

Salt & Skin

Eliza Henry-Jones

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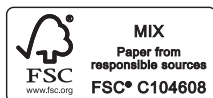
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It has been called the ghost house for as long as anyone can remember. It's set on a tidal island called Seannay, which can be reached from Big Island by crossing damp sand at low tide, or picking a careful route across the causeway when the tide is high. Once, the ghost house had had neighbours; answering glows of candlelight through door and window gaps. Answering whistles of wind on stormy nights; answering sounds of life. Its neighbours are ruins now.

The ghost house is alone.

The roof is made of old slate, and there are narrow beds pressed up against opposite walls in the small loft. There is the skin of a dead fur seal pushed into the rafters and long forgotten.

Plovers and curlews; a spirit who calls in the voice of a gull. Sometimes baleen whales sing at night, their bones stuck fast in the shallows of the bay. A trick of the light or an old curse or spell that makes the tidal island a particularly curious place. It is said that some folk, as soon as they step onto Seannay, can see the luminous traces of scars across human skin. Every injury a person has ever sustained to their flesh – every scratch and pimple and pox and burn – illuminated by the pearly light. Someone with the sight can see the scars spun brightly across the skin of their children; strangers; enemies. Their own skin, too. In this way, all skin is the same on the tidal island. And all skin on the tidal island is utterly unique.

Island witches are said to have met there on clear, still nights.
But, of course, that was years ago. Centuries.
People know more now than they did back then. They do not
believe in witches.

PART ONE

Chapter One

FEBRUARY (THEIR FIRST YEAR)

The boat had seemed large at the dock, but now that they're rumbling away from Big Island, it seems flimsy and ludicrously small.

Luda tries to think of the last time she'd been on a boat before coming to the islands. Years ago. Someone's thirtieth birthday on the thick, marshy water of the Hopeturn River back home in Australia. Even back then, the river's level had been low and the unpleasant smell of wet things made dry had permeated the boat, making people drink more than they should have.

Ewan whistles under his breath, doing whatever a seafarer does in the cabin of their boat. Luda's two children, Darcy and Min, are out on the deck with her. Darcy, the eldest, is slouched against the gunwale, looking as though he's waiting for a late bus that's going to take him from one bland place to another. Min, two years younger, clutches at a pile of rope (Luda notices, but does not point out, that it's not fastened to anything). Min is pale and looks almost bewildered by the world viewed from the small and rumbling fishing boat. When she notices Luda's gaze, she scowls. Fierce, fractious little Min who is not so little anymore. Fourteen, Luda thinks, with the usual jolt of shock. She's *fourteen*.

Ewan cuts the engine and the boat immediately begins a slow spin in the currents. The strangely intimate sound of water against

the side of the boat. Ewan comes out of the cabin, his beanie low over his eyes. 'You can really see the erosion of the cliffs from here,' he says, and points.

Of course. Luda has almost forgotten why she's here. Almost. They have been here a week. Ewan is trying to help her find her feet as quickly as possible, so that she can get to work documenting the damage climate change is doing to these islands: taking photos, writing funding applications. It is, she knows, not a particularly popular topic in the local fishing circles. Through his subcontracting to the council for these sorts of climate change adjacent projects, Ewan has made himself something of a pariah. Still, he smiles at them now, smelling of coffee and brine. He looks far older than twenty-seven.

Luda studies the shoreline Ewan's pointing to. It's low tide now, the sea pulled back to reveal a short, sloped skirt of rippling sand up to the base of an overhanging, rocky cliff. Figures walk along the sand, leaving silvery footprints, their pants rolled up. Shoes in hand. Now cavorting, chasing each other. A mother and child, Luda thinks, but the shore's a bit too far away to be sure.

She cocks her digital SLR camera, focuses on the cliff face, the beach, the figures which (with her camera's zoom) she can now make out more clearly. Yes, a little girl with curling bronze-red hair. She looks six or seven or eight. She is with a muscular woman who is perhaps in her mid-thirties. Luda follows them for a moment with her lens. What she sees is the easy intimacy of a parent and child at this age – the way the child's body still touches the parent's without thought. The mindless, automatic *easiness* of it. Had Luda ever appreciated it the way she should have? She misses it now.

She feels like a voyeur. They'd have no reason to imagine a camera trained on them from the fishing boat. The idea gives her a little thrill, shivery and darting.

'Sandstone,' Ewan says. 'You can make out the bands of it, see?'

Luda has noticed that Ewan engages in quick, heavy bursts of interaction and then retreats back into himself. He continues to talk about erosion and deposition behind her, further along on the deck.

He will be talking to Min, but it is Darcy who will be listening closely, storing the information up in that terrifying vault of a brain he has. Min tends to let information trickle over her, off her, like water. She remembers the broad strokes and how they fit together. Darcy has always been preoccupied with the finest details of a thing.

Luda snaps a few frames. She inspects them and is impressed by the mood of the midwinter light, which she had expected to be glaring or dull. She lifts the camera back to her eye, trains it back on the cliffs. And then the world collapses.

* * *

A cracking sound. A flurry of movement as sheets of rock fall onto the narrow, sloping beach. Stillness, and then the awful keening of a woman parted from her child.

'Allie? Allie! *Allie!*'

Swearing, Ewan hurtles into the cabin, fires up the engine and begins making calls on his phone. For a moment, the three Managans are alone on the deck. Min and Darcy watch their mother, still peering through the lens of her camera.

'Jesus,' Darcy says over the throb of the engine. 'Mum, put it down!'

