



The Sea-wreck Stranger

By Anna Mackenzie

Chapter 1

The late winter sky hangs low and dull as we trail our feet towards the trees, the bucket clanking loud against the post as I latch the gate behind us. Despite the cold that nips at me, I'm pleased to be outside, away from the morning's work and, as well, from Aunt Tilda's temper.

It's a fool's errand, searching for green-shoots. It'll be weeks, most like, before the first bright stems push their way up through the tree litter and the frost-hardened soil. Tilda knows that as well as I – so maybe what she wants is to tempt us into disobedience just for the pleasure she might have in punishing us after.

Tilda delights in our punishment – mine especially. I've seen the way her tongue flicks greedily across her thin lower lip as Uncle Marn reaches for the leather strop he keeps hanging behind the kitchen door. Marn beats my brother Ty and me readily enough, but not Sophie. He favours her, his own child, and I try hard not to blame Sophie for that. I don't always succeed.

At the top of the slope we turn from the track and climb the wall that edges the field. From here, if we keep low, we're out of sight of the farmyard. I breathe a sigh and look around. To the west the dark belly of cloud has begun to shred so that two bright shafts of sunlight angle down like an invitation. Ty meets my eyes. Tilda's not expecting us back for an hour or two.

Without a word Ty turns away from the trees. We're forbidden to go to the bay, but it draws us like a magnet.

'Ness?' Sophie calls, doubtful.

'We've plenty of time,' I tell her. 'And we'll not find green-shoots anyway.'

Sophie mostly follows my lead but it troubles her when I go against Tilda.

Turning my back on my cousin's doubt, as well as on thoughts of Tilda's green-plum sourness and Uncle Marn's strop, I bend low and hurry after Ty. Halfway along the wall we turn again, jumping down into the ditch that drains our lower fields and heads on towards the sea. Between its high banks the water flows dark from the morning's rain, but it's not deep. Where the drain turns sharply we scramble back over the stop-bank and cross the slope to where the old sea-path angles down to the bay.

As soon as my feet begin the steep descent a honey-sweet excitement starts to well within me. Mostly I keep whatever I feel tamped down so that no one can see it, and it's generally not happiness that tries to sneak its treacherous way onto my face. Today, for an hour, I can let up my battle to keep my face still and obedient.

Ty notices my expression and snorts. 'Better wipe that smile away before Tilda sees it,' he says.

Tilda's is the kind of unhappiness that comes of thinking you've got less than you deserve and wanting more than you can have, though what she has is fine enough. Even at this thin end of winter we've food and warmth, and Tilda has a marriage share besides in Uncle Marn's orchard and fields, barn and byre, hens, pigs and goats, not to mention Sal the milk-cow. But Tilda is always looking at what she hasn't and, no matter what Marn gives her, there'll always be plenty of that.

'She'd not recognise a smile even if she saw one,' I reply.

'Unless it was Sophie's,' Ty answers.

Sophie is well behind us on the track but I glance back to measure the distance and weigh in my mind the sound of his

voice against the sound of the sea. Tilda is Sophie's stepmother, rather than step-aunt, and because of that she offers Sophie something closer to affection – albeit of a pinched, ungenerous kind – than she's ever shown my brother or me.

Even so, I've begun to think that Tilda is easier on Sophie for no reason other than that it serves her purpose to have it so. Tilda knows that Sophie is our weakest link.

As I pause now to watch our cousin threading her way down the zigzags of the path, I can't help thinking she should learn to face life a bit bolder, the way you need to if you're going to do anything other than be tumbled about by it, the way a piece of driftwood is tossed this way and that by the sea.

Sophie looks up suddenly and catches me watching, and her face clouds.

She's pretty, Sophie. She has long dark hair that falls neat behind her ears and down her back like a river, while her eyes are unshadowed as a summer sky. Though we're cousins there's little enough in the way we look that would tell anyone so. Sophie's finer-made somehow, fragile where I'm strong. The contrast does me no favours, making me seem broad and rough, with hair that waves unruly around my head in a tangle of harvest browns, and eyes that are queer besides, neither blue nor green but shades of both. Ty shares my too-big nose and my too-loud voice, but my eyes are all my own.

Thinking to smooth the frown that decorates Sophie's brow, I wave her on. 'It's not so steep once you've passed the bend,' I call.

'I know,' she answers, and her tone tells me I've said something wrong.

Sophie usually gets where she's going in the end so maybe I should leave her to do it her own way and speed. Ahead of me Ty hoots like a barn owl as his feet reach the broad sweep of sea-firmed sand. Tossing my head I shuck off all thoughts of Sophie – and of the three dead parents we have between us – and jump the last steps to where the path flattens and curves like a ribbon lost amongst the dune grasses.

Chapter 2

Skellap Bay curves like a wheat sheaf laid flat between two headlands – the one a low tumble where the path runs down from Uncle Marn's farm, the other a great tower of cliff that rises sheer to the south. You can reach the bay from either end but only by crossing Marn's land on the one hand or scaling the cliff on the other, and neither route can be taken lightly.

I've been coming to the bay for as long as I can remember. When I was small and Marn's first wife, Bella – my mama's sister – was still alive, Pa would bring us to Leewood several times a year. It was never long on those visits before Pa and Marn fell out over some talk or other. When that happened Bella would shoo us outside and Pa would take my hand, lift Ty to his hip, and lead us down to the bay. On the sand we'd run till we fell from exhaustion, then we'd settle to sleep or to listen to Pa's stories.

