.

The wolf leapt. An awesome leap, faster and higher and longer than Johnny ever thought possible. It knocked Robert down and trapped him.

Johnny still didn't know what to do. But he *did* remember the only way to handle a scary situation with anything supernatural was straight-ahead, dead-on.

As soon as he had this thought, his mind . . . opened. At least that's what it seemed like. He was calm, everything was still. The wolf didn't move, either.

Johnny remembered more. From listening to elders at tribal circle. He had to *be* the wolf.

Without a further thought Johnny slipped out of his body. He went *through* the wolf. He became the wolf.

His muscles were strong. His blood ran hot.

Beneath him the eyes of the boy he held trapped danced unfocused. He craved to bite the boy's soft neck, wet with drool from his own wolf-mouth. His black nose nuzzled

the boy's chin and . . . Johnny recognized his friend.

His wolf-body still yearned to bite but Johnny's own spirit was stronger. He pulled the wolf-body away from Robert and flew back to his own body, which had just been standing there stupidly.

The wolf, without Johnny, skittered and shied, and disappeared into the heather.

Johnny inched up slowly to Robert, avoiding a look at his throat. He wasn't sure how he'd feel now about seeing his neck. Robert's eyes were closed but there wasn't any blood. Johnny leaned down and listened for a breath.

"What are you *doing*?" Robert yelled. Johnny jumped back, his eardrum throbbing painfully.

At a safe distance Johnny asked, "You're all right?"

"Why *shouldn't* I be all right? I just tripped."

Johnny nodded slowly. Apparently Robert had blanked out. Just as well.

Still a little dazed and not completely comfortable again with his own body, Johnny looked across the heather in the rising sun.

The creatures on the path were like the pieces in a game of chess, he thought. One side, with the stoat and maybe the wolf and the owl, was trying to *stop* them from getting to Malfleur Manor. The other side, with the Dobermans, was trying to *help* them get there. He didn't know who was playing these pieces, and he didn't know why. But it was a fierce game, fiercely played.

Robert said, "Come on, Johnny."

"Right. The sooner we get there and make the call and leave, the better."

Johnny helped Robert up and felt something under Robert's shirt. "What's that?"

"Oh, nothing," Robert said, talking to the ground.

Johnny knew he felt *something* not "nothing." He also knew Robert was stubborn, and if he pushed it, Robert might clam up completely. So he just said, "It can't be much farther."

At the top of the next rise they stopped and looked down on a grand but faded estate. Vines nearly covered the stonework and deep windows, and the doors were made of a wood almost black. Malfleur Manor.

## Chapter Eighteen

### Dangerous Ground

ElsBeth knew that she and Sylvanus trailed far behind Johnny and Robert on the path to Malfleur Manor. She decided she needed to use whatever magic she could to catch up so she cast a simple time spell that slowed everything down and speeded herself up.

Sylvanus had to go into fast-cat-mode to stay with her. Despite his weight gain, and an occasional forward roll when he tripped over himself, he was doing fine.

The path was overgrown and ElsBeth wasn't exactly sure where they were going. But she'd learned to follow animal tracks on the Cape Cod dunes, and she could see traces now and then of the boys' progress. She didn't even have to use magic for that.

She needed to stay focused. But they hadn't gone far when, even at the speed they were travelling, ElsBeth was distracted by an enchantment she perceived nearby.

Something magical was hiding in the heath, the low shrubs just beside them.

She stopped short. Sylvanus continued to blur along.

ElsBeth dodged off the path to look. She saw a shape, darker and more solid than the surrounding shrubland.

She approached, and was almost on it. It fluttered. She drew closer.

A yellow eye looked back. ElsBeth flinched.

Not what she expected. An owl. A magical owl, she could tell by the energy it cast. She screeched, “Hi,” in Owl.

“No need for that, young Ms. Thistle. I’m perfectly capable of English,” the owl said.

Aside from Sylvanus she didn’t know any animals who could speak People-Talk. She always had to use their language. Or communicate without sounds. That worked, too, sometimes.

“Quit thinking so loudly and just talk to me,” the owl said.

She thought he *must* be magical if he can tell what I’m thinking.

“Of course I’m magical. I must say, you are one of the dullest Thistles I’ve ever met.”

That hurt. ElsBeth knew she wasn’t as smart as Lisa Lee, or Johnny, and maybe Veronica. But it didn’t help to have someone tell her she was dull. She really was trying to think like Professor Badinoff had taught her.

“Get over it. I didn’t mean to hurt your feelings. But look, I have a damaged wing. Be a good witch and lay some healing hands on me.” The owl winced as he lifted his wing to show her.

The owl continued chattering away. “That nasty friend of yours is about to hand over the deed to the castle, and I

have to do something about it. The whole Highlands is on alert. The banshee even called up the wolf.”

ElsBeth tuned out the fussy creature while she tried to remember what to do. She’d seen Grandmother use healing hands on animals many times. Even if this owl said she wasn’t the smartest witch, she was going to do her very best.

ElsBeth gently touched the bird’s wing.

“You have to hold me more firmly than *that*,” he squawked.

“Sorry, I’ve never done this before,” ElsBeth said.

“As if I didn’t know,” the owl sighed.

ElsBeth held on firmly and imagined the wing as it would be healed, spread out strong and sound. She felt the injured area heat up, the blood flow fast, and the bones knit together.

The owl sighed again, this time with pleasure. “Rather a good job for your first time. Granted, I’ve had better.”

ElsBeth frowned.

“But for a first try, it was jolly good. Really.”

“I’m glad I could help.” This was a new skill she wasn’t meant to learn until next year, and she’d just done it by herself.

“Trust me, take the lesson anyway. There *is* more to know.” The owl carefully adjusted his wing, which now looked bigger and stronger than his other one.

ElsBeth stood to admire her work . . . and in horror saw *Sylvanus* fly through the air in a huge leap, claws out, aimed straight for the owl.



“*Stop!*” commanded ElsBeth.

Sylvanus did stop, mid-leap, and plopped heavily on the heather in front of them.

The cat snarled at the owl. The owl shrieked at the cat.

“What’s *wrong* with you two?” ElsBeth said. “We need to catch Johnny and Robert before they get to Gorgeous Banks’s place.”

She looked at them hard and long until she knew they really *got* it. Then she took off. And keeping a respectful distance from each other, Sylvanus and the owl followed.



Johnny and Robert raced down the hill to the Manor. They paused at the gate.

Two dark stone griffins, those mystical creatures with the body of a lion and the head and wings of an eagle, stood atop each post. Johnny noticed their eyes were tricky—they seemed to move in their stone heads, watching and following them.

With *their* eyes fixed fast on the griffins, Johnny and Robert eased through the rusty iron gate and entered the front garden. Thick perfume of much-too-sweet roses closed around them—all black roses, Johnny could see when his head cleared enough to see anything at all. They pressed on.

The front door was almost as large as the castle’s. Johnny saw flowing letters carved in the stone above the entrance. “‘*Felis demulctamitis,*’” he whispered to himself, “‘the stroked cat is meek.’ Hmmm.”

“What?” Robert said.

“The motto over the door. It’s Latin. It says, ‘The

stroked cat is meek.’ ”

Robert shrugged. “We have a family motto, too. I can’t remember what it is but I’m sure it’s something honorable.”

The words above the door put Johnny on edge. The doorknocker didn’t make him feel any easier. Maybe it was supposed to be the Loch Ness monster but it looked to him more like a snake.

Johnny held his breath and raised a hand to knock. The door swung open.

Gorgeous Banks, looking as elegant as the day before, smiled charmingly. “Welcome to my home. Not quite Cairn Castle, I know. But all things in their time,” he added cheerily.

Banks showed them in, and though it was still early in the day, the hall was dark. The heavy door shut behind them.

And, as simple as that, they were inside Malflour Manor.

Johnny and Robert followed Banks down the deep dim hall. “We’ve come to ask if we can use your phone,” Robert said.

Banks stopped and turned. “*That’s* why you’ve come?” His stiff smile was more a grimace.

“And what we talked about,” Robert said, out of the side of his mouth.

“Well, that’s grand.” Gorgeous beamed again.

He led them on to a spacious study. The heavy curtains were closed, and the only light came from a small brass lamp. “Let’s see what you’ve found.” Gorgeous patted the

desk.

Robert's hand went into his shirt and Johnny heard a dry crinkly rustle. Robert glanced up at Banks . . . and his hand stopped.

Robert tensed. Johnny felt Banks tense even more. It seemed like the man's eyes tried to *pull* whatever Robert had from his shirt.

"Well, come *on*, boy. Let's *see* it," Banks said.

Johnny got the distinct impression his friend had done something very wrong. He took Robert by the shoulder and pulled him back. "We're out of here."

"Not so fast." Gorgeous grabbed Robert's other shoulder. "You know how dangerous it can be out there." Banks whistled, and from another room Jekyll and Hyde barked wildly.

