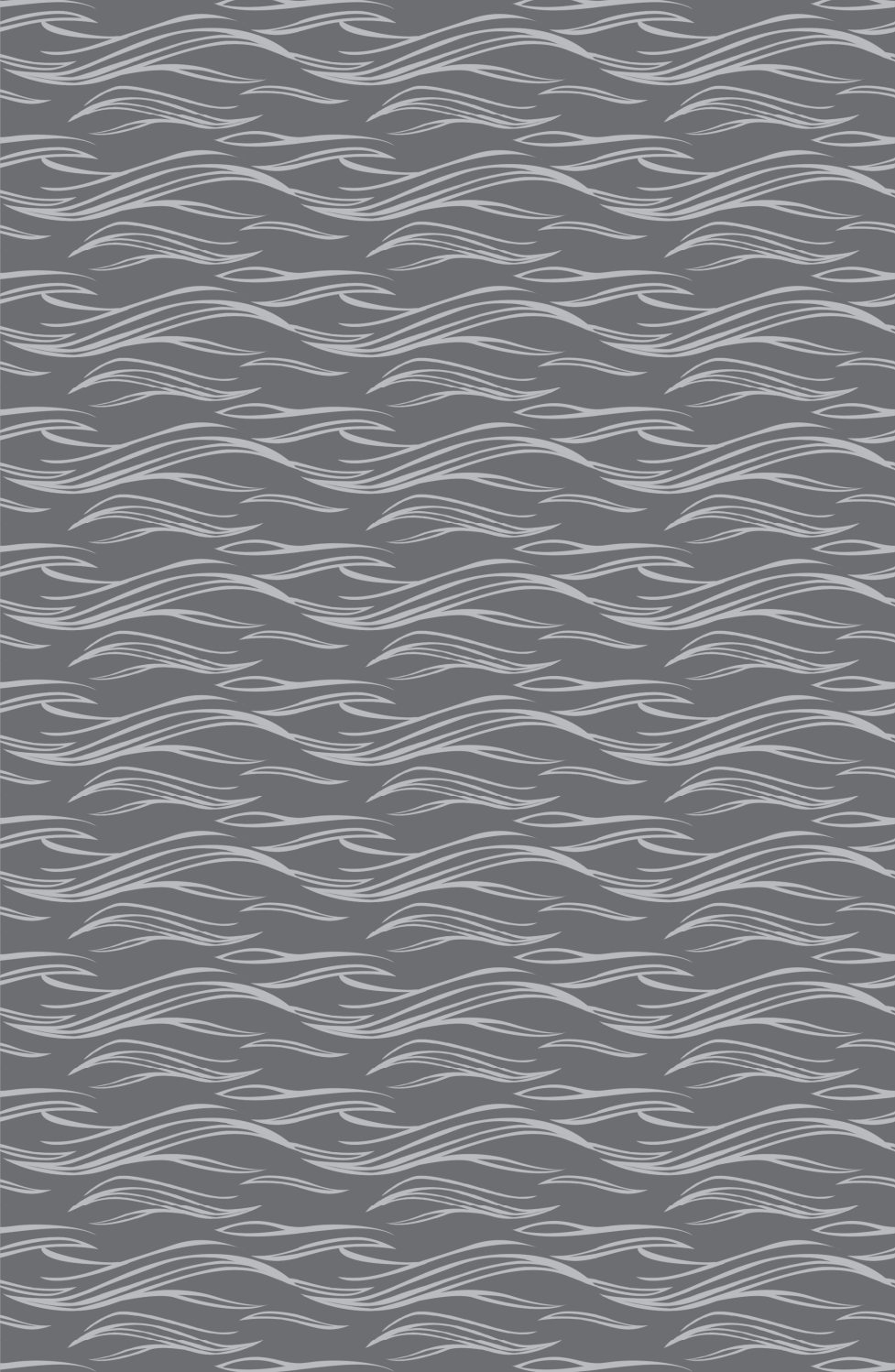


Praise for *On Silver Tides*

'This book is a gift of rare imagination and luminous writing. I haven't read something so original and immersive in a long time. *On Silver Tides* is a classic in the making and I loved every word'
Katya Balen

