PRAISE FOR *THE WEATHER WEAVER*:

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‘I would recommend this book to all middle grade readers and anyone who loves myths, legends and all those who look up at the clouds and dream.’ NETGALLEY



THE WEATHER WEAVER

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With interior illustrations by Hannah Blackman-Kurz

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For Leonardo & Isabella:
May you always find the silver lining.
xxx



One

SHETLAND

STELLA hung over the wooden rail and watched the inky waves, far below.

I know you're down there . . .

As if in answer, a sudden swell made the ferry tip and her stomach rolled. She'd never liked being out on the open water, but the nightmare had made it worse. She couldn't remember all of it. Deep, dark water. The feeling of drowning. In the daytime, the details always faded, like mist in sunlight.

Mum always blamed it on Gran – all her tales of sea witches

and selkies, blue men and sea monsters. Stella didn't really believe the stories any more, but deep water still made her uneasy. She couldn't shake the feeling there was something down there, watching.

"We're close now," said Dad, his eyes twinkling. "The edge of the world!"

It did feel like it. They'd been travelling for ages. Always north. Until the air was clear as crystal and the only sound was seabirds.

Dad nudged her. "You excited to see Shetland again?"

"Can't wait," she said.

Ever since they'd moved away, Stella had been longing to come back, but now it was really happening, it felt alarmingly real.

"It'd be better if you were staying too."

Dad put an arm round her shoulder. "We've talked about this."

"Just for like, a few days?"

"You know we can't," said Dad. "That's the whole point of you coming here. Mum and I have got to work."

Work. Always work.

Other people's families went on holiday together. That was the point of holidays.

"It's important, what we're doing," said Dad.

More important than me. Stella narrowed her eyes at Dad, but he just smiled at her.

"I could come with you?" she said. "I could help."

"Don't be daft," said Dad. "You'd be bored out of your mind.

Besides, I don't think they allow children on research vessels."

Stella pulled a face to show what she thought of that.

"Hey, you're the one who's been pestering us to come back here!" said Dad.

It was true, but Stella had always imagined *all* of them coming back, as a family. Not just her, on her own. She *was* excited to see Grandpa again. The bit she wasn't looking forward to was Mum and Dad leaving. Six weeks was a long time.

Dad shook her gently by the shoulder. "Happy thoughts, remember?" he said. "I know you're nervous, but you're going to have a great time."

Stella curled her toes inside her shoes. Maybe she would. Maybe it would be amazing.

"Come on," said Dad. "Name one thing you're looking forward to."

Stella thought about it for a moment. "Hot chocolate," she said.

In a big mug. With cream instead of milk. And loads of shortbread to go with it.

"More than I'd be allowed at home," she added, daring Dad to disagree.

"Sounds like a plan," he said. "With cream? Shortbread to dip?"

Stella nodded. He remembered.

"So, hot chocolate. What else?"

"Seeing puffins again," she said. "Real live puffins."

"*Tammie norries*," Dad reminded her. "Get Grandpa to take

you to the lighthouse. They're nesting, this time of year. You'll be able to get right up close."

It was hard to stay cross with Dad, even when he deserved it. Somehow, he always knew what to say.

Puffins. Right up close!

"I'm looking forward to staying with Grandpa, too," she said.

It would be strange seeing him without Gran. They were always a pair. Salt and pepper. Bread and butter. Gran and Grandpa.

Now it was only Grandpa, but it would still be brilliant to see him. It had been such a long time! Six whole years. The last time she saw him, she was only five.

"Do you think he'll recognise me?" she said.

Dad smiled. "He'll recognise you alright. But I daresay he'll be amazed. His favourite little girl, all grown-up and independent," he said.

Stella's heart glowed with pride. She stood up straighter, turned her face into the wind and let her knees bounce, riding the movement of the boat, like a proper Shetland sailor.

The deck bucked over a wave and she grabbed for the rail again. How did Dad make it look so easy?

"There it is," he said and pointed at the horizon.

Stella squinted at the distant dot and her stomach flipped like a mackerel.Soon she'd have to say goodbye.

The Shetland mainland looked like a little limpet. A small grey hump hunched low in the sea. As the boat drew gradually closer,

the cliffs loomed taller. Seagulls whirled and swooped down the sheer rock face like stunt pilots.

On the skerries, close to the shore, dozens of seals were sunning themselves like fat black sausages. Stella pointed at them in excitement. "Sleeping selkies!"

"I'd forgotten you used to call them that," said Mum, joining them at the rail.

"They've made a welcoming party for you," said Dad. "Remember the selkie story?"

"Of course I do," replied Stella. "I've got the book with me."

"*Shetland Myths and Magic*? No wonder this rucksack's so heavy!" said Mum, hefting it in her hand. "How on earth did you fit it in?"

