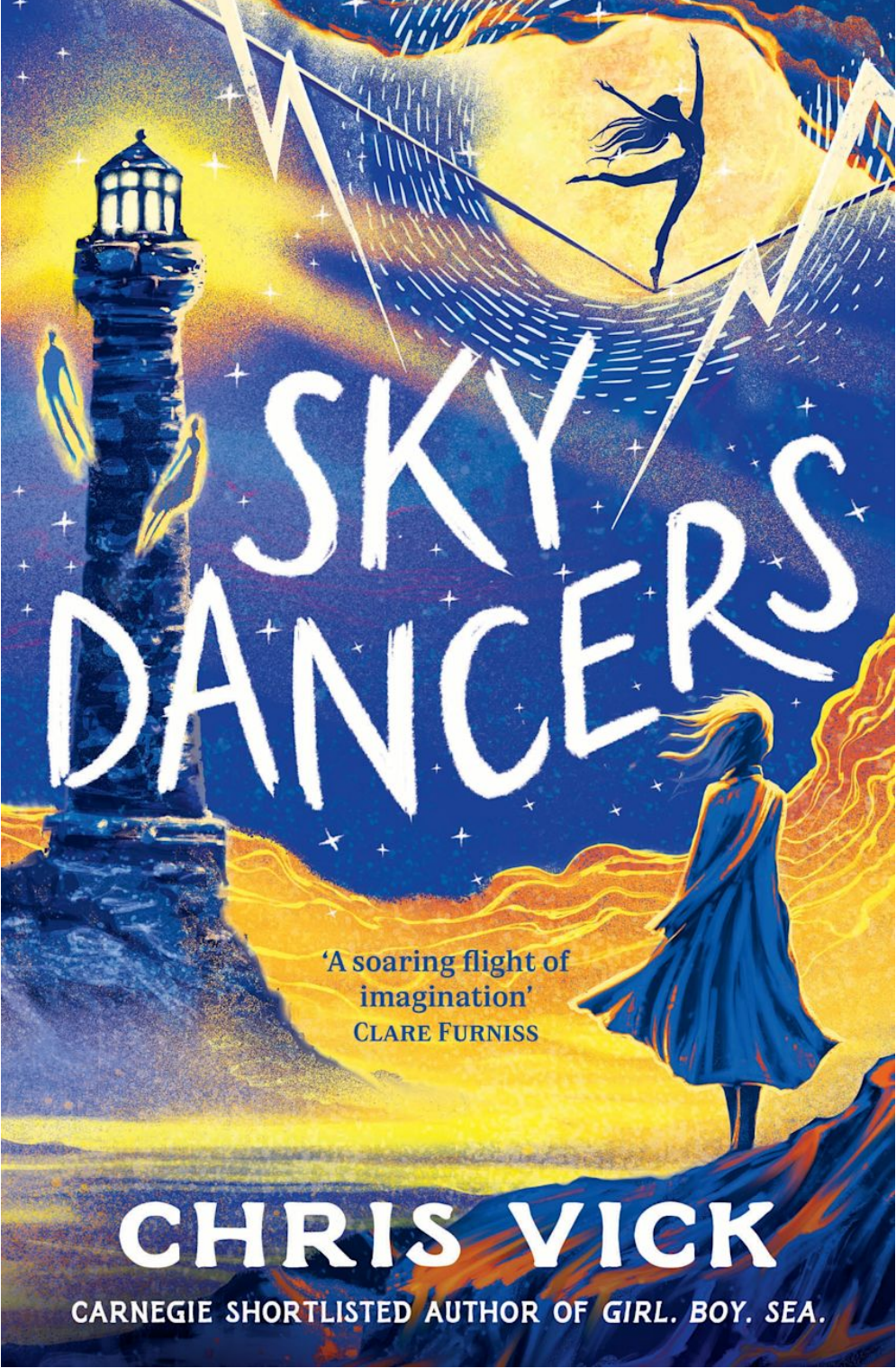




SKY DANCERS

'A soaring flight of
imagination'
CLARE FURNISS

CHRIS VICK

CARNEGIE SHORTLISTED AUTHOR OF *GIRL. BOY. SEA.*

‘A breathtaking tale of wild storms, dark secrets and dangerous enchantment. *Sky Dancers* is pure magic, a soaring flight of imagination and wonder. This is electrifying storytelling. Chris Vick is a captivating writer of rare skill and power’