'*On Silver Tides* is a beautifully constructed book about the love of family and the importance of embracing what we don't understand. I was with Kelda through every triumph and betrayal, every hurt and heartbreak. Bishop's writing transforms Britain into a magical network of rivers, channels and lochs that will fill you with wonder'
Ann Sei Lin

'I loved this book so much. It feels to me like a contemporary classic: thoughtful, literary, with clear and gorgeous prose, yet urgent and relevant. It touches painlessly and obliquely on our own troubled relationship with the environment, but above all it's a great story with vivid, complex and lovable characters. The world-building reminded me of Susanna Clarke in its rich and playful inventiveness'
Alice Winn

‘Spellbinding storytelling brilliance –
I absolutely loved it’
Katharine Orton

‘Sylvia Bishop has a written a whole new world in *On Silver Tides*, with its own myths and history. It’s a watery *Twilight*, or a freshwater version of Helen Dunmore’s Ingo books. The kind of storytelling that stops your breath and weaves knots around your heart. Exquisite, and hard to leave behind’
Nicola Penfold

‘A richly imaginative story with home and heart flowing in its veins. I loved the world-building and the lore Sylvia has created, and the themes of acceptance and environment are more important now than they have ever been’
Dan Smith

‘This is a gorgeous book full of heart, drama and beauty. I loved the way Sylvia Bishop wove threads of old folklore into her vivid and original fantasy Britain. I was completely engrossed in Kelda’s world, from the cosy family canal boat to the terrors and thrills of the open sea. Both a moving tale of family, friendship and growing up, and a thoughtful reflection on learning to live with uncertainty. It is one of those rare books I’ll want to read again and again’
Anna Kemp



On Silver Tides



On Silver Tides

Sylvia Bishop



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For everyone who needed an escape from the 2020 lockdowns; and anyone who needs an escape right now.


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TRENT

1

Kelda's little sister seemed like a perfectly normal baby until her seventh day, when it was time to throw her in the river. Then they found out she couldn't breathe underwater.

It took a moment for everyone to realise. When Kelda's mam emerged with the baby in her arms the family were all waiting at the side of the boat, and they threw petals and cheered, and Uncle Abe struck up something complicated and twirly on his fiddle. But then she handed the baby up to Kelda's father, and the little body was very still and tinged a strange grey-blue, and everyone stopped cheering.

The fiddle carried on, unfurling reels like streamers, because when Uncle Abe was playing he stopped really paying attention to anything else. Somewhere from an islet to their left, a reed warbler answered him.

Normally, Kelda's family were quick to respond to danger. They knew how to fix a boat's engine, and bail out and mend a leak; they could handle nymphs and grindylow without breaking a sweat; they knew the cures for every kind of river worm and parasite. But none of them knew anything about drowning. Kelda's mam just shook and wailed. Kelda's father

leaned low over the little body, peering through his spectacles, and asking Mam questions in a low, urgent voice. Kelda's younger brother Firth nudged Uncle Abe. But none of this made the baby any less limp.

Kelda had seen a drowning man once. She had been left on the boat to practise knots while the others went silverside, as a punishment for cheek, so she was the only one who saw the man get scooped out of the canal. He wasn't limp like the baby; his limbs twitched horribly. One of the women had knelt down in a puddle of skirts, torn off his ridiculous cravat and collar, put her mouth over his, and breathed into him until he revived. She had reminded Kelda of her family – the way she knew just what to do, and set about doing it without any nonsense.

The others missed all this, only arriving in time to see them pull away in a motorcar, which caused great excitement. But Kelda had dreamed for weeks about the poor landman who spent too long silverside.

