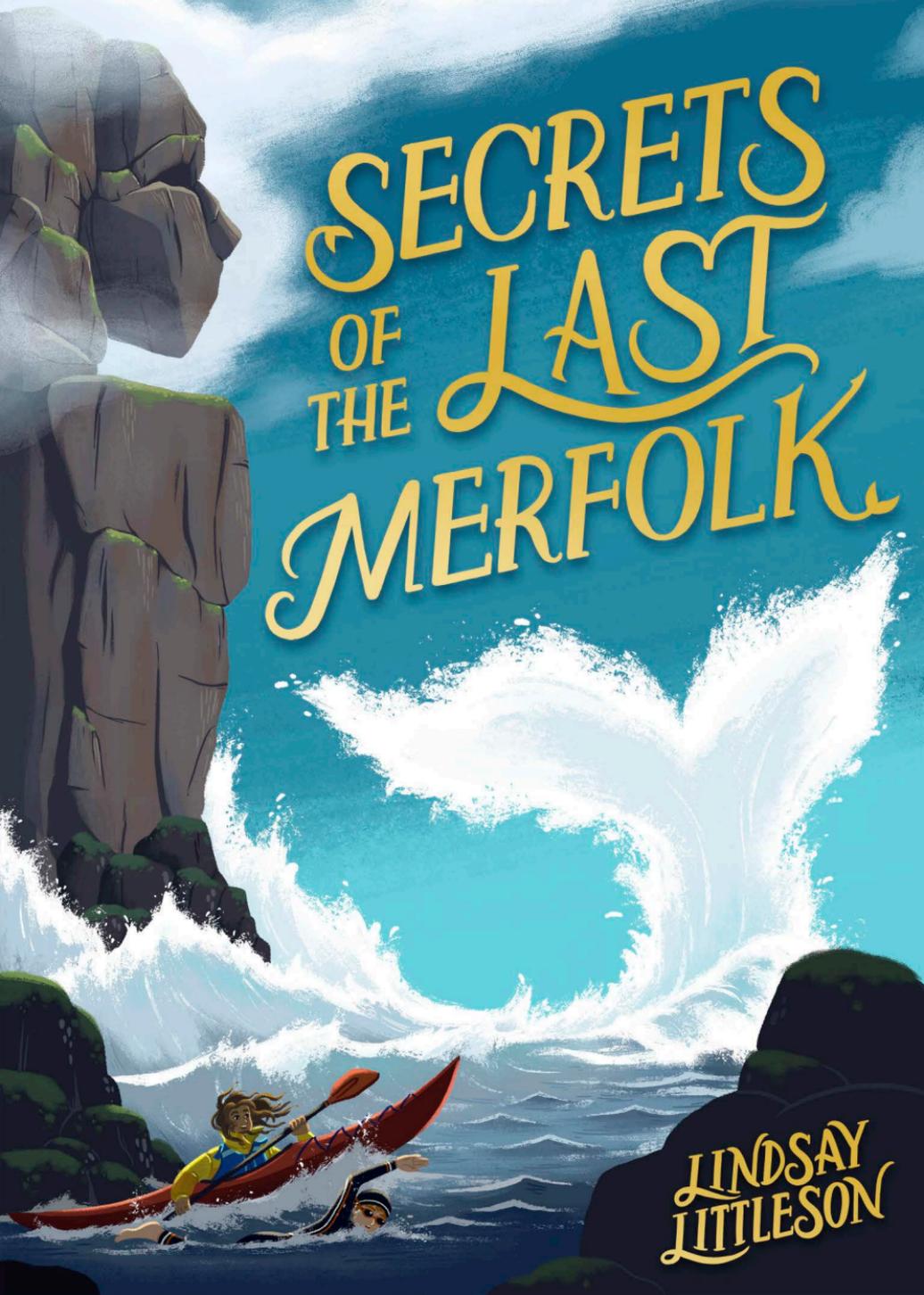


FROM THE AUTHOR OF GUARDIANS OF THE WILD UNICORNS

# SECRETS OF THE LAST MERFOLK



LINDSAY  
LITTLESON

SECRETS  
OF  
THE LAST  
MERFOLK

To my brother Andrew, with love  
Thank you for all the advice and videos  
about diving in the Firth of Clyde!