Clare Furniss, author of *The Things We Leave Behind*

SKY DANCERS



ALSO BY CHRIS VICK

Girl. Boy. Sea.

The Last Whale

Shadow Creatures

SKY DANCERS



CHRIS VICK

ZEPHYR

An imprint of Bloomsbury Children's Books

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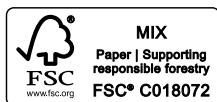
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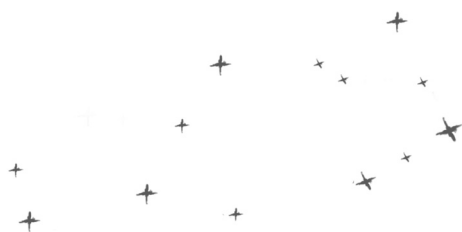
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For Fiona, a mage



Where two worlds meet

Dedication engraved on a bench, Cape Cornwall.
(Now gone.)





Three Generations Ago

There's a storm coming.

Sailors bring yachts and trawlers to harbour and roll sails tight. Captain Peters secures bow lines to dock cleats. Soon the wind will moan, boats clatter and strain and, Captain Peters says, 'make a racket like mad men in chains'.

Farmers close gates and fill barns with bleating sheep.

In the backyards of the terraces, mothers take washing off lines and close window shutters tight.

Houses creak, bracing against the wind.

Boulders roll and grumble at the shore.

Ice rain falls in sheets.

And waves thump and smash over the harbour wall. A metre. Two. Salt-heavy spray batters roofs and bashes St Pirran's granite walls.

The stream that trickles through the village all summer, now rushes and bursts, flowing into the streets against quickly sand-bagged doors.

Gulls are kites on strings that break; their wings flail and fail.



Drinkers outside the Harbour Inn and youngsters out from winter school, stand ooh- and ah-ing, playing chicken with waves that break over the harbour wall, washing the cobbled streets. Others (those who know the girl who lives in the lighthouse) usher folk up hills and indoors. They have seen storms. But not like this. Not like this.

‘Get in! Get away. Now!’

‘The storm hasn’t even hit yet!’ says Jack, swim-walking in a sea of daytime whiskies.

‘I want to see it,’ says five-year-old Milly, crossing her arms.

Others remember: The ‘never-let-go’ hand of the sea that drowns fishers, sailors. Children. The vicar, shaking his fist uselessly at the sea. Before his mind addled, before he was taken away, screaming tales of a witch, flying in the night clouds.

The first stabs of lightning scar the sky.

‘It’s them!’ Miss Tavistock shouts, hardly heard above the rage, prodding and herding folk with her umbrella. ‘That heathen girl at the lighthouse. Her and her father. I told you!’

‘It’s just a storm!’ Jack slurs.

‘It’s her!’

‘It’s her!’



Outside the lamp room, at the top of the lighthouse that sits on a finger of rock poking into the sea, stands a fourteen-year-old girl. Her dress is soaked through. Other than her long tawny hair (dancing as though she’s underwater), she could be a statue. Her hollow, shadow-filled eyes do not blink as she looks into the heaving ocean; waters lit by flashes of brilliant lightning. Though she does not ‘see’ this. Not exactly. Doesn’t feel the bite of wind, nor needles of sleet, nor hear the thunder.

That girl is me.

The lamp lights. My shadow is thrown across the sea. A captain, lost in the waves, might see my silhouette; a black pupil in the eye of the fire-orange lamp.

