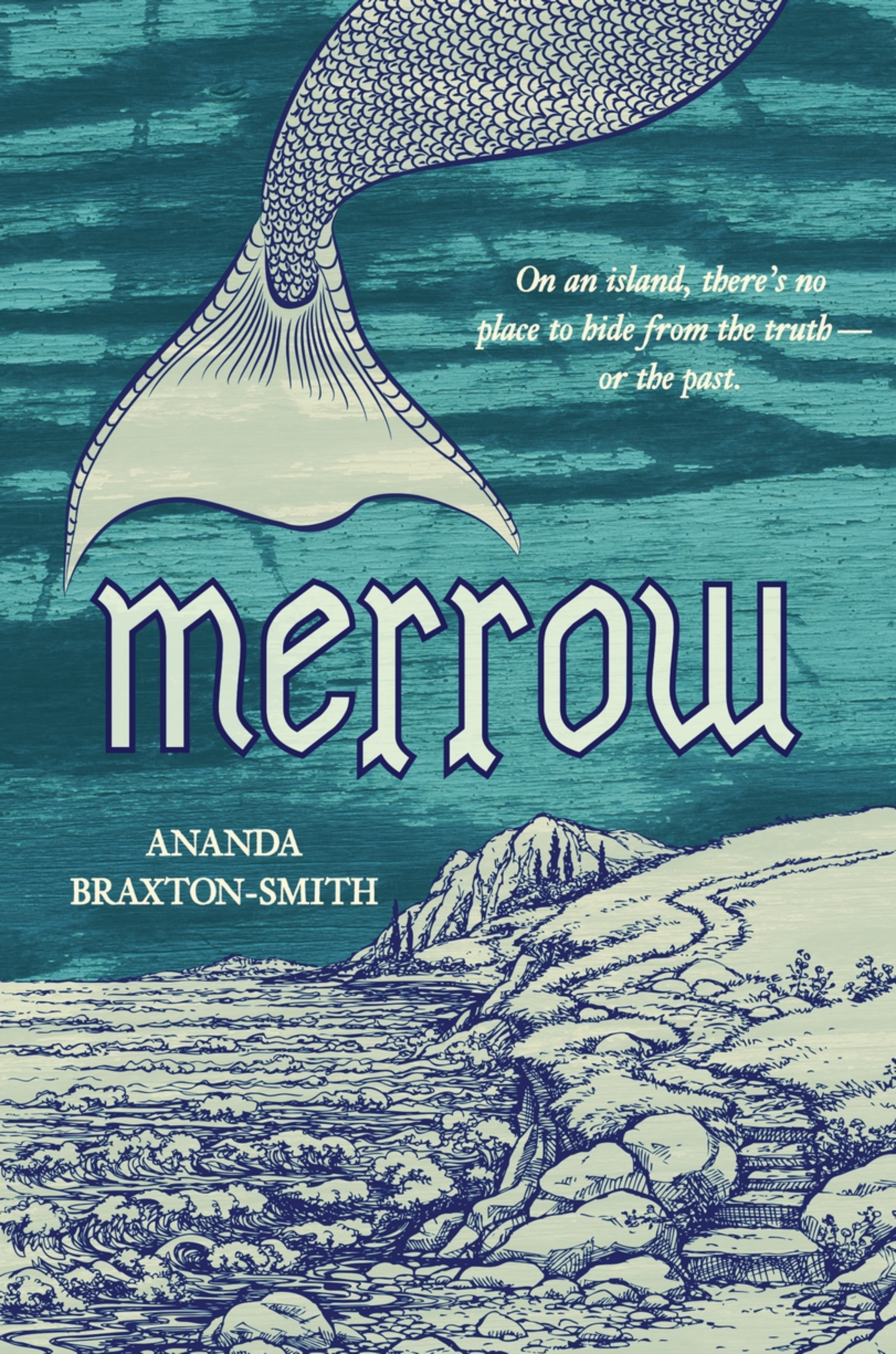
On an island, there's no place to hide from the truth — or the past.
merrow
ANANDA BRAXTON-SMITH

merrow

Ananda
Braxton-Smith

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A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

Some of the words in this book are Manx, the talk of the people of Isle of Man in the Irish Sea. This language nearly died out but is now reviving. There are still only two thousand speakers of it in the world.

The language of the Vikings is called Old Norse. The author would like to thank Ruarigh Dale of the Centre for the Study of the Viking Age at the University of Nottingham, U.K., for giving Ulf words.

