

The Storm Keeper's Island

*'Magical
in every way'*
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CATHERINE DOYLE

BLOOMSBURY

The STORM
KEEPER'S
ISLAND



CATHERINE DOYLE

BLOOMSBURY
CHILDREN'S BOOKS

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PROLOGUE

In a field full of wild flowers, a boy and a girl stood side by side beneath an ancient oak tree. The sky was angry, the thunder growling like an angry beast.

‘Are you ready?’ asked the boy nervously.

The girl raised her chin, her wheat-blonde hair sweeping down her back in a curtain. ‘I’ve *always* been ready.’

They pressed their palms against the gnarled trunk. The tree began to quiver, its branches stretching as it shook itself awake. There was a brief silence and then a crack exploded above them. A whip of lightning leapt from the clouds and split the centre of the tree in two. Flames erupted along the bark, climbing across the branches and devouring the leaves until everything was a bright, brilliant gold.

‘Betty?’ said the boy uncertainly. ‘Should we –’

‘*Sssh!*’ hissed the girl. ‘It’s about to say something.’

The tree began to whisper. It was much louder than

the boy expected – the crackle and hiss of surrounding flame slowly turning into words. ‘*Ssssspeak or be sssspoken to.*’

The girl asked her question. As the tree considered it, she grew restless, tapping her fingers against the charred bark. The air grew heavier, a veil of mist curling the strands around her face.

The tree did not speak to the girl again.

Instead, it turned its attention to the boy and climbed inside his head. He fell to the ground, twisting and writhing, as a vision unfurled in the blackness of his mind.

He was standing on the edge of a headland with the clouds gathering in his outstretched hands and the wind wreathing his body. He felt the sea rushing through his veins, leaving salt crystals in the lining of his heart.

He knew that he was changed forever.

Betty had been wrong.

The island had chosen him.

He tried to blink himself awake but the tree tightened its grip on his mind. Another vision pushed its way through. Something they had not asked to see.

‘*Watch,*’ hissed the tree. ‘*Pay attention.*’

A boy appeared before him. He was a little younger, but he was wearing the same nose and the same eyes. In one hand, he held an emerald as green as the island grass. In the other, a crooked staff that pointed out to sea. They

stood apart from each other, looking but not really seeing as ravens filled the sky in plumes of feathers. The earth cracked beneath their feet and a shadow crept across the island and buried them in darkness.

The boy woke up. Back in the field of wild flowers, it was pouring with rain.

'Betty,' he said, a droplet landing squarely in his mouth. 'You won't believe what I've just seen.'

The girl was standing over him, her narrowed eyes like burning coals. She kicked him in the ribs. 'Don't you mean what you just *stole!*'

'Stop!' He twisted away from her as she kicked him again. 'I need to tell you something. Can you stop, please? Ow! Listen to me. I saw ravens, Betty. I think ...'

The girl wasn't listening. She was stalking away from him, through wild flowers and sodden grass, her chin tipped to the weeping sky.

The boy wanted to call her back, to tell her this was much bigger than her – that it was bigger than both of them – but she had disappeared into thin air, leaving only the faintest ripple behind.

The boy tried to swallow his fear. Somewhere deep inside the earth, the darkness was rising again, a darkness more terrible than anything the world had ever seen.

It was too late to stop it now.



Chapter One

THE SLEEPING ISLAND

Fionn Boyle sat hunched on a plastic chair with his arms tucked into his sides and his chin tucked into his chest, and tried not to be sick all over his shoes.

The ferry groaned. Fionn couldn't help noticing the rust around its edges, the flaking blue paint, how the horn sounded like a dying cow. He tried not to imagine how much seawater he would have to swallow to drown from the inside out. Tara wasn't watching him just then but Fionn knew sisters could smell fear. If he hurled his lunch up, he'd never hear the end of it.

To make matters even more grim, Fionn was wedged between two nattering old ladies, and his phone was dead in his pocket. No coverage. Not even one bar. Sometimes

the old ladies would stop and chew on a secret like it was too big to swallow. Sometimes Fionn could feel their gazes prickling on the side of his face, like they were waiting for him to join in. Mostly the waves roared and drowned out all of it.

