



THE SIGNS OF A MYSTERY

PART TWO

THE BLACK
MIRROR

NIKOLAI NAWRI

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by

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If thou didst ever hold me in thy heart,
Absent thee from felicity awhile,
And in this harsh world draw thy breath in pain,
To tell my story.

– William Shakespeare in *Hamlet*, Act 5 Scene 2

PROLOGUE

She would have to die, that much was certain. During the past days, waves of panic and determination to fight had alternated with periods of resignation. But now she had given up any hope of rescue, as the inevitability of death had become undeniable.

No one would find her in that remote place, it would have been foolish to hope otherwise. After the police investigation into the previous murder had finished, and the media attention had finally died down, the old manor house lay just as abandoned as it had for decades – or so it would seem from the outside.

And yet, for five days she had been imprisoned in this upstairs bedroom. By now, her captors had to have realised that they were not going to get any of the information they wanted out of her. They had to realise that the repeated threats made against herself were as ineffective as the threats they made of going after Elisabeth and Siobhán. Nonetheless, they still showed no intentions of either releasing or killing her.

Was she only kept alive for the purpose of blackmail? Or were they perhaps waiting for the right moment to make another statement? Send another warning to any of the old conspirators who were still out there, demonstrating once again that they were willing to do whatever it took to get the information they needed?

At this point, apparently, Elisabeth was the only one still alive of those they thought had been involved in the conspiracy – the only one they had been able to track down, at least. However,

given her age, most likely, they were reluctant to go after her directly, thinking that she may not be concerned enough for her own life to be able to put pressure on her. And so, they had been looking for a younger family member.

But whatever had happened during the war, it was such a long time ago. Whatever betrayal might have taken place, how could this still have any significance two generations on? Moreover, how could anyone believe that Elisabeth had ever played a role in it? Surely, if anything, she had been one of the victims herself, being forced to escape at the last minute to seek refuge with the enemy.

And then, fifty years on, it had all begun again – with a rare mistake for these shadowy figures, and a lucky escape for Siobhán. But since the erroneous attack on Kathleen, it seemed they had successfully executed all their plans with ruthless precision, proving that they were determined enough to follow up the initial murder with a whole series of violent crimes, until they had achieved their objective. And that objective had to have great significance for them. As they were not in any way mentally deficient, there had to be a strong motive for their actions. They were well organised and highly intelligent individuals. They had been able to follow her around for weeks without ever becoming more noticeable than a cloud of vague fears. They had tools and skills that had allowed them to enter her flat without leaving a single trace. They had to do this for a compelling reason.

Tracking her down in the first place would have been easy enough, once they had found Elisabeth, which they could have done simply by referring to the phone directory. Elisabeth's

regular daily routine, especially her predictable visits to church early every Sunday morning, would have given them more than an hour to search the house. They would have found not only Alison's own, but also Siobhán's temporary address at Kathleen's flat. And based on Siobhán's family name, they would have instantly recognised her as a direct relative.

They would then have gone to Cambridge, but would only have seen Kathleen's name on the doorbell plate. For a while, that might have perplexed them enough not to act immediately, wondering whether Siobhán had not moved in yet, or whether she had lived there previously and had since moved out. They would have continued to observe the block of flats, while probably also keeping an eye on Elisabeth's home in Norwich. Simultaneously, they had possibly been pursuing other activities as well, all related to their great plan. With these distractions, and with Siobhán's irregular schedule – her frequent absences for the various training courses – they must have kept missing her.

But after days or even weeks of waiting in front of different buildings, exposed to the stormy winter weather, their patience had finally run out. They must have decided to break into Kathleen's flat, to look for any indications that Siobhán was actually staying there. They had picked the lock and had found that the door was additionally secured by a chain. That would have been when they had known for certain that someone was indeed in. At that point, of course, Kathleen had already returned from London, and Siobhán had moved out. But by the time they realised that they had found the wrong person lying in bed, it was al-

ready too late. Forced to go through with their attack, they had then spontaneously adjusted their plan and had staged that horrific murder.

To be able to do that, they must have been aware previously of these Satanic rituals being carried out in the manor house, which meant that they had to have been there for some other purpose. This building clearly was of some historical significance to them. For that reason, they were determined to use it as a secret base for their activities. And by disposing themselves of Kathleen in that callous fashion, they managed to get rid of the unwanted visitors in one blow.

Then, they had to begin all over again. Unable to find Siobhán, they would have been reminded of that other girl they had seen on the many photographs displayed in Elisabeth's home. Together with the collection of letters from the past ten years that they must have found there as well, Alison's visit at Christmas would have suggested to them that she was as close to Elisabeth as Siobhán was, especially as Siobhán had not visited Elisabeth once over the holidays.

Alison's abduction had then been carried out with a timing that was too good to be a coincidence. They must have known that she would not be missed at work for a few months. And they must have known this before attacking her. This meant that they had been inside her flat at least once before. They would have seen the confirmation letter from the broadcaster, stating the exact period of her sabbatical. At the same time, they would also have found the train ticket to Dublin, together with the information about B&B's from the travel agency. It may even have been

her visit to the travel agency that had motivated them to search her flat in the first place, as they suspected that she might be planning to leave the country.

If they had followed her around, they would also have known that she had spent hours on end in the library or in newspaper archives, shutting herself off from everyone else, distancing herself from those who might normally have been concerned about her sudden absence. Observing her in the archives, they would have noticed her interest in the manor house. They would have seen her compile a record of any information, any incident related to that building and the wider region. Maybe that would have raised their suspicion and suggested to them that she had interpreted Kathleen's murder correctly, that she had begun to look behind the sensational circumstances at the surface of that crime and had begun to read between the lines. It would have seemed to confirm to them that she too was involved in the conspiracy.

Still, no matter how carefully planned and executed the abduction had been, her disappearance could not go unnoticed forever. Eventually, she would be missed. The police would then enter her flat. They would check for any clues to her whereabouts. And knowing of her connection to Kathleen, they would search for any indication that she too had been abducted. But would they find the message? And if so, would they understand it? When even she still did not know what these few words really meant. When she herself had failed to recognise the most important implication of the few snatches of the conversation between the intruders that she had been able to overhear – while they had

sat around in her flat, talking quietly, completely indifferent to the traumatic situation that they had forced her into, waiting until late at night before taking her to their car and beginning the long drive north.

That one short and obscure message – it all depended on it now. Would it allow anyone to make the right connections? To realise that her disappearance was indeed related to Kathleen's murder? Would it help them to realise that Siobhán was still in danger – Siobhán more than anyone else, more even than Elisabeth? Had she done everything she could to protect her friend? Had she been intelligent and perceptive enough? Or had she let her friend down? Should she have been able to understand earlier that these seemingly irrational fears, the apparent paranoia, had actually told her the truth? And if she had understood that, would she have been able to convince the police? Would that have allowed them to apprehend these elusive characters?

Either way, for one more year, Siobhán would be safe on Antarctica. That was the one thing the assailants with all their resourcefulness had not yet been able to find out. From their repeated questioning it was evident that also Kathleen, if only trying to protect herself, had not told them anything about Siobhán, had most likely denied knowing her at all. There was therefore one more year for the police to find the truth, to uncover the real reason behind these crimes. Would that be enough? When Siobhán returned from Antarctica, would she be warned? Would she be safe?

Resigned as Alison was to her own fate, these thoughts, this endless loop of worries kept going through her mind as she stood

by the upstairs window, gazing down to the sloping lawn behind the old manor house and the lake that lay beyond it, surrounded by the crescent of the mountain ridge.

Temperatures had clearly dropped over the course of the afternoon, turning drizzle into a light snow. A thin layer of ice had started to form along the edges of the water. The wind had picked up as well, buffeting once more against the mullioned bay windows which, despite their age, gave no indication of having even the slightest form of weakness. They were set between narrow columns of brickwork, with individual glass panels held together by a solid metal frame. They were not intended to be opened, except for the tilting panel at the top, which was far too small for anyone to squeeze through.

Across the lake, the sun would be setting soon behind the dark line of jagged mountaintops, their shadows already creeping towards her. Through the wind-torn gaps in the clouds, the last rays of light fell onto a cold world, to which she was not going to return.

A renewed wave of panic overcame her. She hastily turned away from the window and slumped down onto the old armchair that stood beside it.

Once more, her desperate eyes searched the formerly grand but now neglected bedroom for any kind of support, anything that would help her escape or at least defend herself. But there was nothing new to discover, nothing but the same four-poster bed, the wardrobe with the old blankets, and the fireplace, which was exclusively lit at night, to prevent the smoke from being seen down in the village.

Then, she heard a noise on other side of the building, faintly at first and muffled by the whistling of the wind around the windows, but gradually getting louder – the engine of a car approaching on the rough track leading up from the main country road that wound its way along the foot of the mountain. They were earlier than usual. Normally, they waited until complete darkness had settled before coming out to the manor house. And they were driving faster than usual too. She could hear the harsh crunching of the breaking tyres as they dug into the layer of gravel on the forecourt.

A few seconds later, three car doors slammed, the sound echoing between the building and the surrounding mountains. Then, rapid footsteps reverberated in the large entrance hall. They really seemed to be in a hurry this time. Something had happened. Something had stirred them into action.

The footsteps were coming up the old staircase now. Instinctively, she knew that this was the end. If she had managed to keep track of the days correctly, it was Thursday, 31st January 1991. A day like any other. A day that would never go down in history. A day, most likely, that would not even be associated with her departure from this world.

Once more, her thoughts were drawn to Siobhán. But this time, it felt different. It felt as if Siobhán were simultaneously reaching out to her. After the crushing sense of abandonment that had lain over her during the past days, she felt the strong connection again that had existed between them for so many years.

And, suddenly, a deep calm came over her. It was the clarity

of a fresh understanding of her situation, the certainty that she had yet an important role to play. If she had failed to warn her friend, there was still one thing she could do to protect her. To succeed with this, continued denial of her involvement in that old conspiracy was the wrong strategy. It was futile. They were never going to believe her. Instead, she had to turn the false expectations of these shadowy figures into fear – a fear that could be used as a weapon against them, to force them to suspend their violent acts for a while, to carefully reconsider their next steps, long enough perhaps for them to realise that they were chasing an illusion, or long enough for someone to catch up with them.

This one last task she had to accomplish. Then, she could rest, knowing that the end, which was now rapidly approaching, would not be in vain. At that thought, the cold dread of a lonely death left Alison. She would not be crying anymore. They would not find her lying in bed or cowering in some dark corner. She would be facing them, on her feet, looking them straight into their eyes – the only parts of their faces that were visible behind the masks.

She therefore got up from the armchair and calmly walked to the middle of the room. And as the door opened, revealing three figures on the dark landing, obscured behind the circle of blinding light from an electric torch, she was ready.

Whatever happened tonight, she would give Siobhán a second chance.

CHAPTER ONE

SHADOWS OF DOUBT

‘Siobhán! Good Lord. You gave me a terrible fright, dear, walking in here so suddenly. For a moment there I thought you were some kind of apparition.’

The secretary had failed to hear her enter over the noise of the typewriter and, with a sigh, sank back into her chair.

‘I’m sorry, Mrs Evans, I didn’t mean to startle you.’

‘Oh, now you are here, you’re very welcome, to be sure. It’s just that we didn’t expect you back for another four weeks. After all that talk about you, you must be the most famous person in the entire institute right now. And with the uncertainty hanging over everything for a while ... I haven’t even had a chance to organise the accommodation for you yet.’

‘Yes, originally, I was supposed to stay on the icebreaker until Germany. But then, when we got to Cape Town, I decided that, as I had recovered well during the almost two weeks on board ...’

‘You call this recovered? My word, just look at you: all pale and with sunken in cheeks – only a shadow of your former self. No, you clearly lost a lot of weight. Good thing you had such a healthy figure going into that adventure. I can see you’re still limping, and it’s no good pretending that your ribs have healed in that short amount of time, Siobhán. Well, at least your nose is all right again – frostbite they said, such an awful thing. I was

shocked when I heard, remembering my dad when he came back from Norway – all his toes gone. And with that, we had to be glad that he still had the rest of his legs. That was during the war, you see. Terrible time ... Anyway, in the end, the only thing that matters is that you are safely back in England, isn't it? But why didn't you tell us when you went off the German ship?

'I ... Yes, I was thinking about it at the time, but then ...'

'Then, you realised that the Institute might insist on you staying on board, with injuries like that, and you were anxious to get home. Well, I can understand that, but really ...'

Mrs Evans made an effort to appear stern and disapproving, and then remembered something. 'On the other hand, I'm glad you came, Siobhán, because there are a few things we need to discuss. Nothing complicated, so don't you worry your tired head. And I'll get you a nice cup of tea and some biscuits. I think we can take some from the batch for special occasions – you know, the fancy ones with the chocolate. But first, let me make a note here. We'll have to put out a press release about your return, now that we've got the whole team back – a bit of good news, isn't it? A welcome change from all the tragic things that are happening everywhere, what with the Troubles going on and on. Did you hear about the bombings down in London, just two days ago? Despite all the political talk, it's only getting worse, it seems. But your accommodation here ... I really wish ... Oh, well, not to worry. I'll set you up at the Granta, on the visitors account, at least until ...'

'No, that's all right. I can stay with my gran in Norwich. Most of my stuff is at her place already, in my old bedroom. I

deposited it there when I gave up my flat in Aberdeen.’

‘Oh, now that is a relief. Have you got a lot of luggage with you, dear?’

‘Only this kit bag here. Of the things I was given by the Institute, I managed to bring back the camera and the diving suit. I also rescued some of the notes and other data from the biology lab. But the books I had borrowed from the library were destroyed in the fire, I’m afraid. Also the survival suits: one of them was burnt in the locker room, and the other got ... well, sort of damaged.’

‘Not to worry, dear. It’s just ordinary wear and tear, isn’t it – and the special circumstances, of course. You can hang on to the bag for the time being, but leave the rest of your gear with me, the camera and the diving suit. You don’t need to burden yourself with that anymore, when you go out to Norwich.

‘But now that I remember: can’t you stay with your friend again, here in Cambridge? Alison was her name, wasn’t it? I met her, you know. She was here to pick up the letters and film rolls you had sent back after the holidays. She also asked if she could send a message to you, so I directed her to Personnel Section. Lovely girl – very pretty, isn’t she? And she was ever so polite. But she did give me the impression of being in a bit of a hurry, and nervous about something, if you ask me. From Personnel I heard that she was your primary contact. They tried to reach her after the fire. First at work, but they were told that she would be on a sabbatical until the end of April. Then, they repeatedly tried her home number, but only ever got the answer phone. So, finally, they had no choice but to inform your grand-

mother, although you had specifically requested not to contact her about anything serious. But eventually we had to tell someone, hadn't we? And ... I was very sorry to find out that way that you are without parents, dear. There was so little time to get to know you, wasn't there, before you left?

'It's all right. Gran easily makes up for a whole family.'

'Well, that's very sweet of you to say. But before you go, Siobhán, I need to discuss two things with you. One I remember off the top of my head, but I want to keep that for later. The other briefly occurred to me as we were talking about Alison just now. I mentioned it to her. But what was it again? I'm sure I've got a note here somewhere, attached it to your file. I meant to telex it through to Aurora, ages ago, but then it got buried. You know how it is, with one thing or another ... Now, in addition to everything else, we have these ugly contraptions to deal with – computers. As if life wasn't complicated enough already. I used to be able to lay it all out very nicely, never misplaced or forgot anything. But with this monstrosity sitting on my desk, taking up half the space ...

'Although, I do remember it now. It was about an article in one of these magazines you see everywhere. Here it is: Denise Quinn, editor of *Brigid*. She sounded quite young, not much older than yourself, I suspect. Alison knows the magazine, said she subscribed to it. So, I suppose it must be decent then, mustn't it? In any case, this Miss ... Mrs Quinn thought you might wright about your experiences on Antarctica. A column, I think she called it – yes, column is what I wrote here. But why do I even mention it to you, now that everything has changed. Poor

dear, it must have been such a disappointment. I know how excited you were about going down to Aurora.'

'I was. But it's good to be back, in a way. Looks like nothing has changed around here.'

'No, it's all as you left it – awful winter, though. The cold is getting into my bones. And then all that snow – the "wrong type of snow," apparently. That's what British Rail said. Makes you wonder what the right type might be, doesn't it? But it's finally beginning to thaw, and thank Heaven for that. I honestly don't know how you're managing on Antarctica. Of course, it's different down there, isn't it? I mean, the base is built on snow and ice, after all. And we wouldn't want that to melt now, would we? Just think what would happen then.'

'Yes ... The boss isn't in?'

'No, dear. Professor Taylor went on holidays again after the situation on Antarctica was sorted out; when you were on your way home on the ship, and the others had arrived back here in England. He'd been skiing in Austria, you know, when it happened; came back immediately when we heard about the fire. Oh, it was a terrible shock to all of us: the base destroyed, two of the team in critical conditions, and then – worst of all – you getting lost. John Rowlands, he was completely devastated, having had to make that awful decision to leave without you. For two days, no one got a wink of sleep, I can tell you, until the Germans finally radioed that they had found you alive. But if their base had been farther away ... If it had taken them only a day longer ... Well, they did get you out of a right old pickle this time, didn't they? So, three cheers – and who would have thought

we'd ever say that for the Germans. Then again, I guess, Antarctica isn't a place where you can be concerned about history and different nationalities and such. When you're up against the elements, you just have to find a way to work together, haven't you?

'But you mustn't believe that we'd given up on you – really, Siobhán, you mustn't. It was simply one of those awful situations where the safety of the team has to be placed above that of an individual. And at that moment, when they left, there was nothing more for them to do to find you. Now, with you back, we can breathe again – all's well that ends well, as the bard said. And you know, Siobhán, if we're being honest about it, it had to happen, hadn't it? Not to criticise anyone, of course, but I said it all along: the thirteenth wintering team ... I know you people think I'm a superstitious old bat. But I said it before, and I don't mind saying it again: they should have skipped that ungodly number.'

'Even so, we would still have been the thirteenth wintering team, no matter how you'd called us. Short of terminating the programme after twelve got back ...'

'There, you see, that's exactly what I mean. But there are things you scientists simply cannot understand. And then look where it gets you – into no end of trouble, right from the beginning. Starting with Brian getting struck on his shoulder by a rock during field training and ending up in hospital for a few days. Gerard forgetting the new transceiver for his ionospheric sounder, bless him, so that I had to send that after them. Then, there was bad weather on Ascension, bad weather on the Falk-

lands – one warning after the other, before they even got to Antarctica. And then, that unfortunate incident with your predecessor – Kevin, such a pleasant lad he was, never would have imagined. But he’s all right now, back at his old job.

‘Meanwhile, for the rest of us, worries about finding a suitable replacement for him. Professor Taylor, poor man, lost more hair over you lot than in all the other years that he’s been in charge here. And I still remember him as a young lad, you know, going south as part of the first team at Aurora. That’s them over there, in that black-and-white picture above the filing cabinet. The base was only a collection of a few wooden huts in those days. And they still had the dogs there, as you can see. In a few years, they were saying, even at Halo the last remaining dogs will have to be removed. There is going to be some kind of international agreement about “non-native animals.” Well, I don’t know, aren’t we all? Sometimes, I do wonder why we bother with Antarctica. But then they did find that strange hole in the sky, didn’t they? Apparently, that was very important. At least the Institute got a lot of credit for that.

‘And things are moving fast these days, aren’t they, in all sorts of ways. It’s such a nice change to have you here, Siobhán. And so glad he was, Professor Taylor, when he found you – you know, when we heard how well you managed down there. After all, it’s quite a rough place, isn’t it, for . . . well, anyone really. But what a shame you had to take over under such unfortunate circumstances. On top of everything else, just before you left, that horrible murder of your poor friend. When, all of a sudden, it was unclear whether the police would let you leave the country,

with their ongoing investigation. How they could ever have suspected you, I really don't know. Then, when things were sorted out at last, Professor Taylor away on his well-deserved holiday – that's when it happened, the explosion and the fire. And just when we thought the evacuation was going to be successful, the news came in that you had got lost on the way to the aircraft. Now you're telling me that these were only coincidences? Well ...

'Of course, we knew the base was getting old, didn't we? That's why they were already planning the next one. God knows where all the money will be coming from, now that we have to advance the schedule. Only recently, we had that new satellite system installed, as you know. And looking at our budget, I'm not at all sure if we're going to have a team on Aurora during the next year. Not surprisingly, the Germans are getting nervous now. If we're not going back at the end of this year, they will be pretty lonely down there. They already have to get through the coming winter on their own. What if something happens on their base? And that one is even older than ours, if I'm not mistaken – Helios, yes. They must be thinking about building a new one too, although they probably have got plenty of other things to worry about right now. Have to rebuild the whole eastern part of their country, haven't they?

'But I can still remember when we began the construction nine years ago – "Aurora IV, the most remote outpost of the Commonwealth. Keeping the legacy alive." That's how we'd sold the proposal to the Government, you know, just before we went to war on the Falklands. Now it's all different. These days,

it's all about "international collaboration," isn't it? That's how we're selling the new base, at any rate. But that it would happen so soon. We'd expected Aurora IV to be habitable for at least two more years. An electric failure in the generator room, they were saying. Well, I don't know.'

'So, the base is beyond repair?'

'I'm afraid so, dear. The *Steadfast* radioed this very morning. They arrived at Creek 9 yesterday, sent out a team to collect the snowmobiles you had left behind at the skiway, and to check on the base. There is nothing useable left inside the South Tube. It's completely burnt out and collapsed. They removed the fuel and some of the supplies from the other tunnel, and secured it for the winter. But it was a sad end for Aurora, wasn't it?'

'Yes, it was. Are any of the lads here?'

'No, dear. Everyone's on holidays – except me, of course. There is nothing for them to do at the moment, is there? Iain is bringing forward the wedding now. Did you know he got engaged before heading south? He certainly didn't tell anyone here about it. Must have thought we might not let him go for such a long period of time, if he had family ties – and he was right too. But I don't know. I think it's very romantic, isn't it? It must be comforting to know that you have a loved one waiting for you at home when you're that far away, in such a lonely place. And he said he's stopped smoking now. But he didn't seem too happy about it, if you ask me. I suspect his fiancé is behind that.'

'Hmm ... Andrew and Nigel, are they ...'

'They are fine, dear, both out of hospital now – no permanent harm done to anyone. Although, I imagine Andrew is still re-

covering at home. But that reminds me, Siobhán: you'll have to take a proper medical examination as well, just to be sure.'

'Another medical? But I'm much better.'

'No, you're not. Just look at you.'

'I'm simply tired from the journey.'

'Exactly, and that is no excuse. The Germans should never have let you off that ship. It was all arranged so nicely. You were going to have a good place to stay and to recover while we sorted things out here. And then, letting you go, all on your own, with your heavy kit bag – and in South Africa, of all places.'

'Actually, I wasn't alone. One of the Germans left the ship with me. He was flying home via Heathrow as well. And when we found out on Monday that the airport was closed due to the bombings ...'

'Makes no difference, Siobhán. You still need to ...'

'But I was rather hoping ... Do I really have to?'

'Yes, dear, and that's final. I saw the report the German doctor telexed to us – a woman, apparently – Monika Something-or-Other. Did she look well after you?' Mrs Evans leafed through various documents. 'She sent us her report in English, so that was considerate of her. I'm no medical expert, of course, but I do understand the meaning of concussions and contusions, severe blunt trauma, fractured ribs ... I was quite sure I had a copy of it somewhere. Listen, why don't you come back on Monday. Then I'll make an appointment for you with one of our own doctors in the Medical Unit. Mind you, this is not to reflect badly on the German doctor. I'm sure she is quite capable. But we have much better facilities here than what they have at their base or on the

ship – x-rays and these things, you know. This is important, dear, for you and the Institute. We’ve had enough problems already without you suffering from some delayed complications. And you’re on sick leave, with full pay, at least for the next month or so.’

‘Sick leave for a whole month? But I’m really ...’

‘No, Siobhán, you really are not. And it’s only until we’ve found something else for you to do. It’s all arranged with Aberdeen. You stay on our books and take some time off to recover, until we’ve decided how to proceed with the Antarctic programme.’

‘All right, thank you. I really appreciate that. I would have thought that, after all the trouble I caused ...’

‘Nonsense. Don’t be silly, dear. We’re all very glad to have you back. But now that this is off my desk, I can get to the last item on my list. For that, I shall have to leave you for just a minute. So, you go and sit yourself down in the lounge, rest your legs, and I’ll be back in a jiffy.’

As Siobhán waited, it occurred to her that having been put on sick leave might actually have been the best thing that could have happened to her. At least it provided her with the opportunity to focus her time and energy entirely on finding out what had happened to Alison. Surely, that had to be the main priority right now.

On the surface, of course, there was no reason to be concerned. Alison had understandably been depressed following a personal tragedy, had requested and been granted a sabbatical

from work, had told others that she had been planning to leave on her first day off, and then she had done so. That was all there was to it. And since everyone knew how desperately she had wanted to get away from everything for a while, nobody else was alarmed by the fact that she had not been in contact with anyone for weeks.

It all seemed proper and above board, except for one thing: Alison had told everyone when she had been planning to leave – everyone but Siobhán. Why would Alison have gone away without telling her, without leaving a message for her with the Institute? Where had she been on that Sunday, when they had agreed to speak again on the phone? On Alison's last day in Cambridge, when she could have told Siobhán about her definite plans for leaving?

No, Alison's absence did not feel right. Siobhán needed to get the spare key from her grandmother's home in Norwich, and then return to Cambridge at the earliest opportunity to check out Alison's flat. If there was no indication as to where exactly she had gone, it was time to get the police involved. After almost a month of silence, something needed to happen.

Mrs Evans entered the lounge, carrying a tray with two teacups, some cookies, and a flat object wrapped in brown packing paper, which was held together by a piece of coarse string.

'Sorry, dear. Took a bit longer. With all the excitement, I almost forgot about the tea and biscuits I had promised.' She put the tray down onto the table. 'And there is something else too. Before your teammates went away on their holidays, they

prepared this little present for you and left it with me, to pass on to you once you got back.'

With fond disapproval of its plain exterior, she removed the packet from the tray. 'Men ... You'd think they would make more of an effort, wouldn't you? But as they had decided to do it themselves, I didn't want to interfere. You can see it comes with a note.'

A single folded sheet of paper was tucked underneath the string, together with a black felt-tipped pen. The message on the inside page was written in a precise longhand.