CHAPTER ONE

Wrack

AUNTIE USHAG SAID I WASN'T FIT to be around. She said it was beyond her how a body could be so prickly and dark. She said it gave her the Screaming Purples just to look at me, always lying around looking sideways at her like a reptile on a hot rock. That if I couldn't raise myself on my hind legs and help, the least I could do was go away and leave her to it.

Honor Bright, all I said was I wished she'd open her mind a bit and that she didn't know all about everything. I said she couldn't prove that our Marrey great-grandmother wasn't a merrow. She couldn't swear that Mam had run away after Pa drowned, now, could she? All I said was perhaps Mam had actually just gone home to her people under the sea, and that she could come back to us one day, if she wanted to. I only said it was possible.

"What you don't witness with your eyes, don't witness with your mouth," my aunt snapped. She could be as tight-minded and purse-mouthed as the southerners she hated so. These days she was as touchy as a slug, and wholly unreasonable. I slipped out the window with her still wittering on behind me, and was nearly away when she shouted, "Never mind me opening the mind. What about you opening and using the door?"

That woman had eyes in the back of her head. "And fetch some garlic if you can spare the time."

I headed for the cows.

In the byre I filled my stomach with warm, foamy milk straight from Breck. Bo lowed softly and butted me, gentle but determined as always. I rested my head on hers, smelling her warmth and listening to the crunch and creak as she ate. She was only a calf, and I loved that we could stand head to head and eye to eye. As we stood that way, I felt some of her steadiness pass into me. There's nothing more peaceful than a happy cow.

All winter I'd been tormented by these restless humors. My legs itched inside, and I just had to walk. It was the only thing that helped. I walked through icy wind and sleet, storms and thunder, and those days that sulk about in grey garments and sighs. Each day, I walked farther and found more of Carrick's hidden

places. I was sure Auntie Ushag knew nothing of these warm hollows filled with dry leaves and molted fur, or those caves up the gorge where bats hang all day like drying kelp. Life was all work to her. She probably knew only the yard and her trapping trails, and the cove.

I was sure she knew nothing of the little inlet tucked into the cove's cliff walls. Its white sand and green water, its climbers and dangling vines appeared to me a kind of impossible paradise. I could see all the way to its sandy seabed and even make out the schools of tiny fish and deep drifting weed. I heard the inlet call to me; I knew it was my own, my very own, but I couldn't find a way to get down the sheer face. All I could do was stand on the cliff and look as the inlet beach whispered and gleamed.

We have always had days when this island floats in an edgeless blue world. When I was young, they'd been easy days to be happy, but now everything was wrong. The sun was too hot, the sky was too blue, the dawn birds screamed at the blinding sun, and the cows bored or bullied me. All talk ended in trouble, and Auntie Ushag and I were strangers.

Even the island had grown restless. We had been rocked by earthshakes all through fall and winter. In our cove, the cliff had been quietly slipping into the sea, rock by rock and stone by stone. Summer had

been calm, but the very ground now had this pent-up quality, and we lived with one eye on the cliffs. I didn't mind. It suited my humor, which was full of dark predictions and trouble.

"Go away"! I couldn't remember Ushag ever telling me to go away before. No mam, no pa, and now this aunt who didn't want to claim me. I was an orphan. Why had I never noticed how sour Ushag was? It was baffling how much of a spit hag she'd become in just a few months.

That morning, all I'd done was tell her about my dream, and she couldn't have looked more buffeted if I'd turned into a fish before her face. She turned grey and pressed her lips together as if she wanted to stop them forming words.

It was only a dream, I told her.

In it, the sea was getting green in the light of morning, and I was on the shore collecting limpets. Everything was as it always is, calm and unremarkable; then I saw out in the cove a pale round moon rippling just under the water and closing in on the shore. I prickled all over but couldn't look away.

When the moon thing reached the shallows, it drew itself out of the purple sea and bobbed there, half in, half out, letting me look. The torso of a greenish woman rose out of the foam, paler than any woman I ever saw. It seemed transparent, and I thought I saw

the blue veins pulsing in its neck and breasts. Its flowing hair seemed to be an ocean in itself, so flapping was it with tiny silver fish. I stepped into the water up to my knees to see it better.

