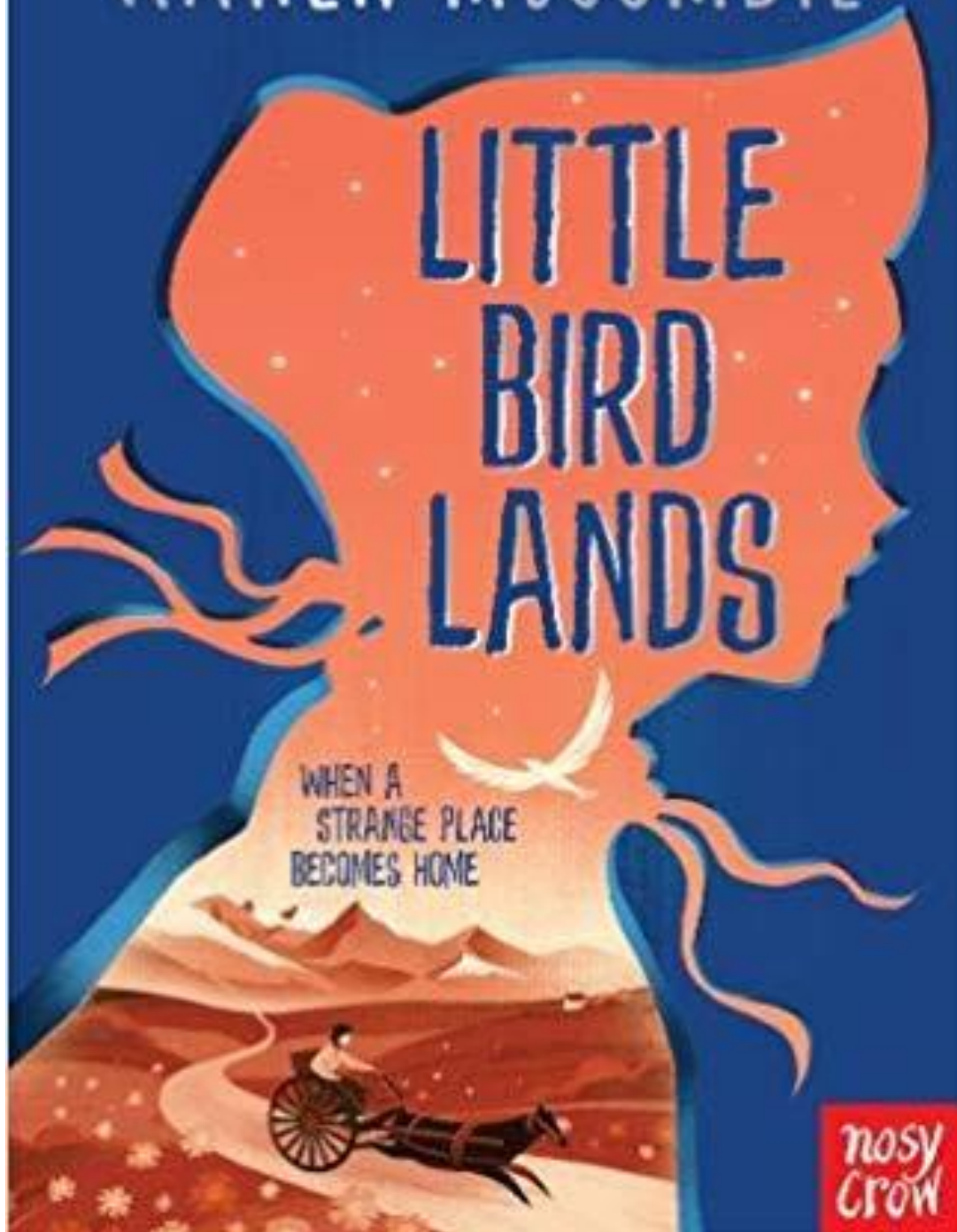


KAREN McCOMBIE

LITTLE  
BIRD  
LANDS

WHEN A  
STRANGE PLACE  
BECOMES HOME



**nosy  
crow**

# Little Bird Lands

Karen McCombie

## New York, 1864

### Chapter 1

Fifteen years ago, my mother looked down upon me – cradled and broken in her arms – and made a wish. She wished that I might live, since it seemed likely that I would not. But I was a determined little thing; determined *not* to die. And thanks to my mother's words of strength and courage, whispered in her beloved Scots Gaelic language, I thrived.