Mrs Evans nodded encouragingly. 'Go on, dear – read it aloud.'

'Well, let's see. It says: *Siobhán*, ... Oh, no. This is going to be awkward.'

'Never mind that, dear. Just read it, do.'

'All right, here goes: *Siobhán, while serving Queen and Country, you managed to turn a combination of inexperience and bad luck into a heroic life-or-death struggle. You are therefore standing in a long line of British Antarctic explorers, upholding a tradition that is as old as British Antarctic exploration itself. But, against all odds, you made it through. No one could therefore be more deserving of the accompanying souvenir than you are. With the best wishes for a speedy recovery and hopes for future collaboration, signed on behalf of the XIII. Aurora Wintering Team, John Rowlands, Base Commander.*

Mrs Evans beamed. 'Well, that wasn't so bad now, was it. Then go on, dear, open the packet.'

It was light and supple, and Siobhán knew what it contained

even before the twine was unknotted, and the wrapping paper fell open.

She had never imaged to see their old flag again, or to hold it in her hands; to feel the worn-out cloth between her fingers. Through the memories it evoked, it still seemed to give off the dry smell of the vast frozen landscape above which it had flown, through sunshine and blizzards, unperturbed and staunch.

Although it was only three weeks since their hasty departure from Aurora, these events and everything leading up to them might well have belonged to a different life.

Still, the weathered Union Jack was undoubtedly the same, except that now it was covered all over with proud sprawling signatures, scattered around a bold roman thirteen right at the centre of the cross – covered all over, except for some space just above the middle that had been kept conspicuously clear.

* * *

The officer at the reception desk reluctantly glanced up from his paperwork. ‘Can I help you?’

‘My name is Siobhán Dannreuther. I’d like to speak with DCI Anderson. It’s about a missing person.’

‘DCI Anderson is in CID. He’s working on major crimes. If you want to report a missing person . . .’

‘I know. But the person who’s gone missing is a witness in a case he’s investigating. Her name is Alison Jane Conway. She and I were interviewed in December about the murder of Kathleen Reed. I’m very concerned about her, and I need to speak with the Chief Inspector. He knows me.’

The officer nodded. ‘Could you wait over there, please? I’ll let him know you’re here.’

He picked up his phone and dialled a number. His attitude had changed completely with the mentioning of Kathleen. There was now a real sense of urgency in his behaviour. Any reference to the case evidently still attracted immediate attention.

The officer hung up the phone and indicated “he’s coming.”

So, the busy detective was willing to give Siobhán some of his precious time. But casually throwing out Kathleen’s name had been reckless, an obvious bait, given that, on the surface, there was no good reason to suspect any connection between Alison’s absence and Kathleen’s abduction and murder. Strictly speaking, from an outsider’s perspective, there was not even a particularly good reason to be suspicious about Alison’s absence at all.

It was therefore imperative to be rational and sensible about it now, to take the opportunity to lay out the situation exactly as it was, in a calm, collected, and well-articulated manner.

‘Miss Dannreuther ...’ DCI Anderson came striding across the entrance hall, visibly tired and over-worked, but smiling as he held out his hand. ‘Good to see you again. You got back safely from Antarctica then?’

‘Yes, I did, thank you – and sooner than expected. But now, Alison has disappeared. She was the one who contacted you about ...’

‘Yes, of course. I remember her well – both of you. How ...’ He hesitated and then checked his watch. ‘We should talk somewhere else. We can go to one of the witness interview rooms.’

But I'm afraid I can't spare much time right now.'

The room was significantly friendlier than the one that had been used for her previous interviews, with a round table in the centre, a few chairs – cushioned this time, and without a tape recorder. It had a window overlooking the snowy park. Across from the police station, the acute spire of Our Lady could be seen through a line of bare trees, pointing up into a cloudy sky. It struck Siobhán how grey England was in winter. Even the snow had none of the crisp sparkle that it had on Antarctica.

DCI Anderson pulled one of the chairs out from underneath the table. 'Please, take a seat. Can I get you some tea or coffee?'

'No, thank you, Chief Inspector.'

'All right.' He settled down himself. 'So, you said that Miss Conway has disappeared. How do you know that? You must have got back only recently yourself.'

'Yesterday. But I've tried to reach her by phone for more than three weeks now. I picked up the spare key to her flat and went there this morning. She definitely hasn't been at home for a while. The earliest post I found was stamped Monday, 28th January. That is also the date of the oldest message on her answer phone, a message that I left from Antarctica. We had arranged for me to phone her the previous Sunday. I had tried all evening and again on that Monday, but without success. I phoned her office this morning, and they confirmed that she had been at work until Friday, the 25th. So, that leaves two days – Friday afternoon to Sunday afternoon – during which she must have disappeared somehow.'

‘I remember she works for a regional television station.’

‘She’s the deputy editor of the current affairs programme for Cambridgeshire, yes – *Focus East Analysis*. But here’s the thing: she’s been on a three-month sabbatical since 28th January.’

DCI Anderson reacted with an impatient gesture and checked his watch again. ‘Then I honestly don’t understand what the problem is.’

‘The problem is that she wouldn’t go away without telling me.’

‘But you were away. Communications with Antarctica must be extremely limited.’

‘They are. But she could have left a message with my institute here in Cambridge, only a few words, and they would have telexed it through to the base. She also hasn’t contacted my grandmother since the last time she visited her in Norwich, either on 22nd or 23rd January. Gran wasn’t quite sure if it was the Tuesday or the Wednesday.’

‘She and your grandmother are close?’

‘Yes, very. Gran basically raised us together.’

He nodded. ‘And what were your grandmother’s feelings about Miss Conway’s absence.’

‘Well, Alison told her that she was planning to go to Dublin the following Monday ...’

‘Miss Dannreuther ...’

‘No, please, I’m trying to explain. It’s true that Gran knows about Alison’s planned departure. She also knows how depressed Alison has been ever since the murder, how much she wanted to get away from here for a while – and everyone encouraged her

to do so, Gran included. She thought that Alison simply needed a clean break for a while, when she didn't hear from her. And so I guess ... Yes, all right, she didn't seem overly worried about not having heard from Alison since her last visit.'

'Not worried at all, then?'

'No, but ...'

'Miss Dannreuther, your concern for your friend does you credit. But aren't you perhaps just a little worn out after your adventure on Antarctica?'

'The only thing wearing me out right now is the uncertainty about Alison – and I do mean uncertainty. Had she communicated to me when she was going to leave, I wouldn't be worried about her absence any more than everyone else is. But she didn't, and I can't simply ignore that. Also, where was she on that Sunday prior to her planned departure, when I repeatedly tried to phone her, knowing I was going to phone?'

'Maybe she forgot about it in the excitement over her trip to Dublin. Or maybe she had a very early flight and had to leave the previous evening.'

'She planned to take the train via Holyhead.'

'That could have left early too, and she would have had to get down to London first.' DCI Anderson was getting increasingly impatient. 'Can you think of any reason why she would have left without telling you – you, specifically?'

'No.'

'Did you have an argument, for example?'

'No ... not really.'

'Then you did have an argument?'

‘Not an argument, just . . . Alison was very upset the last time we spoke via the satellite link from Antarctica – depressed, as I said. I didn’t know how to help her, or what to say. Obviously, we couldn’t meet and talk it over in person. There just wasn’t anything I could do, and I may have come across as uncaring. I don’t know.’

He sighed. ‘The way I see it, if she was under any mental strain, it isn’t too surprising that she would have behaved out of character. Also, you’ve been living away from Cambridge for several years now. Your personal contact with Miss Conway must have been considerably less than what it used to be. And people do change.’

Was that it? Had Alison truly changed that much within the last few years? Had she resented it after all that Siobhán had been able to leave Cambridge in the wake of the murder? Although it had been Alison herself who had encouraged Siobhán to leave as planned? After their last phone conversation – consciously or not – had she perhaps wanted to demonstrate to Siobhán how it felt to be abandoned, by leaving home without telling her?

Seeing Siobhán’s anxiety, DCI Anderson became more sympathetic. ‘When you visited Miss Conway’s flat this morning, was there any indication that makes her absence suspicious?’

‘It’s the fact that she’s gone that makes her absence suspicious.’

‘Miss Dannreuther, the flat?’

‘No, it’s all as you might expect, no sign of a break-in or a struggle, no indication that she left in a hurry. The door chain

wasn't broken, and I know she always put that up when she was at home, at least since the murder. Also, the fridge is empty and cleaned. Only this isn't about Alison's flat. In that case, I wouldn't worry. This is about her.'

'All right . . . Are you sufficiently familiar with her belongings to be able to say whether anything is missing?'

'Her large travel bag is gone, and so are many of her clothes.'

'And her passport?'

'I couldn't find it.'

DCI Anderson looked at Siobhán with a thoughtful and slightly pitying expression. 'Either way, it's only been . . .'

'Four weeks tomorrow since she was last seen by anyone, or since anyone heard of her. Even if she had been angry with me at the time, she would have cooled off since then and would have got in touch with my institute.'

He nodded, getting perhaps a little concerned himself. 'I take it you didn't find any hotel reservation in her flat, any information about where she might be staying, or how she might be contacted in Dublin?'

'There was nothing. But Gran told me that Alison had planned to travel along the northeast coast during the first week or so, up to Belfast and on to Derry, possibly making spontaneous stops along the way, before returning to Dublin. Alison wanted to visit the main conflict areas, and she showed Gran a list of B&B's that she had got from a travel agent that day, together with her *Sealink* ticket. Neither are in her flat, at least not in any obvious spot – and I do realise what that might imply.'

DCI Anderson's mood alternated between impatience and com-

passion. ‘Miss Dannreuther, I have seen the two of you together under stressful conditions. I have seen how supportive you were of each other, and I have no doubt that you are very close and both very fond of each other. I therefore do not think that your attempts of finding Miss Conway are anything but honourable. Nor do I think that Miss Conway is actively trying to hide from you. But as an adult, she has every right to be away for a while, even from close friends and family. Nonetheless, although the circumstances of her absence do not appear to be suspicious, given the amount of time that has passed since at least two close acquaintances have heard from her, we will classify her as missing.’

He took a notebook out of the inner pocket of his jacket and leafed through to an empty page near the end. ‘We already have her particulars on file from the Reed investigation – and yours. But I still need to assess the level of risk, so that we can respond appropriately. Is this the first instance when you have been unaware of Miss Conway’s current whereabouts?’

‘Yes. That’s what I’m trying to say. She ...’

‘Miss Dannreuther, please. I do understand. But I still need to ask certain questions, even if some of them may seem unnecessary or insensitive. One thing in particular I need to clarify. You said she was depressed at the last occasion you spoke with her. Is there any chance that she might ...’

‘She would never do that.’

‘... cause self-harm?’

‘Never.’

‘Are you aware of any vulnerability? For example, does she

need regular medication?’

‘No.’

‘Can you think of anyone who would want to harm her?’

‘No. Everyone who knows Alison loves her. She’s just ... But you know her. You met her. Here, I brought the most recent photograph of hers I could find in her flat. I took it last July when she visited me up at the field station in Scotland.’

There was Alison, standing on the gallery of Tarbat Ness Lighthouse, high above the ground, smiling happily, with her hair streaming in the wind, and the sun sinking over Moray Firth behind her.

DCI Anderson contemplated the photograph for a moment, then he nodded. ‘We will do everything we can, Miss Dannerreuther. I’m still confident that everything is all right with your friend, but we won’t take any chances. So, let’s go over a few more points to establish the situation in more detail. One possibility we must consider is that she had an accident that has gone unnoticed. She might have been cycling or jogging on her own, the weekend before she intended to leave, before you tried to reach her by phone. It’s been unusually cold and snowy these past weeks. If she slipped and fell ...’

‘No, she never uses her bicycle in winter, and she never does sports on her own. Since our school days, she’s always been a team player. This winter, the only athletic activity of hers, that I’m aware of, has been the aerobics classes. That’s where she met Kathleen, as you know.’

‘All right ... Then what about her flat: does she own it, or is she renting?’

‘The latter. I saw on a bank statement that her rent continues to be paid by standing order.’

‘And the other bills?’

‘Are being forwarded to Gran. Alison arranged for that before she disappeared.’

‘Does she keep a diary?’

‘No, not that I know of.’

‘Does she have access to a vehicle?’

‘She owns a car – a red 205. It’s still parked outside the apartment building on Chesterton Road. The keys are in her flat.’

‘Would she use it if she was travelling within mainland Britain?’

‘Most likely, yes.’

‘Then this is consistent with her being abroad?’

‘Unless ...’

‘I understand. And I assure you that we will be taking this case very seriously – like all the other missing person cases we get.’ He closed his notebook. ‘I shall make sure that this information is recorded on the police national database. I shall also arrange for regular airwaves circulation over the next few days, asking Miss Conway to get in touch with either us or her friends and relatives. I shall get someone to go over the police and hospital records; contact the coroner, to see if they have any unidentified victims who match her description. We will begin locally and expand the enquiry if necessary. The case will remain open until Miss Conway has been found, and it will be reviewed at regular intervals. But unless the circumstances change, that is all we can do at the moment. I hope you agree that, right now, there is no apparent risk of danger to your friend.’

‘Well, I do wonder whether an assessment of Kathleen’s situation, the day before she was abducted, would have come to the same conclusion – that there was no apparent risk of danger.’

DCI Anderson struggled to maintain his calm. ‘Miss Dannreuther, nothing I know about that murder case gives me any cause to suspect that there is any relevant connection to your friend’s current absence from her fixed abode. Her involvement, or yours, as tangential as it was, has never been made public. I therefore really do not see how ...’

‘Yes, I know, I’m sorry. It’s just that I am genuinely scared. And it is true that you received crucial information from some anonymous source – most likely from the real perpetrators, who have not been found yet.’

He hesitated for a moment. ‘I don’t know how much you know about this case, Miss Dannreuther, and what you read or heard about it in the media. Sadly, the news reporting has been rather poor overall. Briefly, then, stripped of all sensationalised speculations and supernatural trappings, here is what happened. Sometime between 10th and 15th December last year, Miss Reed was abducted from her home in Cambridge and brought to the abandoned manor house at Loch Cuirinnein in the Scottish Highlands. Forensic analysis indicates that she was kept there, for a short period, in a room different from the dining hall in which she was found. We don’t know exactly what happened to her during that time. Her body showed no signs of violence prior to her death. But we do know that she died of an overdose of heroin, in combination with a sedative-hypnotic drug, about two to three days before she was examined at the scene of the crime.

If the group of young people who discovered Miss Reed's body arrived at the manor house when they said they did, she would have been killed only a few hours previously. Based on the information that you mentioned, we arrested all these cult members. While the prosecution is mounted against them, they have been put on remand, pending the jury trial in summer. Regarding these other individuals who were at the manor house – whoever they are, and whatever their involvement is in this crime – I assure you that we are doing everything in our power to apprehend them and to bring them to justice.'

'But isn't it true that you have come to the conclusion that the group who were arrested did not actually commit the murder; that they were set up, for some reason, by these other people who are still out there?'

'At this point, we have not come to any conclusion, Miss Danreuther. And I cannot discuss an ongoing investigation – beyond the facts I have just summarised for you, which are already publicly known through the initial court hearing. It is a very complex investigation, with various police forces collaborating across the country, coordinated now by the Metropolitan Police.'

'And the owners of the manor house?'

'Excluded from our investigation, entirely. That is all I can tell you about that.'

'Has anyone been back at the building – of the police, I mean?'

'Not since we completed our investigation.'

'I need to know if Alison is there.'

'You don't think that ...'

'Why not? Nobody would expect it to happen again so soon,

at the same spot. The people behind Kathleen's murder clearly feel safe from prosecution. Otherwise, they would never have denounced all these cult members in a manner that makes it blatantly obvious that they had been there too. They are confident that, in that remote place, they can continue to come and go and do anything they please, without being discovered. Once they bring a new victim there, they simply leave and stay somewhere else. And if anyone finds the victim, that abduction too will be put down to some Satanic rituals, which do not appear to have anything to do with the real crimes that are being committed up there.'

'All right. I do understand your concerns.' He glanced at his watch. 'I shall contact Northern Constabulary and ask them if they can send a car up from Ullapool, to check on the manor house again – just to be sure. However, without a warrant, we will have to get the owners' permission before we can enter the building and search inside. By tomorrow morning, we should have the answer. Then, you can contact me again. But now, I'm afraid, I have other duties to attend to.'

CHAPTER TWO

THE MESSAGE

A deadly silence pervaded the first floor flat. The dampened sounds of the outside world – the occasional passing of a car, or the church bells ringing in the Sunday service – all seemed far away and disconnected. On the inside, no sense was preserved of the previous vibrancy of a happily occupied living space.

Nonetheless, that empty flat was the one remaining point of contact with Alison. It was there, then, that the search for her had to begin. Somewhere within those deserted rooms had to be some information about her last days in Cambridge; some clues to where she might be now, and about the circumstances of either her planned departure or her forced disappearance.

As Siobhán listened into the silence, she began to understand what Alison had so desperately been trying to tell her, during their increasingly tense phone calls from Antarctica, about a darkness she had felt creeping ever closer to her, becoming ever more threatening with each sleepless night. Standing now in the same space, and remembering her friend's words, Siobhán too began to sense the presence of some unknown malevolence, although it was impossible to explain exactly why. Was it that the shadows hiding behind pieces of furniture seemed a little too expansive to be natural? Or was it that they always seemed to move, just at the edge of vision, whenever she turned to keep another dark corner in sight?

Siobhán could not help feeling that the shadows were the manifestations of tragic events in the recent past that lingered into the present, encroaching on her, when everything else in the flat was static, as if frozen in a particular moment in time.

Those were the emotional surroundings in which Alison had lived during the final days in her previously cherished home. But had these surroundings only been created through the terror of her own imagination? Or had, one day, the shadows indeed come to life, taken shape behind her, overpowered her, and taken her away?

If Alison really had been abducted, there had to be a connection to Kathleen's abduction two months previously. That would mean that the perpetrators were likely the same. And the same perpetrators were likely to follow a similar strategy when carrying out a similar crime.

If, then, Alison had been abducted from her own flat, as Kathleen had been, with the chain at the door still unbroken, an attack on her could only have been carried out if the intruders had entered by picking the lock while she and most other residents of the building had been away at work. If they had watched her for days, they would have known about her daily routine, that she lived alone, and never brought anyone home with her.

And so, on that fateful day, returning from work, Alison would have unlocked her apartment door and stepped into the hallway. She would have deposited the keys at the usual spot on the chest of drawers. For a moment then, she would have been standing in front of the mirror, able to see behind her – the dark opening of the door to the kitchen. She would have switched on the

light in the hallway and walked over to the coat rack, away from the mirror. While she was occupied with hanging up her coat, a figure might have stepped out from the kitchen, grabbed her from behind and put a hand over her mouth to prevent her from screaming. Then, very quickly, the others would have emerged. Physically fit as Alison was, and not easily intimidated, it would have taken at least two to pull off such an assault without creating a lot of noise.

That would have happened in the late afternoon or early evening, when there was plenty of movement throughout the building and out on the streets, as everyone else was also returning from work. This would have made an immediate attempt to take Alison away very risky. Instead, they would have waited until later that night. During that time, they would most likely have placed Alison on her bed, after they had injected her with the same sedative drug that had been found during Kathleen's post-mortem.

Would there have been someone with her in the bedroom? Cramped as it was with half of Siobhán's belongings – piles of bags and cardboard boxes in every available corner – there was barely enough space for one person to move about. Without anywhere to sit, except on the bed next to Alison, would they not rather have waited in the living room, or in the adjacent office? If they had left the door to the bedroom open, they could have heard instantly when Alison began to stir.

It was likely, in fact, that they would have waited precisely for that to happen. It would not have been sensible to carry an unconscious person out of the flat and to manoeuvre them into a vehicle that would necessarily have been parked on the street

outside the apartment building. Anyone who had witnessed that would have realised immediately that a crime was being committed. After nightfall, the intruders would therefore have wanted Alison to be able to walk on her own, while no doubt threatening her with some concealed weapon.

If such an abduction had indeed occurred, those responsible had very successfully removed any obvious signs of a struggle. However, there was a remote possibility that, after Alison had regained consciousness, she had been presented with a brief opportunity to leave some kind of message, some subtle indication that she had been attacked and was about to be taken away.

The chance of finding such a message was exceedingly slim – unless Alison had somehow managed to contrive the presence of a clue that would be apparent to someone entering her flat once her absence had roused suspicion, but had been invisible or unrecognisable to the perpetrators at the time.

Only Siobhán knew of Alison's persistent fears of being followed around and having her private space invaded – the one person who was not supposed to be there, not for another year, if things on Antarctica had gone as planned. And although she felt as if she were nothing but a ghost, haunting a once familiar world that had turned lifeless and empty, it might have taken several weeks longer for anyone else to begin investigating, had it not been for her unexpected earlier return.

Alison would have been aware of this delay. Whatever the reason for the attack on her, she would have realised that, by the time anyone would be concerned enough about her absence to enter her flat, the probability of her still being alive would be

small. If she had somehow managed to leave a message, the objective for doing so would have been revenge, to provide as much information as she could about what had happened and why, to allow others to track down the assailants and bring them to justice.

What, then, could Alison be expected to have known? Before the attack, even she had not trusted her own instincts as they had attempted to warn her of the ongoing surveillance and the imminent danger. She certainly had been unable to as much as guess at the identities of the pursuers and their motives. And she had been as mystified by Kathleen's abduction and murder as everyone else had been. It was true that she had begun to suspect that the remote manor house in the Scottish Highlands, in which Kathleen had been found, was more substantially connected to the crime than through the Satanic rituals that had been performed there. But the last time they had spoken via the satellite link from Antarctica, Alison had not yet managed to find any evidence to support her suspicion.

Nonetheless, if indeed there was a message hidden inside the flat, Siobhán had to find it, if only to obtain certainty that a tragedy had befallen her friend, conclusive proof that she could take to the police, even if the identities and motives of the perpetrators were still unknown.

If Alison did get an opportunity to leave some clue behind, she could not have been kept under total observation. This would only have been the case if her attackers had been confident to be able to remove all traces of the abduction. None but the most subtle indications could therefore be expected to persist.

The most obvious place to begin the search was the bedroom. But it did not take long to establish that there was nothing concealed within the pillow and duvet covers, or between the sheet and the mattress. Underneath the bed was only a biro. Its style suggested that it belonged to the little notebook that lay on the bedside cabinet. It was brand-new and had never been written in. None of its pages were missing. There was also nothing inside the chest of drawers, or on the shelves inside the wardrobe. All the coat pockets were empty.

But this was far too easy anyway. These were exactly the kind of locations that anyone would check first. Any lasting evidence of the crime, any message that had been allowed to remain, had to be hidden well, at least from the perpetrators. From their point of view, it had to be encoded in seemingly insignificant details.

To find these elusive clues would require greater intuition and flexibility of mind than Siobhán felt she possessed. She was confident in her work as a scientist. She was methodical and persistent. And if it was a question of following a logical chain of reasoning, of systematically testing various hypotheses, guided by careful observations, she knew she would eventually arrive at the correct solution.

But this was different. This was exactly the kind of puzzle that Alison had always excelled in, the kind of conundrum that required a mental deviation from a straight line, taking an oblique look at an open question, whereas Siobhán preferred attacking her problems head-on. However, she could not fail Alison now. She needed to work this out on her own because for once her clever friend was not around to help her out. She needed to make

her best effort to continue searching for something she ultimately hoped not to find.

Having so far failed to find any visible clues, Siobhán was reminded that there were other means of transmitting information. And one of the most important invisible signals was sound. Anything that had happened inside the flat would have produced some noise. If Alison really had been attacked after she had returned home from work, she might have briefly managed to get away from the intruders, if only for a few seconds. She might have staggered into the living room, over to the shelves with the stereo. Then, fending off her assailants with one hand, she might have been able to secretly press the record button on the tape deck behind her.

There was a well-worn mix tape inside the right drive. Having stopped in the middle, it could not have run until it shut off automatically at the end. Even so, to be sure, Siobhán rewound the tape for a few seconds, hit playback, and the chorus of “Life on Mars?” broke into the hushed stillness. That was the end of that hypothesis. Whatever tragic story may once have been written onto the stagnant air inside the room, it had long faded away without leaving a record.

The row of photographs on the shelf above the stereo was unperturbed, standing exactly as it had always done, and presenting Alison’s life in a sequence of snapshots. On the far left was the old baby picture together with her parents. This was followed by Alison and Siobhán, perhaps five years old, playing at the shore of Lake Windermere, with Siobhán’s grandmother only visible as a shadow while taking the photograph. Further on towards

the right was their school hockey team, with Alison standing at the back, slender and smiling confidently, clearly the leader of the pack; and squatting in the front row was Siobhán, her sturdy appearance accentuated by the goalkeeper's protective pads.

What had happened? Alison's and her life had used to be so closely entwined for so many years. Although the photographs were meant to tell Alison's story, Siobhán was usually present alongside her: there at the graduation ceremony in the yard of Senate House; there all dressed up again for the Proms, posing outside the Albert Hall; up until the very last photograph of Alison's that Siobhán had taken herself – just an empty frame now, the glass cover reflecting her own worried face against the black cardboard, worn out and haggard compared to all those years ago.

But Siobhán could not indulge in nostalgia now. She could not allow herself to be taken over by sentimentality, to allow her thoughts to linger in happier days that threatened to become a distant past. She needed to hang on to her common sense and rationality. That alone would allow her to solve the riddle that the empty flat potentially presented to her.

The final room left to investigate was the small office at the end of the corridor. There, too, everything looked ordinary. The letter from work granting Alison the sabbatical still lay on her desk. It had arrived two days before their last phone conversation and only served to confirm the generally accepted scenario that Alison really had gone away to Dublin as planned. Among the other papers on her desk, as well as inside the waste paper basket, a careful examination revealed nothing that would seem

suspicious or otherwise significant.

No new messages had been recorded on the answer phone since Siobhán's visit three days ago. Before then, there were only two that Alison had not listened to. The earliest was Siobhán's own message from Aurora, the evening before the fire, desperately trying to sound cheerful underneath the static crackle of the long-distance satellite connection, but quite obviously concerned by the repeated unsuccessful attempts to reach her friend. This was followed the next day by a message from the British Institute for Polar Research, informing Alison that they needed to speak with her in a serious matter. Everyone else who would normally have been likely to phone her, evidently, expected her to be away.