I saw its tail then, shining and coiling under the surface, and I knew it to be a merrow. Raising my eyes to its face, I was shocked to see tears dropping from eyes singularly wild and hollow. I suppose I'd never thought of the merrows as having mortal feelings. I suppose I'd thought of them as glamorous fish, but cold and heartless. This one seemed to be full of a heart that was breaking. Wading in up to my thighs, I lifted my hand toward the wet, weeping creature.

It called me by name.

"Neen." My blood ran cold as a winter stream.

Twice it called. "Nee-een."

A third time.

"Nee-eenie," it called me, doleful-like and lonely. Reaching with webbed fingers through the sea spray, it dropped a sizable pearl into my hand. There was something about its face I knew from somewhere. Then it turned and was gone, with no trace of bubbles to mark a trail. I was left on the shore, gripping the pearl and searching for the wake.

Then I woke up.

After my aunt's first reaction, during which I thought she was going to be sick, she'd pulled herself

together and asked who'd been telling me those stories.

"What stories?" I asked.

"Merrows, water horses, charmers . . . all of that." She rolled her eyes to the sky as though petitioning someone there for patience, and I felt myself grow still and colder even than the dream merrow's touch.

"Nobody told me, I just heard," I said. "What's a water horse?"

"It's nothing, is what it is." She gave me a sharp, sudden glance. "You can't have just heard. Somebody has been filling your head."

I thought how typical it was that she would take it for granted that I had a head that needed to be filled with stuff, as if it were hollow. As if I had no head already filled with its own stuff. I felt overhot and shifty, and before I knew it, I was saying all that about opening her mind a bit and not knowing everything about everything.

Auntie Ushag did not like me saying such things.

"And you, heishan, you know nothing about anything." She came close and pulled herself up to her full height, but because for the last few months we've been the same height, it didn't have the effect she was looking for. In fact, we both noticed at the same time that I had to look down to meet her eyes. She took a big breath, fattening herself up like a puffer fish. "The

trouble with you is that you're neither one thing nor the other," she added. "You're an in-between."

I didn't know what that was. It sounded like an insult.

"You're in between your own self," she said.

"What does that mean?" I asked, but she'd finished with conversing. She said all that about reptiles and darkness, and then she shouted at me to go away.

So I did.

But the byre and the cows weren't far enough. It was the sea I needed. My aunt's words followed me, and the air swarmed with irritable humors. My feet pounded the path with a satisfying crunch and set gravel rattling down the cliff and onto the beach below. Collecting my stone sack from its hidey-hole, I dragged it past the rocks and to the edge of the water. Our spread of white sand and half-moon of foam made me welcome and filled me up with content.

One of the seals had chosen to whelp alone in our cove this year, though hundreds of her fellows were doing likewise just around the corner in the next cove. It was a strange thing for a seal to be so solitary. They commonly like the company of their kind and can't be persuaded away, even for fish. This lone mother lay on her side, head and tail both held off the ground, and watched me stamp past. The hungry pup at her teat stopped feeding to watch too as I, dragging my

sack behind me, walked straight into the sea and raised a cloud of fussing gulls all about us. I waded into the warm water up to my waist, to my chest, to my shoulders, and when the sea reached my chin, I just took a deep breath and kept on walking.

At the last moment, I filled myself with air. I sucked it in until I felt I was mostly air and my body a ghostly thing. The sea rose over my face, and I opened and closed my eyes to accustom them to the salt. There was a rush in my ears, and all the din and heat dropped away. A few more paces and I was at the edge of the drop, where the sand stopped and fell away into dark water and the kelp forests.

Straightaway I stepped off the drop and into the dappled place. My sack was stuffed with stones and shells for ballast, and I sank to the seabed and settled cross-legged into the sand and grit. I gazed upward through giantess's ribbons of wrack and waving weed. Above me, the sun rolled over the water's surface like a silver ball and shot its cold light into the warm depths, reaching down even to where I sat, as far away from the surface as I could. Below me, the sand shifted and sea beetles wriggled up and out into the water, swimming here in the speckled world just as they fly above.

Half a furlong into the kelp forest, the water darkens and starts to drag at the weed. In some places the

sea meadow is pushed flat and the whole sea seems to be rushing past. I feel the drag of it. At times it seems to want to pull me away. When that happens, I stuff more stones into my sack to stop myself sailing off like an untethered boat in a storm. Mostly, though, it's peaceful, and the best place to think.