Johnny and Robert froze.

Banks was all smiles again. "Forgive me. What kind of host have I been? You've walked the whole way, haven't you? Some refreshment, perhaps? And you wanted to make a call?

"First things first. Let's go to the kitchen and get you something to eat."

Robert relaxed, but not Johnny. He thought about the motto over the door, "The stroked cat is meek." Not *this* "cat," Johnny said to himself. This all-too-smooth Mr. Gorgeous Banks wasn't going to make *him* meek.

~

How could Elsbeth not see that this owl was seriously flawed! He was simply showing off—flying ahead, then dropping back, just to prove that he, Sylvanus, could not

keep up. The owl's snide pridefulness clearly showed what an awful character he was.



For his part the owl rather enjoyed taunting the temperamental cat. The legendary Sylvanus thought he was something. But he was so fat now that without using magic he could barely get around, and was probably so lazy that he'd forgotten most of the magic he ever knew.

I could out-magic that cat with my eyes closed, he thought. And to prove his point the boastful owl did close his eyes, and flew on using owl sonar only.

Which was fine for a while. Then he dived sharply, and the ground rose fast.



Sylvanus watched the owl crash. What a strange one, he reflected, as he strolled up to the heap of feathers.

"What in the world are you doing?" he asked, and in his amazement he set aside for the moment his other feelings toward the large bird.

The owl righted himself but was dazed. He blinked and got his bearings. "I had to fly so slowly so not to leave you behind that I couldn't stay airborne. What of it?"

But many magical fellows are not good liars, and Sylvanus was not fooled.

"Look," Sylvanus said. "I know you were flying with your eyes closed. And I know what you think about me."

The owl shrank into himself, embarrassed.

"It's true, I've gained some weight," Sylvanus continued. "Peanut butter is delightful, but not so good for the feline figure. And I *have* probably forgotten more magic

than *you'll* ever know.”

The owl bristled at this insult.

Sylvanus became serious, a rare thing. “Look, the clan castle and lands are at stake. I don’t even really belong here anymore. But you do. So let’s work together. At least for now.”

The owl blinked . . . twice . . . as if digesting this logic. He shoved out a wing. “Portentus is my name. I guess we’re . . . teammates. For now anyway.”

Sylvanus raised a paw and they high-fived, sort of.

Then faster than flying heather in a hurricane, they flew to catch up with ElsBeth.



Robert looked around the Manor kitchen, which was big enough to skate board in, with two large stoves, a walk-in freezer and two sets of double sinks. His eyes stopped on a locked gun case holding several rifles. A shotgun leaned against the wall by the door. Robert swallowed.

Gorgeous Banks fussed about. He opened and closed cupboards and the fridge. “Here’s some lovely orange juice. I know you Americans love orange juice. How about a nice thick peanut butter sandwich? That’s what you eat ‘across the pond,’ isn’t it?”

“Anyway, it’s Cook’s day off,” Gorgeous rambled on, “and it’s not exactly as if Mummy ever taught me how to do anything in the kitchen. Come to think of it, I don’t think *she* knew how to do anything in the kitchen.”

“Orange juice is fine,” Robert said. “We would like to use your phone, please. Our families will pay for the call.”

“Yes, yes. In a minute. Relax and drink up.” The man

poured juice into fancy wine glasses and handed these to the boys. “Let’s take a look at what you found while you’re enjoying your refreshment, shall we?”

Robert again hesitated. Something was definitely not right about Banks, and definite second thoughts about handing the document over banged about in his head.

Johnny didn’t waver. “No. Whatever Robert took doesn’t belong to him. We’re going to take it back.”

Robert *hated* it when Johnny took charge ... and now he lost it. “*Nobody* tells me what to do, Johnny.” He pulled the parchment out from under his shirt and shoved it across to Banks.

Gorgeous snapped it up and spread it out. He read the fancy writing aloud:

*“ I, Charles, King of England, by this Crown Writ, do hereby gift and grant to Our loyal subject Laird Thistle of Sutherland, as requested by the Earl of Sutherland, the lands herewith described: From the southern tip of the Loch of Inchard on Our western coast, north to and including Cape Wrath, thence east to the Loch of Eriboll and to its southern tip.*

*“ This estate to be held henceforth by the Thistle family, with the charge that the land and the creatures thereof are kept forever free and safe for the pleasure of God and the Crown, as long as the Thistle family line shall exist. This line of inheritance specifically to include any female descendant, as requested by Laird Thistle and approved by the Crown, with knowledge that Our land deeds have not previously recognized a female heir.*

*“ If or when the Thistle line is no more, this land*

*shall revert to the Crown, and may be sold or dispensed with at the discretion of the Crown's Agent.*

“ ‘Signed by my hand, King Charles of England, this 23<sup>rd</sup> day of September, 1631. Confirmed by Seal of the Parliament of Scotland, 1633.’ ”

Gorgeous bounded off the floor like a three-year-old who's eaten a whole bag of candy.

“It's mine!” Banks squealed. “I was right, I knew it. The Thistles are gone and I'm the Crown's Agent!”

~

Robert had that extremely rare feeling, for him, that he'd gone too far. He'd crossed a line and was now on dangerous ground—in Malfleur Manor and in his life.

He heard his father's voice in his head:

*“Friends and enemies, made in a flash,  
Can make a life livable, or make it crash.”*

His life began to look like something he would not be able live with, and he wondered if he'd crashed his life completely and forever.

Robert looked out the kitchen window.

He *could not* let Gorgeous Banks get away with stealing the castle and lands.





## Chapter Nineteen

### From Bad to Worse

Johnny faced Banks across the Manor kitchen table. “You’re wrong. There’s at least one Thistle. There’s ElsBeth.”

“No, *you’re* wrong, boy,” Banks said. “I did the research. The last known Thistles were Brodie Thistle and his wife, Faith Goodspell Thistle. And they disappeared *years* ago with no known children.”

Johnny thought he saw a way to throw Banks off, or at least to slow down his plans. Johnny wasn’t sure it was true, but that wasn’t the most important thing right now, and it did make sense to him. “ElsBeth’s grandmother is Hannah Goodspell,” he said, “and ElsBeth is the Thistle child.”

“*What?* Where is this ‘ElsBeth Thistle’!” Gorgeous squeezed his wine glass of orange juice, cracking it in his clenched fist and splattering juice and glass on the stone floor.

“Back at the castle,” Robert said.

“Well, we’re just going to have to go have a talk with

her, aren't we," Gorgeous said, not looking so gorgeous right now, his face puffed up and pulled out of shape.

"ElsBeth's not going to talk to you." Johnny got up and grabbed Robert. "We're leaving."

"Oh no, you're not." Banks reached for the shotgun by the door.

"Run for it," Johnny yelled, and he shoved Robert ahead of him down the hallway toward the front door. They dodged from wall to wall like they'd seen in the movies so Banks couldn't get a clear shot.

Banks stumbled over Jekyll but ran after.

Johnny pushed Robert through the door but Hyde was right outside. The Doberman knocked Robert down. He showed his teeth and growled but did not bite.

Johnny started toward Hyde to pull him off.

"No. Run, Johnny," Robert hollered. "I'll be OK."

Johnny stopped. He saw their only chance was for him to get help. "I'll be back, Robert. Stay strong."

Jekyll then shot out the front door after Johnny.

But the grey wolf appeared and stepped between them. He was bigger than the dog and had longer sharper teeth.

Jekyll snarled and snapped but the wolf stood his ground, and Jekyll crept back to safety next to Hyde. Johnny didn't wait to see what happened next. He took off.



Held on the ground by Hyde, Robert watched Banks step out the Manor front door.

"Drat, I lost one," Banks said, kicking the ground. Then he smiled. "It isn't as if they can call the coppers, though,

is it? No phone, no car, not even a pony cart.” He laughed.

“No, I don’t think I have to worry too much about some kids and the feeble caretakers the MacFinches. Not when *I’m* the Crown’s Agent, the law of the land.”

Robert looked up at the man he once thought of as “his kind of people,” and wondered how he could have gotten it so wrong.



ElsBeth ran up the next hill on the path to the Manor, as Johnny Twofeathers dashed over the top from the other side. Elsbeth slowed to normal speed so she was visible. Sylvanus and the owl pulled up beside her.

Johnny stopped, and Elsbeth waited while he gulped the Highland air. When he looked like he could talk, Elsbeth asked, “What happened, Johnny? Where’s Robert?”

Johnny’s eyes fell. His face went still.

ElsBeth felt a lump in her throat but managed to say, “Tell me, Johnny. What happened?”

Johnny looked like he had air enough but not the heart to speak. Elsbeth waited until he could.

“Gorgeous Banks has Robert. He has some crazy scheme to try to steal the castle from Effie and Baird’s family.”

“He can’t take the castle! It doesn’t belong to him.”

