

*The Most
Perfect Thing
in the
Universe*

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MARGARET FERGUSON BOOKS
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For anyone who's ever longed for a nest, or wings, or both

It may be hard for an egg to turn into a bird: it
would be a jolly sight harder for it to learn to fly
while remaining an egg.

—C. S. Lewis

CHAPTER ONE

Loah Londonderry lived in a house with three chimneys and one alarmingly crooked turret. Built of mud-colored stone, the house sat in a small, dark forest of tall, looming trees. *Spooky* was the general opinion. Classmates from town, who no doubt lived in tidy homes with trim lawns, dared one another to spy through the windows. More than once, Loah had looked up from her laptop to see a pair of wide eyes staring at her. Loah would give a timid wave. The child would flee.

Loah herself was the least spooky person you could imagine. She was short and stout and shy, with curly brown hair and a left eye that wandered. She lived in the house with her mother, Dr. Anastasia Londonderry, and with the Rinkers, who took care of her when her mother was away, which was often. Dr. Londonderry was an ornithologist specializing in birds of the Arctic tundra. Not many species of birds lived there to begin with, and the ones that did were having a terrible time. Ground that had been frozen solid for tens of thousands of years was rapidly thawing and shrinking. Try to imagine helplessly watching your home disappear before

your eyes, and you'll have an idea how the Arctic tern, spoon-billed sandpiper, and gyrfalcon feel.

Loah's mother could not single-handedly stop climate change, but she was a tireless, determined woman, and she did all she could to help the birds. She gave lectures. She wrote books. She went on numerous expeditions sponsored by the university where she was a professor. When she came home, she described her adventures to Loah: Navigating thick fog in small, flimsy planes. Sleeping in tents on rocky ground while wolves howled. Scaling cliffs. Eating lichens for breakfast and dried caribou meat for dinner. Dr. Londonderry would describe calving glaciers and fickle winds. Hungry bears. Killer whales.

Torture, in Loah's opinion.

Loah was a homebody. She didn't take after her mother or her father, who'd died before she was born, in a horrible mountain-climbing accident she didn't want to hear about, thank you. Loah would never climb a mountain, not if she could help it. Both feet on level ground was her motto. Her favorite activities included knitting, doing home repairs, and watching old episodes of *One and Only Family*.

Actually, she didn't love doing home repairs. Does anyone? Yet she did love her home, the nest she'd lived in for her entire eleven and a half years, and when you love something, you take care of it.

It was late June, the beginning of summer vacation, which meant she got to be home every day. This morning she woke to hear birdsong pouring through the open windows. Loah's parents had bought the property not for the house but for the trees, which were home to countless birds. ("We got it for a song," her mother would say with a warm, wry smile.) The birds serenaded Loah as

she walked along the hallway with its peeling wallpaper, to the bathroom with its unreliable plumbing, down the staircase with its faded carpet of cabbage roses (which resembled, if you looked at them the right way, cheery pink faces), across the entry hall with its stag-head chandelier (not a real stag head, thank goodness), and along another dim corridor to the kitchen, where the floor was checkered black-and-white tile and the Rinkers' E-Z Boy recliners took up much of the space.

Loah looked out the window. The summer morning was fresh and blue, and the birds were jubilant. Actually, they were always jubilant in the morning, but today they were absolutely fizzy with joy. If you've ever shaken up a pop bottle, then unscrewed the cap? That kind of joy. Along with her team, Dr. Londonderry had been on her current Arctic expedition for fifty-seven days (Loah was definitely counting), but she was due home the day after tomorrow. Somehow, the birds seemed to know. Dr. Londonderry was their hero, after all. Their champion.

Loah herself had mixed feelings about birds. Ask her to name her favorite animal, and she would say cat, which was too bad for her, since cats are the number one predator of songbirds and under no circumstances was she allowed to have one.

Not to mention, birds were the reason her mother had been away for fifty-seven days and counting.

This morning, though, Loah and the birds were united in happiness. Soon, she and the Rinkers would drive to the airport, where her mother would sail through the gate in her all-weather jacket and hiking boots. When Loah hugged her, a hug that would go on for a long time, she'd smell of moss and midnight sun. Back home, they'd sit side by side in the house's library, eating sunflower

seeds (Loah had already set them out on a little table) while Dr. Londonderry typed her expedition notes (using nine and two-thirds fingers, since she'd lost the tip of one to frostbite) and Loah worked on a knitting project. They'd eat their meals outside beneath the trees, which Dr. Londonderry always rejoiced to see after the tree-less tundra. She'd twist her little red wooden bird call, and a black-capped chickadee would fly down to take a sunflower seed from her hand.

