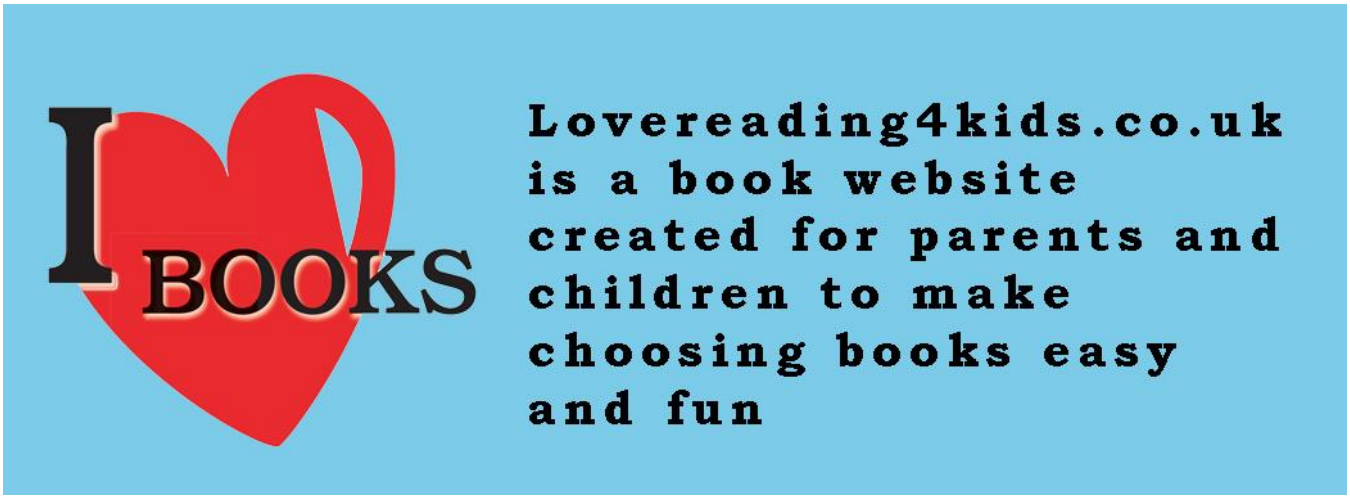


Opening extract from

The Secret of Skara Vhore

Written by

Jennifer M. Calder

Published by

Matador an imprint of Troubador Publishing

All Text is Copyright © of the Author and/or Illustrator

Please print off and read at your leisure.

Lovereading4kids.co.uk

Copyright © 2015 Jennifer M Calder

The moral right of the author has been asserted.

Apart from any fair dealing for the purposes of research or private study, or criticism or review, as permitted under the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988, this publication may only be reproduced, stored or transmitted, in any form or by any means, with the prior permission in writing of the publishers, or in the case of reprographic reproduction in accordance with the terms of licences issued by the Copyright Licensing Agency. Enquiries concerning reproduction outside those terms should be sent to the publishers.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses, places, events and incidents are either the products of the author's imagination or used in a fictitious manner. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental.

Matador
9 Priory Business Park,
Wistow Road, Kibworth Beauchamp,
Leicestershire. LE8 0RX
Tel: 0116 279 2299
Email: books@troubador.co.uk
Web: www.troubador.co.uk/matador
Twitter: @matadorbooks

ISBN 978 1784624 064

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data.
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Printed and bound by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon, CR0 4YY



Matador is an imprint of Troubador Publishing Ltd



Island of Farinsay



Contents



Part one *The Revealing* 7

Part two *The Finding* 145

Part three *The Replacing* 279

Glossary 351

Acknowledgements 352

Part one



The Revealing

1

The Burnings

IT WAS DETERMINED that the house of Shona would be the first to burn.

It was the first. And it was the last.

Such a terrible deed. Such a murderous crime. The flames lit so great a fury in the people that they forgot their own fear and safety. With stones and sticks and vehement curses they drove away the evil. There were no more burnings in that glen.

2

The Boy

THE BOY CAME TO. His body was so numb with cold it felt almost unreal. His brain was dull.