“I saw the deed, Elsbeth. It actually belongs to you.”

ElsBeth was confused again about this “deed” business. She thought she understood when Sylvanus explained, but she didn’t get it. “What are you *talking* about? What *is* this deed anyway?”

“A deed,” Johnny said, “says officially who owns a piece of property.

“My great-grandfather told me that in the old days no one in the tribe ‘owned’ land. The land was just ‘the land’ and you used it. You hunted and fished and grew corn on it.”

“I got *that*,” ElsBeth said. And she didn’t have an opinion about *owning* land or *not owning* the land. All she was interested in was *this* land and *this* deed. “Why do you think *I* own it?”

“Robert stole the deed from the castle and gave it to Gorgeous Banks. I saw it, and that’s what it said.”

ElsBeth opened her mouth—to say something or scream, she wasn’t sure—but nothing came out.

“Gorgeous Banks tricked him, ElsBeth. You know Robert. He can be a rat sometimes. But he wouldn’t do anything to really hurt you or your family.”

Beneath her confusion and her anger ElsBeth could see, *barely*, that Johnny was probably right about Robert. But she still didn’t understand.

“The deed says the castle and lands belong to the Thistles,” Johnny went on. “As long as there’s a living member of the Thistle family. Banks said he researched that the last Thistles disappeared years ago, and he plans to use the deed to steal the castle and lands.”

Johnny was one of only a few people who knew how much she missed her parents and ElsBeth saw his concern for her. But she was still too mad to say anything, so she waited for him to continue.

“Banks said the names of the last known Thistles, and the wife’s middle name was Goodspell. I thought that

might be your mother.”

ElsBeth felt herself fall to some dark place inside. She managed to hold on enough to whisper, “They ‘disappeared’?”

“ElsBeth, I know this is hard for you, but we have to try to focus on this situation. Gorgeous Banks wants to get to you so he can get the castle and lands for himself. Even more important, he has Robert right now.”

From far away ElsBeth began to crawl back.

“You’re right. We have to get Robert. Let’s go.”

Johnny took her arm. “OK. But we can’t just run up and demand he give us Robert and the deed. We need a plan.”

~

Sylvanus and Portentus had been silent, but making plans got them both excited.

“I make fantastic plans,” the owl said.

“Right, like flying into the ground?” Sylvanus said. “No, we need my kind of plan. Devious.

“Don’t talk to me,” the cat said. He held up a paw for quiet and turned away. “I need to think,” and he began to pace.

~

ElsBeth heard Sylvanus and the owl yapping but not what they said. She was trying to come up with a plan.

Johnny said, “Maybe we should go back and talk with Effie and Baird about this, and the MacFinches. Maybe they can think of something.”

ElsBeth had been accused of being the dullest Thistle,

but now she had an idea. “I’ll sign the deed over to Banks,” she said. “That’s what you do with property, right Johnny?”

“I . . . think so. I remember my aunt signed her deed over to the new owner when she sold her house. But . . . Effie and Baird’s parents will lose the castle.”

“What if I sign it over, and you’re outside with Robert’s digital video camera, the one he takes on all his sails to record his treasure hunting. I make it clear Banks is forcing me to sign the deed. Then, when Robert is safe, we get the video to people who’ll send Banks to jail, and we get the deed back.”



Sylvanus and Portentus had stopped and were listening. “Tricky little witch,” Portentus said. “Maybe she isn’t so thoroughly dull after all.”

Sylvanus nodded. Then he realized Portentus had just disrespected ElsBeth, and the extra-chunky cat took a swipe at the bird.

“Now, now,” Portentus shook his big head. “Team-mates, remember?”

The owl hissed at ElsBeth. “Sorry I didn’t introduce myself before. I’m Portentus. The cat and I like your plan. We’ll help.”



ElsBeth bent down and whispered to Sylvanus and the owl and they sped away. “I sent them to get the camera,” she told Johnny, who wasn’t surprised, and ElsBeth didn’t expect him to be. He was good at talking to animals, too, after all.

“I don’t trust this guy, ElsBeth. And it’s risky getting

the deed back after you sign it. That could be complicated. But it *might* work.”

Johnny clearly wanted to help, but just as clearly he was worried. She listened.

“Are you *sure* we shouldn’t go back and talk with the others about this first?”

“If we go back, they will all want to help,” she said, “which is nice. But can you imagine Nelson and Amy out here?”

Johnny nodded. “I love those guys, too, but you’re right. We better do this on our own.”

~

From the heather, the white stoat heard these plans and now set out to report back to Durst. Trueheart had noticed the wolf nearby, too, *and* the wispy form of the banshee.

So, no . . . the bold young man and young witch were not, in truth, alone.

## Chapter Twenty

### Bad on Bad

Robert sank deeper into one of the dusty, overstuffed chairs at Malfleur Manor while Banks paced about excitedly.

“Oh, do be reasonable, old chap. It’s just business. I need the land rights and they have them. I have authority and they don’t. It’s the oldest story in the book.”

Banks spoke more to some vague space over Robert’s head than to Robert. Banks looked in the mirror and patted his hair each time he walked by. Wow, this guy was vain. But as long as he was carrying on like this, Robert felt fairly safe.

“I’m getting rather fond of you, Hillman-Jones. I saw the look in your eye when I said it was ‘just business.’ Come now, I could tell right away by your shoes that you have family money, too.

“You know how it is—the ‘haves’ and the ‘have-nots’ and all that. We’re the ‘haves,’ my dear boy, and we should work together.”

Amazing how just a few hours ago Banks made so



much sense. Now he seemed like a planet out of orbit, spinning away faster and faster into the blackness.

“You have *no idea* how much this property is worth,” Gorgeous continued. “I’ve always wanted to have a significant impact on the world. The family’s been in banking forever, and it’s marvelous how you can manipulate *whole countries* through international finance.

“But dear old Dad went and loused it up, didn’t he? Instead of a fat inheritance I got this shabby manor back of nowhere in Scotland, and this historic title ‘Crown’s Agent.’ Worthless, I thought. But I was wrong, wasn’t I?”

Robert thought about answering one of these questions but the man hardly noticed he was there.

“When I was contacted by that old scientist fool and he explained about the oil reserves practically *beneath the castle*, I knew it was my destiny. To be richer and more powerful than Daddy ever dreamed.

“And I made sure that scientist fellow never got a chance to tell anyone else.” Gorgeous giggled in a way that was *way* beyond scary.

Robert kept quiet.

“The old fool wanted to see that the land was never ‘exploited,’ whatever *that* means. He was worried about the plants and animals. He was worried about pollution. He was worried about the sea life and the fishing.” Banks’s voice became high and whiny.

“I say let the plants and animals fend for themselves. A little pollution doesn’t seem a big price to pay for a comfortable lifestyle, now does it?”

Robert began to think Gorgeous was not only a really awful person but genuinely mad. A Cape Codder born and raised, Robert knew like he knew his own name you

couldn't harm the environment and not harm yourself at the same time. No way around that.

The land deed said the forests and animals had to be kept safe, and that made sense, too. He'd seen on the hike this was a rare, wild place. Banks could not be allowed to get away with this.

Robert leaned farther back in the large chair and watched Banks . . . and he remembered how he dealt with his teacher Ms. Finch—who was also a little unhinged, in his opinion. She absolutely adored him, and the key thing he'd figured out with her was simply to pretend to agree with everything she said. And like it or not that's what he needed to do with Banks.

“Yes, sir. You are absolutely right, sir.”

Gorgeous smiled. “I knew you'd come around. You know, I like you so much I might even make you my heir.”

*That* was a disturbing idea, but Robert forced a smile.

He felt he could handle Banks better now, but he still wasn't sure if—at any minute, and for any crazy reason or no reason at all—Banks might not just turn on him and go totally nuts.

So as Gorgeous rambled on, Robert turned his mind to how he would escape. *And* how he would make things right.

~

“I *have* it,” Portentus screeched.

“No, *I* have it,” Sylvanus growled.

“Look,” reasoned Portentus, “ElsBeth said we had to be fast. And I can fly faster than you can run.”

Sylvanus glared.

Portentus hefted the digital camera. It was small, but he still sagged under the strain. He knew he was mostly feathers and hollow bones, and that it was his intellect and expansive personality that made him impressive.

He tried to make the best of his strengths, and his weaknesses. So to keep the peace, he said, “The little witch needs us both. The camera is heavy and will slow me down. But if I carry it, we’ll both get there at the same time.”

Sylvanus tilted his head, thinking this over. He frowned briefly and then said, “What are we waiting for?”

Portentus generously let him have the last word.

~

Back on the path to Malfleur Manor, ElsBeth and Johnny went over the plan. “OK. I’ll go up to Malevolence Manor,” ElsBeth said.

“It’s ‘Malfleur’ Manor,” Johnny said. “ ‘Malfleur’ means ‘evil flower,’ I think. Though ‘Malevolence’ Manor totally fits, too.”