The cove's creatures were good companions to me then, and almost as diverting as stories. This day a red crab unfolded itself inside some nearby bones and made a dash for the cover of its rocks, dragging a ragged lump of flesh behind itself like a smuggler's hoard. Its eyes, standing on their tall stalks, waggled over its shoulder as it sidled to its snug and folded itself away into the rock. There were times I'd felt that if I could become that crab or some other sort of creature, I would. I would move and talk in their simple way, eat and drink as they do without all the growing and tending and seasonal hungers. I would live among them without being insulted and told to go away. I knew this day for the first time that though they were my companions, the creatures could never be my friends. They just didn't understand.

How can a person be in between themselves? You're always just you, aren't you? It's not like there's a you here and a you there—and you're also in the middle somewhere. You can't be on the way to yourself; you're always just right where you are. Aren't you?

I don't know how long I sat in the drop, but suddenly I knew I wasn't alone. Urchins, sea horses, red crabs, and such don't trouble my solitude. Only something like me can do that: something warm-blooded and with a type of sense and loyalty. A seal can trouble me, an otter too—and other creatures that come and go but I never see up close, like whales passing on the other side of the wrack. My breath was almost gone now and I felt my body straining toward the air, but there was something there, something hidden in the kelp, and it was something human-like. I leaned forward and stared deep into the forest.

A stillness among the moving curl and tangle of wrack drew my eye. A long shadow rocked in there. Two wild, black eyes were watching me as I watched. A mottled body stretched away back into the speckled light, two tiny hands parted the kelp, and I saw the tail, sinuous, and a face. Its mouth parted in what looked like a grin, and bubbles rose from its lips and nose as if it tried to talk. Then, as quickly as it came, it turned and slipped like a ghost back into the forest of dim beams and rays.

Only a year before, I would have run to tell Auntie Ushag, but all that had changed. I didn't know any longer how to talk to her. She would only roll her eyes and tell me to go away. After all the trouble over a dream, I wasn't about to lure her jibes and temper

again. My breath rushed out of me, and I emptied my sack and rose to the sun.

I can't help seeing what I see. It's in me to notice things. I don't mean to.

I sweated that summer through in the heat of my need to know everything my aunt wouldn't tell. I needled and poked and kept on until she told me I put the lie to the old saying that it's better to be quarreling than lonesome. She said that lately she envied lonely people. If she wouldn't start talking, there were others who wouldn't stop. I had an eye for them.

Monthly market days in Shipton were the only days my aunt and I mixed with the others. It was there I'd overheard the talk about us. Why would the Marreys choose to live out there in that wild and shattered place, the earwigs muttered, two women alone and far from humankind? Nothing but the sea to look upon, they told each other, slipping me pitying looks that made me want to bang their heads together. Nobody but each other . . . and the girl growing up now, they whispered, casting cold eyes upon Auntie Ushag.

Last market day of the fall, I'd overheard them in the baker's snug. That Neen Marrey looks to have grown into a sweet girl, one said, and they all made what would have been sounds of agreement, were they not all three sheets to the wind. As it was, they

sounded like a coven, cackling and spitting and slapping the table. I pressed closer into the wall shadows to hear more. Baker's Cushie said, What she needs is company of her own age, and Ushag should be ashamed, hiding her away in that dark corner of the island to rot and lose all her chances. . . . The young one's like a shy little wood violet. The table of women shrieked like gulls trailing the boats.

You know, she went on loudly, full of herself now that she had them all listening. I've heard that violets grow sweeter when grown near something bitter . . . like onions. The onions draw to themselves the foulness in the soil, see, leaving all the sweetness to the violets. She made a vinegar mouth, and then, as if she couldn't wait, she spat ale and almost burst. That would explain a lot about those two, now, wouldn't it?

Their nasty whispering made me angry. They had a neat way of tucking their point inside something soft-seeming and neighborly. The cutting edge was hidden in a joke or a piece of advice. It was like being sliced by a tiny blade hidden in a goose feather; it took a moment to realize the wound. Every market day, there was a barb for my aunt, and one for me. We were nothing but a type of pastime to them, and it made me even angrier that in one thing their nasty whispers were right. I would have given just about anything to have a friend who wasn't a cow.

In the face of Market-Shipton, I watched my aunt clamp her mouth into its tight line and fold her scarred brown arms across her chest. She bargained hard and was fair and honest, but she tried no market friendships. She never drank with the women, and we left as soon as trade was done. Everybody thought her too proud by half and just asking for a fall, but if she heard any of the barely hidden talk, she never mentioned it.