Hopeful and heartened, Mother dared to make a *second* wish.

She wished that I might live a long and peaceful life, never leaving the small Scottish island that was home to our family. That wish did *not* come true ... and I for one am glad of it. For if I had stayed on Tornish all my days, I would never have known an evening like tonight!

How my heart soared to see the glow of the distant lights of New York City as we left Mrs Drummond's farmhouse – where we lodge – and rollicked along dark country lanes till the cartwheels met the smoothness of the new-built roads.

And the very racket of the city! Songs of street musicians, roars of the peddlers, the hiss of the hundreds of gaslights illuminating grand carriages, gawping families and drunken carousers stumbling from saloons...

Then to be lost in a cloud of words I did not understand as we stood in the queue for the world-famous Barnum's American Museum. Folk about us chattered excitedly in a tumult of different tongues, of the wonders they'd see inside I supposed. Scientific exhibits, curiosities from around the globe, strange creatures never before seen.

And of course, if I had stayed in Tornish, I would never, *never* have found myself face-to-face with a monster...

“What is it, Little Bird?” Marthy-Jane asks me, teetering on tiptoe on the wooden viewing platform, her eyes just level with the glass window. Her small hand clutches my weaker one, nails as fine as pale pink seashells pinching my skin.

She gazes up at me for an answer. When I am not helping her grandmother around the farmyard, or with the laundry she takes in for the rich of the city, I help Marthy-Jane Drummond practise her letters and numbers. But right now I am too taken aback to act like a teacher and give her an explanation; I can do nothing but shake my head stupidly. For when the great, white, waxy bulk of a monster floats in front of you – one of its glossy, dark, apple-sized eyes locked on to yours – it is difficult to be certain of anything, to find a tongue in your head even.

“It is a bel... a bel... something whale,” I hear Lachlan saying as he tries to read the sign by the huge tank, while folk jostle alongside us for a good spot to see the creature. Mind you, my eleven-year-old brother would struggle to read the brass plaque even if he were quite alone in front of it. He can speak and chatter as quickly as the mynah bird in Mrs Drummond’s parlour, but when it comes to reading and writing he stumbles as if words were rocks and ditches along a path, set on tripping him up. His teacher despairs of him.

“A *beluga* whale.” Father’s more certain voice comes from behind us. “It was captured off the coast of Labrador, with great difficulty, it says, and transported here.”

As I listen to Father read from the plaque, I suddenly think not of the animal’s capture or the means used to bring it to New York, but of how on earth they got the thing up the stairs of this building, all the way to the second floor!

“Dear me; Labrador is up in Canada. This beast has come from the great seas there only to be stuck in a tank,” I hear Mrs Drummond add with a sorrowful sigh. “Poor thing...” I suppose our landlady will still be gripping Father’s arm. She is not in the best of spirits, and I think regrets letting herself be persuaded to come to the yearly Evacuation Day celebrations. She is used to the quiet life of her farm, she always says, though it gets less quiet every day. There is the building of Central Park nearby – where Father works as a stonemason – and the never-ending clunk, hammer and boom of explosions as the new roads and buildings march closer to small farms like Mrs Drummond’s, ready to swallow them up whole.

“It’s worse than that *last* one we looked at,” I hear our landlady grumble, in a voice that makes her own Scottish heritage quite clear, though *she* last saw the shores of her homeland more than half-a-century ago, while my own little family have been here but two years.