“Right,” ElsBeth said. She didn’t really hear him, she wasn’t really listening. She was concentrating on the plan.

“I’ll go up to the door. I’ll say you sent me to help Robert. I’ll tell him you’re right behind me, with Effie and Baird and the others. But I was worried so I ran ahead. He shouldn’t give me any trouble if he thinks you’ll all be there soon.

“I’ll sign the paper in the kitchen, where the curtains are open. You find a spot in the back where you can hide but still see us and make the video. I’ll try to get him to keep the dogs inside.”

Johnny looked nervous. ElsBeth was worried, too, but these were the cards they had to play.

“OK,” Johnny said. “I agree Banks will want to get the deed signed fast and get you and Robert out. He won’t want us all there. But you’ve *got* to be careful, ElsBeth.”

Sylvanus loped in and Portentus dropped down from the sky.

“That was fast,” Johnny said. He took the camera and checked the battery and memory card. Robert always had the best equipment and, as usual, it was in perfect condition.

Sylvanus and Portentus took positions as back-ups in the heather. Johnny and ElsBeth moved over the last hill and down to Malfleur Manor.



When they got near the house, ElsBeth went to the gate and Johnny went around back.

ElsBeth watched the griffins on guard over the gate, watching her. “Hello,” she said as she passed them by. She could see some kind of spirit lived in the stones.

One of them groaned. She turned back and said, “I’ll be OK, you’ll see.”

The other griffin groaned. ElsBeth got the idea that Malfleur Manor had not been a happy place for a *long* time, and that the griffins were afraid for her. She nodded back at them.

She passed between hedges of heavily perfumed black roses, and became distracted. “My, aren’t you beautiful.” She gently pulled a blossom to her face and breathed the scent in deep.

“Grandmother would love these,” she went on. “They’d look grand next to her bright-colored roses, even prettier next to the white ones.” ElsBeth felt dreamy.

The manor door came into focus at the edge of the garden. “What a funny motto, ‘*Felis demulctamitis*’—the stroked cat is meek.” She laughed. “That definitely doesn’t apply to Sylvanus.”

She found herself drifting off even further, when her family motto came to mind, “*Amicis semper fidelis*”—always faithful to my friends . . . and she caught herself.

She had to pay attention! Robert was probably in there being tortured by that awful Gorgeous Banks.

She filled her lungs with clear fresh air, grasped the tail of the sea-serpent doorknocker in her small hand, and rapped as hard as she could, three times.



Gorgeous Banks, with Robert behind, opened the door.

“Hi, ElsBeth,” Robert said. “What are you doing here?”

“*This* is ElsBeth Thistle?” Banks said.

“Yes, sir, I’m ElsBeth. We saw each other yesterday at the castle and out hiking but we weren’t introduced.” ElsBeth talked to Banks but studied Robert carefully for any signs of torture.

“Come in,” Gorgeous said, adjusting his smile. “We were just having a chat.”

ElsBeth watched Banks put on his manners like a pair of fitted gloves. She stepped across the threshold and heard the griffins faintly moan again.

She walked slowly, to give Johnny time to get into position, but went straight back to the kitchen, according to

the plan.

“ElsBeth Thistle, are you related to the Thistle clan of the castle?” Gorgeous asked, as if making conversation at a tea party. He leaned casually against the kitchen wall.

“Yes, sir,” ElsBeth said tightly.

“Well, I guess your friend Johnny was right. You see, ElsBeth, we have a little problem here. I happen to need the castle. I need it badly.” Gorgeous came to within inches of her face. “And you’re going to have to give it to me.”

Banks had apparently decided being “smooth” wasn’t going to get him favorable results with ElsBeth and that a direct approach was needed.

ElsBeth, however, did not respond more favorably. Quite the opposite. She couldn’t *stand* this man. And she immediately forgot the plan.

“You can’t just go taking other people’s property! That’s stealing.” ElsBeth didn’t yell, but this was not her “tea party voice,” if she had one of those.

Gorgeous took a deep breath. In that pause ElsBeth saw through the window that Johnny was in position and recording them from the back garden.

She took a deep breath herself.

Gorgeous went on. “My dear, that is what we bankers and government folk *do*. Didn’t you ever wonder why, in a world of plenty, so many people are poor and starving? Well, it’s like this. Some people are the wolves, and some are the sheep. And I, my dear, am a wolf.”

A wail rose from the heather outside. ElsBeth looked at Robert, and Gorgeous, but they hadn’t heard anything.

“So this is my proposal. You sign this official looking

document assigning any rights you may have to the castle and lands to me as Crown's Agent. Of course, it might be not be entirely *legal*, but that never stopped us government wolves in the past, and it never will." Banks snickered.

"I'll go on and make my billions, and you get to take your friend back home with you. Now, doesn't that sound like a fair exchange?"

ElsBeth was rattled by Robert's thoughts, hitting like a hammer inside his head *and* hers.

*"I have so screwed up. And on top of it all I have to get rescued by a girl. Majorly embarrassing. But I will undo what I've done."*

"Don't sign anything, ElsBeth," Robert said out loud. "We'll get out of this somehow."

Wait. This wasn't in the plan. She'd have to think fast.

Gorgeous looked at Robert like the son he'd just cut out of his will. Jekyll and Hyde closed in. "You think you two little American ragamuffins can stop me? I think not."

Gorgeous leaned across the table and shoved the paper at ElsBeth.

"Here. You *will* sign it." Some spit flew from his mouth. "Then you'll go away and you won't tell anyone. Ever. Because no one will ever believe you. An Agent of the Crown forcing a child to sign over her property rights? Oh, no. Anyone would say that's just the fantasy of a child on a summer vacation in the Highlands."

Banks began to strut. "By the time the Primroses return, the paperwork will be filed and recorded, and buried so deep in a bureaucratic nightmare that the only thing anyone would find, if they looked into it, would be their own sleepless nights."

Banks turned and got right into Robert's face. "And there won't be a *thing* anyone can do.

"But look on the bright side, *children*. You will have had a trip to the Highlands you won't soon forget." Gorgeous laughed at his little joke.

ElsBeth's hair began to frizz, but she stuck out her hand for the pen—moved a little to the left for Johnny to get a better camera angle—and signed.

Gorgeous snapped up the document. "Now please go. I have things to do."

He looked down at Hyde and seemed to resume a chummy conversation he'd been having with his Doberman from some time in the past. "We won't have to worry about Plans B or C to get the deed now, will we, boy? Isn't it amazing what you can do with the law on your side?"

Banks turned to walk away but again bumped into Jekyll. "You're in the *way* again, you clumsy beast. Get outside!" He opened the kitchen door and sent both dogs out.

"Come on, Robert," ElsBeth said. "We're leaving."



ElsBeth and Robert were halfway down the front hall when it hit her. "The dogs will get Johnny!" They ran back to the kitchen.

She heard the dogs barking outside, and through the window she saw Johnny backing up, trying to get away, camera in hand.

Banks stepped out the kitchen door. "What the . . ." he said. Then, "Get him, boys."

Both dogs sprang for Johnny.

"Take the gun, Robert," ElsBeth yelled, "so Banks



can't use it on us. And come on!"

Gorgeous had his back to them when they shot out the back door and ran past him. He took off after them.

ElsBeth looked back. The dogs had Johnny up against a tall hedge. Holding the strap, he swung the camera at them. Jekyll caught it in his massive jaws and crunched down.

Hyde moved forward to pounce on Johnny—but held back when a black furry shape with claws, and a brown feathered shape with its own claws, took up a position between Johnny and the dog.

"Johnny, come *on!*" ElsBeth shouted. Gorgeous was close, and she and Robert couldn't stop to help.

Jekyll ripped the camera out of Johnny's hand, knocked him down and held him under his full Doberman weight. ElsBeth slowed time down, without trying to, and she couldn't tear her eyes away. "Johnny!" she screamed. Her legs kept pumping but her heart felt like it had stopped.

A large grey shape rose up from the heather and rushed at Jekyll ... but in slow motion. It seized the dog by the back of his neck and pulled him off Johnny.

The wolf stared long at Johnny—then time zipped back to normal and Johnny was up, running and gone.

Banks was still gaining and just behind ElsBeth and Robert—when the white stoat jumped off a tall rock and onto Banks's head. The creature raked a claw across his gorgeous forehead.

Banks pulled up. He touched the blood that dripped onto his face and looked at it closely. Then he shrieked hysterically and ran back to his manor house.

Like in a snapshot, looking back, ElsBeth glimpsed the white stoat on his hind legs, both puzzled and amused, watching Gorgeous Banks howl and run.

Robert threw the shotgun in the heath and ElsBeth, Johnny and Robert ran as fast as they could for as long as they could and as far as they could.

The only thing ElsBeth knew for sure was—they were getting *away* from that crazy place.