Next to the phone lay a tidy folder with newspaper clippings about Kathleen's abduction and murder, together with photocopies of documents that Alison had collected from various archives. Also included were several pages of neatly handwritten notes. The fact that the folder still lay on her desk suggested that, even as Alison had organised her trip to Ireland, she had not been quite ready yet to let go of the case.

The only other items on the desk were the few letters that Siobhán herself had placed there, having taken them out of the postbox on her first return to Alison's flat. But since they had clearly arrived after Alison's departure, they could not possibly provide any clue to what had happened prior to that. There was no personal communication among them, nor anything that seemed urgent – except perhaps the one letter from the Central Library.

Having ignored it the first time around, Siobhán realised that, if it was a reminder for an overdue book, she could return it and save Alison the late charges. As expected, it was an overdue notice, for *The Secrets of Narnia – A Guide to the Magical World of C.S. Lewis*. The book had been due on 6th February. That date caught Siobhán's attention as it had been the day she had left Antarctica on the German icebreaker.

But then it struck her that far more remarkable was the fact that the book had become overdue at all. Well-organised and meticulous as Alison was, she would never have forgotten to return borrowed items before going away for an extended period of time – under normal circumstances, at least. Was that just another reflection on Alison's mental state leading up to her planned departure to Dublin? Or was that perhaps finally the clue that suggested that she had indeed been forcibly taken away a few days earlier?

In either case, the book still had to be somewhere inside the flat. But where? A library book with the laminated cover and the stickers would have stood out already during Siobhán's search – whether it had been lying about on any of the tables, or whether accidentally it had been put onto any of the book shelves in the living room.

Then, Siobhán remembered that there were several stacks of old children's books piled on top of the wardrobe in the bedroom. She had to squint to be able to read some of the spines. There were a few titles that she remembered. They evoked memories of Alison and herself as little girls, tucked up in bed together, while her grandmother read them a goodnight story. The light

near the ceiling was a little dim. But seen from below, none of the spines looked as if they might belong to a library book.

Siobhán was about to return to the office when she noticed one of the albums she shared with Alison, containing the photographs from their primary school years together. Although this was clearly not the right time, the urge to leaf through it again, after so many years, suddenly became too strong to resist.

But the album was difficult to reach, and even harder to wriggle out from underneath the other albums and the few children's books that lay on top of it. When it was finally halfway out, the pile began to tilt dangerously. And just as Siobhán contemplated whether it might be worth getting a chair from the kitchen, the pile toppled over backwards.

By the scraping sound that immediately followed the collapse, something had fallen behind the wardrobe. Stretching around its side, Siobhán could see that one of the albums had got stuck near the top. With her fingers wedged between the wall and the back of the wardrobe, she began to rock the bulky piece of furniture, a few millimetres at a time, until the album began to slip. Then, it dropped, dislodging a narrower book that had got stuck farther down.

It was the library book. It was not missing after all. Inadvertently, it had been hidden in plain sight, like a needle in a pin cushion, so well that it had escaped Siobhán's scrutiny in the poor light. Cleaning up one day, distracted and in a hurry as Alison had probably been before her departure, she had put the library book on top of the wardrobe, together with her own children's books, and then she had simply forgotten about it.

Leafing through it, Siobhán was relieved to find that the damage done by the fall was minor. Although some of the pages were bent, none had been torn. But then she saw that on the notice with return dates, which had been taped to the inside of the front cover, was some handwriting, only a few words in shaky letters:

Ultima Thule
Where is the Secret?
Who guards it?

* * *

Nothing ... There was nothing in any of the newspaper clippings, nor in any of the other documents and notes that Alison had collected about Kathleen's murder, not a single reference to Ultima Thule. And yet, these words clearly had held such a significance for her that, the very instant she had come across them, she had felt compelled to write them into a library book.

It was not her usual neat handwriting. But there could not be any doubt that it had been Alison who had written these words. If the previous lender had written straight across the list of return dates, the notice would have been replaced.

There was also little doubt that these words were related to Kathleen's murder. Since Alison had checked out the library book, fifteen days prior to her last day at work, nothing else had occupied her strongly enough to make her behave in such an uncharacteristic fashion.

The colour of the writing matched that of the biro that Siobhán had found underneath Alison's bed. The same was true for

one of the other blue biro on the desk. However, there was the possibility that, lying on her bed, Alison had written into the library book after she had been attacked. In addition to being panicked and in a great hurry, during a brief unobserved moment, a state of intoxication from having been injected with a sedative drug could then account for the unclear writing.

But what had Alison been trying to convey through this secret message? Had she truly found out something about Kathleen's murder that everyone else had overlooked? If so, the intruders had surely removed any incriminating material from the folder that Alison had compiled about the case. The fact that it no longer contained any information that would have explained these three cryptic lines, therefore, came as no surprise.

Against this terrifying hypothesis stood the question about a motive that was strong enough to carefully plan and carry out such a ruthless act of violence. Even if Alison had come across something previously unknown that was critical to solving Kathleen's murder, how could the perpetrators have found out about that? As DCI Anderson had pointed out to Siobhán only three days ago, there was no relevant connection between Alison and the ongoing investigation, and no connection at all that was publicly known.

There was, however, another way of explaining all available evidence that did not involve any violent crimes and thus required no motive. Under that scenario, the lines in the library book had been written at the time when Alison had been most depressed, before she had made the decision to take her sabbatical and to get away from Cambridge for a while. Consistent

with what she had described to Siobhán on the phone, she may have woken up one night, still drunk, having fallen asleep on the sofa in the living room, afraid of going to bed and being haunted again by her recurring nightmares. In that state, she may have thought of something she felt was related to the murder case. As she did not want to forget it, and with nothing else around, she wrote it into the library book. Then, tidying up the next day, hung-over and unable to remember anything that had happened during the night, she simply put the book on top of her wardrobe by mistake. And so, intoxication by alcohol, rather than some forcibly injected sedative drug, could also explain the misplaced library book, as well as the nature of the writing inside it.

The light from the midday sun gradually began to penetrate the grey wintry sky and feebly shone into the office window. Over an hour had passed since Siobhán had found the few handwritten words in the library book and had begun to carefully read through the material that Alison had compiled about Kathleen's murder. Now that she had got to the end of the meticulously assembled collection of documents, which also included a summary of Alison's research on the manor house, she was still left with nothing but uncertainty and a growing fear that her suspicion would prove to be correct, that the mysterious lines in the library book were indeed a secret message deliberately left by Alison, rather than a note to herself that she had written in a state of confusion.

However, one thing was certain: Siobhán could not stay any longer inside the empty flat. Already, she felt as if the things

she had just read about were beginning to take over her mind – as it had happened to her friend. She could not trust herself to remain on her own, turning over the same thoughts again and again. She needed to get out. There were far too many questions for which there would be no answers within those silent walls. If something terrible really had happened to Alison, there was no more time to lose.

Siobhán would let the police follow their routine enquiries. She could do nothing to contribute to that. Instead, she would go off in another direction and see where that would lead her. She would not betray Alison by assuming that she had been inebriated when she wrote into the library book. As irrational as it seemed, Siobhán would follow the clues that, at least at some point, had meant something to her friend. She would find out as much as she could about the bizarre subjects she had read about in Alison's folder. She would enter the world of Satanic rituals and witchcraft.

For that, she needed to talk to someone who had experience with unconventional beliefs; someone who would not tell her to be sensible and simply believe what most others in that situation would believe; someone who was irrational enough themselves to not outrightly reject any less plausible notions. Most importantly, she needed to talk to someone who understood the power of emotions.

In short, she needed to talk to someone like Claire.

CHAPTER THREE

THE WAY BACK

The rows of greying sandstone buildings on either side of North Street were still as familiar as they had been two and a half years ago – as was the blustery winter weather. The pointed bell tower of St Salvator's Chapel was ominously shrouded in fog, and driving rain howled through the wynds on the seaward side of the road. Although the sea itself remained out of view, its smell was carried inland by the wind, together with the skirling of the multitude of birds.

St Andrews . . . Despite the stormy weather, what to Siobhán had always seemed to be a sleepy and dull little town, now, under the circumstances of her return, had a comfortingly mundane atmosphere.

Even back then, during her final years as a student, she felt that she must have been happy there, in a restlessly detached sort of way, confident that some day an opportunity would present itself of taking her research out into the more remote corners of the planet.

And, for a while, it had seemed as if that had indeed been the case. But now she was back, just passing through again, and this time bringing with her something of the darkness that had surrounded her ever since her return to Cambridge – the same darkness perhaps that Alison had attempted to warn her about, while she had still been far away on Antarctica.

At that time, Siobhán had been unable to believe that any physical danger could be associated with the invisible threat that Alison had perceived during the two weeks leading up to her disappearance. Siobhán had failed to accept her friend's fears as anything other than symptoms of the shock and subsequent depression that had been brought on by Kathleen's violent death. And it seemed that everyone else who knew Alison was still in that same state of disbelief.

But since her return from Antarctica, Siobhán had entered Alison's flat – apparently the only one who had done so since Alison's disappearance. As a consequence, no one else so far had felt that lifeless silence and emptiness inside the abandoned rooms, that all-pervasive menacing presence that hung over everything. Siobhán alone had experienced that the same phantoms that had terrified Alison had still been there, waiting to attach themselves to a new victim.

Then again, having been alone in the flat, with nothing to distract her and no one else to engage with, trapped inside her own mind, perhaps Siobhán had simply relived her friend's fears. Had Alison not told her about them on the phone, Siobhán might well have experienced nothing but an ordinary living space that was temporarily unoccupied.

And yet, something dark was undeniably going on. Satanic rituals had been conducted in a remote manor house over a period of months, and there had been at least one murder that was somehow connected either to these rituals, or to the location itself. These were well-established facts, not just some vague feelings. And those responsible for the murder were still out there,

somewhere, pursuing a plan that was yet to be revealed.

Understanding what that plan was would be essential for preventing any further tragedies. Without an apparent motive, Kathleen's murder in itself was unlikely to have been the ultimate goal. And its execution had been too elaborate and too clinical for a random act of violence. Perhaps further violent crimes had already been committed. And unless those shadowy figures in the background were stopped, more violence was likely to follow.

Of course, this was not a suitable topic for casual conversation. Even with Claire, with whom Siobhán had shared a flat for almost four years, she would have to approach the subject carefully. Without having maintained any contact, she had been away for too long to show up again, out of the blue, and immediately ask peculiar questions.

As she got closer to her old home, it occurred to her that she had not even remembered to get a present for Claire. Indeed, until the previous day, she had not really thought of Claire as someone she would ever meet again, even after she had been reminded of her twice on Antarctica. When, on the return journey, she had seen the woollen scarves at the market in Cape Town, it had been Alison whom she had thought of – although, looking back, she realised that, in truth, their bright colours were much more Claire's style.

Now, it was too late, for there already was the familiar blue door, set back deep inside the weathered wall, in a mostly futile attempt to provide some shelter from the harsh elements.

For a brief moment, Siobhán's finger hovered over the door-

bell. Surprised by her nervous hesitation, she suddenly doubted whether the impulsive decision to phone Claire had been the right one. On the phone, once Claire had overcome her initial surprise, she had seemed more or less the same as she had always been – delighted, in fact, to hear from Siobhán again. But what if, after all this time, things had changed so much for both of them that they would not be able to connect anymore, not enough to have a meaningful conversation about the bizarre subjects that Siobhán needed to understand?

Encouragingly, however, the sound of the bell, emerging muffled from inside the house, still was the same as ever. It was followed quickly by the sound of footsteps descending the creaking staircase, their hurried nature projecting perhaps a certain nervousness that mirrored Siobhán's.

Then, the door opened – and, as if stepping out of some gateway from the past, there she was.

'Hello, Si. So good to see you again. And you've had your hair done – love the pixie, Si, very classy. For that trip to Antarctica, was it?'

'Good to see you too, Claire. But let's not talk about my hair. I know it looks ghastly at the moment, with this awkward in-between length.'

'Just keep it short. It suits you. Or give it a few months and let it grow into a bob. But, meanwhile, do come in. It's a bit nasty outside, isn't it? As if the rain wasn't bad enough, they were talking about snow again later today.'

She led the way up the stairs to the first floor, still wearing the same kind of long roll-neck jumper that was designed to be more

tight-fitting than it was around her, together with the compulsory leggings, and the thick woollen socks substituting for slippers.

Entering the flat was like a step back into a happier time, when the biggest worries had been exams, essays, and lab reports.

‘Funny, it’s as if I was here only yesterday.’

‘When really it’s been at least seven hours and fifteen days?’

Claire laughed, in an attempt to break the ice. ‘But I’m glad you still feel at home in our old diggings. Just put your bag down here for the time being. It looks heavy.’

‘It’s not so bad. Most of it is taken up by the sleeping bag.’

‘You shouldn’t have burdened yourself with that. I’m sure we can make do with what I’ve got here.’ She studied Siobhán attentively. ‘But you’re already tired. Didn’t you manage to get some rest on the sleeper? And your legs still hurt, don’t they? I noticed you limping up the stairs behind me. But let me take your jacket, back in its rightful place – there.’

‘Now I can give you a proper hug. It’s lovely to have you back. For a while I thought I might never see you again.’

After a brief embrace, Claire quickly backed away at arm’s length. ‘But Si, you’re not well at all. You’re way too skinny.’

‘Now look who’s talking.’

‘I am exactly as I should be and always have been. But you must have lost about a stone compared to when you were living here. I can feel it, and it shows, even in your face. My first impression was that you were just tired.’

‘I’ll be fine. Don’t fuss. It’ll all come back soon enough.’

With a sceptical glance, Claire released Siobhán. In an effort to keep her feet dry, she carefully sidestepped the puddles that

started to spread around her former flatmate.

‘Listen, Claire, I’m sorry about the mess.’

‘Never mind that. Just leave all your wet stuff out here in the hall, take off your boots, and come into the kitchen. I’ll go ahead and pop the kettle on.’

Claire disappeared through the kitchen door while Siobhán was left in a flood of memories – coming home late in the evening, tired after hours of lab work and training, having lugged the big duffle bag with diving equipment up the stairs, hoping to catch some delicious smell still lingering in the air, which might be related to leftovers from Claire’s dinner.

And there was Radio Fife still playing in the kitchen, with the same jingle after the news and weather; the same DJ, with a valiant effort to sound upbeat, telling his listeners to make the best of the blustery Monday afternoon, while his voice blended into the opening bars of “China In Your Hand.”

It was as if the last couple of years had never happened; as if the research in Moray Firth and then on Antarctica were only part of an illusion; as if the dreams of leaving this quiet town for more exciting surroundings had remained just that, nothing but dreams – until they had come to an abrupt end in a burnt-out base, buried under a deep layer of snow in a frozen wasteland.

And from that rude awakening, Siobhán had been sent back to a familiar time and place – almost like a warning – to start over and not to go down the same path again, to do things differently this time; as if, at some point along the way, she had made a bad

decision.

Claire stood in her favourite corner of the kitchen, by the window with the usual decoration of rowan branches, looking out over the wintery gardens behind the row of houses, humming along to the music – just as she had always done.

She smiled as she heard Siobhán enter and turned off the radio. ‘Good of you to come visit us up here so soon after you got back from Antarctica. It was a bit of a shock, to be honest, when you phoned so suddenly.’

‘Yes, I know. I’m sorry. It was all rather spontaneous. Having been put on sick leave, with nothing else to do ... Then, yesterday, I thought ... well, of you up here, and so ...’

‘Did you just arrive, or have you been to see someone else?’

‘No, I came straight here from the bus station.’

‘Great. It’s just gone past two o’clock. If you didn’t have lunch already ...’

‘Cheers, Claire, but I’m really not hungry at the moment. I had a bacon butty in a caff near Waverley this morning.’

Claire shuddered. ‘A nice cup of tea, then.’

She was still using the same water kettle, but the cooker and all the worktops were polished to a shine now, even the taps. There were no used dishes in the sink anymore, nor any coffee stained lecture notes spread all over the kitchen table; only a few neatly folded pages of a newspaper, and a small stack of magazines, with an issue of *Brigid* at the top.

Balancing on tiptoes, Claire surveyed the contents of her well-stocked larder. The corner that, during Siobhán’s time, had been

reserved primarily for tins and instant coffee, was now taken up by an assortment of exotic-looking bags and boxes. Everything was meticulously arranged.

Siobhán wondered how anyone could live like that without getting in their own way. Why, during the years they had lived together, had Claire never indicated that cleanliness was so important to her? Then, Siobhán could at least have made an effort. Instead, it had to have been a relief for Claire to get rid of her flatmate and to have all the rooms to herself.

She pulled a jar out from the back of the cupboard. ‘Dandelion tea all right?’

‘Sure, for old times’ sake.’

‘Si, you don’t have to. I’ve got all kinds of real teas – and coffee.’

‘No, honestly, dandelion is fine. But I wouldn’t want to drink it with anyone else.’

Claire seemed genuinely happy about that. The glance over her shoulder was a little questioning, but her smile had all of its usual openness. Only the skin underneath her eyes was more wrinkled and darker than normally. She appeared to have had a short night herself.

As the water in the kettle began to simmer, she dropped a handful of finely chopped roots into a teapot that was waiting on a tray, together with two cups.

‘I was sorry to hear your trip to Antarctica didn’t work out. You must have been very disappointed. That was exactly the kind of adventure you always wanted, wasn’t it?’

‘Yes, it was, or at least it could have been. But, in the end,

I got an unplanned crossing to South Africa out of the whole debacle. So, really, I can't complain.'

'You know, I first found out about you going to Antarctica through *The Apostle*. They have this column about what former students are up to now, and they reprinted an interview that you had given to King's College for their *Alumni Magazine*, you traitor. I knew how chuffed you must have been about being selected. But I don't know how you do it, Si – diving, I mean. If I think of the things that frighten me most, being underwater is pretty high up on the list, ever since . . . Well, maybe it's because of these horrendous floods that happened in the south of England, back in the '60s. You may not remember, if you weren't affected by them in East Anglia, but my first clear childhood memory is of our living room under a few feet of water, and Dad carrying me out of the house. After all the horror stories I had heard in church, I honestly thought the world was going to be drowned again, and we wouldn't get onto the boat. It was absolutely terrifying. But water doesn't scare you at all, does it?'

'It . . . no, it generally doesn't.'

Claire removed the whistling kettle from the cooker and poured the hot water into the teapot.

Then, she picked up the tray. 'Shall we go into the lounge?'

In keeping with the kitchen, the living room too was neat and tidy, with several new decorations, but no photographs of people. The rug was new, but aside from that, the room still contained much of the same furniture, positioned at the same spots – including the old sofa, with its familiar energy-sapping soft-

ness.

Claire put the tray down onto the coffee table and settled into her favourite bowl chair, with her knees pulled up to her chest, and smiling expectantly across the table. 'So, how's the famous Cambridge treating you again?'

'All right. But I didn't get the chance to spend much time there while they rushed me through the basic training programme for Antarctica.'

'Did you move in with this old friend of yours? Alison was her name, wasn't it?'

'Moved in with ... No, not really. Only for the last few days, why?'

'I was just wondering. You always seemed very fond of her. And she phoned you regularly while you were up here.' She curled up even more in her chair, becoming serious. 'So, what's troubling you? No, don't tell me that there is nothing wrong. I know you're here for a good reason. You always do things for what you consider to be good reasons, and I can see you're worried. Call it negative energy or bad vibrations ...'

'Negative energy?'

'Don't be offended. I'm not blaming you. I'm not saying it originates with you, but you are clearly affected by it.'

'Claire, there is no such thing as negative energy radiating away from people.'

She deflated visibly. 'Sorry, Si, I forgot how exasperated you always get when people don't use the correct terminology. But there are different ways of viewing the world than through the *Oxford Dictionary of Science*, you know. For example, when or-

dinary people go out to celebrate the beauty of natural processes ... Clever people, such as yourself, might treat them as laws of nature, if you're good at maths and things like that. But what about numpties such as myself? We can still appreciate nature in our own little ways, only from an intuitive perspective, and using different expressions. I mean, who gets to decide what the vocabulary of reality is? And I do think that scientists are a little irresponsible sometimes when making discoveries, or at least when publicising them. One day you decide to chime in on a particular topic that everyone else has been developing ideas about for decades and possibly centuries – such as deities, for example, or other supernatural beings. Then, you do your investigation, and when you found your answers, using your own methods, you walk away to turn your attention to other unresolved questions, leaving everyone else behind in a wake of rational deconstruction and shattered ideologies.'

'And? That's a good thing, isn't it?'

'But you don't replace whatever you destroy with anything else.'

'Yes, we are. We're replacing it with scientific facts, proven hypotheses – the truth.'

'But no one could possibly understand that. It takes a lifetime of study, and still you can't fully comprehend even a single aspect of nature. You know that. You're doing it within your own field. It therefore isn't surprising that manageable belief systems still exist, even if, strictly speaking, they are not true in a materialistic sense.'

'And leaving it open, rather than inserting some random nar-

rative, is not an option?’

‘No, Si. People need answers to these big questions. And some of the things you can find in science textbooks are just as weird as any supernatural theory I’ve ever heard of. Some months ago, for example, I borrowed a book from the library that was recommended to me by Professor Harris, my old thesis supervisor, do you remember? He’s my boss now, but I don’t believe you ever met him, did you? Anyway, the book was written by a professor of mathematics – down at Cambridge, actually – specifically for laymen. Even so, I still had the hardest time with it. But, basically, what he’s saying is ...’

Siobhán realised that she had made a mistake by latching on to the “negative energy” expression. After Claire had already asked her outright what the problem was, she should have been open with her. It would have been easy to get on to the real issue straight away. Now, Claire’s characteristic twirling of her hair indicated that she was rapidly becoming engrossed in the subject, making it difficult to divert the conversation into more relevant channels.

‘... and he talks about the Big Bang, how time and space and everything was created back then – or somehow came about, without a creator – and how it makes no sense to ask what was before the Big Bang because there was ... no, not nothing. That’s exactly where my problems began.’

She stopped twirling her hair, to free both hands for gesticulating, and pushed herself into a more upright position. ‘I was never quite able to understand. But what he’s trying to explain is that before the Big Bang there was no was, you see, no time and

therefore no space to accommodate anything, not even nothing – oof. It was really complicated, and eventually I had to give up. Still, it was very interesting.’

She emerged from that recollection with a strained expression and a shock of tousled hair. With a scrunchie from the table, she gathered her wavy strands into a lopsided ponytail. ‘And it got me thinking about life, or death, rather. Not physical death, you know – decomposition and horrid things like that – but death as a spiritual transition. What if, at the end of our lives, we simply run out of time, literally. What if, just as the macrocosm of the universe, the microcosm of each individual life begins with the creation of its own time – a given amount of lifetime, if you like – and when that is used up, we die.’

‘Sure. I guess that’s one way of looking at it.’

‘No, but don’t you see what that would imply? It would imply that there is no point in asking what is after death any more than wondering about what was before the Big Bang. There would be no time left for us to be or, indeed, not to be. We’d be back where we started, in whatever timeless state that is – some other dimension, I suppose, outside of our normal space and time. I don’t know, Si, I just don’t think that’s very satisfactory, do you? I mean, what if that dimension isn’t particularly nice?’

She was genuinely concerned about that possibility. Then, she remembered the steeping infusion and poured out two cups. ‘In any case, lives are connected, aren’t they? Our individual timelines are all part of the same continuum. We inherit the past. We latch on to an older narrative, with a chance of rectifying previous mistakes. And if we fail, if we’re overwhelmed by our

challenges, isn't it comforting to imagine that someone else may come along at a later stage and continue where we have left off? Wouldn't it be sad if, after all this time we spent down here ... You see, there it is again: after time – the same old concept we don't understand. So, you must admit that, to someone like me, these scientific theories should seem entirely strange and supernatural, just as counterintuitive as my ideas seem to you.'

'Exactly, Claire, I completely agree. That is why science isn't done intuitively. It's strictly evidence based. The problem with the theories I heard you talk about in the past isn't that they seem strange or supernatural. The real problem is that they don't have any empirical support. All your evidence is purely anecdotal, and none of the supposed effects are reproducible under controlled conditions.'

'All right, but what is proof?' She held out her hands in a placating gesture. 'Si, please don't get angry with me. I am really trying to understand, and this is an important question, isn't it? Are we only willing to accept as reality what we can see with our eyes, for example? I remember paging through one of your introductory biology books once, and coming across an illustration that really shocked me. It showed the range of frequencies that we can see in all the light that comes from the sun. Si, it was such a small part! So, looking at this, I started to wonder how much could be hidden, all around us, in this very room, right now? Something that exists in those parts of the spectrum that we can't see – ghosts, let's say. Normally, they are hidden from us in some unseen frequency. But sometimes, if they want to interact with us, they shift themselves out of that frequency into

one that we can see. That's completely possible, isn't it? A kind of frequency modulation, you know – which is something else I picked up from you, your dissertation, in fact. Of course, if we use artificial senses, some instruments in a laboratory, we can see much more than with our eyes, but still not everything, I'm sure. And for many people that scientific approach is just too restrictive. That's why they prefer to talk about faith. They accept certain spiritual ideas as part of their reality, and then they try to find the justification for their beliefs within themselves.

'Oh, come on, Vawny, don't look so unhappy. You see, in the end, it doesn't matter if these beliefs are factually true or not. It's simply a way of seeing ourselves within a larger context, of focussing inwards and recognising there the unique personal reflection of the common universe that encompasses all of us. After all, it's within humans that spirituality comes alive, not within test tubes in a lab. It's nothing rational, you just feel if it's the right thing for you.

'Surely, you must know how it is. Sometimes your head tells you exactly what to do, but you have to feel that it's the right thing to be able to go and actually do it. In winter, for example, when the alarm goes off early in the morning, and the sun is still down. You have to get up and go to a lecture, but you don't want to turn on the lights because ... well, you know how it is with bright lights after you've just woken up.

'So, it's one thing to know that it takes, say, a dozen steps from your bedroom across the hall to the bathroom. You're intuitively aware of that, since you've made that trip a countless number of times. But it still takes faith to walk even that short

distance because you never know, there may be a large black bag with diving equipment lurking for you in the dark.’ She winked cheerfully.

‘I didn’t ...’

‘Yes, you did – repeatedly. But that’s not the point. The point is, Si, no situation is ever going to be either completely black or white. There will always be uncertainties, you know, shades of grey. And so, there may come a moment, while walking a dark path, when your senses and intellect can only tell you so much. But your faith in a higher power can give you the courage to go all the way. Sometimes, you have to listen to your instincts, even if they don’t seem to be rational.