At night, Loah's mother would tuck her in, then sit beside the bed. Outside, the screech owls would call back and forth. Often, Loah would wake to find her mother still there, watching her sleep. Mama would smile and put a finger to her lips, and Loah would drift back into contented dreams.

Loah had been counting the days. Now she was counting the hours. Her mother had promised not to go away again till next spring. Long, lovely months stretched ahead.

Standing by the kitchen window, she watched Miss Rinker prowl the yard with her scythe, looking for weeds to chop down. (If you're unsure what a scythe is, look up the Grim Reaper.) Meanwhile, Miss Rinker's brother, Theo, tenderly tended the hummingbird feeder. Both Rinkers were old, scrawny, and white as napkins. Theo was as delicate as Miss Rinker was tough. Her dentures didn't fit right, and when she wore them her upper lip was always slightly raised, as if she had to sneeze. Miss Rinker refused to get new ones, though. Thrift and sacrifice—that was *her* motto.

The phone on the counter began to ring, but Loah ignored it. Shy as she was, she didn't like talking to people in general, and talking to a disembodied voice was even worse. She opened the refrigerator and peered in, hoping to find something good to eat. In

vain. Miss Rinker shopped at Bargain Blaster, where the food was cheap and weird. Thrift and sacrifice!

The phone persisted.

Was it Loah's imagination, or did the birds suddenly grow quiet?

She turned toward the phone and the ringing stopped. When she turned away, it began again.

It was not Loah's imagination. The birds had hushed. Only the mourning dove gave its mournful call. *Ab-coo-coo-coo...*

Loah crossed the room, recognized the number displayed, and gleefully seized the phone.

"Mama!"

"Sweetie!" said Dr. Londonderry. "I'm so glad you picked up."

Loah's heart did a cartwheel. Maybe her mother was about to surprise her! Maybe she'd left the field early and was already at the airport.

"Where are you?" she asked.

CHAPTER TWO

Dr. Londonderry's voice came and went. It sounded as if she were in a wind tunnel. "Just as we were packing up . . . something extraordinary . . . changed everything. . ."

Loah's excitement began to fade.

"Are you outside?" she asked. "Is there a storm?" The tundra was not supposed to have storms in summer.

"This weather . . . warmest I've ever experienced . . . and the winds . . ."

There was a great deal of static. Loah gripped the phone, waiting for her mother's voice to return. When it did, she could not believe what she heard.

"Incredible news . . . your namesake . . ." Dr. Londonderry's voice was always squeaky but now it pitched even higher. ". . . hardly wait to tell you!"

Holding the receiver, Loah crossed the room and leaned her forehead against the window. Miss Rinker vigorously swung her scythe. Theo poured fresh water into a birdbath. They both looked so normal, so untroubled, it was hard to believe they existed in the

same universe as she did at that moment. She chose her next words cautiously.

“Mama, the connection is so bad, I thought you said something about a loah bird.”

“Yesterday the weather was calm, and I was taking one last reading of CO₂ levels on a fell-field of exquisite little sedges and wildflowers, when I heard the sweetest, shyest call. I looked up and to my astonishment . . .”

Her voice cut out again.

“Mama! Mama?”

“ . . . fumbled for my camera . . . disappeared behind a pingo . . .”

Loah spun away from the window. The last reported sighting of a loah bird, by amateur birders on a cruise ship, had been eleven and a half years ago. Before that, nobody had seen one for over thirty years. The cruise ship sighting didn't count, not with the scientists who kept track of these things. The International Union for Conservation of Nature still classified the loah as in grave danger of being extinct.

“ . . . that unique streak of gold on her alula . . . not the bright yellow of a goldfinch or the gaudy gold of a meadowlark, but a color deeper and richer . . .” Dr. Londonderry's voice squeaked with emotion. “Headed due west, toward the coast. It's late but still nesting season . . . clutch always small, no more than three eggs, always so vulnerable, and now with these conditions . . .”

If her mother had really, truly spied a loah, it was a mind-boggling discovery. These days no good news came out of the Arctic, which was warming at twice the rate of the rest of the globe. (Loah knew all about this and, if you asked, could also define

fell-field, which means a rocky slope covered with low-growing plants; *pingo*, which is a dome-shaped hill of permafrost; and *alula*, which is a digit on the upper edge of a bird's wing used to fine-control flight.) Finding a creature everyone feared was lost forever would be a bright ray of hope in a long dark night.

