

“Emma Seckel’s debut crackles with dark energy, conjuring a world where the skies are full of crows, ghosts walk the moors, and the islanders are haunted by loss. Seckel knows how to write heartache but these pages are also bursting with a fierce love for the living and the dead. *The Wild Hunt* is a wonder of a novel.”

—BRENDAN MATHEWS, author of *The World of Tomorrow*

“*The Wild Hunt* is a thriller, and a family drama; a mystery, but also a romance; a war novel and a ghost story. It’s a social commentary. It’s a tear-jerker. I’m not sure how one novel can be all of these things, and also be gut-punchingly sad, beautifully written, and oddly hopeful, but it is. Evocative, haunting, and deeply compelling, *The Wild Hunt* weaves together the known and unknown worlds in pursuit of the answer to the most elusive of life’s questions: how can life go on after devastating loss?”

—AMY BRILL, author of *The Movement of Stars*

“*The Wild Hunt* is a gorgeously written, entirely captivating debut novel set on an island off the coast of Scotland in the wake of World War II. Rich in atmosphere and historical detail, this novel and its exquisitely drawn characters will transport even the most reticent reader to a different time and place, and captivate them until its satisfying conclusion. A deeply engrossing read.”

—CRISTINA ALGER, *New York Times* bestselling author of *Girls Like Us*



# THE WILD HUNT

Copyright © 2022 by Emma Seckel

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever without written permission from the publisher except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles or reviews. For information, contact Tin House, 2617 NW Thurman St., Portland, OR 97210.

Published by Tin House, Portland, Oregon

Distributed by W. W. Norton & Company

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Seckel, Emma, 1995- author.

Title: The wild hunt / Emma Seckel.

Description: Portland, Oregon : Tin House, [2022]

Identifiers: LCCN 2022011139 | ISBN 9781953534224 (paperback) | ISBN 9781953534286 (ebook)

Subjects: LCSH: Island life—Scotland—Fiction. | LCGFT: Historical fiction. | Novels.

Classification: LCC PR9199.4.S435 W55 2022 | DDC 813/.6—dc23/eng/20220321

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2022011139>

First US Edition 2022

Printed in the USA

Interior design by Jakob Vala

[www.tinhouse.com](http://www.tinhouse.com)

Cover Image: John James Audubon

THE  
WILD  
HUNT

EMMA SECKEL



TIN HOUSE / Portland, Oregon



*To my family*



# 1.

On the first of October they arrived. They gathered in places they could see the whole island, the rolling hills and the farmland. Sitting in trees and on curbs, on barns and along low pasture walls. Across from the church and atop the green moss-glow of the epitaph in the shadows of the high street. In October the crows always came in threes.

Dawn was about to break, and on the beach Leigh Welles watched her father burn. It was a small funeral party. A girl, a man, the minister, a border collie sitting dutifully next to them. A few others scattered across the beach. If Leigh had asked, probably more people would have shown up, but when the minister appeared at her door the day after she'd arrived, she made it clear that she didn't want a lot of fuss.

The boat burned only with the help of a great deal of petrol, struggling against the incoming tide. A man waded into the water to attempt to push it back out to sea without displacing the shrouded figure nestled within. Leigh called to him to be careful, but the wind reclaimed her words into air.

This wind was indiscriminate in what it took and only fragments of the minister's committal reached Leigh's ears ("—the body of our brother, Graham—"), which had gone numb with the cold. The collie, Maisie, nudged her wet nose into Leigh's palm and the sky slowly lightened, through indigo to violet to purple to pale mauve. Leigh watched her father's body burn ("—dust to dust—") and wondered if he cared how many of the islanders showed up. Likely not. If Leigh did not like a lot of fuss, she had learnt how from him. Besides, it didn't matter how many people were there. Her brother, Sam, was not. The boat crested a wave and seemed finally to be on its way out, and the flames grew stronger, taller, brighter ("—in the sure and certain hope of resurrection—"), until they hurt Leigh's eyes to look at. Above her and behind, the stone circle towered on the bluff. Perched on one of the stones, three crows, inky punctuation.

The man (Tom) waded back in to shore. Drenched from the top of his head to the hems of his trousers. He trudged up the beach, shoes squelching, and rejoined the little funeral party, patted Maisie once on the head, scrubbed the water from his hair, and turned to face the sea.