Kelpies is an imprint of Floris Books  
First published in 2021 by Floris Books.  
© 2021 Lindsay Littleson

Lindsay Littleson has asserted her right under the  
Copyright, Designs and Patent Act 1988 to be  
identified as the Author of this Work

All rights reserved. No part of this book may  
be reproduced without the prior permission of  
Floris Books, Edinburgh  
[www.florisbooks.co.uk](http://www.florisbooks.co.uk)



Also available as an eBook

British Library CIP data available  
ISBN 978-178250-760-4  
Printed by TBC



Floris Books supports sustainable forest management  
by printing this book on materials made from wood that  
comes from responsible sources and reclaimed material



SECRETS  
OF THE LAST  
MERFOLK

LINDSAY  
LITTLESON





# PROLOGUE

The rocky islet was silvered by moonlight and the sea glimmered, deceptively calm. All the others were asleep. Even Mol, their leader, was snoring, his sleeping face still stern.

As Muir drew closer her courage began to skitter away, a fish fleeing a shark.

Behind her, Traigh whispered, his voice a hiss in the darkness. “Keep going.”

Muir’s brother had been reluctant at first to get involved in her plan, but she persuaded him, and so here they were, drawing ever closer to the highest rock, staring at a small, tide-carved cleft near the base, trying to summon the courage to steal from Mol.

This natural shelf held their leader’s only possessions: a thousand-year-old shell box and an ancient flint arrowhead. But Mol rarely looked at his treasures, and that fact comforted Muir a little. They should be able to return the box before he noticed its absence.

As her fingers curled around it, Mol stirred and murmured in his sleep. She froze.

“Grab it. Quick.” There was a hint of glee in Traigh’s voice, as if stealing from Mol pleased him, however dire

the consequences of being caught. And Muir could see why, she really could, because she felt the same. Every new moon a council meeting was held on the high rock, and every time she and Traigh were excluded. The elders said they were too young. Well, it was time for change. And while making that change was terrifying, it was also exciting.

As she clutched the shell box her fingers tingled, like a jellyfish sting without the pain.

“Got it.”

Traigh stared at the box, his eyes round as moons, as if he couldn't quite believe she had gone through with it. He pointed across the expanse of dark water, to where lights twinkled on the far shore. “What if nobody answers our message? We will have risked everything for nothing.”

Muir spoke as firmly as she could. “We have got to do something. You know that better than anyone. You have seen Her.”

“You are right.” Her brother gave a deep, sad sigh. “Let us go now. We need to be back before the others wake.”

Silently, they slid off the rocks and into the sea. As they dived underwater, their long tails flicked.

# 1

## FINN

When Dad swore, Finn stopped playing *Alien Wars* and glanced up from his phone. Snow was splattering against the car's windscreen. The wipers were flailing, struggling to keep the glass clear. Outside, the road was turning white. The sea cliffs had vanished, obscured by cloud and falling snow. Their route looked dangerous, but there was one upside to the worsening weather: at least Lizzy would stop wittering on about the views. Her constant commentary had been doing Finn's head in.

“Oh look, a sign for Culzean Castle! We'll need to visit! Look, it's Ailsa Craig, can you see it in the distance, Tom? That big lumpy rock! It's covered with bird poop because it's a sanctuary for seabirds like gannets and puffins.”

Luckily Finn's dad had kept his eyes on the road, or they'd have gone over the edge by now.

Lizzy had tried to encourage both back-seat passengers to admire the scenery too, but Ava had been fast asleep by the time they reached Ayr, her head lolling against the car door, and Finn would have refused to cooperate even if Lizzy had pointed out something genuinely interesting, like an alien spaceship or a herd of sodding unicorns. There was no way he was playing Spot the Poo-splattered Rock.