Not me, though. I heard most things. It's in me to listen, and I don't see why I shouldn't. How do you ever find things out otherwise? I overheard Mr. Owney in the pub say that Pa was a drinker who'd killed Mam by mistake. One year, he said, a year of the Hunger, Colm plowed her under with the dead greens after putting away two bottles all by himself. She'd fainted in the bottom field, and, all unknowing, he went right over her, horses and plowshares and feet and all.

Well, he said, it was twilight, when the eyes are easily fooled. Everybody smiled. And she was always a little brown woman. Easy to miss, flat on the ground and in that light. Everybody laughed.

Then Colm Breda drowned all right. Mr. Owney sighed, shaking his head. Poor fella fell in a whiskey vat—and died trying to drink his way out! It took some time after this for their merriment to die down.

I despised them. They didn't even try to make a

good story. This one was just plain wrong; Pa drowned a whole year before Mam disappeared. Men from Merton found his boat and his woolen in the Breda weave still in mostly one piece and brought them back to us. I don't understand people sometimes. They can be dumb as dirt and crueler than any creature.

Some folk say Pa married a merrow and that, being able in the water and full of jealousy, Mam went after him and was drowned by his new wife and her minnows. They say Carrick's men have always bred with the merrows. They say that's why they live in such numbers in our waters; they all have family ashore.

Others say Mam lost her mind from the grief after Pa died. They say she walked the island without stopping, half-dressed and skeleton-like, for an entire year, and then disappeared. There are people who say they've seen her in the tunnels and caves of the cliffs; they say she's white-haired now, and perfectly pale and transparent in the body, so as you can see her heart, and it's broke clean in two. Some saw her boarding a missionary boat for the mainland, alone and pitiful.

Each story is worse than the last.

Scully Slevin is a different sort of fish, though. He was sixteen and lived with his mam over the rise of Shipton-Cronk and up the moaney. They were our closest neighbors but still a good afternoon's walk

away. Of course, Ushag didn't hold with mixing. To her, friendship brought bother, so we didn't see them much, but during the last Hunger, people helped each other as they could, and Ma Slevin has never forgotten the Marreys. She speaks jewels of Mam's kindness and of my aunt's great heart. That Hunger was long past, though, and I couldn't see signs of any great heart in Ushag, as hard as I looked.

Anyway, I don't remember that Hunger. It's ancient history. It doesn't mean anything to me.

Scully's blind, and he plays his fiddle for money on market days and on all the other days for free. He plays tunes that catch you. Everybody dances as they pass Scully's jig. I once saw a man and woman stop right in the middle of a brawl and start spinning each other around. The music took the fight right out of them. Of course, he also plays tunes that drag the heart right out of your chest, but he doesn't do that so often. I don't think he's sure what to do with people's tears.

At that last fall market, just before winter set in and we all closed ourselves in against the cold, he grabbed at my hand as I passed him. Out of the blue, he told me that I should be proud to be Neen Marrey. Not only did our family have the merrow blood, but the Marreys were one of the few families left on Carrick that once had our very own banshee. He told me

I was truly lucky. He said he'd give his sight to see a banshee.

I pointed out that he'd already lost his sight, so it wasn't his to give any longer.

He tightened his old fiddle pegs and said, as if I should know better, "Not that sight."

CHAPTER TWO

Changeling

IN EARLY SUMMER I TOLD Auntie Ushag what Scully had told me at the market, about the merrows and our family, and that was the start of all our bother and quarrels. That first time, she folded her arms across her chest and looked at me for a good while before speaking. Then she sighed.

"Why are we to listen to Scully Slevin?" she asked.

"Because he's a seer," I told her simply and truthfully.

"Listen to me," she said slowly and clearly, speaking as though I were old or deaf or stupid. "Scully is not a seer. There are no seers. Those days, if they were ever here, are gone. Everybody knows that. And it's a good thing too," she added.

"Why?" I asked.

"Because those days were a mess."

"Why?"

"No one knew where they stood. All those sprites and half-beings and whatnots, they had too many rules. Don't build around the barrows, don't plant in the dancing grounds, don't fall asleep under the alder or pick the columbine from Strangers' Croft. Who could remember all that? Then they had holidays every other day! With presents and special clothes, and feast food. And wine, barrels and barrels of wine. Nobody got any work done. The Little Brothers and their one god are better." She paused. "Slightly."

