BARBARA HENDERSON

WILDERNESS WARS

pokey hat



First published in 2018 by Pokey Hat

Pokey Hat is an imprint of Cranachan Publishing Limited

Copyright © Barbara Henderson 2018

www.barbarahenderson.co.uk

The moral right of Barbara Henderson to be identified as the author of this work has been asserted by her in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act, 1988.

All rights reserved.

No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording or any information storage or retrieval system, without the prior permission of the publisher.

ISBN: 978-1-911279-34-1
eISBN: 978-1-911279-35-8

Cover Illustration: Seascape
© shutterstock.com / Vadym Prokhorenko

www.cranachanpublishing.co.uk

@cranachanbooks



cranachan



PRAISE FOR WILDERNESS WARS

Wilderness Wars slow-builds menace from its nail-biting opening to its stunning apocalyptic climax. This is a golden eagle of a book—it grabs you in its talons and won't let go. A thought-provoking and often frightening study of what happens when you mess with Nature and Nature decides to fight back. And how faith, family and friendship can forge the right path.

Olivia Levez

Author of *The Island* and *The Circus*



For my wonderful friend Sandra, wildlife artist
and first reader of this manuscript.



CHAPTER ONE

RAGE

There is a jolt, throwing me forward into my seatbelt.

The car has stopped.

Wading my way back to consciousness through several layers of sleep, I hear Dad's excited voice: 'That's it, that shape in the distance. Do you see it?'

I lean forward. Beside me, Struan rubs his eyes and does the same.

Still in a daze, I take it all in:

The wind, the leaden skies, the churning moody sea. The ferry, loaded high with supplies and building equipment, Dad shaking hands with his new team, the grey pier and the greyer waves…

And, far in the distance, a misty outline.

Skelsay.

Wilderness haven. Building-site. Luxury-retreat-to-be.

And now, home.

'Aha,' exclaims Mum, pointing to a small group of people standing around in high-visibility raincoats on the deck of the ferry. 'There they are!'

Struan stretches and runs his fingers through his ginger mop of hair. 'Who?'

'Dad's workforce and their families. Come on, let's do this, kids!' She pulls her coat around her neck more closely, leans back to unclip Izzy from her car seat, and wriggles out with my baby sister clutched to her hip. Struan and I follow.

'Will Snarl be all right in the car, Mum?' my little brother wants to know.

'Of course he will; he's a hamster. He's been perfectly fine in his cage for all these hours, and a couple more won't bother him.'

We make our way past Dad who is patting a pot-bellied man on the back and laughing.

'Let's get on the boat, and you can have your packed lunch, right? It'll take them a while to load all our containers and to get the cars and diggers on. It'll be a tight squeeze.'

Even while she is speaking, Mum drinks in the view: the wide skies, the windborne bird-shapes in the distance, winging across the waves which come crashing in like clockwork. I can tell she is framing in her mind; she's a natural artist; it's the way her mind works. Watching her makes *me* see the splendour of it, too, and I breathe a

little deeper. With every step across the narrow walkway towards the boat, my excitement grows. We're going. We're finally going.

It's only for a year—maybe two at most if there are problems with the construction. Either way, all my friends are still going to be there when I get back. And it is cool, living on an uninhabited island. Hang on; it's probably not uninhabited anymore, now that all of us are going to be there, is it? Oh, I don't know…

I'm so absorbed by all of these thoughts that, unlike my little brother, I don't even complain when Mum hands me an egg sandwich.

On the ferry deck itself stand five women and seven or eight children. I scan the faces.

Then I scan them *again*.

Don't tell me…

I look around, desperately. No, I haven't missed anybody!

But Dad said there'd be another…

'DAD!' I yell.

An hour later, we are rocked from side to side with the ferry's motion. My father has finally condescended to talk to me, but he is pretty unrepentant.

'Dad, you *promised* me there'd be another girl my age!' I'm quietly sizzling with rage, since I can't exactly shriek in a tiny ferry lounge where a handful of damp

strangers are being polite to one another.

'Look, Em, I didn't think it would matter that much.'

I sulk in silence, sipping tea from a nameless builder's flask. I hate sweet, milky tea, but it's the only drink on offer. It's hot. Better than nothing.

Dad tries again: 'It's not as if I haven't had other things on my mind, you know. It's not all about you, Em!'

I turn my face away.

'Very well. I'll leave you to it,' mutters Dad and disappears up the metal stairs to the deck, leaving me to my thoughts.

You let me down, Dad! Badly.

I freeze my frown and stare into the distance where the Isle of Harris shrinks further away with every minute. The smaller Isle of Taransay glides by. Just then, the ferry gives an enormous jolt as it changes direction and more than half of the sickly, now lukewarm, cup of death lands right in my lap. I roll my eyes and groan. *Wonderful! Can this day get any worse?*

Turns out, it can.

CHAPTER TWO

BIRDS

The door squeaks open and a whole group of new people piles in: the pot-belly guy with the moustache, a small round woman with frizzy hair, a thin boy with glasses and the haircut from hell, another young couple and a baby.

Quickly, I grab my jacket and throw it over my steaming lap. Another man walks in now, wearing corduroy trousers and a scuffed tweed jacket. *Wonder who that is. He doesn't look like an architect. Dad said one of them would visit quite early on, but I don't think…*

'Hey!'