That was the worst of all: the ocean right underneath him. In his most gruesome nightmares, it would suck him up and gulp him down and he would wake suddenly, dripping in sweat.

The sea air burned in his lungs and stung his cheeks as he watched the mainland fade away, first to a green smudge on a grey horizon, and then to nothing at all.

Already, Fionn missed the Dublin smog, the clang of roadworks and the half-finished tram tracks cutting up the city and flinging tourists from footpaths. He never thought about whether he liked it or not – the noisiness of a city constantly in motion – only that it was familiar, and to Fionn familiarity meant home.

This was anything but familiar.

Tara stood at the bow of the ship, her feet planted on the railings like she was about to launch herself into the ocean. Her dark hair whipped through the air, loose and tangled, like ropes. She turned, searching the cluster of passengers for him. ‘Come here, Fionny! Look at these waves! They’re *huge!*’

Fionn shook his head. The ferry bobbed and his stomach went with it – up and down – until the contents of his lunch started to climb up his throat.

‘Don’t be such a baby!’ Tara taunted.

Fionn and his sister were close in age. Fionn could even remember a time when they felt almost like *friends*. He supposed they’d had something in common until the day she turned thirteen and he stayed eleven, and suddenly she was much too wise and too clever to hang around and play video games with him any more.

I’m mature now, Fionny. My interests have changed.

Fionn didn’t know how Tara measured maturity but he was the one cooking dinner for the three of them most evenings, while Tara pawed Nutella out of the jar like Winnie-the-Pooh and shrieked the walls down any time she saw a spider.

Tara smirked over her shoulder and then stepped higher on the boat railings, peering over the waves, until it looked like she was going to dive in, just to show him she could. Fionn thought it might be nice if she tipped over, and drowned a little. Not enough to die, just enough so that a fish could come along and eat the part of her brain that caused her personality to be so terrible.

He went back to staring at the blurry horizon – a fixed point to help with the sickness. His mother said it

would help with the motion of the boat. That was the last thing she told him before their goodbye back in Dublin, when her eyes were clear and her smile was sad. Then all of a sudden they were in their neighbour's car, Fionn's nose pressed up against the window, as they trundled across the country and left her behind.

Fionn waited for the island to appear. The one she used to tell them about when he was younger, her eyes glassy with some faraway look. Sometimes the island was a beautiful place. Sometimes it was a sad, unforgiving place that held nothing beyond the memory of his father, long ago lost to the sea. All Fionn ever knew for sure was that Arranmore haunted her, and he could never figure out whether that was mostly a good thing or mostly a bad thing. Only that places can be just as important as people. That they can have the same power over you if you let them.

Tara left her perch at the front of the ferry, skipped across the deck and bent down until they were almost nose-to-nose. 'Do you have to look so depressed about all this?'

Fionn didn't like the way his sister threw the word around like that. *Depressed*. Like it was a colour he was wearing. Like it was something you could be, and then not be, by choice. Besides, it was easy for her to be excited

about this. She had visited the island last summer and had *somehow* managed to make friends.

‘I don’t want to go,’ he grumbled. ‘I’m not going to pretend I do.’

‘You never want to go anywhere,’ Tara pointed out. ‘All you do is sit inside and play video games that you’re *bad* at anyway. You’re so boring.’

Fionn wanted to say he wished he could stay behind with their mother, that he could sit beside her even when it felt like she couldn’t see him. He wanted to say he wasn’t *bad* at video games; that he was, in fact, excellent.

Instead, he said, ‘Shut up.’

Tara slid a Mars bar from her pocket – the result of a petrol-station shopping spree on the way to the ferry, old Mrs Waters snapping open her floral purse full of coins, smiling at them with her toothy grin. *Get whatever you want, my loves.*

She took a bite, her words soupy from half-chewed caramel. ‘It’s an adventure, Fionny.’ She glanced from side to side, then dropped her voice. ‘This place is magical. Just wait and see.’

‘You only think it’s magical because you met a *boy* last year,’ said Fionn with deep, abiding disgust.

Tara shook her head. ‘No, *actually*, I think it’s magical because there are *secrets* on the island.’

Fionn tried to waft the smell of chocolate away from his nose. 'What kind of secrets?'

'Can't tell you!' she said, eyes gleaming with triumph.