That morning Leigh had woken to the unreality of it all and had tiptoed through the house like a thief. There were the two bedrooms upstairs with neatly made beds and hers with a tangle

## THE WILD HUNT

of sheets like a burrow. There were the pans in the sink, the herbs hanging above the counter, the tiny diamantine droplets of condensation on the windows. Leigh let Maisie out to run circles in the yard, flinging up clumps of dirt as she went. The autumn air was stiff, and everything shrouded in the mist rolling down from the moors, dripping and crystalline.

She looked up at the Ben. Once she had thought it a mountain, until she went to the mainland and discovered it was barely more than a hill. This place, she thought. There was the dog in the yard and the goats in the barn but really it was just her, just her and this island, nobody else. Her mother had been the first to leave, disappearing one night when Leigh was ten, gone to the mainland for a better life. Her brother had been the next to go, and then in time Leigh had followed. For Sam there was a fancy school and a fancy degree—a terrible interlude for the war, of which he never spoke—and now a clean bright office in Edinburgh, clients coming in and out all day. For Leigh there had been a job as a secretary, a flat with two girls from work who were nice enough but interested mostly in each other. Two years of never knowing what to say or what to do, what to wear or where to go. Then, this: getting sacked and falling behind on her rent, her flatmates kicking her out, a series of increasingly decrepit flats. A fight with Sam and then another, an end to the lunches they had once gotten every other week. A dream about her mother and a bitterness lingering in her chest for days. (This is what you left us for? This dark and dirty city. These shops and this noise instead of us.)

Sam had never set foot in her flat, but he had sent a cheque or two to keep her afloat. Neither of them wanted to worry their father. The last time Leigh turned up at Sam's office to ask him

to get lunch, he'd been furious. ("Interrupting my work, Leigh. And dressed like that?") And then a telephone call from Tom McAllister: "Come home. Your father's been in an accident. We can't get hold of Sam."

And her last banknote spent on the ferry ride home, and everyone's eyes on her threadbare coat, and the whispers that swirled around her like a breeze when she walked through town. Yesterday Leigh had been trying to patch one of the dozen holes in the barn roof, and as she stood on the shingles she looked up at the hills and down at the grass and wondered whether it might be all right to fall.

The boat disappeared into the grey morning. There'd been a dream, Leigh realised as she watched it go, and that was what had woken her with cheeks cold and damp from tears she didn't remember crying. A dream she'd had before. The sea. A blurry, smudgy figure wading into the waves. Three crows perched on the rocky shore. Nothing but a series of discrete and half-formed images.

The minister dropped her off at home in the sleek green car that Leigh had always thought he looked too tall for. After the funeral Kate McClare had taken Leigh by the elbow and asked her to come for breakfast but Leigh shook her head, she wanted to be alone. When they arrived, the minister patted her hand kindly and said, "Come to church, Leigh, it'll be good for you," and then Leigh clambered into the cold air again, and Maisie leapt from the back, and the minister pulled away down the driveway, gravel crunching beneath the wheels.

## THE WILD HUNT

Leigh watched the light dance on the glossy car as it departed. Her father had always eyed it jealously, curious hands itching to bury themselves in the engine, wrap themselves around the steering wheel. In the corner of the yard Graham's car sat rusting under canvas. Leigh couldn't bring herself to drive it. Graham had taught her how when she was fourteen ("I'll take you out where the only thing you could hurt are sheep. Just you and me. It'll be fun. Your brother was always a terrible driver. Don't tell him I said that"), by which time she had already been able to take apart the engine and reassemble it with her eyes closed. It wasn't the same car she had learnt on, not anymore. The year after she'd moved away, Graham had sold that first car and bought a new one, a terrible extravagance that he never managed to explain.

She went inside to make tea. The floorboards had always creaked, but now they sang discordantly. The corners had always been dark and shadowy, but now it seemed that something might be lurking in them. A thick dust coated the counter, broken by the jetsam of desiccated herbs that had fallen from the bunches hanging from the ceiling. This room did not look like a room that anyone lived in. This room looked abandoned, and dirty, and sad. And all of it hers now. Presumably. Leigh put out her hand to the wall to steady herself. Maisie circled around Leigh's feet, whining plaintively, big eyes looking up at her with reproach as though to say, Pull yourself together. Leigh placed a hand on the dog's head.

"You're right," she said to Maisie. "Let's go."