Mam let out an especially keening, broken wail, and Kelda suddenly understood that no one else was going to do anything. So she ducked her head under her father's and put her mouth over her sister's, as the woman had done to the drowning man. The baby was so tiny, she covered her whole mouth and nose. She breathed out.

She only gave a very slight breath. She had been marvelling at the sheer littleness of her sister all week, and instinct told her that those small lungs could not hold too much air at once. One tiny breath – two – three.

The baby was still.

She tried again – one, two, three.

The baby coughed, and opened her eyes.

That wasn't the end of the danger. They stayed up with her in the galley all night, keeping her close to the warmth of the stove, burning candle after candle as they watched her cough and splutter and squirm and, just as terrifyingly, sleep. But it *was* the moment that saved her life. And it was the moment in which Kelda, until then her own wilful, wild person, was understood by everyone to have become her sister's guardian.

They didn't do the naming that night, of course. No one was really in the mood for it the next night either, but Mam had already made the bitter chowder, and it would go bad if they put it off any longer. The trouble was, the family were old-fashioned, and usually went in for water names – but it seemed cruel to give the little girl a name meaning 'strength of the river' or 'sea goddess' or something. Like they were mocking her.

Mam was the most pious of them, and she wanted to give her a water name regardless. They were still arguing about it while she lit the lanterns strung up along the deck.

'She's *got* to have a water name,' Mam said. 'She's part of the family.'

'It's not right,' said Dad. He hadn't said much else since the baby had spluttered back to life – at least, not in front of the children. He and Mam had held a muttered argument which they thought Kelda and Firth hadn't heard, but the walls of the boat were thin. Besides, Kelda was old enough to know what Dad suspected. In the end, it was Mam's piety that convinced Kelda, and it was probably what mollified Dad too.

Keeping anyone of landman blood on board was absolutely forbidden, and the River would sicken and spoil. If the baby wasn't silverman through and through, Mam would never have her on the boat.

'Well, what do you suggest, Murphy?' snapped Mam. Her voice had the thick edge it got when she was trying not to cry. 'Do you want to brand the poor thing as a freak?'

'There must be something watery that isn't untrue,' said Uncle Abe, ever the peacemaker. He spread his large hands out, palms up, his favourite gesture. 'She'll still live on water, after all. Something about "near the water", or . . .' – he floundered here – ''On – on a boat".'

The unnamed baby whimpered in Kelda's arms. Kelda was inclined to agree. Her sister didn't deserve a half-hearted name, which just said what she *nearly* was. She wasn't a half-thing. Her name should feel complete.

There was no help to be had from Firth, who was leaning over the edge of the boat to watch the lantern-light dance on the black water. Mam and Dad, meanwhile, were strung up tight as fiddle-strings, and neither could bend from their position without snapping. So Uncle Abe turned his spread-out hands and spread-out smile to Kelda. 'Well,' he asked, 'what does the hero of the hour think?'

For a moment there was silence on deck, as Kelda considered this. The only sound from the river was the reed warbler, disturbed on its islet. Kelda loved river islands. They were neither bank nor water: they were a world unto themselves, with reeds and willow trees and nesting birds and secrets of their own.

She reached for the chowder, and took the first spoonful, even though that was supposed to be Mam's job. Nobody protested. She had earned the right.

It was bitter and salty, and she had to work to keep the disgust from her face as she swallowed. Then, with her sister in the crook of her right arm, she emptied a second spoonful into the river, and announced:

'Isla.'



An extract from 'Zoology' in:
The Waterways: Essays on a Hidden World

Amphibians can breathe both on land and in water. While a few have gills, most absorb oxygen directly through their skin from the water. It is difficult for a landman to understand what this feels like. Imagine if your skin could feel how peppermint smells: that's quite close.

It is commonly thought that there are three orders of the class *Amphibia*. The same zoological wisdom tells us there is one living species of the genus *Homo* – *Homo sapiens*, the common or garden human. But there should be another species of *Homo*, or another order of *Amphibia* – or both.