I could see I had one question left before she would stop answering me, saying that my questions were becoming a conversation and she had no time to converse like a scholar or a lady or any other person with no real purpose.

I asked as quietly as I could, "Why?"

My aunt put her hand on my shoulder and looked into my eyes. "Because they're simple, Neen. Ten rules, three holidays, and one god who made everything. Simple." She turned back to the washing. "Anyway, there hasn't been a real sighting of the Others for centuries. Scully is just showing off. There are no seers anymore. No seers, no merrows, no selkies—"

I perked up. "What are selkies?"

"They're nothing." She punched and wrung the wet wool. "I've done talking. I don't have any more time

to waste. Take these and spread them and leave me alone."

Up the cove, we were a house of secrets, but all I had to do was find Scully or visit down at the Slevin place to be glutted with all the stories I wanted. All through that winter, Bo and I'd been sneaking down to sit among the whelk shells, fat hens, and wood ash in Ma Slevin's smoky snug and listen as she blathered. In this manner I'd learned of the flooding, trembling, and burials that have rocked the island. In times past, the very earth has opened up and swallowed whole villages. The sun shines for a month and the lake becomes a bog; rain falls for a month and the bog becomes a lake. You never know with earth and water what's going to happen next, Scully says, almost cheerfully. Out in the cove, there's even an island that appears and disappears as it will.

At other times the sea has risen up in waves that drowned the low-lyingest, edge-most parts of the island, with the result that on clear mornings, fishermen out in the calm cove can see those undersea forests of leafless elm and alder still standing. Not only that, but they see the old paths cutting through the old forest's wavering shadows. At night, lights glint and flicker along these deep paths, and Ma Slevin says they're the souls of the poor drowned cottagers

searching for one another and for a way back into the sun. The manner of their dying is leeching them of human warmth, she told us, and they are well on their way to becoming cold-blooded water sprites. They live an icy, lonely existence, forever searching for something they dimly recall as "companionship" and for a way back to a fading memory of something called "home." Ma has a way of putting things that makes pictures in my head.

Sometimes the waves only wash everything away—old landforms and new monasteries and all—and then retreat with their hoard to deep water. At the bottom of the top lake on a clear, bright night, you can see the steeple of a drowned church. Those who have the ears to hear, Ma Slevin whispered to us, can still hear the bells toll of a Sunday morning. God Be Praised for His Good Bells, she added, crossing herself. It's a beautiful thing, and lucky they are who hear it.

During that long, wet winter, they told me, too, of our last brownie. He still lives down at the barrows, where the Old ones used to store grain and weapons, but being the only one of his kind left has shaped him into a secretive, bile-ridden creature. He no longer helps with household work or dances outside at weddings but just squats in his barrow, now sleeping, now grumbling, and always stinking like a pit.

I felt sorrowful for that lonely brownie. I think it must be hard to be the only one of something. Scully says it's not that bad, and he should know. He walks alone except for his old fiddle, and he never stumbles. His head and eyes roll as he goes, but each footfall is steady. He stops often to feel the sun on his face and takes slow high-steps like a cricket in the summer grass. Sometimes I close my eyes and try to walk like Scully. When you walk blind, arriving anywhere seems a victory of some kind. Even more than a victory; it seems like a miracle. Most of the time, I just fall over.

Ma's place draws creatures to it. Auntie Ushag has dug out most of the flowers from our gardens to encourage the bees into the meadows behind us, closest to the hives, but Ma's garden is full of bees feeding all anyhow. Birds come for the unswept crumbs and then nest all around the house, including one pair of stubborn eaves warblers right over the door. They shit on the threshold, but instead of chasing them off, Ma just throws water over the mess, shouting as she does so to warn any passing ghosts to whom the wet would be worse than fire. Hedge pigs come for the milk that she puts out in dishes for them. She says she has no choice; if she didn't, the hedge pigs would take it directly, and that's a terrible shock for any cow. They nearly die of shame.

I watched Scully move around his place, steady and

sure. He cooked. He tended the fire. He never spilled anything. He never burned himself. He couldn't see, and his mam was too old and stiff to care, so the mess of shells and fish bones we were building around the hearth just grew taller and wider around us as outside the winter sleet flew and the black clouds crowded in. I loved their place.

While Ma told the stories, Scully added the detail. He knew a lot about the Others that even his mam didn't. For instance, he knew that faery talk is not pretty like tinkling bells at all. It's a lumpy sort of language, and everything they say in it sounds like a declaration of war. But they can, and will, take away wounds or deformities if they are asked decently.

