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Opening extract from

The Songbird Café Girls
Mollie Cinnamon is Not a Cupcake

Written by

Sarah Webb

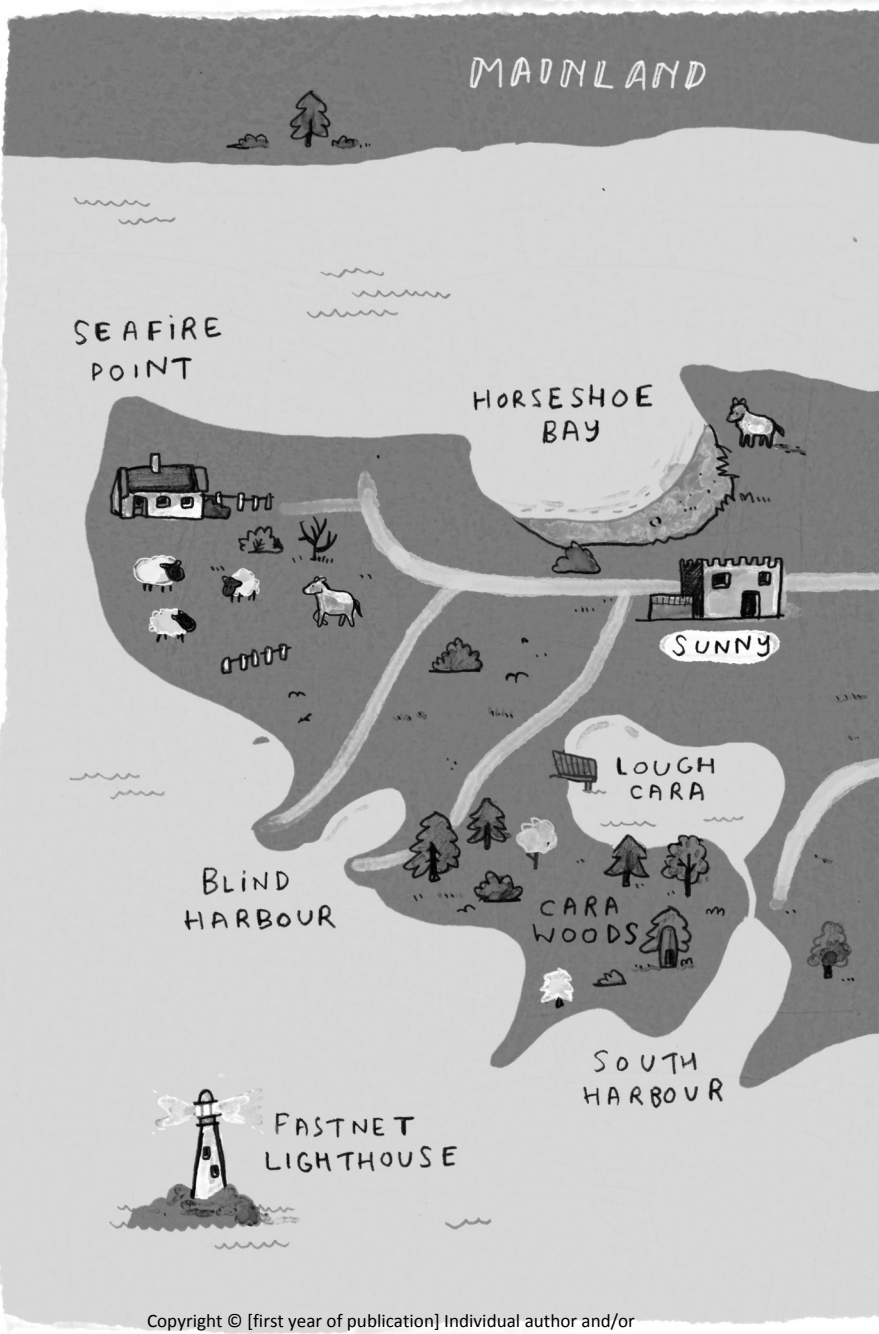
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Chapter 1

As I watch from the window of the ferry, Little Bird Island gets bigger and bigger. I can just make out the harbour, and behind it, a stone castle covered in ivy, where Red Moll McCarthy once lived. She was a famous pirate queen and Granny Ellen said she is one of our ancestors. I was named after them both – Mollie Ellen Cinnamon.