You could call them *Homo aqua*, if you want to think of them as people. Or *Anura sapiens*, if you prefer to think of them as an unusually wise sort of frog. Or you could just use their own word for themselves: silvermen.

2

For the first five years of her life, nobody suggested sending Isla away. When she was still a baby, Firth did once say he wished she *had* drowned, but Kelda had set on him like a wild animal. It had earned her a week's confinement on the boat, but it had shut Firth up.

As far as Kelda was concerned, it wasn't Isla who was the problem. All she did was be born. The problem was everyone else. Sometimes they were still as they should be: Mam humming old songs to herself, Dad's face set in his crinkle-eyed half-smile; family expeditions up tributaries for crayfish or caddis fly eggs or whatever the local up-water delicacy happened to be; evenings spent together round the poplar stove. Those were the good days.

But Dad's suspicion had lodged like a thorn, and he would retreat regularly into baleful silence, and long moody walks. Every now and then, after an especially bad argument, he would disappear for days at a time. And whenever Dad was moody, Mam – who used to give as good as she got – didn't say a word about it, but went through the motions of her day with grim determination, like someone observing a penance.

She was more pious than ever. She kept up an endless parade of River tributes, as though she was atoning for whatever sins she had privately decided were the cause of Isla's strange birth, and she would allow no deviations from strict Lore observance on the boat. A lot of Abe and Dad's more radical ideas were buried under a stiff silence.

As for Firth, finding everyone else had grown sullen or sorry or devoted-to-Isla, he withdrew into books and some private corner of his mind. Only Uncle Abe remained the same.

None of this was Isla's fault. She was easy to please, mostly wanting to potter about Abe's roof garden and eat aster drops and know the names of birds. She had the same flat grey eyes as everyone else, and the same slight sheen to her skin. She learned to swim well, and she diligently memorised her sailing knots and guardian knots, and all the key stanzas of the Lore. When they passed other silverman boats, no one looked twice at her. She was no trouble.

That's what Kelda thought, anyway.

The two of them were out collecting bayroot when Meredith Jupp came along to think otherwise, so they missed the beginning. It was the February of Kelda's sixteenth year, Isla's seventh – her silver year, when she was old enough to be a proper part of their boat. She had been given her first piece of silver that name-day: a pendant in the shape of a knotted eel, just like Kelda's, and Firth's, and all the Pades before them.

That evening the banks were treacherously muddy, and there was a film of mist over the river. The smoke of a landman town rose in the distance, a smudge of darker grey against grey cloud. In black trees, nothing stirred.

Kelda had already spotted the Jupps' boat upriver, the windows warm with lamplight. Which meant that Aeron Jupp would be sure to come by later – he always did. Kelda had drifted from most of her friends once Isla was born, and when their boats crossed it was Firth now who would spend the day with Aeron; but unlike the rest of their crowd, Aeron had doggedly kept visiting Kelda too, sitting with her on the deck for earnest chats once Isla was in bed.

Kelda normally looked forward to this, but tonight, she was nervous. They had heard word a few months back that little Fossy Jupp had got mer-sick and died, and their boats hadn't crossed paths since. Kelda always found it hard to know what to say when the River took someone. Fossy had been younger than Isla.

She told herself that this was why she felt flustered at the thought of seeing Aeron. It was half-true.

'Ooh,' said Isla, 'the Jupps' boat, Kelda, look!'

'Sure is. That bayroot looks *good*.'

Isla looked at her slyly. 'Uncle Abe says you and Aeron—'

'Uncle Abe had you believing there are sharks in rivers for a whole day once, remember? Come on – see the patch I mean, over there?'

Isla was not interested in the bayroot, but she was *very* interested in defending her theory about sharks. The diversion was successful. But as they picked their way along the bank, Kelda found herself glancing back at the bright little boat, checking for a figure in the mist.

Stupid. Silverside would clear her mind.

They were just far enough inland for the water to be fresh,

but she squatted down on the bank to test first, for any hint of the brackish water where river met sea. She had to lean a long way down – it had been a dry winter, and the rivers were low.