Moving was better. The pumping of her legs and the pedals, the whipping of the wind against her cheeks, the panting of Maisie's

breath as she bounded beside the bicycle. Sea mist hung in the air, dusting Leigh's face and collecting in her eyelashes. Soon the grass and grazing sheep gave way to smoother pavement and a low stone wall, the church spire reaching towards the sky in the distance.

A row of three crows on the uneven stone wall along the road, jet black. Leigh squeezed the brakes hard, stuttering to a stop. Maisie stopped, too, and her tail dropped between her legs. Leigh got off her bicycle and walked past the crows, walked until they were safely behind her before swinging back onto her bicycle and riding off again.

She had forgotten what it felt like, seeing them for the first time. It had been years since she had been on-island in October and she'd forgotten what it felt like. Her heart fluttering. The press of every damp, chill particle of air against her skin. The wheels of her bicycle spun her towards town. It was the first of October, and the *sluagh* had arrived. The *sluagh* always came in threes.

Years ago at around this time a tourist came through town. She was tall and willowy and glamorous and entirely out of place, and the whole time she was here the only thing anyone talked about was why. She wasn't a naturalist, a bird-watcher come to gawk at the many species that still survived only on this island's craggy shores. She wasn't anyone's relative, not even a distant one. She wore a white coat with fur around the collar and her hair was the colour of hot chocolate. Leigh wondered at the time whether maybe she'd been a movie star, though Sam had scoffed at the idea. She'd stumbled across Leigh helping some of

## THE WILD HUNT

the McAllister boys hang bunting outside the pub. Across the street the MacEwans were setting up their stall. The festival was just days away.

“What’s all this?” the woman asked in a slick and bright accent. (“American,” Sam said knowingly when Leigh mentioned the woman’s funny voice later.)

“We’re decorating for the festival,” Leigh said, teetering on her stool. Her shoelaces dangled dangerously towards the ground. She hadn’t learnt to tie them yet and her mother had been busy as she’d raced out the door, so Sam had done them. Possibly he’d done them wrong on purpose.

“Hallowe’en?” the woman asked, and Leigh tilted her head, confused. She glanced back at the McAllister boys, but they looked just as confused as she felt.

“What’s Hallowe’en?”

“It’s Bonfire Night,” the woman’s companion said. His accent was more familiar but still wrong, clipped. (“English, you know English people,” Sam snapped when Leigh mentioned the man’s funny voice later.) The boys behind Leigh snickered.

“Nah,” said the eldest McAllister, Liam. “It’s not that either.”

“What’s your festival for?”

“To keep away the sluagh,” Leigh said. The middle McAllister boy, Neill, swore and elbowed her in the ribs. “Don’t say it.”

Leigh rolled her eyes. “People say it all the time,” she said. “That part’s fake.” She looked up at the woman and said, helpfully, “But you really shouldn’t run. The sluagh like a chase. And don’t go out alone after dark.”

“The—sloo-ah?” the woman echoed back, and Leigh nodded approvingly.

“They come every October,” she said. “They look like crows but they carry the dead’s souls. My dad says they used to kill animals in the night, but they haven’t in ages. If you leave your west windows open, they’ll come and take you away to be one of them.”

“They can show you things, too,” Liam said. “Trick you into thinking that you’re seeing ghosts or something, to try to lure you to your death.”

The woman looked aghast, her eyes darting back and forth between Leigh and the McAllister boys, as if waiting for one of them to leap up and declare it all a great joke. “It’s true,” Neill said. “Our great-great-great-grandfather got taken. It hasn’t happened in ages, but you can’t be too careful.”

They’d finished with their bunting. “Come on,” Liam said, and Leigh hopped off her stool and tripped after the boys.

The only thing different about today, Leigh thought as she swung onto the high street, was that the tall and glamorous tourist was nowhere to be found. Mrs. McCafferty shooed her cats inside to safety. The youngest McAllister, Fraser, teetered on a stool with a soapy bucket in one hand and a sponge in the other, scrubbing the windows till they shone. He waved at Leigh as she passed. Maisie ran over to him for a pet before bounding to catch up with Leigh again.

It was alarming, actually, how little the village had changed since the last time she had seen it. The houses were crying out for new paint, their once brightly coloured doors drab and peeling. The street signs had not been returned to the corners, and though the hour had just changed, the church bells were

## THE WILD HUNT

silent. It was like stepping back in time. It was like the war had never ended at all. She glided round the corner as a woman flung open the shutters of an upstairs window and three crows took flight off the roof. The woman's voice carried down to the street as she scolded an unseen companion: "It's time to get up."