Now Lizzy turned around, twisting her neck like a barn owl. She gave him one of her bright, fake smiles. “Nearly there! The satnav says Dunlyre is just over a mile away.”

Finn dipped his head and stared at his phone but, as always, Lizzy failed to take the hint.

“Do you know this is my first trip to this area since I visited the Heads of Ayr Farm Park as a child, way, way back a zillion years ago?” She laughed, a high-pitched squawk as fake as her smile. “It rained the whole time and I was frozen to the bone!”

Finn pointed at the window. “The weather’s looking bad right now. Maybe we should head home.”

Lizzy laughed again and Finn felt his muscles tense.

*Stop laughing. I’m not joking.*

“Anyone would think you’re not keen to spend Christmas with me and your dad!”

Finn gave her a look – a look he hoped told her everything she needed to know.

*I love spending time with my dad. But you're the last person in the world I want around at Christmas, or New Year, or birthdays, or any other days, special or otherwise. I want you to get lost. You've wrecked everything.*

Lizzy's smile slipped, but her voice stayed upbeat. "There's no point us going back home when we're nearly there, you silly cookie!"

She faced the front again but kept chattering. Finn grimaced. Lizzy never stopped talking. She was worse than his gran's budgie, who, Finn remembered, had been eaten by her neighbour's cat. Next time they visited Edinburgh Zoo, Lizzy might venture too close to the tiger enclosure... One shove and his problems would be over.

"We're going to have a fabulous time in a beautiful cosy cottage!" she trilled. "Imagine toasting marshmallows in front of a roaring log fire. It's going to be perfect."

Finn opened his mouth to remind her that he was twelve, not four, but caught his father's warning glance in the car mirror. He flushed, remembering the scene last month. Dad's voice had been firm, and his eyes sad. "Finn, I love you to bits. But I'm really disappointed in your behaviour. You need to stop being rude to Lizzy. It's upsetting her very much. She's so keen that you two get on. And she's my wife, Finn. I'll not have her insulted in her own home."

Finn had been about to answer back, ask if Dad meant he'd leave Lizzy behind on outings from now on, or if he meant that Finn could say what he liked about her when they were out of 'her own home'... but he'd thought better of saying anything at all. He'd even apologised to Lizzy, afraid she'd persuade Dad to leave him out of their weekend access visits.

But resentment was burning a hole in him. He couldn't share his feelings with anyone, not even Mum, who didn't seem as devastated by the break-up as he'd imagined she would be. In fact, she was infuriatingly upbeat.

*Your dad and I haven't been getting on for ages. Splitting up was for the best. But just because we're getting divorced, it doesn't change the way we both feel about our kids. We love you both so much. Come on, Finn, sweetheart, don't look so sad. Look on the bright side, you'll have two bedrooms instead of one!*

His mum didn't have a clue. Having two bedrooms was a total pain. The stuff he needed always seemed to be in the wrong place.

And there was no point moaning to his wee sister. While Ava had been distraught last summer when Dad left, she'd been easily bribed. She loved all the weekend trips to McDonald's, the zoo and the cinema. She adored her bedroom in Dad's flat, which Lizzy had made hideously girly, with fairy lights and a fluffy pink carpet.

And Ava, who doted on Disney films, thought Lizzy's unruly red hair 'looked like Princess Merida's'. In this war, Ava was a collaborator, not an ally. But it wasn't her fault. She'd been fooled by Lizzy and had no idea she was more Maleficent than Merida.

Finn was jolted from his thoughts when Lizzy shrieked, "We're here! There it is! Turn right!" Even satnav woman couldn't get a word in edgeways when Lizzy was around.

Dad veered to the right and the car slithered down a narrow road, the Wayfarer dinghy on its trailer swinging behind, past large houses, all with massive windows overlooking the Firth of Clyde. Though right now, nothing was visible through the fog. They'd planned to go sailing, him and his dad, but it wasn't looking likely in this weather. Then as Finn gazed at the filmy mist, it tore like thin gauze and for a moment he had a view.