No salty sting of pain: the water was fresh. 'Ready?' she said to Isla.

Isla wrinkled her nose, which was how she always felt about water in winter, and which more-or-less meant yes. So Kelda leaned forwards. Then she dropped from the bank, and slipped straight down through the current.

Her skin woke up; her grey eyes blinked, narrowed their pupils, adjusted; and the world became shades of silver, and silent. Basket in hands, she floated just underneath the shimmering bayroot, and began to gather it in.

Thirty seconds later she was shooting back up into the air again, because Isla hadn't followed.

'*Isla*,' she said. It's hard to look stern when you are just a head bobbing about above water, but Kelda had had plenty of practice. 'What are you doing?'

'There's a duck!' Isla explained, pointing. She was not wrong. There was indeed a duck. There often are ducks, when you live on rivers. Kelda couldn't quite match her excitement.

'It's duck*weed* we're after, little miss. Come on.'

'I think it wants to be friends.'

Kelda didn't comment on this either way. Maybe it did, maybe it didn't. It was hard to tell, on account of it being a duck.

'We can make friends later,' was all she said. 'Silverside. *Now*. Mam needs this by dinnertime.'

So Isla reluctantly followed, but as soon as she had to go

up for air, she stayed up. Kelda could see her feet paddling, and next to her, the little blobby shadow of the duck with its flappy feet working furiously. Sighing was not an option, since Kelda wasn't breathing through her mouth right now, so she rolled her eyes instead. But she left Isla to it. There wasn't much bayroot anyway, as the current was only just slow enough; it had been a surprise to spot any here at all. They didn't really need both of them to gather it.

She stayed silverside hunting for more wispy roots long after she had enough. She liked the feeling of the river rippling past her, on its way to somewhere else. Her parents were having a moody day, and the current was the opposite of all the stiff, buried sadness on the boat. But when Isla's legs disappeared, doubtless back on to the bank, she let herself grow light, and drift back topside.

Sure enough, her sister was squatting in the mud. There was algae knotted in her curly hair, and she was cradling the duck. It was hard to be certain, but Kelda thought it might be slightly stupider than the average duck.

'I'm going to keep him,' Isla announced.

Stubbornness was a family trait. 'No,' said Kelda.

'Yes! I promised him.'

'You'll have to unpromise,' said Kelda. 'Mam will never allow it. Look at all this!' – she brandished the basket enticingly. 'Dinner's going to be good.' And actually, the weed *did* look especially good – it was glossy, and a rich, deep green. But Isla was not so easily distracted.

'You can't unpromise a promise,' she protested. 'It wouldn't be a promise if you could just unpromise it.'

Since Mam was going to ban the duck anyway, and a bitter dusk was falling, Kelda decided not to waste any time debating the nature of promises and their applicability, or not, to ducks. Let Mam do the parenting this time. Kelda wanted to get by the stove, and warm her fingers seasoning the stew. 'Mam won't allow it,' she said, setting off for the boat. 'And I don't want you to be disappointed. But do what you like.'

'I'll explain to Mam,' said Isla, trotting behind, 'about the promise.' And the duck gakkered quietly to itself, pleased with this idea.

The galley was warm, and thick with the smell of sage and thyme and lemon balm from the pans that were already simmering on the stove, and the hot mint tea in a pot on the table.

The duck stretched out its neck, with an enthusiastic *quawwk?* But Kelda was thoroughly distracted by the woman sitting at the table, drinking the tea: Meredith Jupp.

She must have come while they were silverside. Kelda was instantly on edge. Talking to Meredith felt like diving headfirst into saltwater, boiling your blood. She was permanently smug, even if you were only talking about the weather – as though she somehow possessed better, more *correct* weather than you did.

Worryingly, she seemed smugger than usual today. And Mam, normally so pale beneath her dark hair, was looking flushed – almost, Kelda thought, *angry*.