Chapter Twenty-One  
Back to the Serpent's Den

In the great room at the castle, ElsBeth and Johnny told all of them what had happened at Malfleur Manor—briefly, calmly, painfully. There were no comments or questions. Only brittle silence.

Robert sat off to the side. Nobody wanted to be near him. He told them what the deed said. He told them what he knew about Banks's plan to exploit the oil reserves.

*That* was like a bomb going off, but still in silence. Emotions exploded, you could feel it, but no one said a thing. Baird tried to speak, several times, but looked like a fish out of water gulping for air.

Then another kind of bomb went off, for ElsBeth. Silent, too, but it was something big. It had to do with being carried here by South Wind, the old man in Greenland, and the ghosts . . . these things came together and exploded in her mind and began to make sense.

Oil drilling here in the Highlands would ruin everything. This beautiful land—this land that was her family's home, that her family had been charged all these centuries

to keep wild, natural and free . . .

*This* was why she was here, why she'd been called.

Still . . . what should she *do*? What *could* she do?

Effie spoke. "Before our parents left they warned us not to let anyone into the castle."

"We kept that Gorgeous Banks out," Baird said. "But I never expected they meant we shouldn't let in a twelve-year-old boy."

Robert was pale, downcast, and squirmed like a worm on a hook.

Part of ElsBeth thought he should feel *at least* that bad, maybe *worse*. She wasn't feeling kind, she knew that, and she didn't see why she *should*.

Robert shook his head. "I'm sorry. Banks said he just wanted to borrow some old documents to study, and I believed him. I'm really sorry, guys. But look, I'm going to make it right. I'm going back tonight and get the deed and the paper ElsBeth signed."

Effie pounced. "Oh no, you're not!"

Lisa Lee spoke quietly but she had their attention. "Even if Robert hadn't given Banks the land deed from King Charles, it is highly probable he would have found a way to get it, one way or another. Let's face it. From what we know now this man is a master of deceit."

"If only I hadn't let go of the camera," Johnny said, "we'd have the proof."

"You did great just to stay alive, Johnny," ElsBeth said hotly. "That Doberman would have torn you apart." But she saw that didn't make him feel any better.

Baird stood up and paced. His body was overcharged

with unchannelled energy. “I’d face that Gorgeous Banks any day before I’d face telling Mother and Da we lost the castle and lands that have been in the families since 1631!”

Round with ideas they went, late into the night. All they could come up with was they had to go back to Malfleur Manor, back to the serpent’s den—and hope, with luck or cleverness or both, to set a trap that Banks, in his greed, would walk into.

Not much of a plan. But better than hers, ElsBeth had to admit.

“No one travels on the roads after dark,” Baird said. “Too much chance of hitting a deer. So Banks probably won’t do anything about the deed tonight. But we need to set up a watch at his manor house before sunrise. Two people. Any more than that and there’s too much risk of making noise and getting caught. But no one goes alone.” He looked hard at Robert.

“OK,” Robert said. “Then I’m on the watch in the morning.”

“With me,” Baird said.

ElsBeth was proud her cousin didn’t refuse Robert’s attempt to make up for what he’d done. But she also understood there was *no way* Baird would trust Robert alone. And there was no way Baird would not do everything he could to keep their lands. Which was exactly how she felt, too.

~

Mac and the Earl watched and listened from the ceiling near the stairs. “Tis a tough fight,” Mac said. “Give me a broadsword any day before facin’ one of those wily Crown’s Agents. An’ a banker, no less!”

The Laughing Earl wasn't laughing. "Looks like we may have expected too much from the Thistle girl. She's brave enough. But we haven't seen she has the wits we need, or much of any magic.

"We'll have to get Durst involved. He still has more magic than any of us. And he isn't afraid to shed a little blood in a good cause—or even a bad one, for all that." The Earl then did manage a short chuckle.

They went off to find Durst where they knew he'd be. They also knew his faithful Trueheart would have reported to him what Robert had done, and Mac did *not* expect to find Durst in good spirits.

As they approached, they heard him sing.

*This brat, this runt  
Will feel the brunt  
Of my unequalled power.*

*He'll sorry be,  
This dainty flea,  
That he has crossed my path.*

*His little mind's  
No equal kind  
To my profundus depth.*

*I'll swat him flat  
And with all that  
T'will be his darkest hour.*

They waited to the end, Mac with the happy tear of a fellow warrior, the Earl with a respectful smile.

“ ‘Tis a bonny song, Durst,” Mac said.

From the dungeon pit Durst looked up at them, still smoldering. “It’s not as if you two are regular visitors down here. Knowing you, you want me to do your dirty work. Is it that little Norman traitor again?”

“Well,” Mac said, “yer right. We don’t visit as often as we should. But ye have to admit, it is . . . gloomy down here. Why don’t ye sing from the top of the keep? Ye can look out over the waters.”

“You think I don’t know what it’s like up there . . . *and* down here? For *centuries* I looked out over the sea and watched people come to my cairn. But that all changed when the Normans came and ruined everything. I can’t bear to be up there now.”

Durst stood. “But you don’t care about that. What’s to be done?”

The Earl explained.



ElsBeth did not sleep well and woke late. Baird and Robert had already left for Malfleur Manor. Johnny joined her for breakfast but they couldn’t eat. They picked at their oatmeal and berries until Johnny pushed back his chair and said, “Let’s walk.”

Outside they tramped the grounds and rummaged their minds for some better plan. Sylvanus and Portentus followed, arguing softly. Elsbeth knew Sylvanus was good at making plans, but no better ideas appeared to any of them. They restlessly made their way along the path that overlooked the loch.

One thing about being with Johnny . . . they didn’t even have to talk, but it was as good as talking because she

could often sort out what was on her mind just by being with him.

And something she didn't even know she'd been thinking about popped into, or out of, her mind . . . depending on how she looked at it.

The "long look."

And the important things she'd been thinking about since they'd set sail from Cape Cod, and even before that, rumbled like thunder and tumbled through her—they came from far away and long ago, and went into the future—until she saw what it was that she had to do . . . and it was simple. It wasn't clever or tricky, but she knew it was right.

*She* had to go back to Malfleur Manor. To that very spot she had been called to face the enemy. And—for her family past and present, for her friends old and new, for herself, and for this beautiful, natural, magical land and all the creatures thereof . . . she had to go there, and *do whatever had to be done*.

She told Johnny.

"It beats hanging around feeling guilty," he said.

They stepped off the path and into the heather, without a word to anyone.

But ElsBeth knew she was not alone. She felt again the presence of the most ancient spirit she'd first felt back on the yacht, the one who had called her so deeply and whose mournful cry she'd heard several times since.

She had the odd idea she was followed by a small army, too—at a fair distance but, if needed, suitable for striking.



Chapter Twenty-Two  
“To Greed, All Nature is Insufficient”  
(Seneca, Roman Philosopher)

Baird and Robert looked down from the heather on the hill above Malfleur Manor. It was early afternoon, and they hadn't seen anything except Banks walking back and forth in the kitchen, talking on the phone. Once in a while he disappeared for a bit but he hadn't left the house.

The Dobermans went outside a couple of times but stayed close. They looked around when they heard a noise but seemed unaware that they and the manor house were being watched.

Baird didn't want to talk with Robert, and that had made for a long day. But looking for any chance to get into the Manor when Banks and the dogs were out of the picture had kept them both “in the moment.”

A motor purred in the distance and dust kicked up at the end of the drive. “Someone's coming,” Baird whispered.

A long black Mercedes pulled up. A uniformed chauffeur opened the back door and a fat man in a dark suit got out. He stretched his legs, scratched his belly and stamped

up the Manor steps. Banks opened the door, smiled widely and showed him in.

Five more vehicles drove up, three different Mercedes, a Cadillac SUV and a lipstick-red Ferrari. Each dropped off their well-dressed passengers and parked.

Baird looked at Robert, nodded, and they crept down the hill.



ElsBeth and Johnny reached the last crest on the path to the Manor. They noticed cars parked on the drive, and Baird and Robert slinking toward the dark building.

“Looks like Gorgeous is having a party. Maybe he’s celebrating tricking us,” ElsBeth said sourly.

“Maybe so,” Johnny said. They edged forward.

ElsBeth watched Baird and Robert circle the house and try to look inside. Most of the windows were curtained. They came across one they could see in and Robert took a peek, but then kept going.

Under the next window Baird tapped Robert on the shoulder, pointed up, and held his other hand to his ear. ElsBeth understood they could now hear the enemy inside.

ElsBeth and Johnny had promised each other on the way here they’d be totally quiet. She agreed with Baird that more than two of them at the Manor might make noise and be dangerous, but she *had* to be here.

They came up silently now behind the two boys. Johnny nudged Robert gently to let him know they were there. Robert gave a small yelp.

Banks stopped talking. ElsBeth heard him walk to the window and open the curtains. The four of them scrunched

against the outside wall as flat as they could.

