

# Chapter 1

## Maybole, Ayrshire

*4 September 1933*

Bobby MacBryde is on his way. He's going to the Glasgow School of Art – to the big palace of painting on top of Garnethill with the windows his mother says would take a month to clean. He's going to do Painting. He's getting away. Five years of tacking soles at Lees Boots and a lifetime it's taken to get here, to this morning, packing and repacking the khaki satchel his mother has made for him.

'You'll miss yer train,' she shouts from the scullery, where the light is always best in the morning. His wee sister Jessie is at school already. His wee brother John is out looking for work. Their father is, as always, at Lees.

'Ah won't,' says Bobby, ducking in to see her again, for the final, final time.

'Yer father's swapped a shift,' his mother continues, without looking up. 'So don't be late.' The dress she's unpicking is even more worn than her, but good cotton – washed, cut down and pressed it will do well round the back doors of the big houses in Ayr.

'Ah won't,' says Bobby, noting a bundle from McKay's the Butchers bleeding on the bunker, wrapped tight as a widow in the *Kilmarnock Herald and North Ayrshire Gazette*. 'You shouldnae

have,' he says, noting the blurring headlines and wondering if this chicken was the freshest or cheapest.

'Acht, what's tick for?' his mother shrugs. 'We're good for it, eventually. And yer Auntie Maggie will be in the night as well.'

Bobby smiles thinking of his Auntie Maggie and her stories and her harmonica. He slings his new bag over his shoulder – it feels so light for all the hope it holds. As the strap settles, he remembers what it took to get here, to this moment.

His father took him out of school at fourteen – the same as everybody else. Despite the gentle protestations of Mrs Kennedy, his art teacher, Bobby was marched out the doors of Carrick Academy on the Friday and down the high street to Green's the Grocers where he was told to start first thing Monday. He got the Sunday off. Come Monday, he mounted the delivery bike, a cast-iron Clydesdale. His legs were found wanting. Wobbling off he lacked puff – his chest, as his mother was always warning him.

When he was ten, he'd spent two weeks at the Sanatorium in Ayr, tucked tightly into a skinny high bed, like an overdue bill in an envelope. He'd been on a ward with men even older than his father – the windows were never shut and sea-green curtains danced on the prescribed fresh air. At first, Bobby had been so bored he'd even missed Jessie and her wee dolly. When he did get home, he was given the only other bedroom and Jessie had to sleep on the scullery floor but never moaned, said she was cosy by the range.

So, Bobby should have known this job was beyond him, but he needed to do his bit in the house and save up for art school. Also, he'd always fancied a bike – it was one of the few things other boys had that he wanted too. You could go far on a bike, out of Maybole, all the way to Ayr, even to the golden sands of Troon. There was no chance of a bike in their house and he knew better than to ask. After a week of huffing from the shop at the corner of Weavers Vennel up to the folk that could afford deliveries, old Mr Green let him go. 'Aye but he's enough puff

to chat up the wifies,' the grocer had winked to his father, who'd smiled thin as bootlaces.

Next day, Bobby had started at Lees, the finest factory in a town famed for cobbling. 'Stick in,' his father had warned him – he'd got him the job, despite lay-offs, because he was a tanner. Bobby could always sense when his father was home, the tang of something dead on the way to leather. So, Bobby stuck in. But he'd no intention of sticking about. He never sat still, chatting away to the girls either side as they all tapped in their tacks – hundreds of pairs of tacketties marching out of Lees every day, to every corner of the Empire. Bobby liked to think about all the places they'd go. One of his favourite books in Maybole Library was *The Times Atlas of the World* – it took two hands to turn the pages. Most of the world blushed pink.

With his mother's nimble fingers Bobby tap-tap-tapped the tacks even faster than he talked. But in his head he was always drawing – his beloved Mrs Kennedy had given him ten silver tubes of Winsor & Newton oils, each promising a world of colour. *Keep at it*, she'd told him, pressing the package into his hands, so nicely wrapped it had to be from a shop in Glasgow. Sometimes, from his workbench, he'd glimpse his father going on a break – tanners got their tea first because nobody wanted to sit with them. He would always wave and sometimes his father nodded back and when he did, Bobby would beam for all the world to see but the canteen doors were always already swinging.

For five whole years Bobby had sat there. Hour after hour. Boot after boot. Every hour the same. Every boot the same. Year by year the order books shrank. He learned to slow down so he didn't show the others up. At night, Bobby could still feel tacks between his teeth.

Sundays he got off for the Sabbath. Bobby's lot never bothered with chapel but he had his own places of worship – he snuck into the Picture House, preferring women's films because there were never any lads there. He would sit at the back so nobody saw him – once, he had to dodge his Auntie Maggie on the way

out of a Greta Garbo; he's still not sure if she saw. After crying his eyes out at *Oliver Twist*, Bobby braved the library to ask for more Dickens. Maybole Public Library was the first building in town to get gas lights so Bobby could sit in there and read even when it was dark, which was most of the year. It was all free – you didn't even have to pay to get in. Soon, he'd read the place dry. But the library let you order books in. He'd been amazed by the arrival of art books, gilt and leather grimoires that smelled of the big houses where his mother bought and sold at the back door. He marvelled at whole-page prints of the Great Pictures and made plans to visit them all one day. Bobby saw no great mystery in the *Mona Lisa*. He knows from Lees what that smile means and it'll end with a ring on her finger, if she's lucky. He imagined himself clinging to *The Raft of the Medusa*, slipping off then being pulled back on by a wild-haired sailor crying *I won't let you go!* Bobby memorised rich Dutch still-lives with glistening goblets and glassy-eyed birds and pearl-handled fruit knives that cost more than he could imagine. What do you do with an artichoke anyway?