'Mam!' Isla announced, ignoring Meredith. 'I've got a duck!'

Quakkerquakker, qwrrrrk, agreed the duck. But Mam

ignored the duck, every bit as firmly as Isla ignored Meredith. It was a family trick.

'Girls,' she said, 'go to your room for a minute please.'

Isla did not protest: this was the best possible reception the duck could have received. It was Meredith who demurred. 'Surely she should stay, Lyn,' she murmured, glancing at Isla – who was too busy with the duck to notice. 'Then we can straighten this out right away.'

Mam drew herself up very straight. 'Meredith,' she said, quietly, 'I will *not* ask my child to be subject to—'

'Come now, Lyn,' said Meredith, 'You're getting emotional. Take a breath.' And she smiled, a chummy smile that instantly raised Kelda's temperature and made her fists curl. Suddenly the galley's warmth was too much. She put down the basket.

'Mam,' she said, 'what's going on?'

'Nothing, Kelda. Take Isla to your room.'

The duck chose this moment to flee his loving captor's arms and waddle under the table, quickly followed by a cooing Isla, so Kelda could not have obeyed this instruction even if she had wanted to. Meredith moved her knees out from Isla's path, rather ostentatiously.

'I've just come about some little rumours, sweetheart,' she said to Kelda. 'I'm sure it's nothing. My Aeron and your Firth were talking, and Firth made some rather strange claims, and I just wanted to *check*.' She swung her knees back as Isla and duck re-emerged, and added plaintively, 'As a *friend*. I didn't think it would cause so much upset.'

Mam fixed on a not-upset smile, but her eyes were furious. 'Well, you've checked. I'm afraid I need to get back to the

stove. Will your boat be moving on tomorrow? Let me give you some aster cake – I remember your Aeron's sweet tooth . . .'

You had to hand it to Mam: she was good under pressure. Kelda could never have been that polite. All she could think of was finding Firth and repeating the pummelling episode. True, Aeron was a friend – and yes, Abe liked to joke that he was courting Kelda, and there might be some truth in it. But *no one* could be trusted with Isla's secret. And here was proof – Aeron had already blabbered everything to Meredith.

'Thank you, Lyn, but I really wouldn't be comfortable taking food from this boat until I can be sure that . . . well . . . you understand, I'm sure. Perhaps Isla could just go silverside with me for a few minutes?'

At the sound of her own name, Isla finally clocked the conversation happening above her. 'But I've just been!' she protested. 'It's yucky tonight.'

The tension in the room tightened. No normal silverman would describe the water as *yucky*, even if they happened to be six years old.

'Lyn Pade,' said Meredith, 'I am sorry to insist, but if I don't see Isla silverside tonight, I will have to take this to . . .'

'Really,' cut in Mam, 'there is no need' – but just then Dad opened the door from the deck. Sometimes his walks worked off his mood, and this seemed to be one of those times; he smiled at them all from the doorway now. The smile faltered when it alighted on the duck, and positively wilted at the sight of Meredith.

'Murphy,' said Meredith, without preamble, 'my Aeron says your daughter is a landman. Is that true?'

Isla's eyes widened, and she looked at Dad. Dad paused in the doorway for a moment, all trace of the smile gone, a grim figure against the mist.

Then he shut the door. He crossed the galley, and sat down. He poured himself a tea from the waiting pot, and took a sip.

'No,' he said.

'I see,' said Meredith. 'Perhaps you might have some suggestion as to what your son could have mentioned, that would have misled my Aeron?'

'I have no idea, Meredith,' said Dad. And he gave her one of his thickest silences, and took another sip of tea.

'You realise, of course, the trouble you would bring on all of us if you were covering anything up. The health of the River . . .'

'Of course. *If* I was.' Dad fixed Meredith with an unwavering look over the top of his spectacles, the kind that always told Kelda she was about to be confined to the boat for at least a week. 'I think if the River's going to suffer over anything, it would probably be your husband's night-fishing. Don't you?'