Many villagers – younger families – believe they are safe and sound. Mothers and fathers mutter comforting words: ‘There’s nothing but wind and rain, beyond the walls. Nothing to be scared of.’

Until...

Lightning strikes the church roof, tearing it open. And I scream. A cry heard in every street, house, room, heart and mind.

The beam of light switches in an instant. Now, a dark light, swathing the sea. Shadow-made matter.

Electricity cuts dead. Fires flicker, dampen and die.

It's too early, but night falls. Villagers pray. And dead voices sing.

'Come back, come back.'

'Just the wind.'

'All is lost.'

'Easy to imagine. It's nothing. Shall I read you a story? I can light candles.'

'The gates to watery hell are open.'

'Mother? Father?'

'It's so dark.'

'I'm so cold.'



By morning, drunk Jack, young Milly and Miss Tavistock are dead. Jack, slipping and swept from street to sea. Milly's house flooded. Miss Tavistock crushed by a falling tree.



Father and I leave the lighthouse at dawn, after the storm, carrying hastily packed bags. Most of what we own, including his books, is left behind.

'I made it happen, Father.'

'No, Isla, you did not.'

I drop my bags and thump my chest. 'I never mean *any* of it. I can't help *any* of it.'

He drops his bags too, and hugs me tight.

'I know, my girl. I am sorry.'

'It's me, Father, but at the same time it's *not*. I *don't* make the storms happen. I don't control them... yet... I *am* the storm,' I cry, and my whole body judders.

Father pulls away, grips my shoulders, to keep me from falling.

'It ends now. It stays here, with Caleb, with Ari. It cannot follow, I promise. I've locked it in the stone beneath the lighthouse, into the rock itself.'

'Is it... dead?' I ask, my voice high with hope.

'It cannot die.' He looks away, struggling to find the right words. 'It... it sleeps. Locked deep by my magic. The villagers will be safe, I promise. As long as you are gone. Now we *must* go.'



At the top of the lighthouse, a boy and a girl stand, watching me and Father leave.

The girl, Ari, appears made of light in this form (when she does not need to pass for human). When she speaks, it's in a voice of breeze and whispers. She has blonde, bobbed hair, wears a sailor's striped smock and linen culottes. The boy – Caleb – appears made of grey stone and wears a miner's denim trousers,

collarless shirt and an overcoat. Ari floats, her feet not quite touching the ground. Caleb's feet are solid on the stone, weighed by the chains around his ankles.

'What now?' says Caleb.

'Peace and quiet,' Ari sighs.

'For how long?' Caleb growls.

Ari laughs. 'For ever, fool!'

'No more storms, then. Not unnatural ones, leastways. The dead can sleep. And now he's gone, I'll be rid of these!' Caleb nods at the chains.

'I can make the chains unseen,' Ari says. 'But you must wear them. We are not free. We must do his bidding, and that is that! To keep all quiet and safe. To keep the humans away. The storm has exhausted me. Now I will sleep.'

'It'll be dull without Isla.'

'Well, that is for the best. I feel for her. Even free of its power, she is cursed.'

'Oh, how?'

'Elements will gather to her, whether she wills it or not. She is a vessel. She draws nature's powers. I'm not sure even he knows that.'

'Never to be free or safe?'

'Not exactly... as long as she flees, she may escape the worst of it.'

'I'm not sure I und—'

'You think that what lies here and she are separate. They are not. Yet, if she is far away... it, the power that

made this storm, has no vessel... and... listen, don't worry your thick head. You know little, understand less.'

'I know enough, Wisp!' Caleb spits. 'Quiet and safe? What when another comes?'

'There are no others.'

'How can you know *that*?'

'Isla is unique.'

'How can you *know*?'

Ari turns, smiles and vanishes.

Caleb spits again. 'You're not as clever as all that, Wisp.'