Fionn sighed. 'I can't believe I'm going to be stuck with you all summer.'

'Well, I wouldn't worry because I *obviously* won't be spending any time with you.' She wrinkled her nose, her freckles hunching together. 'You can hang out with Grandad.'

'I already like him better than you,' said Fionn quickly.

'You don't even *know* him yet.'

Fionn opened his fist to reveal his crumpled-up ferry ticket. 'I like this piece of paper better than you.'

Tara brandished her Mars bar at his nose. 'You're so immature.'

'I am not.' Fionn waited for her to look the other way and then threw the piece of paper at her. He watched it tangle in the ends of her hair and felt a little better then. Across the bay, a seagull dipped and swirled, its wing skimming the waves. It released a savage cry, and as if called to attention, the island rose to meet them.

Pockets of dark green grass bubbled up out of the sea, climbing into hills that rolled over each other. Gravel roads weaved themselves between old buildings that hunched side by side along the pier, where the sand was

dull and brassy. The place looked oddly deserted; it was as if the entire island was fast asleep.

Arranmore.

It was exactly how Fionn imagined it: a forgotten smudge on the edge of the world. The perfect place for his soul to come to die.

Tara flounced back to her perch and Fionn felt himself deflate, like a giant balloon. He watched the faraway blurs on the island turn into people, shops, houses and cars, and too many fishing boats to count. He tried to picture his mother here, in this strange place, wandering along the pier, ducking into the corner shop for bread or milk. Or even standing on the shore, looking out at the ocean, with her arms pulled around her. He couldn't imagine it, no matter how hard he tried.

When the ferry had finally groaned its way into port, Tara bounded on to the island without so much as a backwards glance. Fionn hovered on the edge of the pier, his spine stiff as a rod. Something was wrong. The ground was vibrating underneath him, the slightest tremor rattling against his soles as though his footsteps were far heavier than they really were. The breeze rolled backwards and twisted around him, pushing his hair into his eyes and his breath back into his lungs, until he had the most absurd sensation that the island was opening its arms and enveloping him.

Fionn searched the jagged lines of the headland. In the distance, at the edge of the bay, where briars and ferns tussled on a low, sloping cliff, a cottage poked out of the wilderness. The smoke from its chimney curled into the evening air like a finger.

The wind pushed him across the pier. The smoke kept rising and twisting, grey against the sun-blush sky.

It was beckoning him.

Fionn could almost hear the whispering in his ears: a voice he had never heard before, a voice thrumming deep in his blood and in his bones. A voice he was trying very hard to ignore.

‘Come here,’ it was saying. ‘Come home.’



Chapter Two

THE CANDLE MAKER'S COTTAGE

Malachy Boyle's house was breathing; Fionn was almost sure of it. It was rising and falling behind the tangled briars, peeking out at them every so often. The smoke was still curling into the sky, but there was no sign of Fionn's grandfather.

'Hurry up,' Tara grunted. Her suitcase was spitting rocks at Fionn as she hauled it up the narrow road. 'I want to get there some time this century!'

'Does he not know we're coming?' Fionn was half watching the road and half watching the house up ahead. 'Shouldn't he have met us down at the pier?'

'He's old,' said Tara.

‘Can he not walk?’

‘Do you want him to carry you, like a baby?’ The determined *thu-thunk* of her suitcase punctuated her words. ‘Or can you not climb a hill by yourself?’

‘I’m not by myself, am I?’ Fionn snapped. ‘I’m with Lucifer herself.’

‘Shut up,’ Tara hissed.

‘I just think it’s rude,’ Fionn mumbled. ‘We’re supposed to be his guests. And we don’t even know where to go.’

‘I know where to go. I’ve been here before, only last time I didn’t have *you* slowing me down.’

Fionn rolled his eyes. They had been delayed by almost five minutes when a bee landed on Tara’s shoulder. It chased her around the headland, and she went shrieking and hopping, like it was some great big grizzly bear.

‘Lead on then, Columbus,’ he said, stomping up after her.

Fionn didn’t think his expectations could possibly get any lower. And yet.