‘And don’t you put a lot of faith in science as well? I mean, how do you know that your theories are right? You have to be sceptic about scepticism too, you know. You can’t just ignore revolutionary ideas. The other day, for example, I read something about people being buried alive as late as the 18th Century, when unconsciousness was often misdiagnosed as death. Once in a while, you therefore had supposedly dead people being shaken awake and getting up from the back of the cart on the way to the mortuary or to the cemetery, presumably with somewhat deranged expressions on their faces. Under those circumstances, no wonder you had stories developing about zombies and other undead beings. As they couldn’t explain it scientifically, it had to be supernatural, hadn’t it?’

She snuggled back between her cushions. ‘So, who’s to say that, a few centuries from now, many things that we consider to be supernatural today, simply because we can’t explain them

scientifically, aren't in truth perfectly natural?'

'I don't know, Claire. I would guess that, as far as everyday things are concerned, we're not going to see any major developments anymore. From now on, it's either going to be about the microscopic stuff or the whole universe.'

'But isn't that the same kind of over-confidence in our current understanding of the world that existed in any of the previous centuries? Don't get me wrong, I can do without zombies and vampires and other such creatures running about. But I don't believe that our entire intellectual evolution is going to be led by science. As a matter of fact, I believe that our mind is going to be the next big frontier. It's quite amazing what can happen there, and we're only ...

'Don't laugh at me, you beast. You're never taking me seriously.' She threw a cushion across the table, upsetting the cup she was holding. 'And now look what happened: I splashed tea all over me.'

Attempting to appear indignant, Claire suppressed a giggle as she dabbed at her jumper with a tissue. 'You really are beastly, Siobhán Dannreuther – and you can stop laughing now. You've already derailed my train of thought.'

'Sorry, Claire. You were going to talk about the amazing things that can happen in some people's minds.'

She laughed and gave up on the spilled tea. To cover up her embarrassment, she hid her face behind her arms as she let her hair down again. 'Basically, all I wanted to say was that there are powers and things in this world that we may never be able to understand. And even if we did, they are still beyond our

control.'

'Of course. Nature is full of powers we cannot control or reliably predict. There is nothing weird about that. Just think about the weather. Or take the oceans: they are largely unexplored. But judging by the few things we have already discovered, there must be creatures down there we can't even begin to imagine.'

'No ... I know what you mean, but that's not what I had in mind. It's more like ... I can't think of a good example right now, with you making fun of me.' She started twirling her hair again. 'But wait, here's an unexplained phenomenon even you can't deny – telepathy. You know, the mental links that can spontaneously form between two people.'

'Claire, where do you get these ideas?'

'These ideas only seem impossible if you insist on viewing humans as being embedded exclusively in the physical world, located at a specific time and place, rather than in some more ... I don't know, some abstract overarching mind space, in which differences in time and physical distances don't play a role. You must know the premonitions you sometimes get about a certain friend or family member.'

'Yes – no ... Look, even assuming that in these cases we're right more often than not, there are so many simple reasons for why we might have such premonitions.'

'Not necessarily, and it doesn't have to be dramatic. Don't tell me that there has never been an instance in all those years you've known Alison, in which you and she were apart from one another – while you were living up here, for example – and you were thinking of her and, all of a sudden, the phone rings and it's

she, wondering how you are.'

How could Siobhán dampen such wide-eyed excitement?

'You know, Claire, there was such an instance, now that you mention it. And it was while I was living up here – during the World Cup in '86, when England lost against Argentina. Immediately after the match, I tried to phone Alison, but her line was busy. As it turned out, precisely then, she was trying to phone me. I was in the pub, you see, but eventually I managed to reach her.'

Claire sighed. 'You're hopeless, Si, you really are.'

She fell silent and with a slender finger traced the pattern of her jumper, apparently lost in thought. Then, with a smile of recollection, she glanced up. 'I convinced you to come and see a play at the Arts Centre with me once.'

'I like plays – some of them.'

'Yes, I was surprised. I hadn't expected that. Then, perhaps, you're not completely hopeless after all.'

She pushed herself out of her comfortable chair. 'I'll make more tea. You're empty too, I believe. Darjeeling this time?'

The meeting had gone off to a bad start. Siobhán regretted now that she had not kept in touch with Claire, that she had simply walked away, without ever looking back. Now she had returned with selfish aims and under a false pretence, a secrecy and dishonesty that had felt necessary purely because she had underestimated the closeness that could have existed between them for years; a friendship that had been prevented by her attitude of seeing Claire as someone who could not be taken seriously, based

entirely on some harmless supernatural beliefs.

And what if Claire were right? What if telepathy could truly exist, just for one moment; just long enough to open a mental connection with Alison, to be able to read her mind, to be reassured that everything was all right with her; that she really had immersed herself in the research on her favourite subject, in a city she loved, maybe with an exciting new affair on the side; the provincial town of Cambridge and all the unpleasantness of the past two months finally left behind; until, in a few weeks' time, she had recovered her previous mental strength and optimism and was ready to return to her old life. How troublesome to modern science could such a brief connection possibly be? It would only be a small wrinkle in the fabric of reality, lost in the vastness of the universe and the countless interactions amongst humans that happened every second. No one else needed to know about it, and it would have made things so much easier.

Claire was standing by the kitchen window again, gazing out at the dark clouds that moved across the sky. Despite the early afternoon hours, the sun had not risen much above the swaying tops of the bare trees, and the noise of the wind blended with the hissing of the kettle on the cooker.

She showed no reaction as Siobhán entered the room, but she was not sulking. She immediately turned around as she felt Siobhán's hand on her shoulder and returned her hug. Claire's body relaxed as she let her head sink onto Siobhán's shoulder.

Her hair was of a dark brown, almost black, in stark contrast with her pale skin – but with a faint reddish tint, even in the grey

light. Tousled though it was, it still ran softly through Siobhán's fingers like a breeze of air.

Siobhán promised herself that, when all uncertainty about Alison had been cleared up, she would get her life under control again. She would go back to her previous job. She would eat and sleep and exercise regularly. She would fuss about her hair and live like a normal person. But until then, it seemed as if she would be on a journey by herself; a journey that was still as dark as it had been before she had returned to her old home.

‘Claire, on the subject of dark paths: I can tell you with a fair amount of certainty that your earlier estimate of a dozen steps being required to cross the hall is excessive. In fact, I should think that half-a-dozen steps should do it – just in case you have someone else with bad bag-depositing manners staying over.’

She smiled, her eyes closed. ‘You know what you’re going to do next?’

Then, suddenly, she raised her head. ‘You’re not going back to Antarctica, are you?’

‘I might. But only for the next summer season. Ultimately, I want to return to Aberdeen and continue working at the university there. We have a field station now, out in Moray Firth, by a cute little fishing village called Tarbat Rocks. I never told you about any of this, did I?’

Claire shook her head silently.

‘I haven’t even asked you yet what you’re doing now.’

‘I’m still a lecturer at the School of History – Celtic Polytheism of the British Isles. But I’ll apply for a senior ...’

A shrill whistle erupted from the boiling kettle.

Claire laughed and, with a final squeeze, disengaged herself to pour the hot water into the waiting tea cups. ‘My own work is fine, most of it is done in libraries, occasionally it involves going to archives or museums, a little fieldwork here and there. But teaching is quite time-consuming, especially course development. Next year, I’ll be giving essentially the same lectures again. Perhaps I’ll have more time then for . . . well, other things.’

She meditatively dunked the teabags, watching the brown colour spread.

‘Claire, when we met at the letting agent’s, do you remember? You had just posted the ad for a flatmate to go halves with you on the digs here. You were about to leave as I came in. But as soon as you heard I was searching for a room, you came back and asked if I wanted to share a flat with you. You said I could check it out right away and see if I liked it – if I liked it. You didn’t want to know a single thing about me. Even the agent was surprised. Within a day, there would have been literally tens of people who would have loved to share such a nice and affordable place with someone like you. At the time, I didn’t want to ask, and it’s still a bit awkward. I’m just beginning to realise so many things. And with everything else going on, it’s a complete shambles inside my head. So, I’m wondering . . .’

‘I never regretted having you as a flatmate, not for one second. And incidentally, it was your clothing – your shoes mainly – that attracted my attention. Do you still have them, the black trainers with the white stripes?’

‘No. They were quite old, and I had to get rid of a lot of things when I gave up my flat in Aberdeen last autumn.’

‘Oh well, at least you got a lot of wear out of them. But anyway, ultimately, it was your voice that convinced me. It told me everything I needed to know.’

‘Like what?’

She looked embarrassed and threw out the teabags.

‘Claire?’

‘I knew that you’d be exactly the kind of person I needed at the time.’ She opened the sugar bowl. ‘One spoon in winter, if I remember correctly?’

She stirred the sugar into one of the cups and handed it to Siobhán. ‘There you go, Wawny. Milk is in the fridge, a fresh pint on one of the door shelves. There is also a vegetarian quiche for supper in that casserole at the bottom. You had it before, and you said you liked it. All we have to do is heat it up and make a nice salad to go with it. No milk for me, thanks.’

She shivered. ‘Let’s go back into the lounge. It’s a bit draughty in here.’

About to settle down again, Claire hesitated. ‘How are your legs doing? Are you all right on the sofa? If you want to lie down ...’

‘You make it sound as if I were an old woman. I’m fine, really. But let’s not talk about me. Instead, tell me more about yourself; about your work and everything else you’re interested in – witchcraft and all these things. Give me all the gory details.’

She sank into her chair, looking stunned. ‘Siobhán, are you running a temperature or something? I’m getting seriously worried about you. Throughout all the time we lived here together,

you never cared one tiny bit about what I was doing. The best I could get out of you in those days was a lecture on how silly my ideas were.'

'So? We're entitled to change, aren't we?'

'Quite frankly, I'm not sure I want you to ... All right, what do you want to know?'

'Well, about your interest in ... Actually, before that, I was wondering about what you just said, about me being the kind of person you needed when we met. In what kind of situation could you possibly need someone like me? Given how I was at that time.'

Claire set out to speak, but then reconsidered and took a slow sip of her tea. 'I was in a bad state. It's a bit of a long story. In a way, it goes back to when I grew up – in Tonbridge, down in Kent, as you may remember. At the earliest opportunity, I was bundled off by my parents to an Anglican prep school for girls, and to a similar boarding school later on. Then, when I moved up here for the undergraduate programme, I felt like I had a lot of partying to catch up with. You always thought the town was a bit conventional and boring. But for me, coming from that conservative background, student life was quite a revelation. I was finally responsible for myself, but still had plenty of money to spend from my parents. So, basically, I was spoiled and inexperienced and desperate for any kind of excitement. And, predictably, I made a complete hash of it.

'I went to any party I could find, met all sorts of people and, after a few weeks, I joined the Magick Circle, as it was called: a group of university students who got together on weekends

for some occult rituals and séances. I don't think that, at least initially, the majority of participants honestly believed in any supernatural powers. I certainly didn't. But it was a bit creepy, in a thrilling sort of way: putting on clothes and makeup in a gothic style you wouldn't dare wearing otherwise, and speaking in some solemn pseudo-archaic English.' She giggled, amused and a little embarrassed by her own recollection. 'Anyway, when we were all assembled, for whatever we were going to re-enact – and I must say, we weren't terribly creative about that. Usually, we'd be sitting around a table with a spirit board, or around a pentagram drawn on the floor, with a circle of black candles burning around us. Then, someone would be selected to lead the conjuration of various spirits and demons, with invocations of certain powers, all copied out of some rather questionable reprint of a Medieval or Renaissance grimoire.'

She broke off, looking defensive. 'I mean, you know how it was coming out of the Seventies, with those horror films and the revival of Regency and Victorian era horror fiction. You remember the clothes and the hairstyles and the music during the early Eighties, before the raves got going towards the end of the decade, with the more upbeat music and the flashy colours. All sorts of supernatural belief systems became popular back then, and it was pure coincidence that I got involved with ceremonial magic, rather than with any of the other movements. It was just meant to be fun, really, nothing serious.'

'For a few months, during the winter, we met in someone's flat. Then, when the weather got nicer, we started to go out at night, to some of the abandoned buildings around here – Craw-

ford Priory was our favourite. We never caused any damage. And for the first time in my life, I felt as if I was part of a group of “cool” people, you know. So, after the first year up here, I moved out of the university residence and into a house shared by several members of the Magick Circle.

‘By then, we had got ourselves to believe that there may actually be something about these supernatural powers. But we were also becoming impatient with the lack of any real experiences during the rituals. We therefore thought that, perhaps, we had to broaden our collective consciousness. For that, alcohol is useless, of course. It only makes you dull and tired. Then, around that time, these new pills began to appear – amphetamines undoubtedly – meth or MDMA, I’m not sure. Certainly back then, I had no idea what they were. They looked like the harmless little sugar pills you give to children, but their taste was quite bitter, and their effects were astonishing. It starts with an unmotivated euphoria and a warm feeling of closeness to those around you, being part of a loving caring community. But it isn’t just an emotional response that you might also have from alcohol. Additionally, you get the impression that everything becomes clearer, moving into sharper focus, as if up to this point you’d been seeing the world through a dirty window that has suddenly been wiped clean. Inanimate objects seem to come to life. They begin to move about and to talk to you. If you’re primed for it, you start to see spirits and other beings all around you, pleasant ones at first, friendly and inviting. For a while, everything is fine, until the initial high is over – and then the demons come for you. It gets dark as, once again, the nature of your surroundings

changes. You come to believe that there are malevolent entities all around you, lurking in the dark corners of your ordinary consciousness, waiting for the right moment to strike. That's when you start to believe that you need the drugs to heighten your senses, to be able to penetrate those shadows, and to see the evil within them. And so the vicious circle begins.

'You see yourself constantly making bad decisions, yelling at yourself at the top of your voice, but you're not listening. You know you shouldn't be taking these drugs anymore. You know you should be eating instead – but you can't. Even if you get yourself to try, you just throw up, immediately. You know you should sleep, and you want to, desperately – but you can't. Meanwhile, the paranoia and the hallucinations are getting worse. The walls around you seem to push in on you. They turn liquid, spinning around you, faster and faster, becoming a vortex that sucks you in and comes crashing down onto you. Worse than that is the perception of eyes on you, of constantly being watched. And there are insects everywhere, the noise of scuttling feet. Your limbs are tingling, as if there were creepy-crawlies running over them, incessantly.

'With all that, I got weaker and weaker. I was constantly ill, my immune system shot to pieces. I began to struggle to keep up with the programme at university, terrified to think what would happen if I failed any of the course requirements and my parents found out. They would have withdrawn their financial support immediately. And so, by the end of the third year, I was wildly swinging back and forth – with panic attacks at one extreme, during which I practically lived in the library, desperately trying

to get some work done – and a complete lack of motivation at the other extreme, when I was struggling even to get out of bed. Between those extremes, I barely scraped through on pass grades at the end of Candlemas. Then, during the summer hols, with the group ... We were away from St Andrews ... Well, it got out of hand. And I realised, at last, that it had gone too far.

‘So, when I got back here, I went to see Professor Harris. I didn’t really know him at the time. But during my second year, I had taken a module with him, and I liked his subject. More importantly, there was something about him that made him the one person I trusted. Fortunately, he agreed to become my Ph.D. supervisor – if I succeeded in getting the M.A. at the end of Senior year. I therefore moved out of the house I was living in and, through Harris, found this flat. That’s why I got such a bargain on the rent, incidentally. But it was a bit big, just for myself. Also, I was scared to be alone. I didn’t trust myself, coming down from the drugs. On the other hand, I didn’t want to live with anyone I knew at the time. I then went to the letting agent, to advertise for a flatmate, and there I met you.’

Claire attempted a cheerful smile. ‘You were different, unlike anyone I’d ever met before. All my beliefs in supernatural powers, whether benign or otherwise, were total nonsense to you. You looked after yourself, although your nutrition was, shall we say, pragmatic – and still is, apparently. But you had no time for drugs. You were always on the move – active, out there in the real world, doing things you were excited about, with people you genuinely associated with, with whom you shared common interests. I also liked your friends, but I always felt a bit silly

among them, and I didn't want to embarrass you. Yes, Si, I know. That's just how I felt at the time.

'It's true, I did get a little lonely occasionally, but then I got in touch with a new group of people. I met them through the work I did for my Honours Dissertation. I was studying Celtic polytheism, as you may remember, specifically the role that nature plays in it. Around that time, several reconstructionist movements got going who were interested in the practices and beliefs of the Celts. From other students, I heard about the local grove of a Druid Order, which had been founded recently. As you can imagine, initially, I was extremely reluctant to get involved with another group of people performing some type of ritual. But, eventually, I got curious and went along anyway. Over one cycle of the Celtic year, I travelled around with them quite a bit to various sacred sites across Britain, did the seasonal celebrations with them, and generally had a great time. It didn't matter that there was hardly any authenticity in these rituals, simply because there is so little we know about the practices of the druids. And I should point out, Siobhán, druidry has nothing whatsoever to do with "witchcraft," as you still like to call it, or with the kind of ceremonial magic that I'd got myself into previously. It's just a movement where people attempt to reconnect with the ancient spirits of the land, that's all.

'So, there you are. Somewhat belated, but that was me when we lived here together.'

'Sorry, Claire, I really had no idea. I did notice, when we met, that you weren't well. I simply assumed that you were recovering from some illness, although I should have asked you at the

time. But now, what's your goal in life?'

'At uni, I'm still working and teaching on Celtic polytheism, as I mentioned. But for myself . . . This is going to sound very grandiose, so bear with me. Very briefly, I'm interested in a universal belief system that all humans can agree on, despite cultural differences in the way they express their respective spirituality.'

She gave Siobhán an appraising look. 'All right. As far as we know, every human culture that ever existed on this planet has developed some kind of spiritual framework. This is evidently a fundamental need that we all share, like other forms of storytelling, or music, dance, and so on. It's therefore tragic, isn't it, that one of the things that, on this fundamental level, should have a uniting influence, is used instead to divide people, often based on purely superficial differences? To begin with, the basis of all religions is our desire to make sense of life and death, to believe in the continuity of our spiritual life force . . .

'Don't despair, Vawny, dear. But here, let me be more specific for you. Basically, all cultures have developed a concept for some kind of afterlife, the existence of a special place, or places, where spirits or souls go when they leave their earthly hosts. Think, for example, about the Celts here in Britain, during the time before the arrival of the Romans. Among the few things we know is that – in addition to certain geographical features, such as isolated hills, caves, lakes, or groves of oak and yew trees – they also included the sun and the moon in their rituals. To them, sunsets were associated with the departure of the soul, and what lay beyond the western horizon was therefore

seen as the otherworld. Normally, our physical world and this place of the afterlife are separated by an invisible boundary. But during Samhain – the Celtic New Year on 1 November, according to our modern calendar – that boundary gets very thin, and spirits are able to pass through, to roam the land once more, and to interact with those they left behind. Now, compare that with the beliefs of the Inuit. You may not remember, but I mentioned once their way of interpreting auroras when we got talking about Antarctica. You probably thought that I was just being particularly ...’

‘Claire, I remember well what you told me. And I’m sorry if I gave you the impression ...’

‘No matter, Si. But I’m glad you remember. Then you can see the similarities between the Celtic and Inuit spiritual beliefs. For tens of thousands of years, therefore, the two strands of humanity moving out of Africa and following separate paths around the world – one moving eastwards and ending up in Arctic America, the other moving westwards and ending up here in Britain – faced with different challenges and developing different languages and cultures along the way, having undergone unimaginable hardships and near-extinctions, having seen ice ages come and go, having traversed snow fields and deserts, having crossed mountain ranges and ocean straits – through all this, never gave up on the one basic idea that all cultures agree on: the existence and immortality of the human spirit. Isn’t that great, Si? Come on, even you have to admit that that is incredibly romantic.

‘And there is more. Take a raven, for example – a bird well-known across the Northern Hemisphere. You can’t help noticing

them, hopping and perching and croaking everywhere – especially now in winter, when the trees are bare and most other birds are away. Enigmatic as they are, you can't observe them without wondering what they might be thinking, and how they might be seeing the world. Not surprisingly then, every culture that has known them has made up stories about them, especially the Inuit and other indigenous North American peoples. The details of their stories vary greatly, of course, but many of them have one thing in common: they present the spirit Raven as the bringer of light. A typical Inuit story, for example, might go like this. At the very beginning, when the world was young, there was a powerful magician. One day, tired of living with us ordinary humans, he made a hole in the sky and moved over to the other side, taking the sun with him, while leaving us in darkness and plunging our world into an eternal winter. Finally, our ancestors got so desperate that they asked Raven – who was completely white in those days – to help them, as he had a reputation for being very clever. He agreed and, after a long and perilous journey across the ocean and high up into the sky, found the way over to the other side. There, after many further adventures, he was able to steal the sun back from the selfish magician and returned it to our world. But, by ending our darkness, he had to make a sacrifice, as the magician cursed him and, in revenge, took all light away from him, thus turning him black.

‘The parallels to the story about Prometheus are obvious. But I wanted to tell you about the Celts, and about Badb in particular – the goddess of war, and a messenger of death. She would usually take the form of a crow or a raven, and as such she would fly

above the battlefields and decide who would die and who would survive. Similar to the Valkyries in Norse mythology, she would then catch the souls of the dead and take them to the otherworld. Therefore, across the Celtic lands, the sighting of a raven was generally seen as a bad omen. And that interpretation still lives on in many modern European cultures.

‘So, we have a bit of a problem here, haven’t we? At the same time, Raven is supposed to be the bringer of light – and thus, symbolically, of life – as well as the bringer of death. You might say that, as these are opposite interpretations of the same symbol, they are incompatible; that one thing couldn’t possibly simultaneously be a symbol for life and for death. Therefore, one of the cultures must have got it wrong, surely. But here’s the trick: the two interpretations are simply different sides of the same coin. You have to put them together and treat them as a duality. After all, life and death do belong together, don’t they.’

She interrupted the twirling of her hair and leaned forwards. ‘Here, imagine a coin being tossed. It turns and turns, as it first rises and then descends, finally landing on one side. The bringer of light is up, and you’re being born. After a while, the coin is flipped, and the bringer of death appears. So, what you have here by reinterpreting the original symbol of the raven is a new symbol for dying – a symbol not of two apparently contradictory states, but of a transition between them. Crucially, not all is lost at this point because now you do something very clever: you flip the coin a second time. The bringer of light is up again, and what you get from this reinterpretation is a new symbol for rebirth. You see, Si, even within our objective natural surround-

ings, the meaning of signs isn't fixed. We decide ourselves what significance we want to attach to each and so, to some extent, determine our own reality.

'But there is danger in this fluidity of symbolism. It's easy to misread signs and to be led astray. That's why I also like your way of thinking. You've got all the provable facts and physical evidence on your side. All those things that don't depend on anyone's subjective interpretation. Meanwhile, I see ambiguities everywhere. I've therefore always wondered how to reconcile your rigid scientific description of reality with the diversity of our individual perception of everyday life.'

'And I wasn't a particularly good person to talk to about this, was I?'

'Well, you were always very busy. You had to work so much harder for your degree than I had to. There were whole weeks when you practically lived in the lab, going over your sound recordings and doing these signal analyses. The few short moments I saw you then, you always looked like a ghost – while telling me, of course, that there were no such things.' She giggled and tied her hair up in a bun.

'Yes, but still ... The thing is, Claire, what troubles me about these ideas of yours is that they sound very impressive, like the kind of scary stories you tell by the fireside during Christmas-tide. These stories are great to listen to, they give you the creeps, and afterwards you may dream about them. But then you wake up in the morning, and all the creepy images dissipate. Take your example of the raven: in the cold light of day, it's a simple enough biological item called "a bird." But now you attach two

different meanings to it, both of which it intrinsically does not possess, and then you say that, as both states are related to the same thing, you can go from one to the other as easily as turning over a coin. In stories, this might work very well. It's just that in real life we can only flip the coin one way, once.'

Claire leaned back into her chair. 'Can we really? What makes you so sure? Don't underestimate the power of symbols, Siobhán. If ever you find yourself walking a dark path, and it feels as if the wrong side of your coin has come up and everything is lost – all you need to remember is, when the right moment arrives, to turn it over one more time.'

'But Claire, are you seriously suggesting that people can be brought back from death?'

'Not as walking corpses, naturally. We're talking here about death and rebirth in a spiritual reality.'

'But where does that leave people like me, who happen to be stuck in the real reality? I can't go to all these other realities as easily as you seem to be able to. If someone walks off to a "spiritual place," I can't follow. There are no symbols here for me to interpret or to reinterpret. There are no signs that I can see that might show me the way.'

For a few seconds, Claire appeared to be holding her breath. 'Siobhán, have you lost someone recently?'

'No ... No, I was just thinking. Practically, how is this supposed to work?'

Claire was unconvinced. She knew that Siobhán was hiding something from her. She leaned forward again. 'What's wrong, Si? Tell me.'

But it was not that easy. Talking about it to the police had been different. Siobhán had been angry then, angry with society for caring so little about a person who meant so much to her. And she had wanted to blame someone. Claire was going to believe. She was going to care. She was going to worry. And that would make it real. But it could also make it bearable.

‘Alison disappeared while I was on Antarctica, a few days before the fire.’

‘Oh, no. You mean, no one knows where she is? But that was weeks ago. Si, why didn’t you tell me straight away? Are the police looking for her?’

‘They are, yes. But officially, as far as they and everyone else are concerned, she’s on a sabbatical in Dublin.’

‘And you don’t believe that?’

‘No. She would have got in touch with me since then, or with my gran.’

‘But this could be very serious, Si. I don’t know what to say.’

‘Actually, there is something you could help me with. And from now on, I’ll be completely honest with you. I’m sorry, Claire, but you know, yesterday, on the phone, I lied to you. I didn’t come up here to meet old friends.’

‘Si, I realised that the instant I saw you. Never mind that now. Why did you come?’

‘This is going to sound a little strange, but I suspect that Alison’s disappearance may have something to do with the murder of Kathleen Reed last December. Alison knew her. In fact, it’s quite likely that she was the last person who saw Kathleen before she was abducted. You probably heard about the case. And

you may remember what was said about Satanism in that context. Before I came here, I'd therefore been wondering whether perhaps you ... Although, I realise now that your own interests ...'

Claire nodded. 'I understand. But why do you believe that Alison's disappearance is connected to Kathleen's murder? Was Alison into Satanism as well?'