Part One

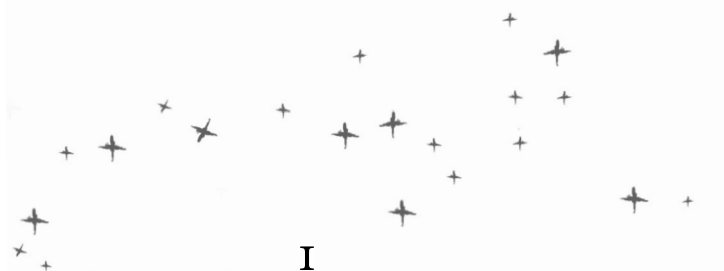
Now

SHIPPING FORECAST

Light breezes, starting calm. Occasional showers.

South-west, four, chance of gales later.





A cottage on the edge of the moor, with sturdy walls and deep-set windows. An attic window; a skylight, with the blind drawn back to let the stars shine in.

Here is a teenage boy, Lorcan Penrose, lying in his bed. On the table beside him is his old laptop and a lamp. Under the skylight is a telescope and against the wall a chair and a desk. Apart from this, the room is unfurnished. On the sloping walls white paint has been daubed over patches of mould.

Tomorrow is the first day of autumn term. Lorcan is finding sleep harder than usual. He likes to listen to the sound of other voices to get to sleep. Without them the night fills with his thoughts.

Sometimes he listens to a science podcast, sometimes whatever's on the radio, if he really can't sleep. It's later, when he nods off during the shipping forecast, after midnight.

Lorcan pins the high- and low-pressure numbers the forecaster gives to a map in his mind, building a picture of the weather fronts; wind speed and direction, whether pressure is building or declining and at what rate. From that, he works out what tomorrow's weather will be, here, where he and his mum live, on Jaggard Peninsular in the far south-west of Cornwall.

The forecasts in Lorcan's head are often more accurate than the BBC's.

If, after this, he still can't sleep, there's a compilation of forecasts on YouTube. Six hours of it. He fades the computer screen to black and listens to the voice in the ether...

Squalls arrive unexpected.

Low 990, 150 miles west of Lantern Rock.

Low off Fastnet, expected 986 by 0600 tomorrow losing identity.

Then, there is a forecast for all shipping areas around the British Isles.

Fairisle.

Dogger.

Viking.

Forties.

Cromarty.



On the first day of term, Miss Tregenza gives Year Nine a project: creative narrative non-fiction. *Connecting place and people: A mystery in time*. Two thousand words, plus five hundred on process and research.

The class is to team up in pairs. Lorcan wants to work by himself. But that isn't an option.

'Proper research, *not* just the internet, please,' Miss Tregenza says. 'You're going to talk with *real* people, visit *actual* places and make a record of it. Lorcan, you'll be working with Hilly Seaborne... when she arrives.' Miss Tregenza points to the empty desk, second row, next to Lorcan's, by the window.

It had been Danny's in Year Eight, but over summer, he and his family moved to London. Everyone, Lorcan notices, sits in the same places. He wants to work alone. Everyone will be happy with that.

But he is curious about Hilly Seaborne. The tongue-wagging has started already. He knows her family has moved into one of the new flats in the old Count House, which had been a ruin, and has now been done up by the council. There's a shortage of homes, because of renting and sales to second homers. So, some aren't too happy about these Seabornes, because there are locals – proper locals, not blow-ins – who need houses.

Hilly doesn't show up on the first day of term, or next day, which is odd, as her sister, two years below, started on time. The desk is empty all the way up to English on Friday, last period, when they are to

present ideas for the project. If she doesn't turn up, Lorcan is definitely by himself because the class is an odd number. He's pleased with this, though worried about the word 'creative'.

Everyone talks about their project and it's getting close to Lorcan's turn. His mouth is open when the head, Mrs Vallant, ushers in a girl, super quick, closing the door fast behind her, as if she's thrown in a grenade after taking the pin out.

'Hi! You must be Hilly,' Miss Tregenza says with total enthusiasm.