"Well, why don't you ask for Scully's sight?" I asked Ma, convinced that if anyone could persuade a faery, that person would be Ma herself, with all her trust and good nature. She smiled fondly on her son and said, "Ah, now. There's a pert question. Will you be requiring your eyesight anytime, Scully?"

"No, Ma, and thank you very much," he answered. He thought for a moment and added, "It could be seen as mighty ungrateful."

Ma nodded. "That's right, my Birdie," she said. "Would you rather see the world, or see beyond it?" Scully blew his nose. I looked at my feet. I felt a long

story coming on, and I stoked the fire, then settled into Bo's warm hide to hear it. She lowed to me in a friendly manner, and Scully shushed her.

"It's said that it's a wise father who knows his own child," Ma began, "but there's times when the same may be said about a mother.

"When I was young, I was married to a peat man and sent out here to the moaney to live with him. The bog was drier then, and less stenching. He was a good man, and we were happy for many, many years before it all went wrong. It took years before I conceived of a child, and when it finally happened, I went about singing for weeks on the strength of it. (It always seems a shining miracle, in spite of it being the most ordinary thing in the world.) There was still a rash of sickness about after the last Hunger, but I was well and the baby kicked me strong enough, so I had no bother or worries.

"I remember that spring well." She sighed, and her nose ran.

"The babe arrived, and he was a big, bonny boy. He already had a full head of hair, and his father nearly busted his jaw smiling as he held his son for the first time, and he said, 'Look at that arm, Mureal. He's already mighty . . . mighty like a Christian!' We were about as pride-puffed as two new parents can be,

feeling as how we were the only ones to ever do this thing, and how our boy was the beautifulest baby ever born, and other such sinful thinking.

"Well, we were punished for it. One morning I go to his cradle to feed him, and he's gone. In his place is this shriveled, wailing thing, looking more like a stick than a babe. Its arms and legs are twigs, and its face withered and covered in bark rings. As soon as it sees me, it starts up shrieking, and it doesn't stop. I knew at once what it was.

"It was a changeling. Having heard of the birth of a fat, healthy mortal baby, the Others had come in the night and taken our boy. It's a simple truth and well-known fact that their babies are thin and ugly and they're jealous of us human mothers.

"It being generally agreed that the old days were gone and the Other Ones vanished, if they'd ever been at all, we couldn't find any help. The charmers all remain silent these days. You can't find a body to remove a curse or eat a sin anymore, not even for real coins. I searched and asked all about the markets and public houses, but nobody listened. I went to the Little Brothers; they were kind and told me to pray to Jesus, but I could tell they didn't believe me.

"At last, a so-called friend told me that in the villages pity for my loss was running thin and I'd best stop spreading stories and hunting charmers before

folk ran out of patience completely. She looked at the unnatural lump in the cradle and declared it human but sickly. A mother knows, though. A mother knows.

"That awful offspring I found in the cradle that morning didn't live. I stopped feeding it, and it soon perished. We had to bury it in the churchyard despite knowing its Otherwise origins. It was terrible to hear the poor Father praying over that ungodly lump and see the waste of the holy water and suchlike. Everyone thought it was grief made me so white and jumpy, but it was fear. I expected their Christian grave to spit the body back up at every moment of that service."

Ma stopped to blow her nose and to spit. She lit her pipe and stared into the flames for a long while. I waited. I didn't want to talk in case she stopped. I'd never been so happy. Ushag and I were warm and safe at home; we were content in our company as animals in their den are, we were soothed by the breath and body of each other, cozy in the smells and the sounds of home, and content in our work, but however comfortable I was at home, I missed something. It was something I couldn't grasp, something nameless and shapeless but so real I could feel the hole inside me where it would fit. Here, by Ma's messy fireplace, I could feel that place filling a little.

"Well, that was that," Ma went on, "and Pherick and I gave up our quest to find that first boy. I won't

say we got over it, but folk have ever lost children and there's nothing to be done about it, though I envied mothers and fathers whose children had simply died. As is its habit, life went on, and within a month of the burial, I was expecting again, and we poured our hope into this coming child.

"Our second was again a beautiful child. This time a daughter, with ears like pink shells and a good, strong shout on her! We enjoyed her for a month, hidden in our home and giving the news to no one. I slept her next to my bed to make sure.