Banks must not have seen anything. He snapped the curtains shut.

Baird gave ElsBeth a look that “yelled,” “*What are you doing here?*”

All of them got it. They could make *no* more mistakes.

They stayed hunched under the window while Banks gave his presentation to both audiences, inside the Manor and out.

“As I was saying, I’ve invited you all here as trusted members of the international banking community. I know you’ve come a long way. I’m quite sure that before we are done, however, you will find your time has been well spent. *Very* well spent,” he added gleefully.

“Gentleman, look at the projection on the wall. I’m going to show you riches beyond your wildest dreams. Not just *personal* riches. You already have those. I’m talking *power*. Power to control *nations*.”

“Through energy and food prices, control of the world is at our feet. And we know the price of energy directly controls the price of food.”

Banks’s voice grew reverent. “Control comes down to energy, and energy comes down to oil.”

The men inside said nothing. The room was quiet.

“Think of the oil fields of Saudi Arabia. Think of Iraq. Middle East oil is not cheap or in our control. But what if we had oil reserves as large and as rich, right here in the north of Scotland?”

A dramatic pause.

“Gentleman, I have just come into the legal rights to a

sizable section of the Highlands. A section, it so happens, that is floating above an *immense* sea of oil.”

He paused again, and ElsBeth could *feel* how pleased Banks was with himself. She seethed like a volcano about to blow.

Johnny glared at her and gave her the silence sign.

A man with a German accent said, “Our geologists have known about this oil, and we would have explored the deposit years ago but the land could not be purchased.” Several other voices agreed.

“That has been true . . . until yesterday,” Banks said. “I traced the original Writ from King Charles the First granting this land in the northwest Highlands to the Thistle family.”

Banks seemed so filled with joy he might burst into song.

“According to the Writ, when the Thistle line is no more the land reverts to the Crown. Now, gentlemen, there are no more Thistles, and I, conveniently, am the Crown’s Agent.

“I’ve ensured all loose ends have been taken care of to exercise my legal authority to buy the land from the Crown—at an exceptionally attractive price, I might add, and with your financial backing and participation, of course.

“For insurance, I’ll bribe the appropriate officials to misplace those papers so no legal challenge can be made, and with some administrative magic I’ll make them vanish forever.

“And, *voilà!* Before you can blink, these hills will be dotted with oil rigs pumping black gold into waiting con-

tainer ships.”

“Are you sure there are no surviving Thistles?” someone asked.

“Absolutely.”

A short sound escaped from ElsBeth. She was glad this wasn’t too loud or there might have been no more Thistles in fact.

“What about the environmentalists?” asked a man with an American accent. “They aren’t going to like the idea of the ‘pristine’ Scottish Highlands full of oil rigs.”

“We’ll get around them like we always do. Make them look like fanatics. Publish our own ‘scientific evidence’ there is no danger from the oil. Get them arrested if they protest.”

Banks seemed to have an answer for everything and sounds of agreement now grew.

ElsBeth then really *did* erupt. She jumped up and banged on the window. “I’m a Thistle,” she yelled.

Banks threw back the curtains. ElsBeth stared into his purple face. He snapped the curtains closed.

“Just a crazy kid from the next estate,” she heard him say. “Pay no attention.” Then, “Excuse me, I must let the dogs out.”

Footsteps clacked across the wooden floor and Banks spoke in a quiet, deadly voice. “Get her, boys.” A door opened and closed.

From outside, yaps and snarls now grew louder and closer. ElsBeth and the others could only wait for the hounds to round the Manor and tear them apart.

Chapter Twenty-Three  
A More Powerful Magic

The dogs were now in sight and charging fast. ElsBeth ransacked her mind for some kind of spell to stop them.

Then—as if by magic, but not her own—three creatures appeared between them and the dogs.

The black cat, the brown owl and the white stoat were large for their species, but they could not hold off both dogs for long. Then a fourth, the grey wolf, joined the three.

The dogs pawed the ground and whined but they did not advance.

Stalemate, for now.

But trapped outside Malfleur Manor—with the legal rights to the clan lands in the hands of Banks and his associates inside—any possible future from here only looked worse.

Baird whispered, “If we could just make them see the truth about Banks.”

Slowly at first, then building and building, ElsBeth exploded again. In silent radiance.

This would be more powerful magic than she'd ever done. Though not so *very* different from some things she could do now.

Last year she found that she could look at someone and see scenes from their past. She hadn't been able to control when this happened, just like she couldn't control when she heard people's thoughts, and some other things that "just happened."

But what if she *could* control seeing scenes from someone's past, and *project* them so others could see them, too?

Like the scenes of the terrible things she was *sure* that Gorgeous Banks had done in his life. *This* would tell the truth about Banks to the men inside.

ElsBeth peered between the curtains and zeroed in on Banks.

If ever there was a time for a spell it was now. And like a gentle breeze that could not be resisted, ElsBeth's clear voice carried into the room:

*From the past, the truth will show.*

*And by these scenes, the truth you'll know!*

All talking inside stopped. Then one voice said, "Oh, *no*. That's just not *right*."

"*Oooh*, that's bad," a second said.

"*Gorgeous*, how *could* you?" a third spoke up.

"Oh, that's just *too much*, old man," a fourth pronounced.

On the wall in the room, instead of the map of the oil reserves of northwest Scotland, the men now saw past

scenes from the life of Gorgeous Banks. It was not a pretty picture.

A young Gorgeous lighting a cat's tail on fire, locking a little girl in a shed all day, and cheating on his math test. A teenage Gorgeous, preening in the mirror while stealing money from his mother, and feeding spoiled food to an opposing team's polo ponies. The groans were particularly loud on that last one.

But there was more. Forging his father's name on a document to appoint Gorgeous as Crown's Agent, bribing a man to keep his appointment as Crown's Agent, stealing from the Crown as the Crown's Agent. The scenes went on and on.

Banks didn't know what the men were reacting to until he turned and saw an especially nasty crime he'd committed.

"Who has these pictures?" he shrieked. "I'll not be blackmailed!" Then, "You want all the oil for *yourselves!*"

A few of the men looked interested in *that* idea. They began to talk among themselves. Gorgeous had lost control.

The men then watched the scene of Gorgeous forcing ElsBeth to give up her inheritance to save her friend. The mood in the room darkened fast. Gorgeous was alone and weakened, like a wounded fox hunted by the pack.

One man said to the others, "Our Mr. Banks is a truly vile creature. But there's money to be made here, a great deal of money."

He turned to Banks and demanded, "Where is the girl!"

ElsBeth felt the devious and disgusting mind of Gorgeous Banks spin wildly and then settle. And when it set-



tled she saw that it settled for Banks with a shattering clarity. The men he had invited to his home wanted ElsBeth so they could cut *him* out. Just like he had tried to cut *her* out.

Gorgeous struggled to say something clever, to stall. But all he could sputter was, “I really couldn’t say where she is.”

ElsBeth wasn’t sure what to do *now*. She’d just performed the most difficult magic she’d ever done and was fresh out of ideas.

Then the ghosts appeared. ElsBeth knew Mac. The other two seemed vaguely familiar, though she couldn’t remember seeing them before.

One, though, a warrior spirit with a blue-painted face, had seen quite enough.

He and Mac, and the round ghostie-fellow with the crimson robe, moved into the darkened room. The blue-faced one quickly made it clear it was too late for Gorgeous and his friends.

He let fly a crackling lightning ball that stunned the men blind. He roared in a terrible, ghostly voice, “*Clan spirits live!*” and he basked in delight in their quaking fear.

Mac pulled himself together right proper and solid, in full Highland dress, and came at the men howling, broadsword swinging.

The men ran—into each other, into the walls, into any dark corner they could find. The ghost with the elegant robe didn’t do much, but he laughed and laughed.

ElsBeth was awed, and wonderfully proud at the same time.

From outside a banshee’s wail froze the men’s insides

to ice. But it stirred in ElsBeth a warm connection with that most ancient spirit. And connection with memories... of great strength and love of these lands and people, from a time that seemed far older than her years.

Soon no one remained in the dark room, in the dark manor house in the now late afternoon, except Gorgeous, who hid in terror in one of those dark corners—and the three castle ghosties who were, ElsBeth saw, quite comfortable in the dark.



Robert took the opportunity to run into the Manor—around the side away from the dogs, who still held them at bay. He shot in right past Gorgeous Banks, into his study, and snatched up the land deed and paper ElsBeth had signed.

Gorgeous didn't try to stop him. Gorgeous didn't move. He looked a mere puddle of a man.

"We have it!" Robert yelled and waved when he met up with the others.

"You're a wee scoundrel," Baird said, "but you made up for it in the end." He gave Robert a friendly punch on the arm.



ElsBeth and the boys set off on the path back toward Cairn Castle, Sylvanus and Portentus just behind. The stoat and the wolf had disappeared, and the Dobermans remained cowering in the Manor's back garden.