He could not remember. Had he fallen asleep in the heat of yesterday's sun? The heather lay thick on the moorland and would have made a soft bed on which to lie. Around him lay a wide scattering of rocks, each one half-hidden, tucked snugly into the purple quilt.

He rubbed his head. Had he tripped and knocked his head against a stone? A vague cloud of unease began to gather in his mind. Had he been struck down? Slowly warmth and feeling came back into his body.

A little way off stood tall, impassive forms their silhouettes dark against the eastern sky and their long daybreak shadows directing him to be gone.

The boy's head began to clear and he saw his bloodstained hands. He struggled to his feet. Fiery pains shot through his limbs and forced him back to the ground.

But the boy rose again, willing hot blood to course round his body. He staggered forward – hesitant, tottering movements, like the comic first steps of a calf newly born.

Gradually his pace quickened until, with purposeful strides, he moved away from the rising sun and followed his shadow as it led him towards the south-west.

3

Lost

IT WAS THE POSTWOMAN who reported it. She had knocked on a door – she needed a signature for a delivery – but there had been no reply. It was early morning and things were very quiet. That was how she had heard the noise from a neighbouring house. A child crying. Not screaming, but a soft pitiful sobbing.

She sighed. There had been a lot of despair and heartbreak behind the doors of Dendowie.

The small community lay at the end of a pretty lane, a mile beyond the boundary of the island's main settlement, Inverbeg. It was out of sight and out of character with that comfortable little town. Some of the old townsfolk muttered that the place was cursed.

Indeed, it was a strange place with its little colony of sad streets and dilapidated houses. But it had not always been like this. These houses had been built with optimism in a time of sudden prosperity. A fish farm had been developed out in the bay. There was a surge of employment attracting people from beyond the island and the houses were built here for them.

For a while these were happy streets. But within a few years the fish farm closed and most of the people moved elsewhere to find new jobs. Gradually empty properties fell into disrepair. Boarded-up houses stood like coffins entombing the good lives that had gone.

Over the years Dendowie began to be inhabited by rootless people. For the most part the townsfolk were wary of these outsiders who came and went, and so they kept their distance.

Normally the postwoman wouldn't have lingered long on such a doorstep. She would have quickly popped the 'To be collected' card through the letterbox and been on her way but the forlorn sound stopped her.

No, she told herself. *I'll come back later and maybe ask about the crying child then*. She put the card back into her pocket.

When she came back nearly an hour later there was still no answer at the door. This time she pushed the card through, doing it quickly just in case some dog was waiting to snap. She looked towards that other house. The street was noisy now and she couldn't hear the child. Perhaps things were alright.

She strained her ears, trying to block out the repeated revving of an engine, the shouted conversations and even the 'pink, pink' of a valiant blackbird's warning. She waited for a gap in the stream of sound and then, in a tiny spell of silence, she again heard the crying.

So the police were told. They brought along Cassie Graham, a social worker, and broke into the house. Of course, it didn't take much breaking into. That was how they found the child. And the corpse.

It was a dingy room. Chilling draughts from cracked panes stirred the tattered remnants of curtains and the air was thick with the smell of mould and rotting wood. Cold light filtering through the dirty window picked out the interior. Bare walls, bare boards, bare room. Except for on the floor, amidst the debris of lives gone wrong, one filthy mattress. There lay the body of a young woman. She lay on her back. Eyes staringly awake in their cold sleep. Mouth half-open in a silent cry. Head pillowed on the dank mat of her tangled hair. Useless arms by her side, but motionless fingers still clawing at the air. And, for her slight form, a shroud of dirty and worn-out clothing.

The child was crouching in a corner whimpering and shivering like an animal caught up in an alien world, eyes wide

with fear and bewilderment. She was wearing old-fashioned clothing beneath a long scarf, wrapped around her like a multi-coloured swaddling band. The scarf matched the dead woman's jumper. On both, the big bold stitches were snagged and broken, the once vibrant rainbow hues soiled and faded.

The child's unblinking eyes darted uncomprehendingly over the figures before her. *Poor lamb*, thought Cassie. Here she was, a wee thing, among the feral cats and dogs that inhabited the derelict houses – and there were bound to be rats in this place.