"But there was no escaping it. One night I went to bed, and when I woke she had followed her brother. The Others had come and silently taken her from my very side. This time the impostor seemed more human, but it didn't fool me. This red-faced monster with its rolling eyes wasn't my daughter. As I said, a mother knows her child.

"This time I didn't try to find help. There was no point. I just had to let her go, and that time was the worst of my life. Pherick didn't speak for weeks and spent most of his time out in the cove. I only went to the village for the market and didn't stay to chat. I was changed by it all, and entirely done in. That was when I stopped visiting down there, and met your mam and Ushag. Ven used to come up and sit with me." Ma stopped and looked at me with her bleary eyes. "She

could sit like nobody I've known. Quiet and calm as a warm bath.

"It was her as told me what people used to do about changelings in the old days. It was of no interest to me anymore, as I'd decided never to have another child, but it was a comfort to have someone even pretend to believe me. As it turned out, she was right, and I have every good reason to be thankful to her.

"In spite of deciding to remain childless, I was expecting again within the year. I spent my time fretting and picking at my food, and Pherick spent his fixing locks and bolts, and sharpening his blades. I told him that if the Others wanted to come in, locks and bolts wouldn't stop them, and he told me that's all I knew, for the Other Ones were done in by iron. His preparations put the heart back into him, and I couldn't bring myself to take that away from him, but I knew we were as doomed in this next babe as in the other two. Flying in the face of nature, I grew thinner as I neared my time.

"And then Scully was born. He wasn't a fat, healthy baby like the others, but he was quiet and sweet, and he fed well, so I had my hopes. I thought maybe the Others wouldn't want this one, as he wasn't their usual type, but I was wrong. They came in the second month.

"I woke one day and there he was. Gone."

I looked at Scully. He had his face turned to the fire

and the shadows playing there hid his expression. His fingers moved on his knees like pale spiders.

"They'd come through the rat holes and left a white twig in Scully's place, like it wasn't even worth cutting a proper log for him. This time I sat by the twig as it wailed, and for days I prayed. I prayed to the Little Brothers' god (who was likely to know what it is to have a son in trouble), in spite of knowing the Others to be godless and therefore unlikely to be under Christian orders. I prayed to the saints, them having more freedom of movement, as it were, than Himself, who plainly can't be seen to be mixing with the Other sort. I prayed to Breeshey and the Good Mother Mary and to the Nameless One Herself, and all the rest. In the middle of all the praying, I fell asleep.

"I must have dreamed a memory of Ven's stories, because I was all at once awake in the night and I knew what to do. I picked up that wailing twig. It looked at me with knowing, watchful eyes, and it said to me, 'What art thou doing, Mammy?' and then I threw it in the fire. There was one terrible cry, the fire blazed out of the hearth, and I fell senseless.

"When I woke in the morning, Scully was back and hungry. We never saw the Others again. But there was one thing I hadn't considered.

"It's a simple fact that Other time is different from ours. In the three days he'd been gone from our

world, in the Otherworld, he'd lived seven years and was almost a grown-up. He'd lived with his Other mother and learned their Other ways for all that time, but he returned to us as he'd been when they took him; he came back a baby. And we were strangers to him! It took time for him to settle. Having to repeat his first seven years over made him bad-tempered for a while, and he'll always be a bit Otherwise—but praise be to God, it's a beautiful thing, and comes in useful too.

"Of course, he did come back to us blinded; the great blaze of the Otherworld Halls being too much for his poor eyes. The Others never take something without leaving something else in its stead, though, and they gave him the Othersight to make up for it. He looks upon a different world from us, and sees us in ways we can never see ourselves." Ma stood, stretching her stiff back and placing her spotted hand on his head. She moved to the corner of the darkening cottage and lit a taper. By its light, among a heap of stones and shells, I saw the Christian's cross and a fresh green alder branch, a set of antlers, a stone spiral, and a bowl of milk, all set in the niche behind her bed. She gave each one a touch or a kiss, whispering and blowing and moving her hands in spirals. She drew a woman-sized circle in the air and stepped through it. "All that talking's thirsty work. Who's for a

brew, then?" she asked briskly. Then she bent to me and whispered, "By the way, never trust a salamander. Nasty, feverish things!"

Scully turned his face to me, and his eyes looked straight into mine, milky in the candlelight and amused.

"My mother leaves nothing to chance," he said. "And that's a simple fact."

Merrow

Ananda Braxton-Smith

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