From the top of the last hill, the castle gleamed in the early evening light, and Amy, Beastie and Braveheart raced up to greet them.

“You’re back! It went well, didn’t it? You all look happy.” Amy was breathless. “The dogs barked so I knew you must be close.”

ElsBeth hugged Amy and the deerhounds. “Yes, it went well,” she said simply, and she smiled at the boys, who walked tall and looked well pleased.

Sylvanus and Portentus presented themselves. The owl then swept away grandly, but without a word. Sylvanus let ElsBeth know his friend was starving and couldn’t stay. ElsBeth grinned that the magic cat now called the owl his friend.

Amy couldn’t stop talking. “Little Biscuit’s hoof is healed. It’s a miracle. Effie’s poultice was amazing. And the nice MacFinches agreed to take Veronica to the village tomorrow. Only one of us can go because the pony shouldn’t pull too much weight. Just to be safe, Mr. MacFinch says.”

When they came down the hill to the castle, Mr. MacFinch was leading Little Biscuit in the pasture. The squinty-eyed man looked up, saw the group and frowned. ElsBeth wondered again why he seemed so bitter.

But she caught sight of Veronica and Lisa Lee by the barn and couldn’t wait to talk with them. “Come on, Amy.” And they ran down the hill laughing.

“We were so worried about you and Johnny,” Lisa Lee said.

Veronica linked her arm in ElsBeth’s. “I was beginning to think you two had taken matters into your own hands.”

ElsBeth couldn’t hold back a smile.

“You did, you crazy girl! What did you and Johnny *do*? You’ve *got* to tell.”

ElsBeth told them, *almost* all. It wouldn't do to talk about spells and ghosts and other such things, but the rest was a good story.

## Chapter Twenty-Four

### A Play Within a Play

After a good night's sleep, ElsBeth woke knowing that tonight would be their last at Cairn Castle, and that Effie and Baird wanted to make it special. Robert's Uncle Preston was flying over tomorrow to sail them back to Cape Cod.

The families had finally agreed that the young Cape crew could sail home together in the *Sea Charmer*. Some parents wanted to come by plane and get their child right away. But Lisa Lee's mother and father—supported somewhat surprisingly, ElsBeth thought, by Robert's parents—argued that sailing back would be a once-in-a-lifetime educational opportunity. And it would be entirely safe with Uncle Preston at the helm, a much-admired Cape sailor, together with some of his expert crew.

The classmates had not forgotten their trip across the sea in the frightening storm, but they were happy about the plan. Through it all they'd become even closer, and they looked forward to what was probably going to *really* be their last, end-of-summer adventure. So there was much to celebrate.

Effie bustled about. She directed chairs to be placed in the natural amphitheater on the west side of the castle. She told the girls what she had in mind for entertainment because they were part of it, but not the boys. She only said to them, "It's just a Scottish play."

After a dinner fit for kings and queens (with no haggis, thank you very much), they went outside and the boys took their seats. The girls stood behind so they could leave halfway through to play their parts.

The sun was setting, and it held them suspended in its warmth.

Sylvanus and Portentus claimed the best view on the garden shed roof.

The entertainment began.

Baird stomped in, bagpipes blaring, kilt swinging. He played several numbers, as if marching to war. All clapped wildly. When he bled the bagpipes of air, it sounded like a huge passing of gas, and there was elbow poking and sniggering by the boys.

Effie came on stage and played her harp, and the music was magic in her hands. The girls sighed, the boys did, too.

ElsBeth noticed the three ghosts arrive and gather on a small landing halfway up the castle wall. Last night Sylvanus had told ElsBeth the stories of their lives, and ElsBeth loved them each.

Durst now shed large tears and moaned, "Oh, to be young, to have a real body, and be alive!" Mac teared up, too. The bagpipes had done it for him. The Laughing Earl chortled on and on, and her heart swelled.

In a wink Effie disappeared, and all the girls ran out. Mr. MacFinch and his pony came on stage. "Count for me,

Little Biscuit. What's ten plus three minus eight?"

Little Biscuit struck her dainty hoof on the ground five times, and ElsBeth heard Sylvanus and Portentus mew and hoot in approval.

The pony did several more tricks, then Mr. MacFinch looked Little Biscuit in the eye. "Is there someone in the audience who's learned a lesson?"

The pony nodded and snorted. She stepped off the stage and up to Hillman-Jones and made a loud, rude pony sound.

Robert scowled. Then he and all the boys burst out laughing. Sylvanus laughed so hard he fell over and rolled down the roof. ElsBeth was ready with a holding spell, but the round cat caught himself just in time.

Mr. MacFinch gave a neat bow. The pretty pony bent her front leg and lowered her head. Enthusiastic applause followed them off stage.

Baird blew a bugle. The girls ran into the wings.

ElsBeth was dressed as herself, but Veronica was dressed as Robert in his jacket, and Lisa Lee was made up to look like Baird—which was pretty amazing, but she managed it by looking fierce and having her face painted blue. Amy was all in white like a mini-Effie.

"Robert" came on stage and said in a low voice, "I must find what that nice Mr. Gorgeous Banks asked me to look for. There!" He grabbed a paper from a table and ran off.

ElsBeth came on next and said, "We've got to rescue Robert."

"Baird" ran on and thrust a sword in the air. "And we have to save the castle!"

They all ran off.

“Effie” came on and spoke to the audience. “The castle’s been our family home for centuries. Before we were here, the land belonged to the legendary Pictish kings.”

ElsBeth noticed Durst beam so bright he cast shadows.

“Then it belonged to other noble ancestors who cared for this enchanting place . . .”

Bellicose Stone, the Laughing Earl, chuckled, and gave a small bow to Durst and Mac.

“ . . . and to other brave Scottish men.”

Mac’s pride grew so solid you could see his blue-green kilt and sword.

“Now it’s our responsibility to keep it safe.”

Baird came on, dressed as Banks, handsome in a brown wig. He struck a pose and patted his wavy locks. “Well, my dear,” he said, “you didn’t count on me, did you? I say it’s going to be *mine*.”

Baird sounded so much like Banks that Robert pushed his chair back to get away.

“Robert” and “Baird” ran back onstage. “Actually, you didn’t count on *us*!” They pushed “Banks” offstage. He cringed in fear and ran away.

The girls gathered and took a bow.

The boys clapped and whistled.

Someone yelled, “Director,” and Effie curtsied.

Someone else yelled, “Gorgeous Banks,” and Baird swept off his wig to boos and laughs and claps.

When this died down, Mr. and Mrs. MacFinch came on together. They carried fiddles and swooped them to their



chins in a well-practiced motion. The dance music began.

The girls pulled the boys onstage for a Scottish reel. The girls had practiced with Effie for hours and showed the boys the steps.

From the dance floor ElsBeth saw Sylvanus's tail swish to the rhythm and Portentus hop in time beside him. She watched Mac's toe begin to tap, the Laughing Earl begin to jig, and Durst begin to swirl like a rising wind. Then the ghosties formed a circle and swung each other in lively dance.

ElsBeth felt a deep yearning rise from the moorland. She knew this was the banshee, who half-wished to join in. But ElsBeth also knew this was not her way.

Instead, the banshee floated just above the heather, swung herself in her own graceful dance, and added her own now-sweet voice to the music.



## Chapter Twenty-Five

### Homeward Bound

The next day ElsBeth stood in the afternoon sun overlooking the loch. New satellite equipment had been installed on the *Sea Charmer* and Uncle Preston's crew had crawled over every inch of her, checking seaworthiness from stem to stern. Final provisions were now being stored.

Uncle Preston tried to give Effie and Baird money for hosting their unexpected visitors but they would have none of it.

The Cape Coddors, each one, said their good-byes, and stepped down the steep, cliff-side stones to the small dock. ElsBeth was last, and noticed Mr. MacFinch scowl at her again.

"Why does he *do* that?" she asked Effie.

"I don't know," Effie said. "Da told me once Mr. MacFinch was upset about what happened to your mother.

"Before you ask, I *really* don't know. But she did look a lot like you, and you may just remind him of her.

"Da also said the MacFinch and Thistle families have

somehow been drawn together, one way or another, over the centuries—both as a help and a harm to each other.”

ElsBeth thought she must have inherited the “harm” part of the connection with her dreaded teacher Ms. Finch on the Cape. She felt sorry for herself a moment, then smiled.

Effie said, “I’ll miss you so much, my wee cousin.” She gave ElsBeth a big hug and then held her away. “Remember, Cairn Castle is yours.”

“I guess that’s what the deed says. But you’re here, and you’re caring for the castle and the land. So right now it’s yours.”

“Who knows what the future may hold,” Effie answered, “since we hold it in our hands.” They both looked down at their hands, which they held together, and laughed.

ElsBeth reluctantly let go. “But I’ll come back again one day, OK?”