"Sweetie!" said her mother. "My heart is singing like a nightingale!"

Loah's own heart plunged like a diving duck. She tried to brace for what was coming.

"It should just be a week," her mother said. "Well, realistically two, maybe three, but no more, I promise. Thank goodness I have leg bands, the digital scale, and, just in case, my incubation equip—"

Crash.

"Mama? Mama, are you there?"

"One second, sweetie." There were thudding, scraping sounds, as if her mother were engaged in a great struggle. At last she spoke again. "Not to worry. The Jeep door blew open but I... Oh for heaven's sake, what's this in my hair?" She laughed. "Dried caribou dung?"

You're supposed to come home. Loah swallowed back the words.

Her mother was saying how the bird's survival could provide crucial clues to helping other birds of the biome, not to mention spark funding for more research, not to mention . . .

Loah could barely listen. Disappointment overwhelmed her. She sank down on Theo's E-Z Boy.

"Are you sure you saw it?" she asked. "Loahs are so small and unremarkable."

"Ninety-nine percent sure. Her call—our only recordings of it

are faint and scratchy, but I recognized it.” Her mother imitated it. What she described as a sweet, shy song actually sounded more like someone wheezing with a chest cold.

“Did you get in touch with Dr. Whitaker?” He was her mother’s boss at the university’s Department of Mammalogy and Ornithology. Dr. Whitaker and Dr. Londonderry did not always see eye to eye, to put it mildly, but it was her job to report to him.

“Whit? That pessimist. I know exactly what he’d say.” Dr. Londonderry pitched her voice low and ponderous. “Didn’t get photos? No recording? Pardon the pun, Ana, but you’re on a wild-goose chase. With our limited resources we can’t—” A burst of static. “Besides, he’s away on his own trek to Costa Rica this summer. I told the rest of the team to go ahead without me. They—”

“Wait.” Loah sat up straight. “You’re staying on alone?”

Another burst of static. The only words Loah caught were “increase in predators” and “time . . . of the essence.”

“Mama,” she said. “Are you sure this is a good idea?”

The phone crackled.

“I think this may be a bad idea. Actually, I’m sure it is. Mama?”

There was another crackle, a cry of “. . . love . . . so much! . . .,” and then nothing. Loah gripped the dead phone.

“Please change your mind,” she begged. When there was no reply, she whispered, “Please be careful.”

“Ahem.”

Miss Rinker stood in the kitchen doorway. How long had she been there?

“My mother . . .,” said Loah. She got up and set the receiver back. Outside, not a single bird sang. “She has to . . . to unexpectedly extend her expedition.”

Miss Rinker's upper lip lifted, revealing her oversized dentures. She looked about to sneeze. Or snarl.

"Your mother is a flighty woman," she said.

Did Miss Rinker mean this as a joke? If so, it would be the first joke Loah had heard her make in eleven and a half years. She tried to reply, but her voice, like the phone, had gone dead.

CHAPTER THREE

Loah hated to cry, but when it was absolutely necessary, she preferred to do it in private. The house had one place where nobody would look for her. She was forbidden to go there, and, obedient as she was, she almost never did.

She stumbled along the upstairs corridor, past the many unused bedrooms. (Miss Rinker and her brother slept in two rooms in the attic, which was uncomfortably cold in winter and unbearably hot in summer. Perfect, in Miss Rinker's view.)

A door at the very end of the corridor was shut, as always. Behind this door was the staircase leading to the turret. The turret was a precarious structure. It appeared to be an afterthought, as if the builder had decided to stick it on at the last minute, using inferior glue. Miss Rinker disapproved of the turret. She considered it frivolous, impractical, and probably unsafe, since the stonework was deteriorating. Loah was never to climb its stairs.

Loah had to tug hard to get the door open, then push hard to close it behind her. The forbidden staircase spiraled up and out of sight. Sinking onto the bottom step, she let herself cry. She was an

explosive, messy crier. A water balloon hitting a sidewalk, that's what Loah's crying was like.