"I took some stuff out . . ." said Stella.

"What?!" said Mum. "What stuff?"

Stella could practically see the packing lists scrolling through Mum's mind.

"Nothing important," she said. "Just spare socks."

"There wasn't spare anything!" said Mum. "And I already packed a stack of books for you. That one's falling apart!"

Stella felt a sudden twinge of embarrassment. *Shetland Myths and Magic* was very tatty now. And a bit young for her. But it was still her favourite.

"Gran always used to read it to me," she said. "Coming back here, I just felt like . . ."

"It was a good idea," interrupted Dad, firmly. "Grandpa will be pleased."

Mum shook her head and looked doubtfully at Stella's two bags – probably wondering what else she'd taken out.

Dad put a reassuring arm round Mum's shoulder.

"It's not a problem," he murmured into Mum's hair. "Socks can be washed. She's going to be just fine."

Stella gave him a grateful smile.

"Come on, tell us what else you're looking forward to," said Dad.

"The northern lights?" she said.

Dad shook his head. "Not this time of year. Right now, it's the *Simmer Dim* – summer twilight, so it won't get properly dark."

Never dark? thought Stella. *I'll be able to stay up all night!*

"That doesn't mean you get to stay up all night, mind," said Mum.

Mum did that sometimes – knew exactly what she was thinking. Usually when Stella was trying to get away with something.

"It's the holidays," said Dad. "A few late nights won't hurt."

"I was thinking more of your father," said Mum. "I should think he'll want his sleep, even if Stella doesn't."

"You'll be fine with Grandpa, won't you?" said Dad.

It wasn't a real question. It was just to make Mum feel better. She almost told him that, but a glance at Mum's face changed her mind.

"I'll be responsible," she said. "And super helpful. And I'll go

to bed at bedtime. And I'll wash my own socks if I haven't got enough. You don't have to worry. I'll be completely fine."

I will, she thought. *I'll be fine.* Her stomach was doing little somersaults. *Just think of it as an adventure,* she told herself.

Stella breathed in as they slipped through the narrow opening in the harbour walls, as though she could make the boat thinner by sucking her tummy in. The harbour was packed with fishing boats, their lines clinking and clanking.

There was a great whirr and growl of thrusters as the ferry lined up neatly alongside the wall. Two crewmen leapt ashore and looped ropes around the bollards that sprouted on the dockside like massive mushrooms.

Stella peered over the side. Ropes of dark-brown seaweed tangled beneath the surface. She counted five jellyfish.

I do NOT want to fall in there.

A scrap of the nightmare surfaced in her mind: a feeling of being trapped, tangled in seaweed.

Dad picked up her suitcase in one hand and walked down the gangplank, as calmly as if he were taking an afternoon stroll, then headed off along the dock.

Stella glanced back at Mum. Dad had made it look easy, but now it was her turn.

She took a deep breath for courage. Also, in case she fell in.

Don't think that! It's not going to happen.

The gangplank bounced as she walked along it. Three short

steps – with her arms out wide, like a tightrope walker – then she jumped off, onto the concrete, and let the breath out again.

It felt good to have solid ground under her feet.



Two

A STRANGE CATCH

MUM put Stella's rucksack down and stood there, looking up and down the dock. There was no sign of Grandpa, and Dad had gone looking for him.

"Honestly, of all the days for him to be late," she said.

"Maybe he got held up in traffic?" said Stella.

Mum gave a short laugh. "Traffic? The only thing likely to slow you down here is rabbits."

"Oh." Stella looked up the road. Mum was right. She could only see one car. A big, boxy car, caked in mud, parked in the long grass.

It looked as though it had grown there.

"Anyway, Grandpa's picking you up in *Curlew*," said Mum. "His boat," she added, in response to Stella's puzzled look.

"Another boat!" groaned Stella. She wrapped her arms around herself and bounced on her toes.

Maybe Grandpa had forgotten. Maybe he wouldn't come at all? Then Mum and Dad would *have* to take her with them.

"Over here!" called Dad, from the other end of the dock.

She turned to see Dad approaching, Grandpa by his side.

It was strange seeing them together without Gran. Gran always walked in the middle.

Between my two fine men-folk.

Stella pushed the thought away and focused on Grandpa. He was shorter than she remembered. Had he shrunk?

No, I've grown!

Stella always used to greet him by running at top speed. Grandpa would catch her and throw her up in the air. He didn't look strong enough now. She might knock him over.

"Good crossing?" said Mum, as they approached.

Grandpa nodded. "There was a fair breeze," he said. His voice creaked and crackled, like he hadn't used it for a while. He cleared his throat before continuing. "You brought the sun with you. We've not had any bad weather for a week or more." He glanced out to sea and sniffed. Dad always did that too. *Smelling the weather,* he called it.