Effie nodded.

Baird hugged his young cousin and swung her in the air. “Can’t keep your friends waiting.”

He called to her as she started down the steps, “Remember the Thistle family motto.”

“Always faithful to my friends.” ElsBeth smiled and waved back.

~

The crew were all onboard and ready to shove off when “His Blackness” flew up the plank. ElsBeth was amused by Baird’s nickname for Sylvanus. It sounded like Sylvanus was some kind of royalty, and it was certainly true he thought of himself that way.

“Where *were* you?” she asked him.

He let out a long burp, and with no further comment moved off to the cabin. It was also true Sylvanus could be outright rude at times. But ElsBeth was happy, again, just to know he was aboard.

With emotions breaking over her like the waves on the bow, the water between the dock and the *Sea Charmer* grew and grew.



As the yacht pulled away and down the loch, Durst joined Mac and the Earl on top of the old Norman keep. The three grand figures wafted like pennants in the breeze, and Durst’s soulful voice rang out.

*From east to west at end of quest,  
Of truth we learned, all safe return — to home.  
Our land secured, we kept our word,  
Now sail to sun, this battle won — to home.*

*We rapped the bullies and sent on their way.  
We stared them full down and darkened their day.  
They’ll not show their faces here soon again,  
And fools if they dare, we’ll gladly fight then.*

*I’m proud of my beast, is Trueheart the fair.  
I’m proud of my clan, from here and from there.  
Proud of the blessings we’ve earned and we share  
That we can still breathe the wild, sweet Scot air.*

*The sky is fine, the wind divine,  
Above the ship, a piper's lip — to home.  
And harp and drums, the music comes,  
Rolls o'er the sea, and rises free. To home!*

Now high above the keep, over the sea he loved so much, Durst watched the Highland creatures come to salute the departing ship.

His loyal and feisty friend Trueheart stood next to Mac and the Earl.

Portentus swooped over the cliff and dipped a wing.

The selkie circled the yacht even as it slipped away. It was selkie law she would not see ElsBeth again for at least seven years. But she rolled and she breached in the ship's foamy wake, and she smiled her whiskery smile. Durst knew that those years were only a blink in the time that they all called the living.

The wolf followed a path for miles up the loch, and at the end he howled a solemn good-bye.

While the banshee sang, in sweet harmony, all the way to open sea.

Chapter Twenty-Six  
Six Druid Lane



It was another glorious day just off the coast of Cape Cod. The midnight blue sea faded into a light blue sky, the breeze blew fresh and tangy.

ElsBeth and the whole crew were on deck when Frankie's dad brought his police boat alongside. He escorted the *Sea Chарmer* its last mile and they entered the marina right on the schedule Uncle Preston had called ahead.

They all lined the rail and scanned the shore for their families, who were not that easy to find as the whole village was at the dock. Even the band was there playing rousing tunes.

But one by one they connected. Frankie's mother held up a Boston cream pie. Veronica's mom held an armful of pretty packages. Lisa Lee's dad set off some fireworks so that they landed to sparkles of silver and red.

Nelson's mom and dad held a hand-lettered sign, "Welcome Home, Nelson, Our Very Own Hero." Nelson was happy to see them, but embarrassed. Anyone could tell because his ears turned cherry red and his glasses fogged up.

Amy's father towered above the rest in his military uniform, at attention, his back ramrod straight. He gave a serious salute as the yacht came near, then broke into a wide grin.

Robert's parents were there. "I can't believe they coordinated their schedules to both be here," Robert said. "It's great to see Nani, too."

Beside them Ms. Finch looked . . . like *Mr. MacFinch!* The teacher smiled when Robert waved, but frowned immediately when she spotted ElsBeth. Ms. Finch turned to say something to Mrs. Hillman-Jones, and Robert's mother frowned briefly at ElsBeth, too.

She's probably blaming the whole thing on me, ElsBeth thought, before she spotted Johnny's grandfather, who looked calm and wise as he always did. And beside him was Grandmother, plump and friendly, looking, well . . . like the perfect grandmother. ElsBeth beamed and waved, and promptly forgot all about Ms. Finch.

The *Sea Charmer* was tied up and they were poised to

step ashore when the chaos that is little Winston Nickerson crashed through the crowd. All twenty-five toddler-pounds barreled down the dock, his red Mohawk haircut catching the sun. The kid was *fast*. And *loud*. “Chase me, ElsBeth! Chase me, ‘Ronica!”



It had been like a street party at the marina. Now . . . Six Druid Lane. It was wonderful to be home. At the same time ElsBeth felt that a new chapter in her life had begun.

Right now she needed a bath and some rest. Tomorrow was the first day back at school.

School . . . She had learned some things this summer on her memorable trip to Scotland—but not how that Banks character had intended. Not at all. ElsBeth knew she’d be thinking about all this for a long time to come.

She was as tired as she could ever remember, but she also wanted to tell Grandmother and Professor Badinoff everything.

When she settled into her captain’s bed, she turned down the half-moon comforter as it was still warm. But her thoughts were not settled, and her attention slipped outside the comfortable Cape cottage, and past Professor Badinoff who flitted near her window.

She felt a breeze in the trees and she stretched into the light of the moon that had always been her friend. The same moon that had given light to her mother’s dreams, and the life *she* had made for herself. Whatever that had been.

ElsBeth didn’t know the story of her mother’s life, or even if she was alive. But after meeting her family in the old country, ElsBeth now felt her mother’s presence in



her life. And what had been a cold, black hole when she thought of her was now a warm, soft glow.

She didn't know what the story of her own life would be. But she felt there were many chapters yet to write, and that the pages turned on an adventure far beyond what she could now see.

An adventure . . . the adventure of her life.

Her grandmother came in and sat in the rocking chair by her bed. Professor Badinoff flew up and perched on the windowsill.

And in a tiny voice, from far away, her eyes almost closed, she said to them, "You see, it all began with a big wind."

THE END

## ElsBeth's Further Adventures

All seems to have returned to “normal” in their quaint Cape Cod village. But what next awaits the young witch and her friends? Restless Native American spirits, a haunted gold mine, and the destiny of the hopes and troubles of the Wild West are in the wind. Find out in the next ElsBeth story.

And if you haven't read ElsBeth's earlier, award-winning adventures in the *Cape Cod Witch Series*, these await you.

Book I, *ElsBeth and the Pirate's Treasure*: In their sleepy Cape Cod town, a never-quite-forgotten pirate's treasure awakens some serious trouble. ElsBeth and her friends, magical and not, must face off against dangerous outsiders — and the notorious pirate ghost Billy Bowlegs — to restore the balance of past and present, good and evil.

Book II, *ElsBeth and the Privateer*: On a field trip to Boston's historic Freedom Trail, ElsBeth and her classmates encounter a famous freedom fighter, the ghostly Captain Thomas Jacques, who spirits them across treacherous waters to Nantucket Island in the daring rescue attempt of a kidnapped, modern-day Arabian prince — and along the way they find out about fighting for freedom, and caring for something bigger than themselves.

Also, the award-winning *Little Cape Cod Witch Cookbook, The Secret Recipes of Hannah Goodspell*: Wholesome, tasty treats you can make with a grown-up helper and enjoy with friends. The cookbook includes full-color pictures, fun stories and interesting cooking facts. Find out how “Cooking is a kind of magic!”

Visit [www.CapeCodLittleWitch.com](http://www.CapeCodLittleWitch.com) to find out more.

## Dedication

This book is dedicated to Emelia,  
and to all the adventurous spirits who have inspired us.

This book is for you.

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## About the Authors and Illustrator

*Author J Bean Palmer* calls upon her family's long history in New England, including a Revolutionary "Green Mountain Boy," Cape Cod cranberry farmers and artists, and an oft-told family legend that as her grandmother's ancestors stepped off the *Mayflower*, her grandfather's relatives were there to greet them. With a degree in Environmental Science, the author's ElsBeth stories reflect a passion and respect for the natural world and its magical kinship.

*Co-author Chris Palmer* makes some use of his education in philosophy at a small New England college (and subsequent practical application as a short-order cook on Cape Cod, a Boston cab driver, and a computer software and Internet services executive in California) in contributing the poems that are sung or spoken by several characters in the stories. A 14th generation Cape Codder, he and J Bean currently reside in a converted barn on the banks of a western Maine river. The authors welcome readers' comments and may be contacted at [jbeanpalmer@yahoo.com](mailto:jbeanpalmer@yahoo.com).

*Illustrator Melanie Therrien* lives in western Maine with her husband Glenn, their dog Tito, and three cats, one of which was the model for Sylvanus in the ElsBeth books. The juried fine artist looks to the state's natural beauty for inspiration for her fanciful images and landscapes. The stylistic artwork for the *Cape Cod Witch Series* is her first book illustration project. The artist may be contacted at [www.wickedillustrations.com](http://www.wickedillustrations.com).