Mrs Drummond’s grumbling is on account of her not caring for the ‘Happy Family’ exhibit we just saw on the fifth floor. It is a large menagerie which Mr P. T. Barnum himself had seen on a trip to Scotland – of all places! – and shipped back to New York to add to his own renowned collections. Inside the large cage are cats and rats, rabbits and foxes, animals that would normally hunt and set upon each other in the wild, but here live contentedly together. “Unnatural...” Mrs Drummond said sourly of it.

And now, as I stand eye-to-eye with this colossus, I suddenly feel as agitated as Mrs Drummond. How trapped must the whale feel? Does it look at all our faces pressed to the glass and wish itself far away, in the pure, measureless ocean it was plucked from?

“Can we go, please?” I say, turning quickly to Father and Mrs Drummond, not wishing to gaze upon the whale in its watery prison a moment longer.

“Of, course,” says Father, reaching out to lift Marthy-Jane into his arms, the way he’d so easily lift my brother and myself – both our older sisters too – once upon a time. “What would you like to see next?”

“The waxworks, please, Father!” says Lachlan, without hesitation. “There’s one of the famous Siamese twins Eng and Chang – they are joined at the stomach! And there is also one of General Tom Thumb who is a grown man but stands *smaller* than Marthy-Jane! Oh, and after the waxworks we *have* to see the living bearded lady, and—”

“Robert, did you say there was a lecture hall in here, where we may sit awhile?” Mrs Drummond asks Father. She dotes on him, as she does all of us. I think we are as good as family to her, what with her only son – Marthy-Jane’s father – away at war in the Union Army, and Marthy-Jane’s mother dead from tuberculosis, that cruel disease that snuffed out my own mother’s life.

“Yes, and a talk might be starting there soon,” says Father, jostling a path for us through the crowds and ignoring Lachlan’s disappointed sigh.

A few minutes later we find ourselves outside the lecture hall, waiting for the doors to be opened and the talk to commence. Lachlan stands a little away from us, leaning at the window and taking in the hustle and bustle below while he eats the sugared-coconut

shavings that he bought from a Chinaman street vendor on the way here. My brother is very taken with Manhattan, the very beating heart of New York, and is determined to be a bellboy in a grand hotel one day. Either that or soldier in the army, if the war is still raging when he is of an age to serve. (*Please* let the war be over before that time!)

“Listen to this,” says Father, reading from a pamphlet he has been handed. “We are about to see Miss Annie Swan, who stands at *eight feet* in height, and is to discuss giants throughout history! Ah, she is from Nova Scotia, in Canada, Mrs Drummond. Wasn’t that where your own family first settled when they came to this continent?”

“Indeed, yes!” says Mrs Drummond, and she and Father begin to talk, as they so often do, about where the Scots emigrated to and from over the years.

“Little Bird?” says Marthy-Jane, tugging at my hand.

I am always gladdened to hear her call me by my old pet name; no one has had any use for it since we left Tornish. To everyone but Marthy-Jane I am plain Bridie these days.

Mostly, being Bridie is just fine, but sometimes I do miss the Little Bird I once was.

“What is it, *m’ eudail?*” I ask, calling her ‘my treasure’ in the Gaelic words I grew up with. She is only a little thing and is perhaps weary of waiting. She’ll surely be wanting to hear one of my stories to pass the time ... stories of my childhood on the island, then of my family’s life in the grand Scottish city of Glasgow, and of our stomach-churning journey across the sea to New York. She thrills to the tales of the mischief-making my old friend Will and I got up to back on Tornish, and of the ways I drove my bossy sisters Ishbel and Effie to distraction. She’s fond too of hearing about the well-to-do visitors who came to the island and became our friends: Samuel the portrait painter and Caroline, the young lady who arrived shrouded in black mourning clothes. Most of all she loves hearing about Patch, the wee terrier we sadly had to leave behind in Scotland.

I only tell her the cheerful stories, of course. I wouldn’t want to scare her with *all* of the truth, of the fear we sometimes lived with and the risky decisions my family had to make...

“Can I tell you something?” she says in reply, looking upon me with such a serious expression for one so young.

“Of course,” I say, crouching down to show that I am listening keenly to whatever troubles her.