And here she is. Hilly Seaborne. Taller than any girl in the class. Faded jeans, too-big hoody, (with the hood up, covering a cap but with a mess of tawny hair escaping). Hard blue eyes, largely covered by a fringe. Miss Tregenza asks her to take the hood down and cap off.

'We've got a desk for you over—'

Before she finishes, Hilly Seaborne sits next to Lorcan, arms folded, looking dead ahead, seeing nothing.

'Welcome,' Miss Tregenza says. And waits: '...I said, *welcome*.'

'Thanks. Hi.'

Everyone stares.

Lorcan is close enough to see the red rim of Hilly Seaborne's eyelids. She's been crying. Miss Tregenza moves on quickly, blathering about the project and suggesting the class talk in pairs, perhaps so Lorcan

and Hilly can get to know each other as well as think about the project.

Miss Tregenza waits till the chatter is at full volume, before asking, 'Are you okay, Hilly?'

'Yes.'

'Sure?'

'Yes!' Hilly says, staring hard till Miss Tregenza smiles and retreats.

'Hi,' Lorcan says.

'Hi,' she replies. Not friendly, not unfriendly; a nothing way of speaking.

He explains the project. Hilly sniffs, and other than wiping her eyes a couple of times, keeps her arms folded, sunk in the chair. Lorcan guesses if she could vanish into her hoody, she would.

'Are you okay?' he asks, repeating Miss Tregenza's question.

'Yeah. Are you?'

'Um, yeah... Well?'

'Well, what?'

'The project.'

'You decide.'

'We have to decide together.'

Silence. A shrug.

'I've got a few ideas. We've got all sorts around here. Old mines, wrecks, smugglers, stone circles. We could do one that the others aren't?'

Silence.

‘What are you interested in?’ Lorcan tries.

‘What are *you* interested in?’

It’s like speaking to a mirror. Or having an echo.

‘Some of the history, maybe?’

‘Let’s do the history, then.’

‘There’s no mystery, though. Only facts.’

‘Well, what *facts* are you interested in?’ Hilly says, rolling her eyes.

No one ever asks him this kind of question.

‘Um... I like astronomy. This part of Cornwall is one of the best places to see stars because there’s no light pollution. It’s a DSP, a Dark Sky Preserve. The others won’t be doing that.’

Shrug. ‘Let’s do that, then.’

‘It’s more science than mystery, and not exactly local. Nearest star is four light years away.’

‘How far is that?’

He writes it down: *23,515,000,000,000 miles.*

‘Really? That is far. I didn’t know,’ she says, raising an eyebrow. ‘How all the stars got there, *that’s* a mystery.’

‘The Big Bang, I...’ Lorcan stops before he even starts. He knows how this conversation goes. If he can ever get anyone to talk about it.

What’s the Big Bang?

There was no bang, only expansion from a point of infinite density.

How did everything come from nothing?

No one knows.

What was there before the Big Bang?

There was no 'before'.

What filled space before the stars?

There was no 'space'.

Hilly doesn't ask these questions, she says, 'I've looked at this. At the beginning there was no time, space, stars, anything. An infinite amount of everything popped up, with nothing to make it happen.' Less you believe in God, of course, or the giant egg, or Chaos and Gaia—'

'You know about the Big Bang!' Lorcan says. 'Sorry for interrupting.'

'Yeah. Everything from nothing. Sounds pretty mysterious to me.'

'It's like all science. It seems mysterious, then someone will find out what happened, how and why.'

'Like a magic trick, but once you know how it's done it's not magic any more.'

'Yes!' he says, trying not to sound excited. '*Exactly!* When did you look at it?'

'I've been home schooled... mostly. We look at all kinds of things.'

'Why aren't you home schooled now?'

'We travel a lot. But we're going to be here for a bit... maybe.'

'How come you're not wearing a uniform? You'll have to.'

‘No point; my guess is we won’t be staying *that* long.’