Luda looks up. Her face is bright, almost feverish. Her horror has twisted itself into something that makes Darcy show his teeth.

Ewan eases the boat as close as he can to the shore, and then he drops the anchor and throws himself off the side into the water. He swims until he can touch the sandy bottom, then he begins an awkward lunging.

Darcy follows, his freestyle strokes unpractised but still somehow graceful. Min, who has never swum more than a few strokes here and there, hangs over the boat's edge, white-faced. Luda, who can swim better than either of her children, stands up.

Min spins around. 'Don't! Don't go.'

Min has always been the bolder of her children – the sort who insisted on dressing herself from before she was two, who used

to scream until Luda unhitched the leading line from her pony's bridle. The panic in her voice is new, and so Luda sits down on the deck, holding her camera in both hands.

On the shore, Ewan helps the woman dig frantically through the rubble. Darcy stands in the shallows, staring up at the cliff face, from which stones still trickle.

'Move!' he yells, his voice carrying over the water.

Ewan looks up, but the woman, bloody-fingered from the scrape of the rocks, does not.

Ewan grunts and pulls the woman away from the rubble. She fights him. Fingernails and teeth. 'Let me go! Let me *go!* Allie!'

Darcy moves quickly to the beach where he wraps a long arm around the woman's waist. She continues to writhe, to kick. To scream. It takes both Darcy and Ewan to pull her away from the cliff face.

Min sits down, shuts her eyes and covers her ears. Luda thinks, unbidden, of red hair tangled under rocks. Blood. *No*. She can't. She cannot.

Luda has long known that the world is full of awful things and that if you let them inside you, if you let yourself linger or *think*, they'll damage you, these things, as surely as a gun or poison or the flash of a man's fist.

ISO. Shutter speed. Aperture. Luda squeezes the camera like she's holding someone's hand. She raises her camera, takes another photo, then another. Nobody sees. It's just skin. That's all she can capture of a person: skin. Luda feels like a ghost. Quicksilver. She thinks that this is her power.

* * *

'She couldn't have survived that first fall of rock,' Ewan says, later. It's dark and he clasps a glass of whisky that he's not drinking. 'Let alone the second one.'

The second rockfall, when the trickle Darcy had noticed had given way so violently that pieces of cliff had landed as far as the

shoreline. The water had reared back from the land so that Min and Luda had felt the force of the cliff's collapse in the sudden agitation of the sea.

A helicopter. An ambulance.

The keening. The keening. The keening.

Min and Luda, shivering on the anchored boat. Luda found a thermos of lukewarm coffee in the cabin and some stale crisps. She and Min sat and ate them and it felt a little like watching something unfold far away. Emergency coverage on a news station, perhaps. The mother, Violet, never stopped fighting to get back to the rubble.

It was dark by the time Ewan dropped the Managans back at their house on Seannay and joined them at their kitchen table. *Home*, Luda thinks now, in the cosily lit kitchen. But the word refuses to stick. The scent is wrong; the fall of light. The accents and the call of birds. There is no Joshua here.

'I should go back and help them move the rocks ...' Ewan says again.

'They'll handle it. You've done enough.' Luda pats his back, but she keeps finding herself gazing at her camera bag. Min's watching a DVD on her laptop, curled up on the couch like she's sick. Darcy sits up on the kitchen counter with his hands cupped around a mug of dark, unsweetened tea. His face, like Ewan's, is marked by the woman's fingernails.

Underneath those fresh marks, the play of luminous scars across Darcy's skin. Luda pretends not to see them. Min, she thinks, cannot see them – Min who says things as soon as they enter her head. Luda suspects that Darcy can see them. It's in the way that he sometimes studies her skin, Min's skin, like he can't help himself. It's in the furtiveness of how he looks away if Luda catches him at it.

Luda wonders how long Ewan will stay, hunched at the scrubbed kitchen table in the ghost house. They have only been on the islands a week – not long enough to learn the intricate play of expectations that binds a community together. Perhaps Ewan will stay here

overnight. Perhaps she has committed some sort of faux pas by not already having offered him the couch to sleep on. She wonders how long Darcy and Min will mill down here before climbing up to the loft where they reluctantly sleep ('Mum! Seriously! How can you expect the two of us to *share a room?*').

The ghost house is the only habitable place on Seannay, which is hitched to Big Island via a causeway. Seannay has no trees, just the house and turf and gorse and piles of stone and slate where other houses and byres had once stood. The ghost house is tiny and smells of damp sand and chalk. The ground floor has a kitchen, fireplace and couch. Above the bathroom is the loft with two single beds. Luda sleeps on a pile of cushions on the ground floor. She doesn't mind – it means that she's unlikely to wake anyone when she goes out for her early-morning runs. Her late-night runs. Her during-the-day runs. With every pound of foot on earth, Luda thinks about her photography.

'Mum?' Min's voice sounds young. She's taken off her headphones.

'Hmm?'

'It's good, what you're doing, you know. Documenting all the climate change stuff. It's important.' Another pause. Her voice is unusually gentle, stilted. 'I get ... I get why we needed to come here.'

Luda blinks. 'Thanks, Min.'

In another family, in another time, Darcy might have echoed his sister's praise. Instead, he gulps down his tea and the ghost house goes quiet.

Ewan shifts. 'I should go back, help them with the rocks.'

More back-patting. Luda's gaze tracing the lines of her camera bag. 'They'll handle it, Ewan. They *will*.'