The cottage was small and squat, wedged deep into the earth, and swamped in a mess of trees and thorns. The edges of stonework peeked out in parts, where the white paint was peeling. The roof was made of slates, but around the edges, some had chipped and fallen into cracked

gutters. The windows were cloudy with dirt and the sills were stuffed with headless flowers, their stems bending over into the garden like they were searching for their lost petals.

It was an explosion of chaos and colour, and Fionn hated every inch of it. He wanted to be back in Dublin with his mother, in their cramped flat, listening to their upstairs neighbours pretend they weren't harbouring a secret pit bull terrier and deciding what to order from the Chinese.

They passed an old letter box, inscribed with faded Irish: *Tír na nÓg*.

The Land of Youth.

Ironic, thought Fionn. And then he made a mental note to double-check what the word 'ironic' actually meant before he said it out loud in front of Tara.

The gate let out a low whine as he closed it behind them.

'It's grim, isn't it?' Tara didn't bother to whisper despite the fact they were now standing in what some people might call a 'garden', but which seemed to Fionn more like a salad. 'And inside is just as depressing.'

Depressing. That word again.

Fionn did a slow-motion turn. 'Why would anyone choose to live here?'

‘Well, I suppose this is the only place that would have me.’

Fionn stopped turning. The blood vessels in his cheeks burst open.

His grandfather was standing at the entrance to his cottage. He was a giant of a thing – tall and narrow with a shiny bald head, a large face and a nose to fit it. It was the same nose Fionn had been cursing in reflections for as long as he could remember. An oversized pair of round, horn-rimmed glasses sat along the tip, making his eyes seem bigger and wider than they really were. His arms and his legs were impossibly long, but still somehow dwarfed in an oversized tweed suit. He looked like he was all dressed up to go somewhere, only he’d been all dressed up for fifty years and now the suit was falling apart on him.

His grandfather threw his head back, opened his mouth until Fionn could see all his teeth – the greying and the white – and laughed. And laughed and laughed and laughed, until Fionn imagined his laughter was sweeping around him in a tornado, the winds of it playing his heart like a fiddle.

And then Fionn was laughing too. It was awkward and forced, but if he laughed then he wouldn’t have time to think about how this didn’t feel so much like an adventure

but a prison, or how his mother had been left behind inside a faceless building in Dublin surrounded by professional-type people wearing expensive jumpers and fancy spectacles. He laughed to keep these thoughts from turning into something sad and ugly that looked and sounded very much like crying.

Fionn would not cry in front of Tara.

This was not going to be a crying sort of holiday. Even if it wasn't really a holiday at all.

When the laughter sputtered out, his grandfather took one long, lingering look at him. 'Well then,' he said, dipping his chin. 'At last we meet.'

He stooped underneath the low door frame and beckoned them inside, his finger crooked like the plume of smoke that had led them up the cliff-side.

Tara charged up the path, tossing an insult over her shoulder. 'Congrats, Fionny. You've finally found someone as weird as you.'

'Watch out for that bee!' The weight on Fionn's heart shifted as Tara yelped and danced her way into the cottage.

Fionn shut the door and nearly toppled into a coat-rack, where hats and umbrellas hung like props, all covered in a thick layer of dust.

'Oh,' he said, staring wide-eyed at the shelves that

stretched floor-to-ceiling around the small sitting room, continuing into the kitchen, which was visible through a wooden archway.

Every inch of space in the already cramped cottage belonged to a shelf, and all the shelves were filled with candles.

Each one was labelled in swirling calligraphy. *Autumn Showers* and *Summer Rain* huddled between *Foggy Easter* and *White Christmas*, while others like *Unexpected Tornado at Josie's 12th Birthday Party* or *Sean McCauley's Runaway Kite* were oddly specific. There were labels whittled right down to the briefest window of time, like *Flaming Sunrise, February 1997* or *Tangerine Twilight, August 2009*, and some were vague Irish words like *Suaimhneas*, which meant 'Peace', or *Saoirse*, which meant 'Freedom'.

One candle simply read *Fadó Fadó* – 'Long, long ago'. That could be anything. It could mean the Ice Age, or the Bronze Age, or that time in Ireland when all the monks were doodling manuscripts and hiding in big round towers for some reason Fionn couldn't remember.