I loved Pa's stories. Most of his tales came from his days as a fisherman but he had other stories too, of fantastical times when people could fly and walk about under the ocean. The people he told of could send their thoughts from one to one another in just the blink of an eye, which always made me wonder how they'd ever kept their secrets.

When I was old enough to ask, Pa told me his stories came from books and were as true as day and night. I never knew whether to believe him or not. Marn says it's all nonsense, both the stories and the books. If ever there were such books on Dunnett Island they'd have been burned long since. Books make good fuel for the Cleansing Day fires that are held each November. When I was small and lived in Tarbet, the fires on Cleansing Day burned as tall as a house and were hot enough to take great mountains of teck and melt it into mush. Most of the teck is gone now, so that the village fire is small and stoked with wood for want of better fuel, with never more than a few tokens to throw to the flames. That doesn't stop Colm Brewster from riding through to proclaim the Council's bans and celebrate the burning. Colm says we've to live in the here and now, for nothing is gained from looking back to the past. Colm's voice is loud, but I've no patience with it. My Pa's in the past, and Mama too, and even Colm Brewster's voice can't weigh against that.

It's to help me look back that I come to Skellap Bay, and I'd come for that alone but I love the bay besides. Whatever Dunnett's Council might say of it, the sea's rhythm – sometimes gentle, sometimes wild – seems to swell in my heart and soothe me. Pa always told me I was born with sea-songs in my bones.

Such a song sings in me now as I run to where my brother stands, legs planted wide and arm out-flung, skimming stones across the water. Ty's tall for his age, near as tall as me, and starting to fill out strong and sure. There's no trace of the sea running in Ty's blood. He's a farmer through and through. Maybe it's because he scarce remembers our life before we came to Leewood.

Letting my voice loose on the wind with the lost cry of a seabird I wheel and turn. There are fewer birds than when I was young, and some I remember that we never see now. The gulls remain, though, and kittiwakes.

I watch one now, skimming low across the water, its flight leading my eyes back to where Sophie is holding her skirt in a bunch as she steps delicately along the edge of the tide, her legs as spindly as a heron's. As each wave breaks up over the sand she runs backwards, to keep the foam from catching her. We know without testing that the sea will still be icy, but that's not why she runs. For my part, I've waded often enough to know there's no truth to the Council's ruling that the seawater is poisoned – leastways not here.

Sophie calls me and I tilt my arms wide as wings and circle back towards her.

'What is it, Ness?' she asks, stooping low over a twisted pile of kelp. Almost lost in its dark strands is a sparkle of blue, gauzy and fine.

I draw it out with a stick. It's woven, I think, but delicate in a way I've never seen on a loom. 'It's a shred of a mermaid's shawl,' I tell her, studying the shimmering of silver in the blue. 'Or a sea star that lost its way.' Marn beat me once, at Tilda's insistence, for sharing such fancies with Sophie, but she's old enough now to know not to repeat them.

Sophie smiles. 'You know it's not,' she says. 'Is it something made?'

I shrug. Sophie thinks I have answers for everything. 'I don't know. It could be.' Lifting the strand of fabric, I hold it out to her. 'There's no harm in it,' I say.

Sophie hesitates. On Dunnett, people are afraid of anything that washes up with the tide, though whether their fear is of Colm Brewster or of the ocean I've never been sure. I don't hold their fear against them, given all the grief that's washed in over the years, but I wish I knew the truth of it.

Mastering her reluctance, Sophie takes the fabric and spreads it flat on the sand, pulling her fingers away as quick as she can.

Despite the bans, we always search for sea-wreck in the tangle along the tide-line. Often enough there's no purpose we can see to the things the sea abandons, but there's no evil either – at least none beyond the hints it carries of a world beyond our shores. As to that, the Council would have us believe there's nothing left but wreck of whatever world it was – in which case, I can't see that it should matter if we trouble ourselves to study it.

Ty interrupts my thoughts and I raise my eyes from Sophie's shred of mystery. 'I'm going to the cave,' he calls.

'We haven't long,' I reply, but there's no answer from his retreating back so I set off after him along the sand.

'I'm coming too,' Sophie says, and I feel her at my side.

The cave, sea-carved in the cliffs that climb steep and grey to the southern headland, is our secret place, its mouth tucked from sight by a double line of rocks at the cliff's toe. Inside it opens big as a barn, but you've always to watch for the turn of the tide when the sea comes creeping back across the sloping sand and up over the rocks that stud the floor, black on gold like fresh-baked plum cobbler. In a westerly storm the waves reach further still, crashing up the rocky shelves of the cave's rear wall, leaving their signature behind as warning. Twice in the years I've lived here there've been storms savage enough to sweep the cave clean, taking back the wreck we'd hidden there and our scant few treasures with it.

Ty is barely halfway to the cave when he suddenly calls out, and I hurry my feet towards where he's standing, oddly still, because there's something in his voice that sounds urgent.

‘What is it?’ I call, feeling Sophie’s hand creep around my wrist.

Ty takes a step backwards before he turns. I’m near enough to see his face and what’s there makes me pause to unlace Sophie’s fingers. ‘Wait here,’ I tell her, before I walk on towards Ty, my eyes on the mound of sea-wreck that lies before his feet.

Almost always the sea’s gifts are broken and battered. Even so, my breath catches in my throat as I understand what I’m seeing. Running past my brother I fall to my knees on the sand, my fingers shaking as I lift strands of knotted weed and the bulbous roots of bull kelp. I know already what lies beneath the sea’s damp wrappings. We all do. We’ve seen enough of death to recognise the tangle before us as the sea-scourged body of a man.

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