‘Why not?’

She shrugs. ‘We never do. Ma does field research contracts. Environmental assessments. Unis, councils, businesses. Once they’re done, we move on.’

‘She’s a scientist?’

‘More a kind of dog’s body who gathers stuff for scientists. She wants to be a marine biologist, though. She’s paid to collect soil, water samples, animal poo.’

‘What’s she doing here?’

‘Picking bits off dead seals. There’s been storms and lots washed up. Something to do with pollution. Or fishing, or whatever.’

‘Tell me more.’

‘I’ve literally told you everything I know. So that’s why we’re here. That or some kind of family history mission.’

‘You’ve got family here?’

‘Had. I’ve never been to Cornwall. But my grandma and great-grandfather lived here for a while.’

‘When? Where?’

‘You always this nosy?’

Lorcan considers this before answering. ‘Mum says she prefers ‘inquisitive’. But, yes, I am.’

Hilly laughs, though Lorcan can’t see why.

Then it’s time for everyone who hasn’t said what their project is to speak. Lorcan begins to say he-
doesn’t-know-quite-what, but it’s Hilly who starts:

‘*A Window to the Stars: the Mystery of the Dark Sky Preserve*. That’s our project, miss.’

‘Great title, Hilly!’ Miss Tregenza says, extra-super-keen. ‘Go on.’

‘This part of Cornwall, on the moors, is one of the best places in the UK to study stars. It was here an astronomer, um... Richard something or other, first calculated the distance to the nearest star, which is –’ she glances at Lorcan’s book ‘– more than twenty-three and a half *trillion* miles away. The mystery is how it was done and how he knew it was accurate.’

‘Amazing. How do you know all that?’

Another shrug. ‘I’m interested in that kind of stuff.’

‘You make a perfect team, then, because Lorcan is *obsessed* with astronomy. Isn’t that right, star boy?’ There are a few sniggers. Then the bell rings and everyone packs up.

‘You stole what I told you,’ Lorcan says. ‘And that bit about this being the place the distance to Alpha Centauri was first calculated. That isn’t true.’

‘And?’ Hilly says.

‘We can’t... we can’t *make things up*!’

‘I thought it was supposed to be creative. You said you wanted to do something about stars.’

‘Well... I suppose... it’s good if we do stars.’

‘I’m pleased you’re pleased, ’cos you’re doing the work.’ Hilly leaves quickly, oblivious to the stares

of her classmates in their not-jeans and not-hoody uniforms.

‘Got a girlfriend, star boy?’ says Alfie, shoving Lorcan hard in the shoulder.

‘She’s not my girlfriend.’

‘That’s right. Not even a friend. Not that you need friends, Lorcs, not when you’ve got a computer, a telescope and a *lot* of video games.’

There are more laughs at this, from the group Lorcan thinks of as ‘Alfie’s acolytes’.

It’s true, Hilly Seaborne is not a friend. Lorcan considers the project and concludes. But *she* is a mystery. And she is certainly creative.



Hilly Seaborne walks home, through scrappy fields of harvested stubble. Over stone stiles and walls. *Paths*, she thinks, *that have been here centuries*. From higher ground, she catches glimpses of the sea. *It’s not so bad here. What did my totally unknown grandma mean with her dire warning?*

The woman Ma hasn’t seen since she was what? Six, seven?

The woman who abandoned her child.

Hilly thinks of the note. It’s all she has of Grandma. All she knows. By heart.

*Darling daughter Beatrice. No words describe
the pain of leaving you. No words to say why.*

I know you will never understand, or forgive.

*I leave you with nothing, but this. A plea. No, I
BEG you!*

*If you value your life and the family I hope you
will have one day, never go to Cornwall. Never
so much as cross the Tamar River.*

If I can do one thing for you, it is this.

My whole heart. All my love.

Ma

XXX

*Yet here we are, Totally-Unknown-Grandma. In
Cornwall. Here we are.*