'No, and neither was Kathleen, that's just it. I'm not convinced that any of this is connected to Satanism, which is why I wanted to see what you made of the case. I suspect that Satanism is only a cover for something else.'

'I would agree with that. Accidental overdoses happen all the time when you're dealing with hard drugs like heroin. But what happened in that old manor house was carefully staged by someone whose knowledge of Satanism appears to be derived from horror films – or for the benefit of people like that. There are still many prejudices in our society against anyone following an ideology other than the officially recognised religions. But someone must really hate the members of this little group to set them up for a sadistic murder like that, and then denounce them to the police.'

'Or their involvement is entirely incidental. Perhaps they stumbled into it by accident. Perhaps, by going out to this lonely place, they disturbed something, some kind of ... I don't know ... evil, I suppose; something that was already there, but lying dormant.'

Claire shivered slightly and sank back into her cushions. 'If that is true, we are dealing with powers that go beyond anything

that I've ever experienced. This wouldn't be the random madness of psychopaths. There is deliberation and a certain logic to it, even if it is perverted. This is not something you can invoke or banish with a simple incantation, or control with a ritual.'

'Claire, in the context of ritualistic practices, did you ever come across the term "Ultima Thule"?''

'No, never. The idea of Thule, of course, goes back to the ancient Greeks. But Ultima Thule ... That could be the most remote Thule, or the last, I don't know. How did you come by that term?'

'It's a note I found in Alison's flat, only a few words, but it mentions Ultima Thule. She wrote it inside a library book. Normally, she would never have done that. It must have been extremely important to her at the time. And the one thing that occupied her more than anything during the days prior to her disappearance was Kathleen's abduction and murder. I know this is farfetched but, to me, it might be a note about something she found out in relation to this case. And now she's disappeared before she could tell anyone else about it.'

'Hmm ... It is a bit spooky, isn't it?' Claire looked at Siobhán with worried eyes. 'And the last thing you need is for me to tell you that "it's going to be all right," or other such uninformed platitudes. Instead, you need someone who can ask you the right questions, to help you work things out for yourself.'

She resolutely got up from her chair. 'In other words, you need to talk to Professor Harris.'

'Your boss?'

'Why not?'

‘You’re serious about that, aren’t you?’

‘I am. The two of you will get on like a house on fire, I’m sure of it.’

‘Claire ...’

‘No, Si, go and see him. Then you’ll know what I mean.’ She grabbed Siobhán’s hand and pulled her up from the sofa. ‘I won’t come with you. I would only be in your way.’

She glanced at the clock. ‘Not quite half past three ... It would be a bit early to go for tea. He should still be in his office.’

‘But under what pretext should I go to see him? I can’t simply barge in.’

‘Ask him about Ultima Thule.’

‘And why would I do that?’

‘Because you and I thought it might have something to do with his area of expertise.’

‘Did we?’

‘Yes. Alternatively, you could go to the library and ruin your eyes by staring at the catalogue computers for a while. Then, you could sit there, all by yourself, and leaf through some dusty old books. Meanwhile, the School of History is right next to the library. You might therefore just as well chat with Harris first, and if that doesn’t solve your problems, you can still go to the library afterwards.’

She steered Siobhán towards the hall. ‘There, the sooner you’re out of here, the sooner you’ll be back. And I’ll prepare supper while you’re gone.’

‘Blasted ... Claire, I just remembered: I was supposed to show up at my institute in Cambridge today, to get an appoint-

ment for a medical.'

'Oh, Si. Some things never change.'

'Well, you see, yesterday, after I found Alison's note, I was in a complete state. I totally forgot about everything else. My only thought was to go and see you as soon as possible. I could have talked to you on the phone, of course, but I felt like ... It was good to see you again, and I wish I could stay. But with that medical ... I caused a lot of trouble for the Institute already.'

'No, you go and get your appointment – and then keep it. If you take the sleeper tonight, you still have plenty of time to talk to Harris. Yes, Si, I really think you should. I'm sure that once you've talked this through with a sensible person – anyone but me, in other words – you'll feel much better. I'll phone him now and see if he's in his office. He knows who you are. I told him about you when we moved in together. And when the news reports came out, he recognised your name.'

'News reports? What news reports?'

'About the accident on Antarctica, silly.'

'That was in the news? You already knew about the fire and the evacuation before I told you on the phone?'

'Siobhán, that was a big story. Your name especially was all over the place for days, with pictures and all.'

'You mean it was on television?'

'Of course: television, radio, all the papers – respectable and red tops. Hadn't you noticed?'

'I was away, remember. Everyone I spoke with since then knew about it anyway, so I couldn't tell. But what were they saying?'

‘The first reports came out on the day after the fire. They said the team had safely arrived at some other Antarctic base, and the injured were being treated in a hospital on the Falklands. Having read about you going to that Aurora base previously, I realised that you had to be involved. But at that point, it seemed as if the evacuation had been successful, and no one was in serious danger. It wasn’t until the next morning when the big shock came. I was in the Student Union café when I heard it on the radio. You know how news readers sound, sort of neutral and uninvolved. And then, suddenly, in such a flat tone, over the kerfuffle of the happy chatter in the room, your name came up, and that you were still missing, presumed dead.’

‘Dead? I wasn’t dead.’

‘No, I can see that now, but back then ...’ Claire fought back her tears. ‘We had to wait until the evening to find out that the Germans had found you alive and were bringing you to their base. Your institute had obviously been trying to keep that out of the news until they had got confirmation from the Germans, one way or the other. But after the others had also transferred to the Falklands, someone must have noticed that you were missing from the team and had leaked that to the British media. Even after the Germans had found you, we needed to be told in great detail about the fire, about how you’d got lost in the snowstorm during the evacuation, and how they had to leave without you; how lucky it had been for the Germans to get through to our base, how difficult that had been, and considering the long and dangerous journey back – it never ended. Until finally, after days of speculations, they said that you had safely

arrived at the German base and were going to leave Antarctica by ship, expected to return to Britain around the middle of next month. Only, by then, I was ...’ Her voice broke. ‘Wait a second.’

She hurried into the kitchen. There was the noise of several tissues hastily being pulled out of their box. A moment later, Claire cleared her throat. Some paper was being shifted on the table – the rustling of a newspaper. Then, she remerged from the kitchen, smiling defiantly. ‘Here, this is what the *Tayside Tele* had to say about you. You can take all these pages and judge for yourself. Read it on the train, but do try and get some sleep as well. You need it.’

‘Cheers, Claire. Look, I’m really sorry about all this, and now I’m rushing off again. But when all this is over, we’ll get together, in style, I promise. In summer, when the semester is over, we can go up to Tarbat Rocks. We take the boat out, and I show you the dolphins.’

‘Sounds lovely, Si. But now you can get yourself ready while I phone Harris.’

‘Claire ...’

With a busy wave, she retreated quickly into Siobhán’s former bedroom.

Getting herself ready – that was easier said than done, with nothing at hand to get ready with. But it was too late, with Claire already talking on the phone; making an appointment with someone Siobhán had never met in her life, but who nonetheless knew everything about the embarrassing debacle on Antarctica – just like everyone else in the country, it seemed.

Everyone except Alison . . . Under no circumstances had she ignored the news about the fire and the evacuation. She would have got in touch with Siobhán's grandmother and the research institute immediately, and then returned to Cambridge at the earliest opportunity. Of course, it was possible that the incident had not made the international news in any significant fashion. It might have been lost among the more significant events around the world.

And DCI Anderson . . . It suddenly occurred to Siobhán that he must have been quite serious with his suggestion that she was "perhaps just a little worn out after her adventure on Antarctica." He had apparently thought that she was under some traumatic strain and was therefore overreacting.

Then, Claire returned, having recovered her usual cheerfulness. 'He's in – Professor Richard James Harris. And he'll be delighted to meet you.'

'Will he? What did you tell him?'

'Not much. I only said you were here until this evening and would like to ask him about something related to his area of expertise. Don't stress yourself out, Si. Just tell him the truth and see what he makes of it.'

'Right . . . And what exactly is his area of expertise?'

'Oh, you know, over the decades he's been working on a broad range of subjects related to pre-Christian cultures and belief systems of Northwest Europe – Germanic, Norse, Celtic . . .'

'Claire, you do realise, don't you, that this is one of those brilliant plans that can backfire spectacularly?'

'Come on, Si, don't be so paranoid.'

‘No, seriously, I haven’t got the faintest idea about any of these things. All I have are some obscure words, which you guess may come up in some ancient mythology, but which actually may not mean anything at all. On top of that, I have nothing halfway decent to wear, never mind makeup. And then these soggy old boots – honestly, I look like a tramp.’

‘You’ll be fine. Harris knows what the weather is like. Just be yourself, and he’ll love you.’

‘Be myself? Claire, you’re asking me to walk into the office of a university professor whom I’ve never met before, looking like this, and telling him an insane story that no one else wants to believe. My dear old gran would have a heart attack if she ever found out.’

‘Si, I know exactly how you’re feeling right now. But trust me, I wouldn’t set you up like this if I wasn’t sure that it would really help you.’

‘Yes, I know you mean well. And, who knows, you may even be right. After all, he’s your boss, and you’re the one who has to continue working with him.’

‘Exactly. You’ve got nothing to lose.’ Claire nudged Siobhán towards the door. ‘Now get out of here.’

And so, once again, the moment had come for Siobhán to pick up her bag and move on.

‘All right, Claire. I’ll give you a ring tomorrow evening and tell you how it went with your professor.’

‘Yes, keep in touch this time – and please don’t let me find out through the tabloids again if something bad has happened to you.’

‘I’ll do my best.’

Claire nodded and pulled Siobhán into a tight hug. ‘Take care, Vawny. Don’t get mixed up with all these weird things we talked about, these supernatural beliefs. It’s not your world. You’re too ...’

‘I understand. Don’t worry.’

The rain had stopped, but the sky was still overcast, and the temperature had dropped noticeably. Already, the wind was driving a few small snowflakes along the street and through the gaps between the houses.

Claire and the flat they had shared, with its illuminated living room window, seemed to belong to a different world; a world in which bad things happen to other people, and everything will be all right in the end. That was the world that Siobhán had belonged to not long ago.

There, outside in the cold, all by herself again, that was the world of her present. That was the world in which she knew that Alison was in great danger.

CHAPTER FOUR

ULTIMA THULE

‘Load of tosh!’

The book hit the inside of the metal waste-paper basket with a resounding crash that reverberated within the corridor of the venerable university department.

Glaring after it, Professor Harris noticed Siobhán standing in the open door to his office. ‘Oh, I’m so sorry, do come in. Miss Dannreuther, is it? Please don’t be alarmed by this inexcusable outburst of mine. I suppose I should not have begun reading this book before you came. I had no idea how bad it really was. I shall not bother you with the details, but I suspect that as a biologist you would find amusement in any attempt to trace a single bloodline over a period of round about two millennia.’

He got up from behind his desk and approached Siobhán with surprising agility and energy. ‘Pleasure to meet you at last, after I heard so much about you. Now that you’re here, we can probably close the door. It is rather draughty in these old buildings. And please do not worry about bringing in some of our inclement weather with you. At least you had the good sense to dress for the occasion. Here, why don’t you put your travel bag down by the door. And let me take your coat. Perhaps we can get it to dry out a little while we chat.’

He carefully draped it over the radiator by the window, against which a flurry of snowflakes were quietly tapping.

Then, he pointed to his visitor's chair. 'Please, take a seat. I promise not to make you tell me the story of your adventures on Antarctica. You must be tired of that by now.'

He settled back into his own chair. 'So, Miss Golding mentioned that you had a question about a topic related to my field of study?'

'I do. But I'm afraid I shall be wasting your time, Professor.'

'Time, Miss Dannreuther, is an abundant commodity for me these days. It is excitement I'm lacking, and I daresay you've got plenty of that to go around.' He winked encouragingly.

'It's still a rather silly idea of mine to trouble you with this. It's just that we, Claire and I ... Well, I thought ... You see, the thing is, Professor, a good friend of mine in Cambridge disappeared, as it seems, while I was still away on Antarctica. I repeatedly tried to contact her via the satellite link from there, but in vain.

'When I got back to England, a few days ago, I checked her flat, but she hadn't been there for weeks, judging by the letters that were still in her postbox. It is true that Alison is meant to be on a sabbatical right now, and she had told others that she was about to go to Dublin. I just don't think that she would have left Cambridge without telling me.

'I then went to the police to file a missing person report. They conducted some basic enquiries and established that Alison has not been involved in any recorded accident, neither in Ireland nor in Britain. They also arranged for regular broadcasts on the radio, asking Alison to either contact the police or her friends. Two days I waited by the phone at my grandmother's place in

Norwich. Then, I got too uneasy just sitting around, doing nothing.

‘I therefore went back to Alison’s flat to see if I could find any clues to what might have happened, and where she might be. At first, I didn’t discover anything of interest. But then, purely by chance, I came across a library book into which, inside the front cover, she had written some words that reinforced my fears that her disappearance might be linked to the murder of Kathleen Reed, which happened last December, as you may remember. Alison knew her and was understandably affected by the nature of the crime, and by the way it was discussed in the media. She did not believe the official explanation involving Satanic rituals. She therefore began to do her own research into the potential background of the murder, ignoring Satanism altogether and focussing instead on the manor house, over in the Western Highlands, where Kathleen had been found.

‘The problem is, I don’t know if these words she wrote into the library book are a note to herself, or a message left for others. Either way, why would she make a note or leave a message in that fashion? Worse than that, it isn’t written in her normal hand. I mean, I think it is her handwriting, but it looks strange. Of course, it is a library book, so anyone could have written into it, if it wasn’t for the fact that the words were written right across the notice with ... No, I’m sorry, Professor, I’m rambling, and I’m really just wasting your time.’

‘Miss Dannreuther, I admit to being rather surprised and confused at the moment. But, please, do stop worrying about my time. I still have plenty left of that.’

‘The thing is . . . To be perfectly honest, I don’t have a particularly good reason to suspect that Alison is not currently in Dublin. Everyone else is happy to accept that. It’s just that I’ve known her for as long as I can remember. And I cannot imagine that she wouldn’t have told me somehow before leaving Cambridge. But then again, things do change, don’t they? We’ve been living apart for a while now – more than six years. In the end, I’m probably just being irrational, and I shouldn’t have troubled you over this.’

As she got up, Professor Harris raised a hand and leaned forwards. ‘Please, before you go, if only to satisfy my curiosity – what made you phone Miss Golding, after the two of you had lost contact with each other for more than two years, if I understand correctly? More importantly, what made her refer you to me?’

While he fixed Siobhán with his eyes, her own image of him became blurred. Having risen too quickly from her chair, her head started spinning, and the persistent dull pain pulsating in her legs became more intense. She could not go on like that for much longer. She should go and see a doctor, as arranged. She should be resting in her old bedroom and allow her grandmother to look after her until she was well again. But she also needed answers.

Professor Harris did not seem to notice Siobhán’s sudden weakness as he watched her sink back into the chair. ‘Given the nature of that murder and its location, I can see why you would consult with Miss Golding, once you had formed the suspicion that your friend’s disappearance might be connected. But what was it that

made her suggest me as a possible source of information? She has far more knowledge about modern sects than I do, and she knows that. Why then would she send you to me? There was nothing in the media that would have indicated that my own area of expertise might have any bearing on the case.'

'There were two words written by Alison that I didn't understand, and neither did Claire. But she thought they might come up in some ancient mythology and ... I better show you the book. I've got it here.'

She got up again, more carefully this time, and walked over to her bag by the door. Ideally, that bizarre situation would turn out to be just a dream. But there, entangled in some underwear, was still the same old library book – very solid and very real.

Professor Harris took it with a glance at the title and a brief smile of recognition. 'Inside the front cover, you said?'

He placed the book on the desk in front of him and opened it. His reaction was almost imperceptible, but that single twitch around his eyes had not been due to old age.

He slowly closed the book again. For a moment, he sat deep in thought, squinting down onto his hands, which were still resting on the worn-out cover. Then, he leaned back in his chair. 'And you found no other writing inside the book?'

'Aside from some ordinary annotations in pencil that were clearly written by someone else – no.'

He nodded, fixing Siobhán with his eyes again. 'Ultima Thule?'

'Yes, Professor. Does that mean anything to you?'

'It does, in several ways. But do you really believe that this ... note or message has any connection to your friend's absence?'

‘That’s just it. I don’t know what the connection is between anything at the moment. Nothing makes any kind of sense to me. People think I’ve gone mad on Antarctica, and perhaps they are right. But as much as I want to, I can’t simply rest and recover, as everyone tells me to do. I used to love visiting Gran in our old flat. But now I get anxious as soon as I arrive because I’m constantly drawn to Alison’s flat in Cambridge, or to do something else to find her. Since I came back to Britain, nothing has been the same as it was before, even the things that haven’t changed at all. I can’t seem to be able to connect with anything anymore. It all seems to be part of another life I had a long time ago. They told me I almost died on Antarctica and, without Claire, I’d wonder if I did. So far, she’s the only exception in this surreal nightmare. She’s more familiar and closer to me now than ever before. If it weren’t for her, I might well have come back to a different world where all the rules have changed. Everywhere I look, there are these bizarre things, these weird rituals, or whatever other weirdness they are intended to cover up. And then this strange message in a library book ... I don’t understand anything anymore. I can’t rationalise what is happening. All I know is that first Kathleen was murdered, and now my best friend has vanished without a trace. Since then, I haven’t been able to think about anything else. I don’t eat properly, and I can’t sleep – because I am just so scared.’

And now she was crying and having a nervous breakdown in front of a complete stranger, in one of the most prestigious universities in the country. But no hole opened in the floor to allow her to escape the embarrassing situation. The old wooden

boards around her were as unyielding as ever.

Professor Harris had appeared at her side and laid a hand on her shoulder. ‘Miss Dannreuther, I can tell you everything I know about Ultima Thule, and that is quite a lot, I’m sorry to say. However, I am not aware of any definite connection of that term to the horrific murder you mentioned – even less to your friend’s absence. And that should be reassuring.’

He walked over to a cabinet that was part of an antique unit of bookshelves. He opened the door and inspected the bottles inside it. ‘You know, I clearly remember having a very nice sherry in here, not so long ago, but somehow ...’

‘Oh, no, I’m feeling much better. Thank you, Professor, I’m fine, really.’

‘Well, I’m sure you are. But it’s just gone past four o’clock, and I need some refreshments – and a smoke. And I don’t often get the opportunity to take tea with a celebrity.’

He smiled as he handed Siobhán her coat. ‘A quick walk in the fresh air will do us both good. And the food in The Saltire is quite excellent – that’s the faculty club a few houses down the street.’

* * *

The ancient magic of alcohol ... As her heart rate increased, and the blood vessels dilated, a soothing warmth percolated down her tired and bruised legs, releasing the tension in the damaged tissue along the way. The anxious noise inside her brain was muted somewhat as, simultaneously, the cultured humming of the assorted academics in the busy lounge receded.

Leaning back into the comfortable arm chair, Siobhán felt that, just then, she would actually be able to fall asleep as soon as she closed her eyes – but this was not the right moment.

Professor Harris had already observed her absentmindedness, covering up for what might have been an awkward silence by preparing his pipe with measured deliberation.

From up close, he appeared older than his energetic demeanour and strong voice suggested. He had to be in his seventies already, with emeritus status to be allowed to keep his office. And when he decided to leave the university for good, Claire would probably miss him.

‘Professor, I’d like to apologise for my outburst earlier on. That was ...’

‘... quite all right, Miss Dannreuther.’ He waved the apology away with a glint in his eyes. ‘But it did remind me of the first occasion I met Miss Golding. She was going through a very difficult period in her life – although, much of what I know about her circumstances at the time I didn’t learn from her directly, but from the police.’

‘The police?’

‘Yes. They spoke with her after they had found her.’

He fell silent as he immersed himself in lighting his pipe.

‘Found her where, Professor?’

‘On what she considered to be the way back here, apparently, only she had got lost.’ He extinguished the match and threw it into the ashtray. ‘I think it would be good for you to know this, as you have now rekindled your acquaintance. She was away with a group of people on a tour through the Western Highlands. It was

late summer, a few weeks before start of term. It must have been the year you moved here – '84, was it? Yes ... They were visiting several historical sites, especially buildings that had been abandoned.

‘Eventually, they got to Castle Tioram, that ruined fortress in Loch Moidart. You may have seen pictures of it. It’s situated on a small tidal island that can be reached via a stretch of sand when the water is out, but is cut off from the mainland at high tide. They stayed there overnight and performed some kind of occult rituals. In themselves, the rituals were entirely harmless, as far as I understand, but drugs were involved. Things got out of hand, and then an accident happened. Someone slipped on the rocks surrounding the ruin, hit his head sliding down the steep slope, fell into the sea, and drowned.

‘That was when Miss Golding panicked and ran away – alone, in the middle of the night. The tide was up, so she had to wade and swim to the mainland. As I mentioned, I never talked to her personally about these events. But she must have been extremely scared and confused, possibly hallucinating under the influence of the drugs. In a state like that, having to cross a stretch of water in the darkness ... All we know for certain is that she managed to do it somehow.

‘The others of the group waited until the tide was out again. It therefore took a while for them to get to a phone and to alert the emergency services. This was also when Miss Golding’s absence was discovered. They began searching for her, first near the shore and along the road; then, as it got brighter, by helicopter over a wider area. As they didn’t see her body on the

exposed seabed, they focussed their attention on the hills. After several hours, they spotted her far from the road, lying in a ravine. When the rescue team finally managed to get up to her, she was unconscious. They were able to revive her, but all she said was, over and over again, that she had to get back to St Andrews and talk to me. Obviously, that had been her goal when she ran away. Under the influence of the drugs, she had pushed herself to complete exhaustion. By the time the effects had worn off, and she realised what she had done, she was hopelessly lost. After a while, it seems, she simply gave up. She had no serious injuries, but she was dangerously hypothermic. They therefore brought her to the hospital in Fort William, where she spent one night.

‘The next morning, the police went to see her. She felt a bit better, but she remembered little beyond her flight from the island. The police had no cause to detain her any longer. By then, they had confirmed that the fatality was the result of an accident and decided that, for lack of evidence, they were not going to pursue the use of illegal drugs any further. Miss Golding refused to rejoin the others of the group. She also rejected any involvement of her parents. The police therefore put her on a coach to Inverness, hoping that eventually she would find her way here.

‘Two days later, she did indeed come to see me, evidently unaware of the fact that, in the meantime, the police had contacted me about what had happened, asking me to get back to them if, in a few days, I still hadn’t heard from her. Now, there she was, heavily made up and still rather unwell, but seemingly sober, and she expressed a genuine interest in doing a Ph.D. with me.

However, I still had to find out, indirectly, what she intended to do about this unhealthy drug habit of hers. I therefore pointed out her irregular attendance of my class and asked her, perhaps a little too sternly, what kind of subject she had in mind, and what exactly her plans were. Then, suddenly, she had a bit of a nervous breakdown. She said she didn't know what her plans were, or what she could do with her life. All she knew was that she did not want to die anymore.

‘When she had calmed down again, we got talking properly, and I was able to learn more about her situation. She told me that she was staying in a house with a group of others, but that she wanted to get out. Fortunately, through a relative of mine, I was able to find her the flat the two of you ended up sharing. It was still several days before she could move in at the beginning of September. During that time, I think she struggled quite severely with the symptoms of withdrawal. But she has made a remarkable recovery since then. She showed great interest in Celtic Britain, particularly the religious aspects of pre-Christian societies. She improved from Pass to First during Senior Honours, and still got the M.A. with a very respectable classification. She then went on to finish her studies with an excellent dissertation. She is easily one of the most talented and sociable people I ever worked with. And to my knowledge, she has never taken drugs again – besides on the few occasions when I was able to tempt her to join me for “tea,” as it were.’ He nodded appreciatively at their Hot Toddies. ‘I tell you this in confidence because you appeared to be unaware of the events that led up to your first meeting with Miss Golding, all these years ago. I thought you

should know how much you meant to her, right from the start, and how sad she was when you moved away. You see, for a while, you were the only true friend she had. And she very much associates you with the end of a dark path, and the beginning of a new life.'

A dark path . . . Claire had known what she had been talking about. That conversation had been no idle banter for her, as she had sensed the darkness surrounding Siobhán.

'The sandwiches here are quite good.'

Noticing Siobhán's struggle to maintain her composure, Professor Harris had decided to tactfully change the subject.

'Thank you, Professor, but Claire mentioned she would make dinner later on.'

'Aren't you returning to Cambridge tonight?'

'I was going to, but it's all right. I can stay until tomorrow.'

He seemed glad to hear that. Then, thoughtfully pulling on his pipe, his expression turned serious.

'Regarding that note you found, there is something strange about the handwriting. It is clearly that of an adult who normally writes well but, at the time of writing, was either in a great hurry, or under some kind of influence.'

'Yes, that's what I'm worried about, that the nature of the handwriting might distract from the significance of these words. It is true that, during the first few weeks following the murder, when Alison was most depressed, she drank more than she used to – at home and on her own, which she'd never done before. That was when she realised how quickly tragedy can strike and a life can end; when she kept thinking how close to being killed

I had come, having lived in Kathleen's flat until about a week before her abduction.'

Professor Harris looked shocked. 'Surely that must have been of some concern to yourself.'

'To be honest, I wasn't too troubled about it. I mean, these things can happen anywhere and anytime, can't they? But I can see how, if our roles had been reversed, I might have felt about Alison the same way she felt about me, especially when it became clear that Kathleen wasn't a specific target.

'About the writing in the library book: to me it's entirely a question of timing. If Alison wrote these few lines days or even weeks before anyone saw her last, they are likely to be quite harmless – just a sudden idea she had, perhaps waking up in the middle of the night and still inebriated; something she spontaneously thought was important, most likely in relation to Kathleen's murder. She urgently wanted to write it down, and the library book with the note taped to the inside of the front cover was the only thing she had handy. Then, by the next morning, she had no recollection of what had happened during the night, and somehow forgot to return the book before departing for Dublin. This is, I suppose, what most people would consider to be the sensible explanation. However, there is an alternative. It is possible that she was abducted from her flat, and that she managed to leave this message shortly before she was taken away. If so, these aren't just meaningless words, written in a state of confusion. They are an important clue to why she was attacked.'

'It would seem rather strange that an attacker would allow her to leave such a message.'