Bobby had boosted his escape fund by drawing cartoons of his workmates – he 'borrowed' stubby pencils and brown paper from the pattern-making cupboard. He made big noses bigger, amplifying every wart into an Ailsa Craig. So long as he was equally unsparing, they'd all laugh. Folk crowded round him, pointing and laughing as familiar faces emerged. At first it felt strange to draw in front of people – to have an audience for something he'd always done in secret, in the art room at lunch-times, or up on Kildoon Hill, just him and the sky. He doubted his colleagues would enjoy watching him try to get the perfect morning blue of the wild periwinkles. They admired his skill. This kind of looking was safe, he realised, because they were seeing themselves. Word spread, as it always did, and folk brought in that one photograph of their cousin that's away to Canada or Australia. Every now and then a tearful woman handed him a tissue-wrapped photo and he refused money for these, drew them

in private. Bobby got good at telling the stories of every face but his own – disliked his pouty lips, which sat right on his mother and Jessie. Avoiding himself was easy because the only mirror in their house was a tile screwed to the wall over the scullery sink where his father shaved every morning, his face curled in steam. Anyway, there would always be somebody to catch him. A man shouldn't look at himself any longer than he needs to; Bobby knew the rules. So, he only ever saw himself in what people reflected back – if he could make them laugh or give them back a face they'd lost, he liked what he saw.

Every Sunday, whatever the weather, Bobby took the paper he'd scrounged and went up Kildoon Hill. He raced away from the houses until he ran out of road or puff. Auntie Maggie was always saying, 'You'll meet yourself coming back.' He huffed his way up the rubbly track, the same one marched by Roman soldiers who built the fort at the top. Bobby imagined their sandaled feet scuffed with faraway dust, swords hanging by their sides, dark eyes on a distant horizon. Why did they come here when they could be somewhere sunny? Where did they all go? He searched the faces at Lees wondering if any of them was ever Roman. Andrew, whose mother was a baker, had an olivey look. Sandra, sat next to him, was definitely an empress. Bobby was far from pale – his father claimed they're from the Black Irish, survivors of the Armada who washed up in Ireland and were welcomed with open – *laugh, nudge, wink*. If his ancestors did come from far away then maybe Bobby could find his way back.

Finally at the top, Bobby would sit himself down on the nearest driest rock and unpack his stuff, rushing to get it all down. Out at sea sits the burnt roll of Ailsa Craig, sometimes so close he thought he could swim to it. White splashes burst from the waves as gannets split the sky, exploding into the depths. Even if it wasn't that dry, and it rarely was, Bobby took his boots off, felt the cool grass between his toes. The hill was studded with wind-stunted wildflowers – he recited their names as he drew. For things he really loved, he broke into Mrs Kennedy's paints. Was

he really good enough for the art school? When he stayed behind after the bell to avoid the walk home, she'd tell him all about the masterpiece of Mr Charles Rennie Mackintosh. She'd taken classes there herself. Bobby had written to them every year since he was taken out of school, but never heard back. Nothing. Not until he got the letter.

Auntie Maggie had marched him into Glasgow for his interview; his mother was up to her elbows at the steamie and his father was at Lees (or the Maybole Arms). It was only his third time on a train – he counted all his pleasures carefully. Then there was his first tram. Finally, they'd both stood outside staring up – they could hardly take it all in.

'In ye get,' she'd said, near kicking him up the stairs. 'I'll be here,' she'd said, with no clue how long he'd be.

Bobby had never done anything like this before so had arrived just as it was about to start. A young woman with mad curly hair rushed towards him asking 'MacBryde?' His arse didn't touch a chair – she propelled him down a long corridor towards tall double doors. 'Ready?' she asked, pushing the doors open and him through. At the far end of an officially echoey hall stretched a long table with three men sat behind. As Bobby crossed the parquet expanse, he felt them look him up and down. The baldy one picked up a sketch he recognised and rubbed the corner of the brown factory paper between thumb and forefinger, before wiping his hands on his heavy tweed trousers. Bobby sat down and did what he'd always done: talked and talked and talked – about all the pictures in all the books at the library, about the particular morning blue of the periwinkles on Kildoon Hill, about the colour of everything. Once or twice the young-looking one smiled and made a note. How long did he sit there talking for? A minute? An hour? A day?

When he came back out, Auntie Maggie was still stood exactly where she said she would be, her rare green eyes shining. She made him tell her everything. Twice. He let her hold his hand on the train until they got to Maybole. A letter nearly beat them

home. Auntie Maggie couldn't read it herself but scried his face and hauled him out onto the front step and shouted to all of Weavers Vennel, the whole of Maybole, that Bobby MacBryde was going to the Glasgow School of Art and that Robert Burns had better watch his back because Ayrshire would soon have another name to sing.

All this goes through Bobby's head as he leans down to kiss his mother goodbye. She stops unpicking stitches for one whole second, her right thumb keeping her place, and half stands to kiss her eldest boy. He's away already, she thinks, knowing he was always going.

'Away you go. The train disnae care who you think you are. And don't be late – yer father will want to hear all about it.'

Bobby wonders if she believes that herself but is touched that she wants him to. 'Aye right,' he says, pulling the back door shut gently. He pauses in the dark bleachy close then steps out into his future, already so bright he needs to blink.