Mothers were supposed to come home. Even birds knew that. Birds were wonderful parents, as her very own mother had taught her. Building nests with twigs or mud, lichen or moss, spider silk or snakeskin, or sometimes with their own saliva. Laying their eggs and then sitting on them for weeks at a time, in every kind of weather. Finding their chicks seeds or insects or, in the case of raptors, small rodents, amphibians, or other creatures, which they tore into tiny, digestible pieces, which was so disgusting but also kind of lovable. Birds never abandoned their nestlings, if they could help it.

Loah's mother would make a very bad bird.

Loah rested her head against the cold stone wall and let loose with another loud, messy sob. She understood how important her mother's work was. She did. She truly did. If anyone in the world was proud of Dr. Anastasia Londonderry, it was Loah.

But she had a bad feeling, and not only because she was so disappointed and hurt. The tundra could be dangerous, even in summer. The terrain was uneven and boggy, making it easy to sprain an ankle or fall into icy water. It was plagued by biting insects. Global warming made everything highly unpredictable. What had her mother said about the predators? And going alone! She'd never done that before. It was against all expedition rules.

In the tundra, even satellite phones didn't always work, and Mama often forgot to recharge hers. There was no telling when they'd be able to talk again. Loah gave an even louder sob.

Hissss.

She bolted upright. What in the world was that? She held

perfectly still, listening. There it was again—a raspy sound, like someone dislodging something from a throat.

A dusty, mummified throat.

Quietly, Loah rose to her feet. Looking up, she saw nothing. A dark, dank nothing. She tried to tell herself it was the wind between the old crumbling stones. Except there was no wind.

Now she heard it again, closer this time.

She yanked on the door. It refused to budge.

Fear can sometimes endow a person with superhuman strength. This, however, was not Loah's experience. Fear made her go as weak as a pimply, just-hatched bird.

She whimpered. When she tried again, the door took pity and opened. Out in the corridor she leaned against the wall. What had just happened? Should she tell Miss Rinker? No, she'd only scold Loah for going near the turret. She'd say Loah was being hysterical and then make her drink warm milk.

Loah shut the door and, still hiccupping (she always hiccupped after she cried), hurried down the hallway to the safety of her own room. On the wall above her bed hung a framed print of a female loah bird. She was a tiny creature, weighing less than an ounce, with a head barely bigger than a hazelnut. Except for that streak of gold on her wing, her feathers were the color of dingy snow.

"It's all your fault she's not coming home," Loah accused the picture.

Which, unsurprisingly, did not reply. Loah sank onto her bed. On the nightstand was a photo of her and Mama. Mama was a small, plain woman, just the way Loah was a small, plain girl, but in this picture, with her arms around Loah and her chin resting on Loah's head, she looked radiant.

Holding her breath to stop the hiccups, Loah pulled what was left of her old baby blanket out from under her pillow. She'd mended it many times, but by now it was little more than a scrap of wool with a silky edge. She was rubbing that edge against her cheek when someone knocked on the door.

"Come in, Theo."

(It had to be him. Miss Rinker never knocked.)

"Look here." Theo tiptoed in, pulling a bag from under his shirt.

Gummy worms, their favorite. Miss Rinker—surprise, surprise—did not approve of candy, so Loah and Theo had to sneak. She chose a red-green one, Theo a yellow-orange. They ate solemnly, without speaking. Loah's mouth filled with rubbery sweetness.

"I'm sorry your mama's not coming home." Theo's hair was white as milkweed down. He cupped her hand in his old, spotty one. "I'm sure she would if she could."

Theo was so kind. Loah's mother *could* come if she chose, but he'd never say that.

"We'll just have to keep the nest warm till she gets here," he said.

Loah smiled. Theo was as much a homebody as she was. He set another gummy worm on her pillow, rocked back and forth a few times, and launched himself upright. Loah listened as the hallway floorboards creaked beneath his feet. Step, step, stop. Step, step, stop. Had he always moved so slowly?

Loah curled up with her baby blanket. Crying took it out of her, and she dozed off till a noise woke her. An odd, woody *thunk*. She sat up, listening, and heard it again, distant but distinct, like a buried heart. What was it? Her own heart raced.

Loah's heart, unlike the rest of her, was very athletic.

CHAPTER FOUR

The next day, no part of Loah felt right. Not her heart, not her head, not a single part. To keep from thinking about her mother, she busied herself with home repairs. Dr. Londonderry, accustomed to the spare rigor of an Arctic field station, tended to overlook problems like leaky faucets, cracked windows, and dubious electrical wiring. Theo was officially in charge of home repairs, but he was old and so was the house, and since time only runs forward, not back, they both just kept getting older. Loah would have died rather than hurt Theo's feelings, so she tried to do things surreptitiously, replacing a lightbulb here and tightening a loose screw there. It was hard to keep up, though, even with the small things. Big things like the crooked turret—well.