‘Not necessarily, Professor. I’ve been thinking about that last night on the train. As a matter of fact, I’ve done nothing but think about that ever since I found the book. At first I hoped there would be several rational objections to that alternative scenario – including the timing of her hypothetical abduction, which would coincide so neatly with her planned departure to Dublin. I’d thought that that was just a little too convenient. But then I remembered that for weeks leading up to her disappearance, Alison had the feeling of being shadowed, wherever she went. At some point, she even thought that someone had entered her flat while she’d been at work. At the time, even she herself put that down to anxiety and depression. But what if she was right? If the perpetrators really did enter her flat before the abduction, they would have found the letter from her employer, which is still lying openly on her desk, confirming the dates of her sabbatical. This would have allowed them to plan ahead. It would have given them the confidence that, under the circumstances, no one would miss her for a few days at least.

‘They would have thought that attacking Alison inside her own flat would be safer than somewhere outside on the street, especially as she did not go out at night. They would have to be capable of picking at least ordinary locks quite expertly, without leaving any obvious traces. They would have done that on her last day at work and then attacked her when she came home.

‘If this is true, we are dealing with people who are well organised, well equipped, and well trained – rather than amateur opportunists, who just happened to abduct Kathleen for the purpose of performing some silly ritual. In other words, they are

much more likely to be these unknown people who denounced the members of that Satanic group, rather than the group members themselves.

‘I completely agree with you, Professor, that a well-organised gang of criminals like that would never have allowed Alison to leave anything behind that would provide any clues to their identities. If she was unobserved for long enough to write that short message into the library book, the intruders would not have expected her to have any valuable information that was not already publicly known. Therefore, none of the results of her research into the manor house, which are summarised in a folder that is also still lying on her desk, could have been the reason for her abduction.

‘I have no idea what that reason could be. I do know from the last time we spoke via satellite link, which was five days before Alison’s final day at work, that she herself was not aware of anything that would make her a target for, most likely, the same criminals who had abducted Kathleen. It was just that vague fear of some darkness hanging over her.

‘There is one terrifying scenario that I keep seeing in my mind. As soon as I close my eyes, it becomes so clear that I might have witnessed it personally. In this scenario – assuming that Alison’s abduction was carried out in the same way as Kathleen’s – she was attacked in her flat, sometime in the early evening. Now these dangerous individuals are waiting until later that night, when it is less risky to take her away, out of the apartment building. During that time, Alison is lying in her bed, sedated but not fully unconscious. She is trying to work out why

she has become the second victim. Perhaps the attack has made her realise a connection of which previously she had been unaware. Through the numbing effects of the drugs, she can hear the intruders talking quietly in her office, which is adjacent to the bedroom, as they go over the documents and notes she has assembled about Kathleen's murder. They want to make sure that there really is nothing at all that can incriminate them.

'They converse with each other in a manner that they think will not reveal anything about them or their motives. But, inadvertently, in what they say is a word or a phrase that suddenly brings something that Alison has read about into focus; something very oblique, perhaps related to the history of the manor house, that previously has not seemed to be of any relevance – a hidden secret that someone is guarding, something to do with Ultima Thule, whatever that means.

'If this scenario is true, Alison needed to find a way to leave a record of that information, to be discovered when, eventually, someone would come looking for her. There was a notebook and a pen conveniently lying on the bedside cabinet, but that would have been far too easy. The intruders would undoubtedly have found that. But there was the library book as well. Pretending to be asleep, she waited for the right opportunity. If she was being watched, maybe her guard briefly left the room, just long enough for her to scribble these few words. Together with the effect of the drugs, that would explain the poor writing. Then, before she was taken away, perhaps as she got some clothes out of her dresser, all she needed was another few seconds to pick up the book from the bedside cabinet and shove it behind her

wardrobe. And so ...’

‘Excuse me, Miss Dannreuther – one moment, please – you’re saying you found that book behind a wardrobe?’

‘Yes, and purely by chance. I’d seen an overdue notice from the public library among Alison’s post earlier on, and I’d been searching for the book, thinking that I might return it for her, but I couldn’t find it. Then, as I was trying to get at one of our photo albums, which was stacked on top of the wardrobe, together with the other albums and some children’s books, the pile toppled. One of the albums fell behind the wardrobe and got stuck there. That’s how I found the library book. Initially, I had thought that Alison had put it on top of the wardrobe, by accident, together with her own children’s books, and that it had fallen behind the wardrobe when I disturbed the pile.’

Professor Harris looked increasingly bewildered. ‘Miss Dannreuther, have you ever read *The Chronicles of Narnia*?’

‘Well, I vaguely remember my grandmother reading it to us when we were little, Alison and I. But the story ... Something to do with witches and talking animals ...’

‘It’s considered a classic now, a series of books, to be precise. In one of them is a rather famous scene in which a group of children step inside a wardrobe, out through the back, and into a magical world. If therefore you wanted to go along with this idea that the book contains a message, written by your friend shortly before she was forcibly taken away, you could assume that the overdue notice for the “Guide to the Magical World of Narnia” was supposed to lead you behind the wardrobe, you see?’

‘But that would mean that Alison was abducted.’

‘Yes. Isn’t that what you’re trying to tell me?’

‘No, not really. It was only a hypothetical scenario. I was basically trying to get people to worry about Alison’s absence as much as I do, simply because everyone else manages to be so indifferent about it, just in case something did happen to her. And it was comforting, in a way, to be told by everyone that I was mad to believe that. But, in all honesty, I never seriously considered it to be true – not rationally anyway.’

‘Well, I have to say, the evidence for this scenario isn’t all that convincing, especially in the absence of any plausible motive for an attack on your friend. And it does seem to me that someone in a position of extreme danger ...’

‘No, you see, that’s just it, Professor. That’s exactly the kind of thing that Alison would do in a dangerous situation like this. She never panics under pressure – on the contrary. It’s true that occasionally she can come across as being a little distracted or absentminded. But I know that, if she was in a situation such as the one that I described, with time to think about what to do, she would definitely come up with something like that message in the library book.

‘And she didn’t have too many options. She had to assume that, before the attackers would take her away, they would clean up her flat to give the impression that she actually had gone to Dublin as planned. After all, there was the possibility that Alison had asked someone to periodically check on her flat while she was away, to bring the post in and to see if any important letters had arrived. The intruders would have been quite confident to come across anything that some unsuspecting person, who had

no reason to be looking for clues, would have any chance of finding. Leaving a message in any effective hiding place would therefore have defeated its own purpose.

‘But they underestimated Alison, as so many people do, based solely on her appearance. That overdue notice was the clue that Alison knew would materialise in her flat days after she had been taken away; the clue her attackers could never find; the clue that would have told any intelligent person not only that there had to be something in the flat that wasn’t immediately visible, but also where to find it – at least, once they had become suspicious of her absence. And then, with that plan carefully laid, unexpectedly blundering along came I. By finding the book through sheer luck, I might have ruined everything. When I think how easily I could have missed or disregarded the writing inside it, and simply returned it to the library ...’

‘But you didn’t. Instead, you took it seriously enough to come all the way up here to ask Miss Golding about it. And may I suggest that it wasn’t luck that led you to find the message, if indeed it is one – nor, admittedly, was it logical reasoning.’

‘Well, as I mentioned, I’d given up searching for the book and wanted to leaf through one of our old photo albums.’

‘Precisely, Miss Dannreuther. You missed your friend – and that made all the difference in the world.’

He smiled as he retreated discretely behind a thick cloud of smoke. But despite his outward optimism, he himself appeared to be concerned now.

‘Professor, do you really believe that Alison may have been abducted?’

He contemplated that question for several moments – several moments too long. ‘It’s hard to tell, based on the facts, such as they are known. But if you yourself consider the possibility, I imagine you showed this note to the police?’

‘I did, yes. After I found the book, I went back to talk to one of the detectives in charge of Kathleen’s murder investigation. I asked him about Ultima Thule. But ... well, he got a little impatient with me. He said he didn’t know what it meant and stated categorically that it had never come up in the context of their enquiries, or during the court hearing. I mean, I can see his point. Judging the situation from the outside, if I was in his position, I would probably react in the same way if someone came walking into my police station with an overdue library book into which someone had scribbled some incomprehensible words, apparently in a state of intoxication. And I can assure you, Professor, that while I’m going around telling people about Alison having been abducted, I’m always desperately casting about for anything that would make that, if not impossible, at least implausible. But every time I seem to have found an objection, it falls apart as soon as I look at it more carefully.

‘For example, one thing that’s been puzzling me is how that book could have ended up on top of the wardrobe. The cover quite clearly marks it as belonging to a library. And so, the only explanation I could come up with was that Alison put it there in a hurry, while being distracted with something else. That was yesterday, when I thought that these few words might be a note to herself about something she had found out about the murder, or about the history of the manor house. But what bothered me

was that Alison could not casually have placed the library book on top of her wardrobe, for the very simple reason that she and I are about the same height, and I could barely reach the bottom of the stack of albums and books. Alison would never have been able to neatly place the book at the top of the pile, without getting a chair to step on. Then, necessarily, she would have paid more attention to the book, realised that it was from the library, and returned it before she left. If, on the other hand, she deliberately hid the book behind the wardrobe, suddenly everything makes sense. Except, I still don't know why she was abducted and by whom. But if this scenario really is true, however she came across those few words, they must be crucial, and most likely related to the motive behind her abduction.'

'Yes, the motive ... That's what struck me upon seeing the note. I thought that finally we may be looking into the right direction, instead of being distracted by all this talk about Satanic rituals. You were away during the police investigation. Therefore, you may not have seen the many newspaper articles that were written about the case. Some of them showed photographs not only of the exterior of the building, but also of the inside. It must have been a grand place while it was still inhabited. But what particularly caught my attention were the large murals that could be seen in the background of almost all the interior photographs, depicting several mythological scenes. I didn't think too much about it at the time, but when you showed me what your friend had written, I was instantly reminded of them.

'There is no point in boring you with an extensive lecture, so I will keep it brief. Both Thule and Ultima Thule have a long

history in European mythology, and we need to understand these lands in connection with another legendary place. It all started with two Greeks and one Roman – a philosopher, an explorer, and a poet – all three writing about mysterious islands.

‘Going back to the Fourth Century BC, Plato, in two of his surviving dialogues, describes a mighty empire that he said existed in pre-historic times, which he called Atlantis. People on that island prospered while they lived in close connection with the gods, forming the most advanced society of their era. But their success made them arrogant. They thought that, with all their technological accomplishments, they did not need the gods anymore. Thus, they turned away from them and became morally corrupt. They also began to invade the neighbouring lands, until eventually they tried to conquer Athens – and that was their downfall. They were decisively defeated by the Athenians. And to make matters worse, their island was sunk by a gigantic earthquake. Sadly, the essential part of the second dialogue is missing. It is therefore unclear whether the sinking of Atlantis was an act of retribution by the gods, although the moralistic style of the rest of the writing would strongly suggest that.

‘A few decades on, Pytheas, after travelling across Northwest Europe, writes about an island that he describes as lying at the northern edge of the world, which he called Thule. We don’t know exactly where he landed, but we can assume that it was in today’s Norway. The description he gives of the island, and of the journey to it, cannot be linked to any real place, but he mentions the midnight sun. Since it is highly unlikely that he

himself crossed the Arctic Circle, he must have retold stories that he had heard from others. If so, the Lofoten would be the best candidates for inspiring reports about Thule, especially as they are known to have had human habitation dating back to at least the Stone Age, unlike many other Arctic islands.

‘Some three centuries later, Virgil, in his long poem *Georgics*, coins the term Ultima Thule, to refer to any landmass beyond the edge of the known world. As the Arctic became better explored, Thule – and therefore Ultima Thule – got pushed farther and farther west and north, from Scandinavia to Iceland to Greenland to Svalbard. But, in essence, that is how it stood for many years: Atlantis was an archetypal and purely mythological lost world, Thule was the northern limit of the known world, and Ultima Thule were the lands that lay beyond our reach, either lost or never discovered.

‘Then, during the second half of the last century, it got more complicated. This was a time when, across Europe, people began dreaming of various utopia, which were pure and unspoilt by the aggressive industrialisation they witnessed everywhere, together with all the associated ecological and societal problems. They wanted to return, as it were, to an imaginary world where humans still lived in contact with the ancient spiritual forces of nature.

‘Specifically in Central Europe, the idea of lost lands in the North became romanticised. Influential societies were founded around the claim that Plato’s mythological account about Atlantis had been inspired by true events that happened during the early days of our planet in the distant land of Ultima Thule. This

land, it was said, was the proper origin of the Germanic peoples, having been populated once by a superior race of humans who had originally descended from the heavens – or, depending on how religious you were, had arrived on Earth from outer space – and whose strong link to cosmic powers has since been lost, although our vague subconscious recollection of this former connection is still expressed through the various spiritual beliefs in some form of deity which, as far as we can tell, have existed throughout human evolution.

‘With this direct access to superhuman powers, it was claimed that these inhabitants of Ultima Thule – Atlanteans or Aryans, as they were referred to by different groups – were able to build a society more sophisticated than anything that preceded or followed it. As in the original story about Atlantis, this lasted until Ultima Thule was flooded and sank by an earthquake, and the Atlanteans or Aryans were forced to disperse, first across Northwest Europe, then continuing southeastwards, and eventually settling in the remote highlands of the Himalayas, in a region roughly corresponding to today’s Tibet, where they found refuge for a while. However, over time, their racial and cultural identity was lost, as they intermingled with “lesser” races. Their powers diminished until they finally died out. But those peoples living closest to the lost world of Ultima Thule, most notably the Scandinavians, still carry in them the purest characteristics of that ancient race.

‘As I’m sure you know, during the early part of this century, these ideas were picked up by the National Socialist movement in Germany, and thereby became part of a crude political agenda,

designed to unite and mobilise the masses, to channel the discontent and frustration of an entire people into a willingness to fight yet another terrible war that would restore the nation's former glory. Always an effective way of accomplishing this is to create fear and hatred of a common enemy – from within as much as from without. Since Jews were the largest ethnic minority in Germany at the time, they became convenient scapegoats.

‘With these political developments, tensions soon began to develop between the older groups following an idealistic Atlantean spiritualism on one side, and the pragmatic fascism and antisemitism of the Nazis on the other. The believers in a lost Atlantean civilisation thought that a revival of that superior culture would lead to a racially pure utopian society that would, by its own strength, conquer the world through an evolutionary process of the survival of the fittest, without the bloodshed of war and active extermination of weaker races. This mystical spiritualism was seen by many Nazis as being too soft and fundamentally incompatible with their aggressive drive towards armed conflict. And so, groups that had originally provided the basis for the National Socialist movement were increasingly suppressed by the very regime they had once supported, and were forced underground as secret societies.

‘That was what came to my mind when I saw these photographs of the murals inside the manor house, depicting several scenes from operas by Richard Wagner – specifically, from the *Ring Cycle*, which combines elements from both Norse and Germanic mythology. In a similar building on the Continent, I would not have been surprised at all to see images like that. There, these

stories had a revival during the late 19th and early 20th Century, especially among those who believed in the Atlantean mythology. But inside a manor house dating from around the same period in Britain, they looked conspicuously out of place. Victorian era interior design is diametrically opposed to these blunt and dramatic paintings. It is very intricate and heavily ornamented, dominated by abstract patterns with a distinctly Indian or East Asian flair, and certainly not Germanic. Of course, it is possible that these murals are the result of later redecorations. But even then, with the First World War and the subsequent growing threat of the Nazis, anything as essentially German as these images would have been seen as highly suspect in this country – which might explain why they are found in such a remote place, and might hint at the existence at that time of a group of people who had subversive interests in the outcome of either of the two World Wars. But I didn't attach any particular significance to it until I saw the reference to Ultima Thule inside the library book, and after you had expressed your suspicion that it might be connected to your friend's absence – which, in turn, might be connected to the abduction of Kathleen Reed.

‘My initial reaction was one of surprise and, to be perfectly honest, concern. Spontaneously, I thought that perhaps this might give us an indication of what really happened and, crucially, why. But now, I'm not so sure anymore. If Miss Reed's death didn't occur in the manner outlined in the media – as an accidental drug overdose during a Satanic ritual – then we are dealing with a very serious and carefully orchestrated crime, committed by people whose ulterior motives are as yet unknown. On

the one hand, it's difficult to see how anything that happened at the manor house half a century ago or more, possibly related in some sense to the old Atlantean myths, could have any connection to this present-day murder. On the other hand, somehow your friend came across the term Ultima Thule, which at least temporarily must have had some importance to her.'

'Exactly. And even if the writing inside the library book was not intended to be a message to others, I think that, while Alison had that book checked out, only the circumstances surrounding Kathleen's murder occupied her strongly enough for her to be compelled to write into it. Maybe, as for you, Professor, it was seeing these murals in the newspaper photographs that got her investigating into that direction. At first, she couldn't draw any meaningful connections. But then, after she'd been attacked, she overheard something that appeared to confirm her initial suspicion, something concerning a guarded secret. Are there any clues in these old myths to what that could be?'

'I'm afraid that, within the ideologies of the various Atlantean cults, there can only be one secret with such a central significance, and that would be the location of their lost homeland – Atlantis or Ultima Thule, whichever name you prefer. I mentioned how, according to their mythology, a utopia on Earth would result if the superior Atlantean civilisation could be recovered. But surely your friend would not believe in the existence, past or present, of such a civilisation?'

'No, not even under extreme mental strain. But she may have considered the possibility that someone else might.'

'True ... Still, I don't think we should automatically assume

that the term Ultima Thule in this short note refers to the old mythological land. In reality, it might be the name given to any number of things. In which case the tentative connection between your friend's writing and the manor house – as suggested by the murals – breaks down entirely and is revealed as nothing but a coincidence.'

'You're right, Professor. Regardless of how one views the situation, something always stands out as being strange and implausible. But whatever the reason is behind the writing in the library book, I won't find the truth by sitting around. I need to go up into the Western Highlands and see the place for myself.'

'Now, I hate to point out the obvious, Miss Dannreuther, but if you are right with your suspicions, such an endeavour would be exceedingly careless. If there is even a remote possibility of danger, this is clearly a job for the police. It would be easy enough for them to check if someone has been back again inside the manor house.'

'They did. After the first time I spoke with the detective in Cambridge, the Scottish police sent a car up to the building. Apparently, there was no sign of any activity since the police had left after completing their investigation. At first, that was a huge relief to me. But as I sat by the phone at my grandmother's place, waiting for Alison to respond to the radio requests for contact – all the while hoping that Gran wouldn't hear them – I began to get worried again. If Alison really was abducted, and if she really was brought to the manor house by the same people who had abducted and ultimately murdered Kathleen, broken locks or windows would be the last thing one would expect to find

there. Nor would one expect a convenient collection of detritus scattered about and a big pentagram drawn on the floor – unless, of course, they wanted to set someone else up again.

‘I know that, when I get to the manor house, it will be nothing but a decrepit building, and I won’t even be able to get inside. But there is nothing else I can do at the moment. And unless I see it for myself, it will haunt me forever. This one thing I have to sort out before I can relax and recover and do all the other wise things that people tell me to do. In the end, I hope not to find anything at all. I hope I’m overreacting. I hope that, very soon, I’ll feel like a complete fool for having panicked like this, when Alison has happily returned from Ireland, ready to face life and work at home again. It’s the same old conflict: I’m aimlessly running about all over the place, telling people that Alison has been abducted, while simultaneously hoping that I’m wrong.’

‘Don’t allow this to eat yourself up, Miss Dannreuther. I have the impression that, currently, you’re attempting to bat and bowl at the same time. When you satisfied yourself that everything is as it should be at the old manor, you should return to Cambridge and trust the police to do the right thing – as they evidently are, based on what you’re telling me. And how are you going to get there? There is no public transport in that part of the country.’

‘I’ll have to rent a car, and then ... You wouldn’t happen to know the exact location of the building, would you, Professor?’

He smiled. ‘From what I remember of the news reports, it is located by an elevated lake, surrounded by mountains. The nearest settlement is a small village called Eyrie, situated at the foot of the mountains, by the shore of Loch Cairnbawn – a long inlet

from the sea, which you should be able to find on any ordinary road map. But do you still intend to stay here overnight?’

‘Yes, at Claire’s – our old home. She’ll be surprised to see me back again so soon.’

He nodded thoughtfully. ‘Miss Golding has a lovely personality. For that reason, she gets emotionally involved with other people’s lives very easily. As you can imagine, for several days, the various accounts of your adventure on Antarctica were all over the British news. And I couldn’t help noticing that, during that time, Miss Golding didn’t get a lot of sleep.’

‘You’re right, Professor. It’s probably best not to tell her about my plans. Tomorrow morning, when I take the bus to Leuchars, instead of transferring to the train south, I’ll continue through to Dundee and rent a car there. I just need to remember to phone my institute in Cambridge. I have to make an appointment with the Medical Unit sometime next week.’

He knocked the ash out of his pipe. ‘Then I shall not detain you any longer. You must be anxious to move on. But if you pass through here again, after you solved that mystery, I hope you’ll let me hear the rest of the story, whatever it may be.’

‘It’s a deal, Professor.’

‘Very good. Please don’t consider me rude if I stay here a little longer. I feel I could do with another smoke. People tell me that it’s an illusion, but I do believe it helps me to concentrate – and I’ve got some thinking to do.’

He got up and held out his hand. ‘It was a real pleasure getting to know you. And I’m looking forward to our next meeting.’

‘Likewise, Professor.’

He remained standing, already deep in thought, as he watched Siobhán leave. Reflected in the glass door of the lounge, their eyes met one last time.

Whether intended or not, his voice carried over the noise of the other conversations: ‘Good luck, Miss Dannreuther.’

CHAPTER FIVE

GHOST STORIES

The lonely country road seemed to carry on forever, winding between the bleak expanse of moorland on the left, and a thin stretch of stunted trees on the right, through which occasionally the glinting surface of Loch Cairnbawn could be seen.

A craggy mountain ridge rose up steeply from the otherwise gently undulating landscape, entirely dominating the scenery. The slanting rays of the afternoon sun glowed on a thin layer of snow that covered its dark rocks.

An overgrown track branched off from the main road and led up the uneven terrain towards the valley that lay hidden within the U-shaped ridge. There was no sign pointing to it by the side of the road, and an air of inaccessibility and secrecy hung over the mountain. Whoever had decided to establish their home in that valley, more than a hundred years ago, had clearly been in search of privacy.

The time had just gone past three o'clock. With about two and a half hours of daylight remaining, it was tempting to drive up to the manor house immediately. But, in an ordinary car, progress would be slow, especially as the rough track was bound to get more slippery with the snow and ice covering the higher ground.

Moreover, Siobhán felt it would be unwise to rush headlong into an unknown and potentially dangerous situation. If she wanted to discover anything that had been missed during the of-

ficial investigation, she could not afford to draw any attention to herself and rouse the suspicion of anyone who might be using the seemingly abandoned building for their criminal endeavours.

A more sensible approach was to begin her investigation down in the village. In casual conversation, she could attempt to find out about any unusual activities in the area leading up to Kathleen's murder, or since then; about any strangers that had repeatedly passed through, or any visitors that had shown an interest in the manor house.

She therefore continued along the main road until a battered sign appeared, revealing the village of Eyrie to lie somewhere to the right. A short distance on from the sign, a narrower road branched off, just wide enough for one vehicle. After it had crossed the thin stretch of trees, it sloped down to the rocky shore.

Straight ahead was a slipway for small boats. Towards the left, the road led past a single row of old but neat white cottages that nestled into the curving coastline, their fronts facing a distant line of snow-covered mountains that rose up on the other side of the wide inlet from the sea.

The first of the houses was identified as a B&B, but there was no additional sign that would have indicated whether it was open to guests during the winter.

Then followed a little shop, which also accommodated the post office. As with the B&B, no lights showed through the windows, and no movement inside was visible.

The rest appeared to be residential buildings – except for an old-fashioned seaside café that came into view at the very end

of the road. The dark green frames of its large windows stood out from the austere facades of the other houses, with the name of the establishment written in Gaelic letters above them – The White Cairn. Again, the inside was not illuminated. But, encouragingly, an “Open” sign was displayed in the door – although, paled by exposure to the sun as it was, this could well have been its permanent state.

Siobhán parked the rental car in a lay-by near the water’s edge and walked over to the café. She tried the door and found that it was unlocked.

No bell announced her arrival, only the creaking of the old wooden floorboards. A bell would have gone unheard in any case, as there was no one behind the counter or elsewhere inside the dining room.

The continued absence of human life was becoming disconcerting. It gave the small collection of houses the air of a ghost town; an idyllic settlement from which, for some reason, people had decided to move away one day, and had never returned. Perhaps they had been compelled to flee, trying to escape some malevolent presence that had descended onto them from the surrounding mountains – some evil power that had taken possession of their village and had forced them to leave everything behind.

This impression was reinforced by the interior of the café, which appeared to be frozen in time, having remained unchanged for the past thirty years or more. The pastel coloured tables arranged along the window front, with matching chairs neatly pushed underneath them ... The oversized coffee machine behind the counter, the mechanical cash till, the scales for sweets

... The entire decor seemed to be relics from a bygone era.

The chest freezer for ice cream, which stood near the entrance, was empty. And the bare shelves above it looked as if they may once have held an assortment of toys for playing by the waterside. Now they were nothing but sad reminders of the carefree summer holidays that belonged to a distant past.

But as Siobhán approached the counter, she spotted some quarter slices of pancake that had been left on a cake stand underneath a glass dome, still looking quite fresh. She then saw that the counter top, although worn-out, was spotlessly clean, without any accumulation of dust. Furthermore, she now noticed the faint trace of an enticing smell of food that emerged from the kitchen.

This was not the silence of an abandoned community at all. It was simply that time of the day, halfway between meals, when the relaxed tranquility of the early afternoon hours was gradually coming to an end.

Standing again by the open door, looking down the still deserted street, Siobhán wondered whether it would be socially acceptable to hang around the café until tea time, or whether it would be more polite to wait in the car, when she heard footsteps behind her.

‘Sorry, love. Did not hear you come in – my ears, you know, not what they used to be.’

The elderly proprietor smiled across the counter as she entered from the kitchen, carrying a steaming teapot. ‘I’m afraid you are a wee bit early for food. I am still ...’

She hesitated, struck by a sudden realisation. ‘But you did not

mean to come here at all, did you, love? You got lost, took the wrong turn up by the main road.'

'Oh, no, I meant to come here. I saw the village sign and thought I might take a little rest.'

'So you did. And you'll be coming from down South, won't you, love? Have you been driving all the way?'