Cassie approached the little girl slowly and knelt down beside her. She spoke in gentle tones. The child trembled but didn't respond and when Cassie stretched out a hand she withdrew further into her shabby, striped refuge.

'The poor wee mite's in shock,' she whispered. 'We have to be patient.' She drew back a little way and again knelt down on the dirty floor.

Something skittered over her ankles. Cassie gasped as she tried to suppress a cry. She spun round flinging out her hand to fend off the unseen creature. It was just a cat. Her panicked movement startled it, turning the soft furriness into a hissing scratching thing. One claw drew blood on Cassie's hand. Then the animal dashed across the room and out through the open door. Cassie felt more relief than pain. *Better this scratch than a rat's bite.*

Cassie turned to the girl once more, softly repeating soothing words. She patiently tried to comfort and coax her from her den. But the child remained unmoved.

Cautiously she crept forward. At last she put her arms around the child. The little girl remained stiff in her arms. Cassie cradled her like a baby, rocking her to and fro, humming a refrain from an old lullaby. At last the tension drained away and the child flopped like a rag doll.

Her lips began to move and a small voice said something.

'What's that, my lamb?' whispered Cassie, holding her ear close to the child.

Cassie smiled, looked up at the others and mouthed: 'I think she said her name.' She turned back to the little head pressed against her shoulder.

'Hello, Katie,' she whispered.

The young woman had been dead for several hours. Probably died during the night, they said. Enquiries were made but nothing came of it. No-one came forward. Anonymous strangers who might have shared the squat had drifted away. Neighbours couldn't help and the townsfolk knew nothing of the homeless mother and child.

Eventually, lost and unclaimed, the young woman was buried in a nameless grave. 'Someone's Daughter' said the headstone. And the child was taken into care.

They thought perhaps the child was four or five years old but despite all the investigations they learnt no more than her first name. After whispering in Cassie's ear, the girl herself had said no more for many months, her voice then returning falteringly and unsure. She could tell them nothing.

Cassie had very much wanted to help this little girl to find her family but very soon an oppressive despondency began to seep into her. She found herself being overwhelmed by Katie's case and all the other cases around her. Apathetically she would leaf through the piles of papers and reports. Her fragile mind failing to manage as the darkness took hold. Her hands would fall into her lap, her fingers creeping to pick at the torn bit of skin. The cat-scratch had never healed. It was all too much.

And so, one morning, she returned all the papers and walked out. When she got home there, amongst the clutter in the hall, she spied a cardboard box. Cold sweat enveloped her. She had taken everything back. She was sure she had.

She had lain awake all the previous night. The stinging of

the scratch had nagged at her. Then, at first light, she had wildly begun stuffing the piles of official papers into bags and boxes.

Now here was a box that, in her frantic haste, she had overlooked. Cassie couldn't cope with it.

She dragged the box into the garden. After several attempts her trembling hands managed to light a match. At once the papers were ablaze. Cassie watched the flames consume the sad details of sorry lives. She stared at the pretty sparks as they rose up in a purifying smoke and stayed until everything was ashes. Mechanically she touched the scratch on her hand again – the irritation had gone. Then Cassie went indoors, lay down and cried herself to sleep.

4

The Classroom

NOISE, NOISE, NOISE. It was the end of term. An excuse for high spirits? No. In every lesson they found an excuse for rowdiness.

Katie wanted to be, where? Her mind was a shuttered blank. Katie wanted just not to be there. She had long ago given up on babyish daydreaming. She was now training her body to be invisible, to be nothing, and the world would be still and silent. It was best to think of nothing. Imagine a quiet emptiness.

It was hard work being invisible. Katie had to be watchful. Being anonymous was being safe, but she had to balance her actions. Behave well enough and be bright enough so that teachers don't bother you. But take care: don't be too good or you'll get picked on. Trust no-one. Play by the rules set by the adults – and by the kids. She had been hurt by both sides. But she never flinched, never showed how deeply she felt the wounds.

From behind the curtain of her dark hair, Katie gazed out of the window. It was raining. Water hit the glass then trickled down the surface.