Fionn's attention was drawn to *Angry Skies Over Aphort Beach*, a candle that looked as if it had been carved from a raging storm. It was dark grey around the base, the clouds gathering in climbing swirls, until the wax bubbled around the edges, fading into a deep violet. A

streak of silver lightning zigzagged through the middle, and the longer Fionn stared at it, the more it seemed like it might leap off the shelf and crackle in the air around him.

‘You’ll be having tea then,’ said his grandfather. It wasn’t a question but it brought relief to Fionn. Some things were the same everywhere in Ireland.

Tara retreated to a corner of the sitting room, searching for a phone charger in her bag, the way a dying man would scour the desert for water.

Fionn ducked under a beam and wandered into the hallway, where the house tapered off into three more rooms and the walls seemed to bend inward, as though they wanted to tell him a secret. There were candles here too. Some were tiny – the size of his baby finger. Some were rainbow-coloured, and others had grass growing out of them. There were oddly shaped ones too – like raindrops and umbrellas and little moons pocked with craters. There were clouds so round and fluffy Fionn had to poke them to make sure they were made of wax and not vapour.

Back in the sitting room, a single candle was blazing above the mantelpiece. It was the largest in the cottage – a big waxen slab sitting snugly in a thick glass trough, as deep as Fionn’s misery. It was pale grey, but in the centre,

around the wick, the wax was marbled with streaks of blue – turquoise and sapphire and aquamarine. There were lines of sky blue that bled into sea blue and even, Fionn couldn't help but notice, shades of the colour of his school uniform – puke navy.

It was the only source of light now that the sun was dipping somewhere behind the tangle of trees outside. Fionn couldn't place the scent of it, but it tickled something in him.

It reminded him of sea air, but it didn't sting his nostrils in the same way. There were other things too. Water? No. Not *just* water. Fionn clenched his eyes shut. He felt as though the answer was buried somewhere in his bones, and if he closed his eyes and concentrated hard enough he might be able to drag it up from the depths of him and wrestle it from the tip of his tongue.

Rainwater. Yes. But from a storm – something that whirls and rages and slams itself into windowpanes. There was the sea again – right in the heart of it, but it was choppy this time, like froth on a restless wave or –

'Earth to Fionn!' Tara clapped her hands in front of Fionn's face and he startled, jumping backwards and knocking a candle from its perch by the head of the armchair. The aroma evaporated at once and Fionn found himself wondering if he had hallucinated it.

Through the archway, his grandfather was filling mugs with tea. 'Didn't your sister tell you I was a candle maker?'

Fionn glared accusingly at Tara.

'I thought I wasn't supposed to talk about that stuff outside of Arranmore,' she said dismissively. 'And honestly, I don't think he'll care that much about the candles. No offence.'

Fionn's grandfather reacted like Tara had just thrown a dart at him, his left eye twitching as he watched her flounce off down the hallway in search of a working socket.

'She doesn't mean to be so terrible,' said Fionn. 'Mam says she'll grow out of it. But it might take a while. She's only just grown into it.'

His grandfather clapped him on the shoulder. 'Don't you worry, Fionn. I am well used to the frigid wind of teenage apathy.'

'Don't take it too personally. She's just never cared much about candles.' Fionn didn't finish his thought, which was that he didn't care about them either, because like goldfish, and maths and his sister, candles didn't do anything of note. And also, he wasn't over a hundred years old, or searching for a last-minute Christmas gift for someone he had completely forgotten about.

'And anyway, I thought you worked on the lifeboats,'

Fionn remembered. This was one of the few things he knew about his grandfather – that like all Boyle men (except for one), Malachy Boyle loved the sea and the sea loved him, that he grew up around the lifeboats and then went to work on them when he turned eighteen. ‘Like Dad did when ...’

When he was alive, he wanted to say, but the words stuck in his throat. There was something about being in the place where his dad died that made the sadness of it seem fresher to Fionn.

‘I used to but I prefer to stay indoors now. I am not as young as I once was.’ His grandfather had returned to the mugs, dipping and discarding the tea bags in the sink, before adding a splash of milk to each and handing one to Fionn. ‘You look a wee bit green, lad. Or are you just very patriotic?’

Fionn followed him into the sitting room. ‘The boat ride here was really choppy. Lots of people were feeling sick.’