*Someone's in the water.*

Finn drew nearer the glass. There was no way anybody would be daft enough to go swimming in weather like this. Maybe they were in trouble, he worried, rubbing at the window, trying to remove the condensation. But they didn't seem to be. Strong, bare arms were cutting through the water. Someone, confident and competent as an Olympic-medal-winning swimmer, was striking out to sea. And they were swimming without a wetsuit, oblivious to the cold, the fog and the falling snow.

*It's impossible. Nobody would be crazy enough to go out so far in water that cold.*

He rubbed again at the window, but the fog had drifted across the sea. When Lizzy yelled again, Finn jumped so hard he nearly dropped his phone. "This is it! The big stone one!"

Dad swerved into the drive, and as soon as he pulled on the handbrake, Lizzy undid her seatbelt and leapt out.

"We've arrived!" she yelled, banging the roof so loudly that Ava stirred in her sleep.

Finn dropped his phone into his rucksack and tugged at the zipper. "You don't say," he muttered.

Dad whipped round, annoyance creasing his forehead. "Behave yourself. None of your lip this week, do you hear me? Ava, wake up, sweetheart! We're at our holiday cottage."

Finn pulled a face. If Dad was dumb enough to wake Ava mid-nap, he could deal with the whining. He'd clearly forgotten Mum's mantra: 'let sleeping Ava lie'.

He stepped out of the car, dragging his rucksack behind him, and shivered in the intense cold. A biting sea wind nipped at his nose, and as he looked up at the house, flecks of snow spat in his face.

It wasn't his idea of a cottage. He'd imagined something like the Three Bears' house: small, quaint and thatched, with roses around the door, although maybe not in winter. This place looked brand new: blonde sandstone, pale

wood and enormous windows. His trainers sank into the snow and he felt cold wetness seeping into his socks. The expensive boots his dad had bought for him would be useful after all, and he was relieved he hadn't left them behind.

Lizzy was fiddling with a key, and as he reached the porch, the front door swung open. She beamed at him, weirdly determined to keep up a friendly facade in the face of seething hatred.

“Cross your fingers that the gorgeous photos on the rental website weren't faked!”

Finn stalked past her, flashing a false smile in case Dad was watching from the car, and found himself in a large, warm, open space. There was a big living area with a massive coffee table and two huge leather sofas at one end, and a kitchen with a range cooker and a long dining table at the other. The front and back walls were almost entirely made of glass, the sea view at the front obscured by falling snow. An oak staircase led upstairs. Finn hoped the upper floor had proper rooms so he could have his own space, or he'd insist on sleeping in the car.

He was about to check when Lizzy tugged at his arm. He stiffened and she jerked her hand away, as if she'd been electrocuted.

“Sorry. I just got so excited about the tree. Isn't it beautiful?”

He could hardly miss the massive Christmas tree standing by the fireplace, festooned with fairy lights and sparkling glass baubles, but he wasn't about to agree with Lizzy. The tree was great, he could admit that, to himself at least. If Mum was here, and Lizzy a stranger living on the other side of the planet, he'd have felt excited about skipping two days of school and spending time with his parents in this stunning, festive house by the sea. But Mum was in Lanzarote with her 'friend' John, and that was a whole different level of worry.

He rubbed his forehead, as if that would make his problems vanish, and glanced round the room.

"There's no telly." A terrible thought occurred to him. "Has this place got Wi-Fi? Because if it doesn't, we can't stay."

Lizzy laughed. "Of course, it's got Wi-Fi. Tom's worse than you. He can't stand to be out of touch. And of course, he'll need to be in regular communication this week. This harbour development means a lot to him."

Finn dropped his rucksack on to a fluffy sheepskin rug so large it must have been made from an entire flock.

"What harbour development?"

He wasn't speaking to Lizzy. His words were directed at his father, who'd come in, hair wet, nose red, carrying Ava over his shoulder. Finn's sister was wailing, drumming her fists on Dad's back, though not nearly as hard as he deserved.

“Dad, what development? Are you working this week?  
Is this not a holiday at all?”

His father’s expression told him everything. He’d been  
lied to, again.