There's a village just up from the harbour, the buildings all painted bright seasidey colours: strawberry pink, vanilla yellow, mint green. I can't believe I'm about to be imprisoned on a tiny island in the middle of nowhere with people who think it's normal to paint their house the colour of ice cream! And Little Bird is such a weird name for an island. It sounds like something from *Sesame Street*. I'm doomed.

Flora dropped me at the bus terminal this morning and made the driver promise to keep an eye on me. Then she had the nerve to get all bleary-eyed and emotional.

"I'm going to miss you, Mollie Mops," she said, hugging me so tight I could barely breathe. "I'll say hello to the kangaroos

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and wallabies for you. Be good for your great-granny, OK? And email me all your news, promise? Sorry I can't travel with you, but I have so much packing to do. You know what I'm like, darling, last minute dot com."

"Don't forget your passport this time," I said. "It's in the fruit bowl on the kitchen counter, remember?"

She gave one of her tinkling laughs and squeezed me even closer. "How am I going to survive without you? I miss you already, sweetie. See you in three weeks for our Parisian adventure." And then she kissed the tip of my freckled nose, and off she skipped, abandoning me, her only daughter, to my fate.

At first the bus ride wasn't too bad – most of it was on the motorway – but the journey along the coast took for ever, worse luck. The roads were so winding and bumpy that I felt really sick. When we finally got to the ferry terminal, the bus driver insisted on walking me to the boat, like I was five. It was so embarrassing.

The journey across the sea took about forty lumpy minutes and now the mainland is a grey-and-green curve behind us. The little ferry has just docked. Flora told me to stay on it and that my great-granny would come and find me. So I wait alone in the cabin, surrounded by cardboard boxes and oddly shaped packages.

The ferry is ancient and smells of diesel fumes and rotten fish. I'm dying to get off, so I jump up from the orange plastic seat and stick my head through the doorway, almost crashing into a white-haired woman.

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"Oops, careful, child," she says. "Mollie? Is that you?" She has a strong accent, all sing-songy.

I nod.

She smiles, making her bright blue eyes twinkle. "I'm your great-granny. Call me Nan. Everyone does. You're very welcome to Little Bird. It's wonderful to finally meet you in person."

I'm not sure what I was expecting from my great-granny, but it wasn't a petite woman in muddy green wellies with a long white plait down her back. Flora's tall and so was Granny Ellen.

"Have you got your bags, child?" she asks me.

She's called me child twice now. How old does she think I am? I may be small for my age, but I'm nearly thirteen. I don't say anything, just nod. I know it's a bit rude, but it feels really weird being here.

I've spoken to Nan on the phone a few times recently (which was super Awkward with a capital *A*), but I've never met her in person. She and Flora don't exactly get on, which is another reason why being here is strange. I guess Flora was so desperate to get rid of me she'd have sent me anywhere.

I swing my rucksack over my shoulder and pick up my travel bag. "What *is* all this?" I ask as I almost trip over a rectangular package that must be at least three metres long.

"That's a tree," Nan says. "The smaller boxes are probably books or DVDs. Everything that comes to the island is dropped off by ferry. There's no postal service, so Alanna takes in the packages, rings the people they belong to and they come and collect them."

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"Who's Alanna?"

Instead of answering my question, Nan asks, "Are you hungry?"

"A bit." I'm starving. We left the apartment at nine and it's now four. There wasn't any bread in the house so I couldn't make sandwiches. All I've had today are an apple and a packet of crisps. Flora says I'm a demon if I haven't been fed. She's the opposite – she often forgets to eat. She can go a whole day on one piece of toast.

"In that case you're about to meet Alanna in person," Nan says. She leaps off the ferry deck and then scrambles up the old stone steps in the harbour wall like a mountain goat. She walks towards a tiny cream Fiat 500 that is parked a few metres away. I follow her, my stuffed bag hitting my shins with every step.

She points over at a sky-blue building. "That's Alanna's place – the Songbird Cafe."

The cafe looks nice. It has a wooden sign swinging over the door and white tables outside with matching chairs. There's a wooden conservatory to the left, a big window overlooking the harbour at the front and a cluster of metal dog bowls near the door.

Besides the cafe, there is a tourist office, a craft shop, a pub called The Islander's Rest and a small grocery shop. And that's it. There must be another village on the island, a bigger one.

"Are you all right, Mollie?" Nan asks me. "You're being very quiet."