Mum stepped forward and gave Grandpa a brief hug. "Thank

you so much for having her. I know it's short notice – we're really grateful."

The butterflies in Stella's stomach suddenly felt as big as seagulls.

"It's fine," said Grandpa, patting Mum's shoulder and turning towards Stella. "Be nice to have some company, for a change."

Mum glanced at Stella and raised her eyebrows very slightly, but a horrible shyness had snuck up and glued Stella's mouth shut.

Dad gave her an encouraging nod.

Do something! she thought.

She found herself sticking out her hand.

No! Stupid brain!

Shaking hands was extra polite – for meeting strangers, not family.

Now he's going to think I'm weird.

Grandpa looked at her hand in confusion for a moment, then shook it solemnly.

"It's official then," said Dad. "You've arrived." There was a hint of amusement in his voice.

Stella flashed her eyes at him. It wasn't funny. This was the first time she'd seen Grandpa for ages and now he was going to think she was weird.

"Off we go then," said Grandpa. "*Curlew*'s down the end."

Stella hoiked her rucksack onto her back. It was heavier than she expected. Maybe Mum had a point about the books.

"You alright with that?" said Mum, looking doubtful.

Stella hitched the straps so they didn't cut so hard into her shoulders.

"Fine," she said, and smiled to prove it.

If she was going to spend the whole summer being grown-up and independent, she might as well start now. It might make up for that awkward handshake . . .

Grandpa gave a nod of approval, then clapped a hand on Dad's shoulder. They walked on ahead.

As Stella followed along behind, Mum took the opportunity to give her a hundred and one last-minute instructions.

"The trick is to be prepared," said Mum. "Think ahead. The weather can change in an instant. And don't go swimming. There are strong currents."

"Mum, I know!" said Stella. "You've told me already."

It was already really hard to be excited, not terrified. Mum wasn't helping.

Instead, Stella focused on the boats. They were really pretty, with tall, elegant masts and brightly painted wooden hulls. She wondered which one was Grandpa's.

Dad hopped down into a boat that looked like a floating bathtub, with a small shed in the middle of it. It looked very small and silly between the tall sailing boats on either side. Why couldn't one of those have been *Curlew*?

Stella pictured it being tossed about by the waves and her stomach clenched.

Dad stowed her suitcase in a deep locker under one of the benches, then reached up for her rucksack. Stella shrugged it off and handed it to him.

There was a low burble as Grandpa started the engine. Mum squeezed Stella in a tight hug. "Stay safe," she said. "I love you."

"Love you too," Stella mumbled into her shoulder.

"We all set?" asked Dad.

Stella took his outstretched hand and stepped down into the cockpit. She sat down where Grandpa pointed, on the seat at the back. The wooden slats were knobbly and uncomfortable, and the cockpit smelled of engine oil and fish. She swallowed hard.

Dad leant forward and kissed the top of her head. "Bye then, poppet," he said. Then, in one swift movement, he was up and out of the boat, untying the ropes and throwing them to Grandpa.

It was too fast. She wasn't ready.

Stella stood up.

A gap of oily water was already opening between the boat and the harbour wall.

"Sit down, lass," said Grandpa. "You'll fall in."

She sat down quickly and twisted round to face Mum and Dad. They were both waving. She waved back, hard enough to make the boat wobble.

Grandpa revved the engine and turned them towards the open sea.

"Love you!" called Mum.

"Have fun," called Dad.

Stella didn't shout back. Right at this moment, she didn't feel grown-up or independent. Her throat was clogged with tears.

Mum and Dad blew kisses. Stella snatched them out of the air and held them tight to her chest. Normally it was her and Mum blowing kisses to Dad. This time, it was them staying behind, her leaving.

I'm on my own, she thought, with a shiver of daring. *Well, nearly.*

She cast a furtive glance at Grandpa.

His faded blue cap was pulled low against the sun and his gaze was fixed on the sea ahead.

He hadn't said much yet. Then again, neither had she.

* * *

The crossing wasn't as bad as she'd feared. The sturdy little boat thudded across the water, and for some reason it didn't make her stomach lurch like the roll of the ferry. Stella began to almost enjoy it. The roar of the engine meant she didn't have to think of anything to say to Grandpa, and that was good.

Me and Grandpa. On an adventure.

As they approached the shore on the far side, Grandpa slowed the engine. They definitely weren't there yet – there was no sign of a house, or a jetty.

Ahead of the boat, a tall column of rock speared the sky – that seemed to be where they were heading.

Sure enough, when they were a few metres away, Grandpa killed the engine. Stella's ears rang with the sudden silence, until the sea sounds crept in – the whisper of the wind, the salty whoosh of the waves curling around the base of the rocks.

Grandpa peered up at the towering sea stack and shaded his eyes with his hand.