“You are very small and pretty, like a doll,” she whispers, her blue eyes wide, her free hand stroking my long black hair, as if I am a beloved cat she cares for.

“Well, that is very kind of you to say,” I reply, smiling at her peculiar compliment.

I *am* small and slight for my age; even Lachlan, four years my junior, is taller than me. But I have never thought of myself as delicate and doll-like.

“And I think that you should *not* be here,” Marthy-Jane whispers again, this time more urgently.

“Why do you think that?” I ask, trying not to laugh at her earnestness, yet puzzling at her meaning.

“What if Mr Barnum should appear? What if he sees your ... differences?” As she speaks, Marthy-Jane nods at the hand that I have placed on her arm, then glances down in the direction of my polished leather boots. “What if he wants to steal you away for his museum?”

Ah, now I understand. She talks of the weakness in my left hand and the twisting of my left foot.

“Oh, I’m not enough of an oddity for this museum, I’m sure!” I tell my little friend.

While I may be certain that the mighty Mr Barnum would not consider me suitable enough to be one of his human exhibits – to be goggled at and mimicked and pitied – I am suddenly very glad for the soft, laced boot that hides my foot, and the sleeves of the too-large second-hand winter jacket that half covers my withered hand.

I am also aware of an uncomfortable restlessness stirring inside me, and I suddenly wish that we could all leave this curious place and—

“Bridie! Father!” Lachlan calls to us, his voice loud so that he can be heard above some shouting – some merry-making? – going on outside in the street. “There is smoke coming from the hotel over the way, and people are running from the entrance!”

“What’s that, Lachlan?” asks Father, striding swiftly towards my brother before I can get up off my knees.

“FIRE! FIRE!!”

Along with every person waiting outside the lecture hall, my head turns in the direction of the stairs from where this cry has come. For the merest moment, I think it must be someone who, like Lachlan, has spied the disturbance in the building nearby.

But then I see the haze of smoke at the end of the long, tiled corridor, and a strange chemical stench catches, *scratches* at my throat.

“FIRE! RUN! FIRE!!” call out more voices, and I am on my feet, gripping tight to Marthy-Jane as I look to Father.

“Go!” he calls out to me as he ushers Lachlan and Mrs Drummond ahead of him.

And now Marthy-Jane and I are in a crush of folk, streaming away from the smoke to what we must all hope is another exit in this fog of panic. And sure enough, here is the wide, sweeping stairwell, and we are quickly upon it, a thunder of feet and a shudder of panting breaths as we hurry in a human stream downwards.

There is a soft and steady surge of bodies pushing around us, and I cannot make out where Father, Lachlan and Mrs Drummond are, but still I hold tight to Marthy-Jane *and* remain calm – until a series of screams ring out. The surge becomes an unsettling, unsteady jostle, and I turn my head sharply, expecting to spy flames licking at the walls of the floor above.

Instead I am instantly aware of the cause of the screaming; a desperately worried woman is in our midst. A desperately worried woman who towers above us, her great height alarming these already frightened people.

The crush on the stairs; it suddenly becomes the forceful surge of a wave that might well tip us forward. And in that sliver of a panicked second, I clearly picture three beloved faces. In my mind’s eye I see the smile of my childhood friend Will, who probably thinks I am settled still in Glasgow, since that was where my family were bound when we fled Tornish. I see my older sisters Ishbel and Effie, who chose *not* to come with Father, Lachlan and I to America.

Will, Ishbel and Effie.

All three lost from me; I have heard nothing from them and have no idea what has become of them.

And for their part, they have no idea that *I* might be about to die here in New York, in this strange museum, in a stampede, in a fire, by the side of Miss Annie Swan, the tallest woman in the world.

But wait... I have come close to death and danger since that very first day I was born – am I not as determined as I have ever been to survive?

“Hold tight. We’ll be fine!” I assure Marthy-Jane as I picture my mother just outside the now-wide open doors to the street, waving a corner of her knitted shawl like a flag, guiding us onward...