I'll become smoother than glass, Katie thought. *So smooth that nothing will stick … And harder than glass so that nothing will break through … And clearer than glass … invisible … untouchable.*

Her eye was caught by a fleck of blue within the grey clouds. Her mind was drawn up towards it. Yes, she would allow an expanse of blue into the emptiness of her mind, maybe some wisps of delicate cloud, perhaps the sound of a gentle wind. But nothing else.

For a moment Katie sensed she had caught the stillness. Then a voice spoke:

'The bell's gone.'

Startled, she looked round. The others had disappeared, even the corridor was empty. Discarded books and papers, pens and pencils were strewn on the tabletops and on the floor. A weary Miss Birkenshaw was slowly gathering things up and putting them in order.

Katie returned her gaze to the sky.

'Hurry now, the Head's waiting for you,' Miss Birkenshaw continued. 'I think you were miles away. Looking forward to your new place?'

Katie said nothing. She got up, carefully straightened her table and chair, and then wandered out into the deserted corridor.

'Hello, Katie. Take a seat,' Mrs Briggs greeted her.

Katie sat on the edge of the chair. Her face was impassive but she clenched her hands tightly to stop them trembling. Her mind was weary and jumpy. As Mrs Briggs spoke Katie couldn't hold on to the words. They only punctuated her thoughts.

'Not been with us long ... Nasty fall ... Been no problems ... Sorry to lose you ... Off to Farinsay ... A new island home.'

Home? That word stabbed her.

Children's homes. Foster homes. Nowhere had been the home she had longed for. She hadn't fitted in. Couldn't fit in, and something had made her not want to. It felt like something she had lost long ago wouldn't let her.

She longed to be rescued and loved. But it never happened. And, after her fall, she knew it never would. Katie's stomach tightened.

It had been her secret exit to her secret den that had caused the accident. At night or, more often, in the cold, grey light of dawn, Katie would step out from her bedroom window on to the sturdy

bough of an old apple tree, climb down and make off to her hiding place in a thicket of bushes that she had found by chance.

She never stayed too long. If they found her missing, they would come looking, and they would surely find her – they always did. That wouldn't matter so much. But if they found her secret place, that would be terrible. Katie didn't know why she went there. Sometimes she felt she was waiting for something, but for what?

It was while she was scrambling back up the tree that the accident happened. Suddenly, with a great crack, the bough broke and Katie tumbled down.

When the blackness began to recede she lay absolutely still and kept her eyes closed. She was waiting for someone. Somebody special was coming for her. People drifted through the shadows in her confused mind. Katie couldn't grasp the images but she could sense the warm feelings that they brought. She had only to wait here, with her eyes tightly closed, and they would come for her.

She lay there for a long time with the heavy morning dew soaking into her clothes, not moving, barely breathing.

Far away Katie heard voices. She opened her eyes. She saw the faces looking down at her – staff arriving for the early shift. All hope drained away: only cold desolation remained. She didn't know what she had wanted to see but this wasn't it. There was something out there that she would never, ever be able to reach, and it would never, ever reach in to rescue her. She lay there abandoned and raised her shield against the world.

Home? Her fingernails were digging into her palms. There was no point in hoping, she told herself. Better to try not to feel anything and steel yourself for the hurt.

Movement caught Katie's eye. Mrs Briggs' background voice had paused and she was holding out her hand.

'Well good-bye, Katie, and good luck on the island of Farinsay.'

'Thank you,' Katie managed to reply. She shook the teacher's hand and was allowed to escape.

In the corridor Katie's legs began to shake and she leaned against a window ledge. Farinsay. A faraway place with faraway people. She wrote the word on the grimy pane. She was afraid to believe it would be different this time. In all her thirteen years, there had been so much change, but things always stayed the same. Tears began to trickle.

She choked back the sobs, wiped her cheek, and with her wet fingers smeared away the name.

The glass had darkened and Katie saw a face look back at her: thin and pale, framed by long dark hair, with large defeated eyes and a tense unsmiling mouth.

'Who are you?' she whispered. 'Where do you come from?'

Katie's lonely heart ached at the deep unanswerable questions.