"What are you looking for?" said Stella.

Grandpa heaved a sigh. "I'd thought to show you the cormorants. Your Dad said you like birds?"

Stella nodded and looked up. There weren't any birds, just a bare rock.

"This place is usually packed with them. I don't understand it," said Grandpa, with a brief scowl. He shook his head in disappointment. "Perhaps the storm petrels . . . We could maybe go out one evening and watch them coming home to roost?"

Stella nodded. "I'd love that. It doesn't matter about the cormorants. I'm sure I'll see lots of other cool stuff while I'm here."

"Ha!" Grandpa's eyes brightened and he stood up and moved to the bow. Stella gripped the seat as the boat wobbled alarmingly. He dragged a large cool box back to the cockpit.

"Here's something you won't have seen before," said Grandpa, a note of triumph in his voice. "Did some fishing on the way here. Take a look at this monster." He lifted the lid.

Stella leant closer to look, but recoiled from the stink. It smelled like fish, but it didn't look like one. It was mostly mouth –

a wide toad-like mouth, bristling with pointy teeth. Its eyes were two small pools of milky jelly and they were too far apart.

"What," she asked, "is that?"

"Supper," replied Grandpa.

Stella looked at its warty skin and swallowed. She hoped Grandpa was joking. There was no way she was eating something that looked like that.

"It doesn't look like a normal fish," she said.

"No. It's a rarity alright," said Grandpa proudly. "I've never caught one on a line before. They're not found near the surface, as a rule."

"But what is it?" said Stella.

"A *masgoom,*" said Grandpa. "An anglerfish. Lives way down deep. Probably never seen the light of day, until now."

He lifted the fish out of the box with one hand. Its brown skin wrinkled into slimy folds between his thick fingers. A long wormy piece of skin dangled from between its eyes. Grandpa lifted it and waggled it about.

"This is its lure, see? Glows in the dark. Looks like a tasty little morsel, but then . . . *Omp!*" He snapped the wide mouth closed.

Stella jerked back and pulled a disgusted face.

Grandpa mirrored her look of revulsion, then smiled. "It's not a pretty sight, I'll grant you. Makes good eating, though."

He put the fish back in the box, closed the lid, and wiped his hands on his trousers.

I wish it had stayed where it belonged, thought Stella. *Down in the dark.*

"Why would it come up?" she asked.

"Don't know," said Grandpa. "Odd, really. Still, lucky for us!"

"Maybe something big was chasing it?" said Stella, with wide eyes.

"Could be." Grandpa nodded.

Stella's mind raced through the possibilities. *A giant squid. A huge shark. A killer whale. Something big and scary enough to make it swim all the way to the surface . . .*

"Wait, I have seen one!" she blurted and yanked her rucksack towards her. She undid the buckle and pulled the book out of the top.

"*Shetland Myths and Magic*," said Grandpa, softly. "You kept it."

Stella flicked through the book, intent on finding the right page. "Here. Look. It's here," she said.

Grandpa patted the seat and she slid round next to him so he could see.

"I always loved the pictures in this book," he said, with a nod of approval. "Must have been painted by a fisherman. They're all so true to life."

Stella had always thought the creatures in it were made-up monsters. The boat suddenly felt very small on the open water. She moved a bit closer to Grandpa.

Grandpa squinted at the book and smiled. "Here, see? Wolf

fish, cut throat eel, fangtooth, viperfish, squid." He pointed each one out. "They all live way down deep – midnight depth. It's usually only deep-sea trawlers that pick them up."

Midnight depth. A shiver crept up Stella's spine.

She turned the page and the sea witch stared up at her.

"That story used to give you nightmares when you were small," said Grandpa.

"Mm." She decided not to tell him that it still did.

"Your Mum was not best pleased, if I recall?"

Stella gave him a conspiratorial smile. "Gran still used to read it though," she said. "We'd just wait until Mum wasn't around."

Grandpa looked away for a moment, blinking.

Was she not meant to talk about Gran?

Worry crawled through Stella's chest. Dad hadn't said not to, but she wasn't sure what was right. It would be hard not to mention Gran at all, especially here. She chewed her lip and looked down at the book.

The edges of the page were a dark tangle of spines and scales, suckers and tentacles. A whirlpool of monsters, fleeing the sea witch as she rose from the depths.

"Why do you really think the *masgoom* was up at the surface?" she said, changing the subject.

"Well, it wasn't escaping a sea witch, if that's what you're thinking," said Grandpa.

Stella shook her head.

"Probably a shift in the currents," said Grandpa. "Or it might have been stirred up by a storm."

Stella looked over the side. They weren't far from shore, but the water was darkest blue, almost black. She tried to imagine how far it was to the bottom, but the thought made her head spin.

"Can we go now?" she said.