His grandfather gave him a knowing look as they sank into opposite chairs.

‘OK ... maybe I’m a little ... scared of the sea,’ Fionn conceded. He took a too hot sip and nearly spat it back out. ‘I don’t like the waves. Any of it, really.’

His grandfather continued to watch him, his head

cocked to one side. The light from the candle flickered along his skin, casting shadows that crawled across the side of his face.

‘Does that make me a bad Boyle?’

His grandfather *hmm’d* under his breath, his gaze passing over Fionn and settling on the wall behind him, where a photograph of Fionn’s grandmother smiled down at them. ‘In my experience, there is no fear – however small – to be ashamed of. Your grandmother suffered very acutely from anatidaephobia, did you know that?’

The moment Fionn heard the word, it flittered away from him like a butterfly. ‘What’s ... that?’

His grandfather steeped his hands in front of his lips. ‘She was afraid of being watched by a duck.’

Fionn stared at his grandfather. ‘What?’

‘Anatidaephobia,’ his grandfather repeated. ‘The fear that, somewhere in the world, a duck is watching you.’

‘... What?’ Fionn said again.

‘Crippling, *crippling* thing.’ His grandfather took a noisy sip of tea that seemed to go on and on. ‘It did her in in the end.’

‘Mam says she died of a broken heart.’

His grandfather stroked his chin thoughtfully. ‘No. It was the duck, Fionn. I’m almost sure of it.’

‘You’re joking?’

His grandfather's composure flickered, his lips giving way to a grin. He chuckled, and Fionn found himself joining in, relief making the laughter spring out of him a little too loudly.

His grandfather tapped the side of his mug. 'Now *that* and *only* that is an absurd fear.'

Fionn sank into his chair, privately relieved that he wasn't afraid of ducks.

'You'd best get used to the sea though, lad. It's everywhere up here.'

Fionn's smile was faint. 'I guess that's the thing about islands, isn't it?'

'That, and they're often packed with extraordinarily handsome old men.'

The silence settled around them, and for a while there was nothing but the dull roar of the ocean and the furious tap-tapping of Tara's phone as she desperately tried to fashion a social life out of a half-dead island. Fionn's grandfather watched him in the waning light. He was drumming his fingers along the buttons of his shirt, tapping his own silent rhythm.

'So,' he said after a while. 'How are things back in Dublin, Fionn?'

'Not very good. But I suppose you probably know that since Mam's sent us here ...' Fionn's gaze was resting on

the hearth of the fireplace. Something was beginning to rumble in the back of his mind. 'She was too tired ...' He trailed off, unwilling to say the rest. *She was too tired to be our mam.*

It didn't seem fair to say it, even if it was the truth and they both knew it. Their mother was just taking a holiday. It was a strange sort of thing, Fionn thought, to take a holiday not from a place, but from people. But it was going to make her better. She was not the shadow behind her eyes.

His grandfather was still drumming his fingers. 'I'm sorry, lad. I know you don't have a choice about being here. You don't have a choice about any of it ...'

Fionn couldn't tear his gaze away from the fireplace. There was a thought percolating somewhere in the back of his mind, and it was an important one, drip-dripping out.

The armchair creaked as his grandfather leaned forward, his elbows resting on top of his knees. 'But the island is a place like no other, Fionn. You'll come to see how special it is ...'

Fionn was staring so hard, he was forgetting to blink.

The fireplace was empty.

There was no soot, no metal grate, or even a fireguard.

The cottage was cool, not bathed in the warm afterglow of a fire.

Fionn looked up at his grandfather. 'Grandad, if there's no fire in the grate, where was the smoke coming from before?'

His grandfather smiled. It was an odd kind of smile that lifted the hairs on the back of Fionn's neck. The candle flickered in the sides of his vision, the flame seeming to grow taller and narrower in response to his answer.

'Where did the smoke come from?' he said again.

His grandfather laughed, but this time it was a dry, dusty sound. Like it came from somewhere else, not deep in his belly, like before. He rose from his chair, unfolding his long limbs, and wandered back to the kitchen, where half-peeled carrots suddenly demanded his attention.

Fionn glanced again at the empty grate, uncertainty swimming inside him like a fish.

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