'No, I ... Originally, I'm from England, yes. But I've lived in Scotland for several years. I studied at St Andrews for a while, and now I'm working in Aberdeen.'

'Well now, a rare visitor indeed, from the university.' She removed the tray with pancakes from underneath the dome. 'I wanted to sit down with a nice cup of tea before the first regulars come in again – enjoy the place while everything is quiet and clean, you know. But why don't you join me? I'll give the wire-less a day off, and you can tell me a story instead. Or are you in a hurry, love?'

'No. Tea would be grand, cheers.'

'I just put the pie in the oven – it's minced mutton today. I hope you like that. But it'll be another hour or so. In the meantime, you can help me finish these tattie scones here. They come with the tea, of course – leftovers from breakfast, you see. But I would hate to throw them out. And you must be hungry after the long journey, coming all the way from the East Coast. Are you travelling on your own?'

'I am, yes. I know the Eastern Highlands quite well. The university has a field station out in Moray Firth, where I do part of my research. But so far, I didn't get the chance to see the west of Scotland. And since I have some time off from work, I thought I

could complete the whole Highlands tour at last. I came via Inverness today. I'm planning to continue north to Thurso, and back down along the East Coast from there. I just hope the weather holds up. I suppose it would be easy to get snowed in up here, with the mountains and the few narrow roads.'

'Tell me about it, love. But it was pleasant enough today.' She poured out two cups of tea and placed them onto a tray, together with the scones. 'We can sit there by the windows. After all these many years, I still enjoy the view across the loch. Don't the mountains look lovely with the fresh layer of snow and the afternoon sun shining down onto them?'

'They are beautiful, yes. I was also impressed by that steep mountain ridge a little farther to the south.'

'Hmm ... *Beinn na h-Iolair-mhara* – or Ben Erne, as you would call it. It's named after the sea eagles that used to live around here. I suppose people thought that the shape of its crest looked a bit like the wings of a big bird.'

'Is it nice for hiking up there?'

'No, love, you should stay away from that mountain. It's not a good place. And the scenery is much nicer down here by the shore.'

'I see ... It's just that I noticed a track leading up the slope. It appears as if it was used by vehicles in the past.'

'It was, when people still went up regularly to the old manor. You can't see it from below. It stands a little way back from the beginning of the valley, near the edge of a lake – Loch Cuirinnein. Now it's all quite desolate up there, and the house has been empty for many years. It was built by an English family more

than a century ago – rich folk, you know, who had made their fortune from the factories down South. Then they realised that they did not like to live near them very much and rather fancied a quiet place in unspoilt nature instead. They stayed up there until the first war, but then everything changed. Society was very different afterwards. It was difficult for them to find household staff for this remote place, and they did not want to do all the hard work themselves, obviously. So, they left and went back to England.

‘Then, very early during the second war, one of the sons and his wife, still a young couple at the time, they returned here – in summer it was, I remember that. You see, during the warm months, we still had the sheep wandering about in those days, and occasionally we children had to go out and get them down again from the mountain. We knew the valley quite well, and we had got used to the building being abandoned. We were therefore quite surprised when we saw that someone had moved back in. But the couple did not stay for long. Less than a year later, after investing all this money into renovating the old house, they left and went back to London, as we were told.’

‘Really? That’s odd. Why did they leave again so soon?’

‘Well, that was exactly the question that everyone around here was asking. And more importantly, why had they come back to the old family home in the first place, having been away for a whole generation? Normally, one might have thought that they had been afeared of the bombings along the South Coast, perhaps worrying that there was going to be an invasion. But then they discovered how lonely it was up here, and they did not have

enough people to help them out. So, they preferred life in the big city after all, even if it was more dangerous.

‘It was a possibility, but we were all convinced that there was something strange going on in that valley. I remember the grown-ups being very mysterious about it. At first, there were rumours that something was being done there “for the war effort” – that’s what people kept saying – probably something to do with Military Intelligence. Of course, as a child, I did not know what that meant, but I could tell it was all very hush-hush, and nobody dared to ask any questions. Still, there were frequent visitors at the manor – important people, you know. We could see them drive up the mountain in their big fancy cars from the South.

‘That went on for a few months. But then – a few days before Christmas it was – the couple came driving down into the village. We could tell straight away that something bad must have happened to them because they behaved very strangely – anxious somehow. Before, they had always been very polite and had tried to have a friendly relationship with us townsfolk. Now they seemed keen on keeping us away from the manor, said they did not need any deliveries anymore, that they themselves would pick up everything they needed from the store, or from the farms nearby. That was very unusual, and in a small place like this talk gets around. You can call it being nosey, but I say there is nothing wrong with people looking out for each other. It was quite clear by their behaviour that they had got themselves into some kind of trouble, and they were definitely hiding something.

‘People were therefore wondering what kind of secret the

couple might suddenly be guarding, which they were more concerned about than their work for the war effort, if they had ever truly been involved in that. Not surprisingly then, very quickly, fresh rumours came up. Amongst other speculations, it was said that now the couple had a child staying with them. Before, tradespeople who had gone up to the manor had never seen any children there, nor had they ever heard the couple talk about children. It was all based on a number of little things, you know: the couple needing a pint of milk more each day, or buying boiled sweets and cod liver oil, when they had never done that before. And so, everyone began to wonder why they kept it a secret if there really was a child staying with them.

‘Truth be told, some of the speculations were a bit wild. It was said, for example, that maybe their child wasn’t quite right in the head, you know, or deformed somehow. Because of that, the couple were afraid of people making fun of it, or that someone might take it away from them and put it into an asylum. That was still being done in those days, you know, and terrible places they were. Others said that maybe it was one of those poor transport children who had to leave Germany and had been coming over to Britain before the war started. Maybe, as the couple could not have children of their own, they had taken one of them in and had become too attached to it. Then, as they did not want to give it back, they brought it up here, to hide it.’

She pulled a kitchen timer out of her apron pocket and put it on the table. ‘I don’t know. It’s all so long ago – half a century now. In the end, I doubt we’ll ever find out what really happened up there. But it was quite obvious that some tragedy must have

befallen the couple. During their last few weeks of staying in the manor, we could tell that the woman especially was very much distraught. And then, towards the end of that winter, they left without a single word to us.

‘But they kept all the furnishings inside the building. And throughout the war, they came back regularly, once a month or so, only for a weekend each time, and always bringing a fair number of people with them. Again, there were all these expensive cars slowly climbing up the steep slope, throughout the evening hours and well into the night. God knows what they were doing up there in that seclusion – still something to do with the war, most likely, as afterwards these meetings stopped.

‘Nowadays, only twice a year, or so, someone goes up to see if everything is all right. If necessary, they get the repairs done, I imagine; some basic cleaning, probably. But they are not from the village. I do not think we’re welcome up there anymore. I certainly have not been up by the old manor since the war, nor would I want to. As I said, whatever happened, the mountain has become a bad place. So, you just make yourself comfortable down here for a while.’

She pushed the plate with tattie scones closer to Siobhán. ‘And take another farl, love. You could do with some food. I hope you don’t mind me saying, but you do look a bit hinky. Have you been unwell recently?’

‘Not really, no, just a little tired. Until recently, I was away on a research project, and it turned a bit stressful towards the end.’

‘You’re doing research then – as you said, of course. I’m sorry, love, I forgot. Aberdeen, was it? My son, you know, he

went to university as well, down in Glasgow – the first academic in our family. I was very proud. Then, afterwards, he got himself married to a well-spoken girl from the South, just like yourself. So, he's staying down there now. But you like Scotland, don't you, love? And I can see you're not married.'

'No, indeed. Somehow I haven't got around to that yet. But children ... What you just told me about the events during the war, it's quite a sad story, isn't it? If the rumours were true, and the couple really did have a child staying with them – whether it was their own, or not – one would have to assume that what caused them to move away again so suddenly was that the child got sick and died.'

'Yes, I suppose that may have been the reason. And that would be very sad, wouldn't it? Of course, we will never know for certain, but that hasn't stopped all sorts of stories from getting about. To this day, there are people who come in here on a long winter's evening and tell anyone who's still willing to listen that the child was a little girl by the name of Rose. They believe that in the chapel that belongs to the manor house the couple established a secret memorial, without any name or date on it, but with the engraving of a rose.

'Which just goes to show how long people haven't been up to that place because I do not remember that outbuilding by the lake as being a chapel, more like a pavilion. But it is true, there is a flower engraved on one of the stones that are set into the wall. Only it's not a memorial stone at all, nor is it the engraving of a rose. Instead, it looks very much like a water lily, as one might expect at a lake by that name. You could say – as people

always do when you point that out to them – that perhaps the little girl’s name was Lily. But look at the age of the stone. I know for certain that it’s been up there since before the war.

‘Still, you know what people say about every myth containing a grain of truth. Well, I suspect that particular story got started because of a real chapel, not far from here, out west by the coast in Clachtoll Bay. In that chapel, there really is a memorial stone with a rose engraving, which was put there during the war, when the chapel was being renovated. So, you see how stories go. Some grow long legs and travel well between places.

‘But there has always been something mysterious about Loch Cuirinnein. For as long as people around here can remember, the lake has been associated with ghosts and other apparitions. It must be the location, I suppose, hidden up there in that valley.

‘Then, when the English came along to build their grand manor ... What these outsiders did not know was that in the lake there lived since time immemorial an ancient wraith, or a phantom, as you might say. Sometimes, in a clear night, under a full moon, just around midnight, it emerges out of the lake, forming from a fog that rises up from the water. Then, if you watch closely, you can see it standing on Innis Tannasg – that little island in the lake. If the English had spoken our language, the island’s name would have told them everything they needed to know. But they did not care. They thought they could do anything they wanted in our land. So, they built their big house, they disturbed the phantom that lived up there, and because of that the family has been haunted ever since. At least that is how the most famous of our stories goes – *The Legend of the Phantom and the Fae*.

‘According to that story, the phantom took revenge on the English family for invading its realm. Once in a while, it came gliding across the water, up to the house, and took over their hearts and minds, causing them to go mad and to commit acts of violence amongst each other and their guests. One night, it was particularly bad. That was when the family mistreated and killed a young woman, and threw her body into the lake. But then something unexpected happened. As their latest victim had been so completely innocent, she did not simply die. Her spirit survived, and she became a fae. She now lives on Innis Siabhraich, another island in the lake that lies submerged for most of the time. But whenever the phantom shows itself, and another innocent victim is in danger, the hidden island rises out of the water, and the fae opposes the phantom and tries to banish its evil powers.

‘Now, I need to say, in all honesty, that this story came about because of the original inhabitants of the manor, long before my time. The couple I mentioned, whom I met myself, I do not remember as being anything but kind to us. But as you can imagine, the more fanciful say that it was the phantom who killed the little girl during the war; that on this occasion the fae was unable to protect her. And so they say that, in moonlit nights, the poor wee lass can be seen stepping out onto the patio of the manor house, walking down the lawn to the edge of the lake and out onto the jetty. There she stands, looking across the water, still waiting for the fae to come and rescue her, and to take her spirit away from that dismal place.

‘But you know, as sad as these stories are, until last December, they were really just stories. Then, that horrible murder

happened. Now, any number of normally sensible people will tell you, with utmost conviction, that there truly is some kind of evil living up on that mountain; that it has lain dormant for many years; but when this group of young people started doing their devil worship in the old building, the evil got woken up again, and now it has claimed yet another victim. So, when you asked me about going for a walk on Ben Erne, I was very surprised. You had obviously not heard about that murder, although it was quite a story around here for several weeks.'

'December was it, when that happened? Well, I was away at the time – abroad, you know, on that research project I mentioned.'

'Away you were, of course. Then let me tell you, love, it was an awful crime. After that, nothing and no one could drag me up to that accursed place. And I'm not saying there really is a wraith living up there – or a fae, for that matter. I don't hold with that kind of ungodly nonsense. But there are bad people around who did a terrible thing. That much is certain.

'The poor lass, Kathleen Reed. She was from the South as well, you know – from Cambridge they said – a university girl too, I should think. They kidnapped her and brought her all the way up here, if you can believe that. Who knows what disgusting rituals they did with her. And when she died, they just left her there. Days later, it was, when the police finally found her lying on the floor, all alone, in the great dining hall of the manor. Eventually, they caught the people who were responsible for that. The trial is still going on, so I daresay we have not heard the end of it. But for now, at least, it's gone quiet again. You're the first

visitor we've had up here for a month or so. Usually, we don't get any during the cold months, or very few. Only this winter, all through the holidays and well into the new year, there were any type of folk running around – journalists, you know, and television people, blocking the roads with their funny vans – in addition to the ordinary onlookers, of course. We were all glad when we were rid of them again. But people are attracted to this kind of thing, aren't they?'

She took her kitchen timer and got up, straightening her back gingerly. 'Well, I should go and check on the pie again. In a few minutes, the first customers will be coming in for their tea. I hope you can join us. You would get to know half the village in one evening.'

'Sure, I'd be delighted. It begins to smell delicious in here.'

'That's very kind of you to say, love. But I don't even know your name. I won't know how to introduce you to the others. I'm Mary, by the way.'

'And I'm Siobhán, Siobhán Dannreuther.'

'Siobhán, how lovely. That's a very noble name – and Gaelic, of course.' She collected their two cups and picked up the tray. 'So, here we are then, two famous virgins. Although, now, I'm afraid I'll have to leave you alone with the café for a moment – but don't fret yourself, love. If someone comes wandering in, just leave them be. They will know what to do.'

That was one question answered, at least. There could be no doubt that it would have been impossible for any outsider to come into the village unnoticed. Even a brief visit to the shop

would have attracted attention instantly. And any excuse for that visit would have had to withstand a substantial pressure of friendly but persistent interrogation.

Meanwhile, up on that mountain, it would have been a different story. As local farming had clearly come to an end, and the younger generation had moved away, the remaining residents of the village were not likely to get about much anymore. From down by the shore, with the main windows of the row of houses facing the inlet from the sea, and the line of trees standing immediately behind them, the chance of accidentally spotting an individual vehicle heading up to the manor house had to be rather small. Considering also that there was only light traffic on the main road in winter, it would not be too difficult for someone to come and go unseen for several weeks, as indeed the cult members had done.

But what value would there really be in driving up to that lonely place? What fresh clues could there possibly be to uncover, after the police had already verified that the building was still securely locked, with nothing suspicious inside or around it?

These rational concerns aside, the important question was not how much sense it made now to go up to the manor house. The important question was how much sense it would seem to have made when Siobhán was back in her grandmother's flat in Norwich; how much she would regret then her inaction now, while she would be nursing her injuries and waiting for Alison to phone – or better still, for her to return from Dublin; while she would be waiting for a decision to be made about whether

she would be able to return to Antarctica in the near future; while she was lying on the old sofa, half her mind on the television, the other half simultaneously bored and nervous; while she was being spoiled with a constant supply of tea and *Fliederbeer* soup or *Plettenpudding*, her grandmother fussing over her, trying to cheer her up, not knowing what the real problem was. In that situation, looking back, how unforgivable would it be that, having driven all the way up to the Western Highlands, she had given up just before the end because she had got lethargic, because she had given in to physical and mental exhaustion – or worse, because she had allowed herself to be intimidated by a collection of old myths and ghost stories?

The door of the café opened with the entrance of an elderly lady. Carefully holding a tote bag in front of her, she headed straight for the counter, apparently oblivious of Siobhán sitting by the window.

Upon hearing the radio and other noises emerging from the kitchen, she placed two clean plates on top of the food display case and began unpacking some homemade pastries – caramel shortbread and cream buns.

Suddenly, she looked up. ‘Oh, hello, hen. Did not see you there at first.’

Just then, Mary returned from the kitchen. ‘Yes, Hannah, I’ve got a visitor here today. She’s travelling through the Highlands.’

‘What, at this time of the year?’

‘Well, as it happens, she has some days off from work right now. She’s a researcher, you see – very clever, from the univer-

sity.’

Having deposited her pastries, Hannah approached across the dining room, sociably squinting against the light from the windows. ‘A researcher . . . But yes, of course, aren’t you that scientist who got left behind on Antarctica, after that explosion?’

Mary glanced over from the coffee machine. ‘Hannah, what are you talking about? Please don’t frighten the poor lass. She needs to rest. Explosion on Antarctica, honestly. This is Siobhán, Hannah. She’s from down South, originally, but she’s staying in Aberdeen now, aren’t you, love?’

‘That’s right, Siobhán, that was her name – Siobhán Donoghue.’

‘Dannreuther, Hannah, she just told me.’

‘Yes, that’s it: Siobhán Dannreuther. You remember, Mhairi, of course you do. You remember that fire and the evacuation. It was all over the papers for days.’

‘Newspapers, really. You know what they wrote about us – nothing but blether. For years and years nobody gives a hoot about what is going on up here. They barely manage to maintain the roads and deliver our post. Then, this terrible tragedy happens, and overnight we’re a big sensation, entertainment for the whole nation.

‘All this talk of witchcraft and Satanic rituals . . . They knew full well that, whatever malice was at work up on that mountain, it came from the South, as usual, and certainly not from the village or out of the lake, as they tried to tell everyone. You remember what they said about evil fogs rising up from the water – misusing our old legends like that, only to make their own stories more interesting. Havers, I’ve really had enough of that.

Now they are saying we should stop wrapping our fish and chips in newspapers. Did you hear that, Hannah? It's not hygienic, apparently. After telling us for all our lives about saving and reusing paper – just goes to show, doesn't it? No use for anything anymore – newspapers. So, why should we pay attention to what they have to say. There are much better things to do.

'Which reminds me, Hannah Ferguson, I must get everything ready for tea now. This looks lovely, by the way, what you brought here, as always. But this young lady needs decent accommodation for tonight. Couldn't you let her have a room, even if it is out of season?'

'Of course, Mhairi. But I thought you said she's travelling through. Isn't she moving on today?'

'No, pet. The lass is tired. Aren't you, love?'

'I ...'

'But of course you are. No, you stay here and enjoy the calm weather, while it lasts. But brace yourself, Hannah, there will be snow again across the Northwest later this week. They were just saying on the wireless.'

'Heaven forfend. I almost slipped twice already over the few yards from my place. That's all the evil that fogs ever seem to be doing around here – icing up our pavements. And it's not a good time for driving in the Highlands, hen, not if there is snow coming.'

'No, I suppose not. But I should be able to complete the whole tour back to the East Coast before the end of the week, if I carry on tomorrow.'

'That nice new car parked outside is yours then, is it? I was

wondering about that. Surely you wouldn't want to damage it in an accident. Imagine if you skidded off the road, out there in the middle of nowhere, without any phone to call for help for miles and miles. No, hen, better to come back here during the summer months. It's much more pleasant, with some lovely walks in the area.

‘But not to worry. Tonight, I'll set you up with a nice room looking out over our *Loch a' Chàirn Bhàin*. There will be a bright moon again tonight, and the light on the water is going to be very romantic.’

‘Yes, Hannah, but the lass needs to sleep, as you can see. Perhaps she can admire the view during the day. No, you get yourself a good night's rest, love, and for breakfast tomorrow, I invite the two of you back here to the café. Just come a little late, when the others have left already. It's more comfortable then. We can chat without any distractions, and you can have a lie-in as long as you like.’

CHAPTER SIX

THE BLACK MIRROR

With a harsh revving of the engine, the front tyres slipped on the icy rocks. There was a quick jolt backwards, until they found their grip again and slowly pulled the car further up along the overgrown track towards the narrow pass that was framed by two massive buttresses.

Siobhán felt a distinct chill cascading down the slope. As she was mostly sheltered from the outside air, that feeling did not altogether seem to be related to her physical surroundings; and it got stronger as, gradually, the details of the craggy mountain ridge ahead became clearer.

Looking back, as she reached higher and higher ground, the scene in her rear-view mirror became wider, until she could see the loch in its full length behind her, with the irregular field of snow-covered mountains on the other side stretching all the way to the horizon.

Finally, the rough track levelled out, passing between the two buttresses, beyond which a deep valley came into view. Near the entrance stood the old manor house, its imposing front sternly facing any intruder who dared to venture into its lofty realm.

Behind it, a wide lawn sloped gently down towards the lake. Near the far end of the lake, seemingly floating on top of its own reflection, a little island with a few Scots pines could be seen through the thin layer of mist that had risen up from the water in

the morning hours and still lingered in the cold air, resisting the piercing rays of the early afternoon sun.

Wrapped around this isolated world was the crescent of the mountain ridge, looking indeed like the protective wings of a giant bird. But for whom was this protection intended? Was it meant to shield the select few who had dwelled within the valley from the dark Satanic mills they themselves had helped to create in the lands below? Or was, instead, the shelter intended for the people who lived on the outside, down by the shore? Perhaps the stories about phantoms and evil fogs that were told there were true. Perhaps, through the ages, the mountain had been trying to contain some ancient malevolent force that resided deep inside the lake – in vain, sometimes, and then people had died, or vanished.

The slamming of the car door echoed between the manor house and the surrounding mountains. In the hushed silence that followed, even the crunching of cautious footsteps on the gravel covering the forecourt felt too conspicuous. Without a single natural sound, the valley appeared to be abandoned by life. And yet, the pervasive silence held in it a premonition of some unseen presence that hovered over the building – waiting and listening.

A more tangible clue to recent human activity was the chaotic pattern of tracks that had been left in the gravel surface. One track in particular stood out from the others, leading somewhat closer to the main entrance and cutting deeper at the very end. It had been left by a vehicle that had been neither unusually wide, nor unusually heavy, but one that had evidently arrived at a higher pace, and had braked harder at the last second. As it

overlay some of the other tracks, it had to be newer. But when exactly it had been produced, and what the reason had been for the abrupt arrival, was impossible to tell.

Even from close up, the old building still looked formidable, despite its weathered exterior. The parapet that ran along the edges of the roof made it look taller than it was. And with its darkened stones, what it had lost of its former grandeur, it had since gained in ominous gloom.

Also, the elegant shape of the tall bay windows, with their regular rows of slender columns and pointed arches, was deceptive. They had clearly been designed to be impenetrable for anything more solid than light, and they showed no sign of decay. Through the dusty glass, the dark interior could only be guessed – the vague outlines of armchairs around a low table, and a large open fireplace in the outside wall on the right – but there was no indication of any movement.

At the back of the building, facing southwest, an open patio was raised a few steps above the lawn. It was large enough for several deck chairs or loungers but, except for a lonely pedestal with a sundial, the space was empty now. Along its edges, symmetrically arranged rows of evergreen shrubs, left to their own devices for many years, had managed to eke out a natural existence, while the former flower beds had long been taken over by moss.

A French window opening onto the patio presented the first potential weak spot of the building. By breaking one of the large glass panes, it would be easy to open the latch on the inside of the door. But without an external lock, it was impossible to

enter through that door unnoticed. As this was the sunny side of the building, the room behind the French window was better illuminated than those at the front. Even so, Siobhán was still not able to detect any signs of recent activity inside it.

Stretched out at the bottom of the untended lawn was the dark expanse of Loch Cuirinnein. A wooden jetty leading out onto it was the most obvious means in the immediate vicinity by which something big could be cast into the water. It remained apparently undamaged, although the old planks creaked and groaned with every step, and the poles swayed ever more strongly the farther away from the shore she got.

At the end of the jetty, the clear water was no more than six feet deep. Through it, the bottom of the lake shimmered in the refracted sunlight, but the only thing that was visible were rocks that had become overgrown by a thin layer of algae. There did not appear to be any currents within the lake. And the wind would only push away from the shore something that was sufficiently light to float on the surface.

Nonetheless, given the steep slopes surrounding the lake, the water had to be getting significantly deeper towards its centre. Anything sinking to the bottom there would probably vanish forever. As there was no boat readily available locally, it would have been necessary to bring something like an inflatable dinghy. This would have required a high level of planning and determination. But to what end? Having murdered and carefully displayed Kathleen inside the building, what motive could someone have to secretly continue with the abduction and killing of innocent victims?

If the old myths that were told down in the village were true, it was futile to search for rational answers to these questions. In that case, the crimes that had been committed inside the hidden valley through the ages, and into the present, had a supernatural explanation. At a safe distance, it had been easy enough to dismiss these stories as superstitions. But up on the mountain, the atmosphere was different. The moment Siobhán had stepped onto the jetty, she had been overtaken by a growing sense of unease. She had a vague foreboding of a latent threat lurking in the dark depths of the lake, as if at any moment an ominous pattern of ripples could disturb its calm surface, foretelling the arrival of the ancient wraith who, having been awoken from its slumbers once more, was getting ready to strike again.

Although, even if there was some truth in the old rumours, it did not necessarily require interference from supernatural entities. If it was not the ghost of a little girl walking out onto the jetty in present times, maybe it had been a very real little girl – fifty years ago – who, having being left alone for just a brief moment, had become interested in something on the lake, some ducks or other birds perhaps, and had walked out onto the jetty for a closer look. Wanting to pet or feed them, she had leaned over a bit too far, and had fallen into the water and drowned.

How devastating would that have been to those who had been responsible for her wellbeing, whether they had been her rightful parents or not? Enough to move away? But why then had they returned to their old home, on a regular basis, throughout the rest of the war? If these comings and goings really had been related to codebreaking or other Military Intelligence activities,

they should have become known in the intervening period, at the same time when other top secret programmes had been declassified. And since the war, why had the owners put all this effort into maintaining the ageing building, instead of selling it on? Was it just because it was difficult to find someone willing to buy a big house in this remote place, which was to this day without connection to the electric grid or a modern sewage system? Or was it for purely sentimental reasons? Did they keep the manor house and the grounds that belonged to it out of reverence for the past? Either in honour of their family history, or more specifically in remembrance of a particular person?

If that was the case, and if the old rumours did indeed have a basis in truth, the little pavilion that stood near the jetty might have become used as some kind of memorial – although, with its open structure, and romantically located by the edge of the lake, it evidently had not originally been intended to serve any religious function. The stone benches were arranged along its octagonal walls, and the interior was devoid of any Christian symbolism. The only engraving on one of the stones facing the entrance was that of a flower. It was as weathered and probably as old as the rest of the walls and, therefore, not as clear as it once had been. But judging by the slender pointed petals, it did seem to belong to the family of water lilies, rather than that of roses.

Any lasting information about tragic events that had occurred in the valley were now only likely to exist in the minds of those who had been directly involved in them. And if there was a memorial that was part of the physical environment, it was hid-

den well, and had been hidden well for a long time. Especially following the scrutiny that the manor house and the grounds had received during the police investigation, the chances of discovering anything new had always been small. It was far more likely that there was nothing to see but a desolate building, enwrapped in an invisible veil that was spun from the dark events it had witnessed over the past century.