He said this calmly, but it was an explosive thing to claim. Diving for fish at night was forbidden. It was supposed to make the moon angry, but it was pretty obvious to Kelda that it was just a way to stop anybody using the cover of darkness to break the other fishing rule – don't take more fish than you can eat fresh. It stopped overfishing; the moon had nothing to do with it. But silvermen were riddled with superstition.

'I wonder,' Dad went on, 'if you've got through all the

pickled fish yet. That must really be coming in handy, while we're all struggling with the low water.'

All the smugness had drained out of Meredith in one great rush. She said nothing, only staring at Dad. Kelda was astonished. Pickling fish! It would be humiliating. And a serious contravention of the Lore. But it was plain from Meredith's face that it was true.

Dad drained the rest of his tea in one gulp, then stood up. 'I am not the only one who knows,' he said. 'I promise you there are enough of us to pass our testimony at Equinox. Now,' – and he crossed the galley as he spoke, and opened the door – 'get off my boat.'

There was a long silence, apart from the gentle sound of Uncle Abe's feet on the roof overhead as he pottered about his garden, and some gakkering from the duck. Twice, Meredith seemed to be about to speak, but changed her mind.

Then she stood, and went to the door. When she reached Dad, she looked up at him with haughty dignity. 'You should be ashamed,' she said.

Dad didn't waver. 'I will never be ashamed of Isla. Goodnight, Meredith.'

He shut the door behind her, but it didn't block out the sound of her footsteps crossing the deck, and no one spoke until they heard the soft *splosh* of her slipping off over the side. Kelda realised her palms were aching from her dug-in fingernails. She tried to uncoil.

'Why did she want me to dive?' said Isla, clutching the duck. 'Does she know I dive different? I kept it secret. Did I do something wrong?'

'No,' said Kelda. 'Mam, where's Firth?'

Mam and Dad ignored both their daughters. Dad sat, took off his glasses, and rested his forehead in his hands. 'We can't hide it forever, Lyn,' he said. It felt like he was just picking up where they had left off, in an old, tired conversation.

Mam's face tightened, the saintly-patient face she wore on bad days. 'She hasn't seen,' she said, with terrible quiet reasonableness. 'She can't testify.'

'You are being deliberately obtuse—'

'Don't take that tone, Murphy, I'm not a child. Can we talk about something else, please?'

'No, we salting can't.'

Mum's patient face grew extra-patient, and she pressed her hands together, and looked away from him.

'Lyn.' Dad massaged his head where his frown crinkled it. 'Listen. Secrecy is not an option, not for a whole lifetime. And if the River gets any worse . . . Better to be safe, send—'

'*No*.'

'It's for her own safety.'

'Is it?' said Mam, and now she really *was* angry. '*Is it,* Murphy?'

Isla looked from Mam to Dad, trying to make sense of it all, uncertain tears brimming. Kelda bent down to kiss her. No one would be sending Isla *anywhere*.

'Where's Firth?' she repeated. It was all she could think about. She didn't even look round when Uncle Abe came in with a cheery hello, and started making appreciative noises at the good smells coming from the stove. She just said it a third time, louder: 'Where's Firth?'

'Kelda,' said Mam, 'please don't *aggravate* things—'

But before Kelda had any chance to really start aggravating things in earnest, there was a howl from behind them, so chilling that it commanded everyone's attention at once – even Kelda's – even the duck's.

Uncle Abe had dropped Kelda's basket on the floor, spilling the bayroot – or rather, Kelda realised, it was spilling *itself*, uncoiling and inching across the wood, already at least five times the size it had been. And there, in the basket, in the clutches of a coil of weed, was the top half of Uncle Abe's finger.

Everyone sprang up at once, grabbing anything silver they could lay their hands on. The weed had grown hideously while they were all distracted: they would have a job to hold it back, even with all of them.

'Firth!' hollered Mam. 'Get the nets and get in here! Kelda's picked Wicked Jenny!'