Loah had been hoping that when Mama got home, she could be convinced to get to work saving their own habitat.

Now Loah carried her Godzilla Glue and a broken cereal bowl (Theo had dropped it on the kitchen tile) down the corridor to the house's library. The shelves overflowed with books on birds. Her mother had written many of them, including the one she was best known for, *The Egg: Nature's Greatest Feat of Engineering*. On

the cover was a quote from someone named Thomas Wentworth Higginson: “I think, that, if required, on pain of death, to name instantly the most perfect thing in the universe, I should risk my fate on a bird’s egg.”

Loah set the broken bowl on her mother’s desk, which was awash with a sea of journals, papers, unopened mail, and books; baggies containing feathers, eggshells, or bird poop; three pairs of binoculars; the red wooden bird call; and more papers, invitations to speak, thank-yous for speaking, awards, and certificates Mama never bothered to hang and had probably forgotten she ever received. On the very edge, lined up like dominoes, stood Loah’s framed school photos, in which, year after year, her mouth frowned and her eye wandered.

In the center sat their other landline phone. This one was programmed with Dr. Londonderry’s satellite phone number, which Loah was only to call in case of emergency.

Sitting down in her mother’s chair, Loah absently reached for a shard of bowl and—*ouch!* A bright drop of blood bloomed on the tip of her finger. The sight of blood always made Loah woozy. She really, truly preferred blood to stay inside, where it belonged. She abandoned the bowl, wrapped her finger in a tissue, and went to the window seat, where her books from the public library were neatly stacked. She discovered one she hadn’t read, a biography titled *Ferdinand Magellan: Circumnavigator of the Globe*.

Loah knew about the Magellanic penguin, so she’d been curious. Now as she read, she discovered that the bird was named for a sixteenth-century explorer in search of a route to the East Indies. Magellan was the hopeful sort, but things went all wrong. He ran

out of supplies, and his men began dying of starvation, thirst, and various horrible diseases. Did Ferdinand Magellan turn back? He did not.

Ferdinand Magellan was making Loah nervous. Skipping to the book's end (something she never did), she read how he got mixed up in a tropical-island feud and wound up dead. His crew, what was left of it, forged on until, to their own surprise, they had sailed all the way around the world.

What to make of this? Magellan had led an expedition that discovered how immense the earth really was, not to mention proved that it was round, but only by accident. Plus, he'd gotten himself killed before it was over and missed out on most of it. For a great hero, he didn't seem to know what he was doing half the time.

She thought of her mother, alone at the top of the world. Which was so upsetting she slapped the book closed, stuck it under her arm, and went outside.

The yard was cool and leafy. Dr. Londonderry loved the trees because they sheltered the birds and sequestered carbon, but Loah loved the trees for themselves. A tree never went anywhere. It was always where you expected. It lost its leaves, but never its courage, and steadfastly grew new ones year after year. Try to name another living thing more patient and loyal than a tree, and you will fail.

Yet today Loah wandered among them like a ship lost at sea. She circumnavigated the mud-brown house. She peered up at the turret, with its two narrow windows (one had a broken pane) and its roof shaped like a witch's hat. Sunlight hit the windows and turned them white, like the eyes of the very old dog who slept all day in a corner of the town hardware store.

Did something flicker behind the glass?

Bony fingers clamped her shoulder. Loah spun around with a startled cry. Miss Rinker frowned at her.

“You’re brooding again,” she accused.

“No,” said Loah, who knew too well Miss Rinker’s cure for brooding. She held up *Ferdinand Magellan*. “I’m reading.”

Miss Rinker took the book and skimmed the first page. Her lip curled. Her dentures glinted. She handed it back, saying, “Explorers! All they do is discover things that were already there.”

This was true. But was it possible to discover something that *wasn’t* there?

“What you need is exercise. A vigorous walk or a punishing bike ride.”

“But . . . it’s so hot. And sunlight causes cancer.”

No use. Miss Rinker produced a tube of sunscreen. Also, her latest Bargain Blaster find: a metal water bottle that said THANKS FOR BEING YOU on its side.

(As if a person has a choice! Who else could you be, like it or not?)