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No, I'm not all right – I miss Dublin and Flora already. But I don't know Nan at all and I don't want to talk to her about this stuff. I gulp down the lump in my throat, nod again and say, "Fine."

"Let's get your bag in the car then," she says, her voice all bright and chirpy.

After putting my bag in the boot of her little car, we head to the cafe. I clutch my rucksack against my chest, needing to keep something from home close by me. It's quiet on the island, so different to the city, and I'm starting to feel very alone and lost – like the little alien *E.T.*, abandoned on planet earth. I don't know anyone here. What was Flora thinking? I can't believe she's leaving me here for two whole months.

"What do you like doing in Dublin?" Nan asks me as we walk to the cafe. "Are you into sport?"

"Not really."

"What are you interested in then? Music? Writing? Drama?"

"Nothing, really." Which is a complete lie. Movies are my life. I just don't feel like answering her right now.

"Come on, you must like something. How about television? Do you watch your mum when she's on?"

"Sometimes," I admit. My mum, Flora Cinnamon, is a television presenter. She started off doing the "continuity", which means talking between the shows – you know, "Gosh, wasn't that exciting? Stay tuned for more drama in *EastEnders*, coming up next." Then she was a weather girl for a few years, and she's just landed a job presenting a new holiday

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programme called *Travelling Light*. She'll be filming in amazing cities all over the world: Paris, Rome, New York. The first stop is Sydney, Australia, and then Auckland, New Zealand. Unfortunately she can't take me with her as I'd miss too much school. That's why I'm on Little Bird being interrogated by Nan.

I'm dreading attending the local school while I'm staying here. I won't know a soul. But here's the good news – Flora's promised to take me to Paris with her in three weeks' time. We have it all worked out. She's going to come and collect me. We'll spend the weekend together in Paris and I'll get to watch her filming some of her show in the most romantic city in the world – imagine! I can't wait. Flora's always really busy with work and her friends and we don't get to spend much time together just the two of us, so it's going to be ultra special. She's promised we can visit the lock bridges – where lovers put their initials on a padlock and secure it to the metal railings of the bridge, pledging their *amour* for ever (how swoony is that?). And we're going to see the Eiffel Tower.

"She's doing very well, isn't she, your mum?" Nan says, interrupting my thoughts. "I love watching her. When's her new show on the telly?"

"It starts in May, I think. Flora isn't quite sure."

"Flora? Is that what you call her?"

"Yes. She says 'Mum' makes her feel old." Flora's twenty-nine. She had me when she was seventeen and she's always telling me how young she is to be a mum.

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Nan smiles. "If 'Mum' sounds old, then 'Great-Granny' sounds positively ancient. I can't believe I have a great-granddaughter who's so grown up." She pauses for a second, then says, "Mollie, I know this must be difficult for you, but I'm delighted to have you here. I've wanted to meet you for a very long time now. I think you'll like Little Bird."

"I doubt it. Flora says it's the most boring place in the universe." The words are out of my mouth before I can stop them and I instantly feel bad.

Nan just gives a surprised laugh and says, "Your mum is a bright-lights, big-city kind of girl. Like my Ellen was. But I know Ellen loved the island in her own way, and maybe you'll grow to love it too."

Granny Ellen was Flora's mum. Which makes her Nan's daughter. She died two years ago. I wish Nan wouldn't talk about Granny Ellen. I don't like thinking about her – it makes me too sad. But I don't say anything. Nan wouldn't understand. Flora says they weren't close.

"It's quiet here, but you'll get used to it," Nan adds. "And the harbour and the village can get quite busy in the summer."

"There are other shops, right?" I ask. "Places to buy clothes and stuff? A cinema? A Chinese?" I love Chinese noodles.

"Mollie, it's a small island. The population's tiny – less than two hundred. Everyone orders what they need from the Internet. We're very lucky – the island has a broadband connection every Saturday. We all trek down to the library and queue up to use the one computer on Little Bird."

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"What?"

She smiles. "Ha! Got you. We have broadband in the house. Don't look so horrified. We're not all that backward. If you need clothes, we can order them online, and I have lots of movies on DVD." She pushes open the door to the cafe. "Now let's get you some food. Ellen used to get really ratty if she hadn't eaten. Are you the same?"

"No!" I say, a little too loudly.

Nan laughs. "Of course not."

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