I feel a nudge to my side. The boy with the glasses has sat down beside me and I am forced to really look at him: the mop of blond hair, the baggy jeans and the hole in the sleeve of his home-knit jumper.

Turning away, I pretend to focus on the view, even though I can barely make anything out through the uniform grey of the windowpane.

The truth is: I feel betrayed. Snippets of conversations around the dinner table back in Glasgow echo in my memory:

How do you fancy a wee stint on an island?

Some of the others are bringing their families, Karen. Head Office say they might even take care of schooling to keep the workforce consistent.

Oh, and Em, I'm sure the site manager has a daughter about your age.

What a mug I am, to count on anything Dad says. He didn't even bother to ask or check.

The door flies open again and a band of younger kids —led by Struan, surprise, surprise—explodes into the room. He holds on to the back-rests of the seats on both sides as he makes his way up the small aisle, followed by two girls and another three boys. They could be anything between five and ten.

'I'm Zac, by the way,' says the boy beside me as if he hasn't realised how awkward I'm being.

'Em,' I reply monosyllabically when Struan interrupts, his eyes bright.

'Yeah, right, everybody, this is Em. She's my big sister. She's twelve. Yep, that's about all I can say about her.'

This meets with small-kid giggles.

'Haha! You're so funny,' I answer, but Struan has no sarcasm-radar.

'Honestly, Em, you should come up and eat lunch out

on deck! The waves are mental and Izzy's fallen asleep so Mum's staying by the car with her. She'd never let us, so now's your only chance! It's wicked! Mikey here's just been sick and I've seen three seals already! Come on!'

Struan's group clamber up the steep metal stair again, a boy with a greenish tinge stumbling up at the rear.

Zac rises and looks at me. I'd almost forgotten he was there. 'I'm going to check out those seals. You coming?'

I roll my eyes at him, even though it's Dad I'm angry with. 'Oh, fine then! Hang on.'

My voice sounds as if, somehow, I'm doing him a great favour, but if he thinks I'm a stuck-up cow, he doesn't show it.

I tie my jacket around my waist to hide the spill, pour what's left in the cup into a dried-up plant pot and stretch. On the way up, I have to squeeze past Dad. I don't even want to look at him.

On deck, people stand side by side along the railing, pointing at the looming grey shape in the mist. A rounded, twisted hill, and what looks like trees sheltered beneath it. Rocky, grassy cliffs and the bright glow of a shingle beach just visible around the left corner. Skelsay, 'Isle of Shells'.

The island that will be home to us all.

'There!' shouts Zac beside me, zipping up his green parka.

'What?'

'Look!'

He points. Right enough, a dark head moves up and down in the waves, followed by another a little to the left.

'I've seen seals before,' I lie in a bored voice. I hate myself when I'm like this, but I just can't help it. Zac shrugs and walks further along to the bow to get a closer look. For a few seconds he fumbles in his coat pocket for something. Then he pulls out a minuscule pair of binoculars and looks out to sea.

I sniff to show how little I care about being ignored and sink onto a bench to unwrap my sandwich.

And that's when it happens.

I can't say what, apart from the fact that the air is suddenly filled with shrieks, feathers and, above all, pain.

Struan screams as a gull pecks him hard on the top of his head. I hit out at everything and anything around my head—wings, feet, beaks and, I'm sure of it—Zac—on a couple of occasions.

And suddenly, Dad is there, roaring louder than I'd have ever believed him capable, ripping off his coat and using it to wave the birds away, but still they keep on coming. Three of them swoop towards his head at once and he drops his coat, hitting out with his bare fists instead, but a gash has appeared on his cheek by the time they soar again.

'Down!' I yell, seizing Struan by the scruff of his neck and stumbling towards the door to the stairs. 'Get down

there!' *He's my brother; he's only eight,* is all I can think.

The younger children disappear through one by one while Zac, Dad and I shield the doorway for them as best we can. Feathery wings whip at our faces and one gull's hooked beak pecks relentlessly at my father's leg. He brings his fist down on it and the bird flutters to the floor before retreating, shaking its head.

Zac has lost his balance and staggers backwards towards the low railing on the slippery deck. *NO!* Dad recognises the danger too and both of us lunge forward. We clutch at Zac's parka to stop him sliding overboard while another gull keeps dive-bombing us from above. With an effort, we pull Zac to his feet, but it's hard: the boy thrashes out blindly with his eyes shut tight, his glasses askew. Bundling him towards safety below deck, I yell, wave my hands; try to whack the sky-brutes with my jacket, but as soon as we edge backwards towards the doorway, the attack abates.

The shadow of a huge bird appears and brushes over us again. All we can do is gape at one another, bewildered. The shadow returns, smaller this time, but we still duck. We see it fly past in the distance one more time before it is swallowed up by cloud or waves, I don't know which.

'Whoa!' croaks Zac.

Shivering, I turn back towards the stairs. Mum's voice carries up from the lounge now, no doubt trying to calm Struan down. Along the length of the boat, I catch a

glimpse of our ever-shifting trail on the water, writhing white on the dark expanse of the Atlantic as Harris vanishes from view.

I look again.

Bobbing seal heads, like the two ahead.

Only now it's hundreds. *Hundreds*, with their smooth skin reflecting the ripples in the water, and their black eyes prying. Watching. Waiting.

Ahead in the gathering cloud, the towering shape of Skelsay threatens to swallow us whole.