At the same time, Siobhán was reluctant to simply reject Alison's suspicion that the manor house had been central to Kathleen's abduction and murder. Alison had been convinced that that connection had nothing to do with Satanic rituals, and could therefore be missed by anyone whose investigation was focussed exclusively in that direction. If that was true, and if Siobhán kept an open mind to other explanations, there was a chance that she might discover something new after all. But, first, she would have to find a way into the old building, without causing any damage.

Over the decades, the large porch in front of the main entrance had served well to protect the two wings of the massive door against the inclement weather conditions. Neither the wood nor the iron fittings showed any sign of weakness. The lock appeared to have been installed more recently, possibly as part of the renovations during the last period of occupation. Despite that, it would have been easy to pick for someone capable of dealing with modern security locks. Certainly those who had managed to enter Kathleen's flat without leaving a single trace could have done so without any difficulty.

But what about all those who legally entered the building,

once or twice a year? The caretaker, different workmen, the cleaners – had they all been given keys? And the police from Ullapool, how had they got in on such short notice, only a few days ago? Since no one from Eyrie appeared to have anything to do with the upkeep of the manor house, the police would have had to collect the key from some other village farther away.

Unless, of course, all these people entered in the simplest conceivable way, without any detours at all, using the same spare key that was deposited somewhere outside the building. The empty flower pots by the side of the door seemed worth a try – although, not surprisingly, that turned out to be too obvious. Meanwhile, the two statues of griffins that stood outside the entrance of the porch were more promising as potential hiding places. One of them showed a narrow gap between the bottom rim of the pedestal and the surrounding ring of moss, as if it had been moved recently.

Carefully tilted onto its edge, the heavy statue allowed itself to be rolled away a short distance, revealing a tile in the floor of the porch, whose edges were noticeably cleaner than those of the others. It was a little loose and easy to lift, concealing a small space underneath it. And there, wrapped in a leather pouch, was a large old-fashioned key.

Ignoring all legal arguments against it, Siobhán decided that this was an invitation that was too good to refuse. Encouragingly, the lock slid back easily with a low metallic click, and the heavy door turned on its solid hinges with a soft creaking, opening to an even deeper silence than the one lying over the valley outside.

The entrance hall was only dimly lit by the diffuse remnants

of daylight that managed to penetrate the tall windows in the northeast-facing front of the building. In it danced a multitude of tiny dust particles that had been stirred up by the sudden return of life to their forsaken world.

The wide staircase leading up onto the first floor, flanked by two columns and branching off into two wings at the half landing, was familiar from the photographs in the newspapers. But with the additional smell of abandonment, it appeared less grand in reality than the black-and-white images had suggested. Even so, it was easy to imagine how, with the dark wood panelling and lit by the warm glow of the paraffin lamps all along the sidewalls, the entrance hall would once have been an impressive introduction to the manor house.

An open door on the left led into the library. In it, large sections of the walls were taken up by shelves, filled entirely with antique leather-bound books – several extensive series of specialised encyclopaedias covering history and geography, different editions of outdated world atlases, and some books about the colonies and international trade. They seemed to be intended primarily for decoration, rather than usage. But none of their spines appeared to be fake, as they would likely have been if they concealed a secret compartment or a safe. A group of armchairs and sofas occupied an excessive amount of space in the centre of the room, further suggesting that the library had been used mainly as a smoking room.

The only artificial light sources available were the few oil lamps on the walls, and the ancient candlesticks on the coffee tables. In this austere pre-electric environment, the portable radio

set, standing next to a writing desk in a corner by the curtained bay window, was strangely out of place. Its style suggested that it had been brought in during the Second World War, when the building had been temporarily inhabited again. Although it was housed inside a cabinet that was consistent in style with the rest of the furniture, it had originally been intended for mobile use and was running on batteries. Equipped with both a headset and a microphone, it had been capable of transmitting as well as receiving. It was still tuned to the low-frequency band, which would have allowed broadcasting over long distances, even in mountainous terrain.

Without a telephone connection, and with a slow and occasionally interrupted postal service in winter, the radio would have been the only reliable connection to the outside world. There had therefore been perfectly legitimate reasons for owning such a two-way radio set. And yet, was it not possible that some clandestine activities had indeed been conducted from the manor house? Under the circumstances at the time, that would certainly have been “for the war effort,” as it was said. But for whose?

The expansive mural above the open fireplace did suggested that, for generations, the family had cultivated an affinity with Norse and Germanic mythology, rather than the heroic stories of the British Isles. It showed a group of women who stood huddled closely together. By their striking similarity, they appeared to be sisters. They were dressed in flowing white robes, with long crimson cloaks draped around their shoulders, and their torsos were protected by intricately worked light armours. They wore winged helmets and were armed with spears and long shields.

Before them stood another woman who, by her appearance and dress, also belonged to the group. She supported a younger girl who was swooning, hanging limply in her arms. The woman looked intently at her sisters, pleading for help and somehow apologetic, as if blaming herself for whatever had just happened to the girl. It was a scene of an unfolding drama, expressing tension and fear – a glimpse at a moment of crisis, when one tragedy had already occurred, but worse was yet to come.

The story to which this scene belonged evidently held a significant importance for the family who had built the manor house. At the time when the original interior decoration would have been completed, they had certainly not been embarrassed by any connection to that mythology. Even when the renovations had been carried out during the early stages of the Second World War, no attempt had been made to cover up the mural. The pride in what they perceived to be their family heritage clearly superseded whatever current political concerns there may have been.

Across the entrance hall from the library, a door opened into the parlour. The room still had a formal atmosphere about it, having probably been used for receptions, but the dark red and purple colour scheme was friendlier than the drab browns in the library, and the group of armchairs surrounding the table in the centre of the room was more elegant than the corresponding furniture in the library.

And yet, as in the library, the wall above the fireplace was covered by a large mural. In the far background of the image, two male figures were engaged in a sword fight. More prominently in the foreground stood the same woman who had supported the

swooning girl in the other mural, now armed with a spear and shield, as her sisters had been. She appeared to have been about to get involved in the fight, but had been distracted by the arrival of the old bearded man who came slowly walking towards her out of the early morning fog. He too carried a long spear, but no shield. Nor was he wearing any armour, only a modest grey travelling cloak. And even his spear served more the function of a walking stick. Nonetheless, he was an imposing presence, radiating an air of invincibility and unmatched powers. He was entirely indifferent towards the fighting men, his whole attention focussed on the woman, who was tense, facing him with some trepidation, uncertain about his intentions. She held her shield up defensively, as if anticipating an attack, although the tip of her spear pointed just a little too low to be aggressive. She seemed intent on avoiding a confrontation with the old man. But she was defiant, demonstrating that she was prepared to defend herself if necessary, that she was willing to stand her ground and fight, futile as that undoubtedly was.

Adjoining the parlour was the room Siobhán had seen through the French window that opened onto the patio. It appeared to be the drawing room. Instead of murals, the walls were decorated with family portraits. The furniture was more cluttered and more casual than in the two rooms at the front of the building, giving the impression of an actual living space, rather than serving a ceremonial function. With the view across the lake, it would have been a cosy place to while away a dreary day when it was too cold or too stormy to sit outside.

Overall, the personal items left behind in the manor house

gave the impression that this had been a grand family estate, much loved by the original owners, and infused with all their idiosyncratic interests and tastes. As it had passed on to a later generation, it had also been popular enough with them to return to this lonely spot – only to abandon it again, shortly afterwards.

Whatever had compelled them to do that, the weight of more recent events hung even heavier in the air. Based on the news reports that Siobhán had read, this had to be the room where, after many years of abandonment, the fireplace had been lit once more for a macabre purpose. And she had no doubt that she already knew what was going to lie beyond the double door opposite the fireplace. It could only be the dining hall.

The flames shot up in a flickering inferno, engulfing the female figure on the horse – the woman from the earlier two murals, but alone this time, and apparently embracing her fate. Her struggles were over. She looked up into a dark sky, her arms raised. Although she seemed to be reaching out for salvation, it was simultaneously a gesture of triumph, as if her appointed task had been accomplished. She had made the sacrifices that had been asked of her, and now she was ready to move on to a better world. Meanwhile, a primordial battle was still raging all around her, outside the ring of fire, where water flowed in from a river nearby, and steam rose up where the two powerful elements clashed.

At a distance, seen across the length of the great dining hall, the vast mural was almost lifelike. Only from closer up, the pattern of individual brush strokes became discernible, as well as the inscription in the bottom left corner:

All things, all things,
all I wot now;
all at once is made clear.
Even thy ravens I hear rustling;
to tell the longed-for tidings,
let them return to their home.
Rest thee! Rest thee, oh God!

It appeared to be a later addition. The paint used for the writing was of a thicker texture and of a deeper black than in the artist's signature in the bottom right corner, or indeed anywhere else on the mural. Years and possibly decades after the original painting had been completed, this stanza, evidently part of a longer verse, had attained a special significance for the inhabitants at the time, such that they had included it in this particular scene. It was referring to a revelation of sorts – connected to some tragedy, or having itself tragic consequences – a kind of enlightenment that was accompanied by the end of days, when the world as it was known collapsed, and everything was consumed by fire and water.

On the wall facing the row of tall windows, illuminated by the warm light of the afternoon sun, was another mural, a wide vista of a lonely mountaintop, lost in a sea of clouds. It was all quiet now. There was no more strife. And the woman was dead. She was laid out on a flat rock, dressed only in a white robe, her weapons and armour discarded. Standing at her feet and gazing mournfully at her, was the same old bearded man as in the scene of the sword fight earlier on, wearing the same grey travelling cloak, but somehow diminished now in his appearance, leaning

heavily on his long spear, his powers seemingly broken.

There were then two different endings to the same story. If the woman was truly dead in the mountaintop scene, she had to have managed to escape the fire and water after all, only to find death in a different manner later on. Or she was lying there in some kind of sleep enchantment, from which she was woken up again at an opportune moment, giving her a second chance to continue some appointed task, until she perished in a violent confluence of fire and water.

These ambiguities aside, one thing was certain. This was the room where Kathleen's story had ended – there, on that old wooden floor. The long dining table had been moved back into the centre of the room. But underneath it, despite the thin layer of dust, a lighter patch was still visible where the floorboards had been thoroughly cleaned recently. No chalk marks or candle wax remained now.

The owners of the manor house had understandably been keen to remove all traces of the murder. But had it only been the murder itself that had troubled them? Or had it, in their minds, been exacerbated by the ritual activity that had taken place in their former home? Had they feared that some evil spirits had been conjured up by these rituals? The same spirits perhaps that had driven them away from there, half a century ago – spirits that were far more ancient and far more evil than the ghost of a little girl.

And so, the tantalising question was still the same as it had been upon Siobhán's arrival in that lonely valley. What lay hidden beneath the surface of the lake? And what were the wings

of the surrounding mountain ridge trying to protect – the inside,
or the outside world?

CHAPTER SEVEN

THE PHANTOM AND THE FAE

For the past two hours, Siobhán had been sitting in the thickly upholstered armchair by the mullioned bay window of one of the bedrooms on the upper floor of the manor house, overlooking the valley. A strengthening breeze had begun to whistle around the isolated building and, gradually, the evening cold began creeping through the thick glass.

With her knees pulled up to her chest, and covered with a thick woollen blanket she had found in a wardrobe, she had been watching how the snowy crest of the curving mountain ridge had begun to light up like a ring of fire, as the sun had sunk ever lower above it.

Even better than from the drawing room directly beneath her, the lake could be seen resting at the foot of the mountains, outwardly peaceful but impenetrable, its dark surface reflecting the little island and the world around it – always reflecting, never revealing its own secrets.

Although she tried to put it out of her mind for the night, she was still shaken by her encounter with herself down in the cellar, being constantly reminded of it by the dull pain that radiated from her scratched palms, as well as from her bruised shins and knees. Even the pain in her chest had become more piercing

again, as the fractured ribs had apparently absorbed part of the impact of the fall during her undignified flight up the steep stairs.

Having finally seen – for the first time in waking life – the site of Kathleen’s murder in the dining hall, she had completed the round on the ground floor by checking the combined kitchen and scullery for any signs of recent activity. The large room had a side entrance for servants. But the door was securely bolted and, judging by the rust on its latches, it had not been opened for many years. Water had to be brought into the house manually, using two hand pumps: one with a spout opening into the wash basin, the other attached to a pipe that led to the upper floor. The surface of the sink was bone dry. On the floor was an eroded patch created by dripping water that had leaked out of the pipe over a long period of time. But the tiles there were dry too and covered in dust.

Across the corridor from the kitchen, behind a solid door that sat deep in its arched stone frame, narrow stairs led down into the cellar. Looking and listening into the darkness beneath the ground, it occurred to Siobhán how quickly and unpredictably events had unfolded since her arrival in St Andrews, and how unprepared she was for her visit to the manor house. As she had never seriously considered the possibility of being able to enter the building, she had not even thought of acquiring an electric torch. But standing by the stove in the kitchen, she found an old cardboard box with several white candles, together with a box of safety matches commemorating the Silver Jubilee of 1935.

The moment she set foot onto the first few steps down, the flickering candle in her hand, she felt the vague hint of some

consciousness reaching up from the unknown space below. Relieved to find that there were no traces of footprints in the dust, she told herself that this was only an illusion and carried on carefully down the worn-out stone steps.

At the bottom of the stairs was a low room with a domed ceiling, corresponding to the entrance hall on the floor above. It was supported by several wooden pillars, all thickly covered by cobwebs. The formerly whitewashed walls had long turned a dark grey. Rows of barrels of different sizes were stacked along the walls. Some had begun to rot and had collapsed under the weight of those above them. Some had writing or company crests on them, suggesting that once they had contained flour, wine, gin, and other spirits. But all the barrels that Siobhán checked were now empty.

From the first room, three archways opened into the remaining parts of the cellar. Siobhán turned to the left and entered a smaller room that was filled with crates for apples, eggs, and bottled milk, amongst other uses. There were also a few travel trunks, which were as empty as the crates.

In the following room was nothing but a pile of sacks that lay in one corner. Judging by the smell and the cough-inducing black dust everywhere, they had once contained coal.

Through there, Siobhán passed into a room that was easily as large as the one by the stairs. It might have been situated below the dining hall, but it was difficult to maintain a sense of orientation within the windowless network of artificial caverns. In the dim unsteady light of the candle, Siobhán saw a number of objects lying about, which had turned out to be more barrels

and crates. Amongst them stood several pieces of furniture and household appliances from the Victorian era – a corroded bathtub, a manual washing machine with mangle, and different types of portable heaters. Arranged on dusty shelves along the wall were smaller kitchen utensils, together with crockery, cooking pots, and saucepans.

As on the floor above, the oppressive atmosphere of abandonment in the cellar was increased by these everyday objects that had been left behind, raising once again, and more forcefully, the same questions as before. What had been the reason for the precipitous departure of the last inhabitants of the manor house? What powerful influence had driven them away? Had it really been some kind of evil that was still lurking in the dark recesses of the old building?

Suddenly, Siobhán felt uncertain about how far away from the stairs she was, and exactly which way she had come. Would she be able to quickly retrace her steps if necessary, or would her memory be clouded, her mind confused by the evil forces? Did they perhaps have the power to change her physical environment? Could they make disappear an archway that lay along the right way back to the stairs, and open up other ones instead? Would that allow them to lure her away from the only exit, deeper and deeper into their world; to send her into an ever-changing and never-ending maze of underground passages, until her candle had burnt itself out, and all her matches had been used up?

Already, the single flame seemed to flicker more nervously, as if sensing some invisible presence, or some motion in the still

air that Siobhán herself failed to register. To her, all was lifeless and static – unless, in that adjoining room, at the very edge of the candlelight, had there not just been a furtive movement, only briefly noticed, before something ducked out of sight, something that had become aware of her intrusion?

And, in a breathless moment, as Siobhán carefully looked through the archway, she thought she saw a pair of eyes, the eyes of a giant monster, gleaming in the darkness, looking straight at her – until she realised that these were only the reflecting heads of two nails in one of the wooden pillars that supported the ceiling, with shadows from the unsteady light of the candle dancing around them.

But she needed to be more careful. Every time she made a sudden movement, it almost blew out the flame. Otherwise, what would happen when the candle was extinguished, during the few seconds of darkness before she managed to light it again? Would more pairs of eyes appear, this time glinting by themselves, bloodshot and hungry, having waited a long time for their next prey, now leering from the opening of each passage and blocking her escape? Or would some other apparitions materialise right in front of her, with the fine dust particles suspended in the air condensing into vague figures that would walk towards her with their arms outstretched, their hands groping? Were they perhaps already there, assembling in the farther corners of the cellar all around her?

Again, in another tense reaction, the candle flickered almost to extinction, passing through a moment of near darkness. And the instant the feeble flame steadied itself, a tall shape loomed

up behind her.

After that, Siobhán only had a vague recollection of stumbling through one cluttered room after the other, until she had finally found the stairs again. Then, in her haste, she had slipped and fallen on the worn-out steps that led back to the world above ground.

There, she had only stayed long enough to take the box with the rest of the candles from the kitchen. Then, she had withdrawn onto the upper floor, as far away as possible from the dark underbelly of the old building.

At the top of the central staircase, at one end of the landing, was the bathroom. In passing, Siobhán had established that it had been thoroughly cleaned not long ago, although it was impossible to tell exactly when and by whom – whether it had been immediately after the conclusion of the police investigation, or within the past few days. Despite a thin layer of dust, the brass fittings of the large roll top bath in front of the fireplace had glowed in the afternoon sun, and on the taps of the elaborate wash basin no fingerprints had been visible. As in the kitchen, there had been no sign of any recent humidity.

At the other end of the landing, Siobhán had found the only room that was still completely furnished. It was dominated by an over-sized four-poster bed. Unwilling to descend again to the ground floor that by now would be filled with an eerie diffuse glow from the descending sun, Siobhán had opted against getting her sleeping bag out of the car and had instead stretched out on the threadbare velvet cover. But the mattress had turned out to be too soft to feel supportive and reassuring, and the old springs had

groaned underneath her with every move she made, sounding too much like a living being.

And then there had been the curtains that were drawn across the bay window, with the faint whistling of the wind through the narrow gaps in the old metal frame behind them. Although the curtains were far too heavy to be moved by the weak draft, Siobhán could not help imagining them billowing inwards, as if a materialising humanoid shape was pressing against them from the other side, having risen from the lake and passed intangibly through the glass.

Eventually, unable to find any rest, she had got up from the bed, resolutely pulled open the curtains to disillusion herself of her own superstition, and had settled into the armchair by the window, which would allow her to keep the lake in sight – at least while the sun was still in the sky.

Now that it had sunk below the mountain ridge, casting the lake into an ominous shadow, she had lit a candle, put it into one of the arms of an elegant silver holder that had stood on a bedside cabinet, and placed it on the deep window sill in front of her. It created a comforting bubble of light in the gathering darkness and helped her remember a world without ghosts and evil spirits – a world in which the gathering darkness was just a tranquil evening.

But even without these supernatural entities, it was easy to imagine that bad things had happened in and around the manor house during the Second World War. It could have been a legitimate British intelligence operation that had been taken over by traitors, or it could have been the clandestine workings of a

group of spies from the outset. In such a nebulous sphere of espionage, something else might then have occurred that time had not allowed to become history; something deeply personal, an inciting event that still lingered inside the lonely valley; something that had made the owners of the manor house change their behaviour to such an extent that even strangers noticed it, although no doubt they would have made an effort to maintain a normal facade. It had to have been something that affected them strongly enough so that they had been unable to hide it. And then, a few weeks later, they had left without a single word to anyone in the village.

It might well have been the death of a child; perhaps a little refugee from Germany, or an evacuee from southern England, whom the couple agreed to take in and to care for, whom they decided to hide away for some reason, and who then died from an illness or in an accident. This could have been concurrent with, but unrelated to, any espionage activities, although it would have suggested that the couple had been on the British side. Alternatively, the opposite could have been true. A child could have been kidnapped from an influential family and hidden in this remote place for the purpose of extorting information from them, or forcing certain political or military decisions. In that case, the death of the child had undoubtedly been murder.

Either way, Siobhán felt that there was an unresolved conflict that hung heavy around the old building. The growing number of incidental peculiarities could not be ignored, no matter how vague they were: the unusual murals that were part of the original interior design, the apocalyptic inscription that had been

added at a later stage, the troubled behaviour of the owners during the weeks leading up to their sudden departure, the various rumours still circulating about them down in the village.

More importantly, Siobhán had to ask herself if reverberations of a tragedy that had happened decades earlier could still be claiming further victims in the present. But any continuation of her investigation would have to wait until the next day. First, she would have to make it through the night. And who knew what evil could emerge from the dark depths of the lake and reach out from the other side of the looking-glass, as the last remaining glow of the sun finally disappeared behind the mountains.

* * *

Loch Cuirinnein lay quietly underneath a shimmering blanket of moonlight, reflecting the jagged outline of the snow-covered ridge that surrounded it.

At its centre, the little island floated weightlessly above the water-filled abyss, while a succession of gentle waves ran smoothly up and down its rocky shore, in a deceptively peaceful motion. From there, the ground sloped upwards towards the top of a low hill, where some Scots pines stood together in a desolate group, their branches deformed by age-long exposure to the harsh winds.

The moon was full, hovering directly above in the dark sea of the night-time sky. It had to be close to midnight. Any moment now, the phantom could appear, indistinct at first, then gradually taking shape in the wavering fog that would ascend from the water. It would then come drifting silently towards its island, as if moving on a soft breeze. It would glide up onto the hill where

it would stand among the trees, looking out for another soul to possess.

Already, the irregular spaces between the trees seemed to be filled with shadows that were about to come alive. And there was a menacing sense of change in the air, as if something sinister was about to happen.

Siobhán looked across the water, watching out for any indication that would warn her of an approaching danger, for any disturbance from below. But all around her, away from the shore, the surface of the lake continued to lie perfectly calm.

Then, she felt that the rocks beneath her feet had become slippery. Looking down, she saw that they were now overgrown with algae, and the waves were running higher up the slope than they had done before.

As the water continued to rise, Siobhán kept stepping backwards, still looking out for any sign of change in the surface of the lake. But as the water washed higher and higher around her feet, it suddenly occurred to her that the lake could not be rising like this. It could not follow the tides as the sea did. Instead, it had to be the island itself that was sinking.

And then Siobhán saw, at the far end of the lake, another island that she had not noticed before as it was shrouded in a fog. Inside the fog, she could now see distorted figures swaying ominously. But whether it was just the group of trees that stood in the middle of the island, or whether there was something else moving among them, she could not tell.

With apprehension, she turned around and saw that the trees she thought she had seen on her island just a moment ago were

no more, and all that was left was a steep barren rock, its wet surface glinting in the moonlight.

But more intense even than the full moon was the pale radiance that surrounded the top of the rock. Forming inside it was a lone figure with long dark hair, who was clad in a white robe. She stood utterly still and looked over to the other island.

Responding to some imminent threat, the hidden abode of the fae had temporarily surfaced. Now that she had found the intended victim of her eternal enemy, she would rescue Siobhán from a cursed afterlife and return with her to her own realm beneath the surface of the lake.

Her island was about to submerge again, and Siobhán would go down with it.

The room was dimly illuminated by the ghostly shine of the moon, casting the regular pattern of the bay window's columns across the floor.

The old manor house was completely quiet – too quiet, perhaps – except for the distant whistling of the wind inside the chimney above the fireplace.

The candle on the window sill had burnt itself out, apparently not long ago, as a faint scent of smoke still lingered in the cold air.

It was twenty minutes past midnight, at least six more hours to go until sunrise, which left plenty of time for the spectres of hidden tragedies of the past to reveal themselves.

Siobhán took a fresh candle out of the cardboard box, stuck it into an unused arm of the silver holder, and lit it with one

of the remaining matches. Although, once again, it created a welcome golden glow around itself, the flame was less steady than it had been earlier that night. It seemed restless in the almost imperceptible draft between the window and the fireplace.

As Siobhán looked out across the lake, she began to feel a presence around her. But every time she turned her head, all she could see in the flickering light from the candle was the dark shape of the wardrobe looming behind her, and of the four-poster bed to her left. Aside from the shadows, nothing moved, and there did not appear to be anything that had not already existed in the daylight.

Despite that, she was certain that there was something she had not noticed before – something immaterial perhaps, a spirit in the truest sense of the word, something that only existed in a world of thoughts. But whether it was a thought that invaded her mind from an external source – be that a malevolent one or not – or a thought taking shape from inside her mind that she was only now beginning to grasp consciously, she was unable to tell.

Chances were that it was just the vague recollection of a dream from which she had just awoken. As she tried to remember some of the details, she was suddenly overcome by the feeling of a paralysing cold creeping up on her. It was accompanied by a vision of dark water rising through the floor, threatening to engulf and drown her. Defiantly, she pulled the blanket more closely around herself and focussed her attention on the world outside.

But even over the valley, she sensed an atmosphere of foreboding. Judging by the scattered clouds drifting across the sky, the weather was beginning to turn. The previously smooth sur-

face of the lake was now broken up into small ripples by the strengthening wind – if indeed it was the wind, and the disturbance did not originate from below. With the shimmering light from the waxing moon, only a day or two away from being full, percolating down into the hidden depths, what ancient entity might not be awoken soon?

And then there was the jetty. Seen from above, it looked like an arrow, pointing towards the centre of the lake – and beyond that, to the little island. It seemed to invite, even demand investigation, hinting at the existence of secrets that remained to be uncovered.

* * *

The lone figure of the little girl slowly walked across the patio, having just stepped out of the drawing room. She walked past the sundial until she reached the edge of the paved area where the lawn sloped down towards the lake. There, she halted.

Standing by the window of the upstairs bedroom, Siobhán could see the details of her crown braids, of her embroidered dress. She could see the little girl very clearly, and she knew what she was about to do.

Siobhán knew it, and she knew she had to stop her. But the window blocked her shouts and trapped them inside the solid walls – and before Siobhán could act, she found that her limbs had become frozen. Powerless to leave the window, she was forced to look on in horror as the little girl climbed down the few steps from the patio to the lawn.

Channelling her panic into one desperate attempt to break

the spell, Siobhán pushed herself away from the window, rushed out of the bedroom, down the central staircase into the entrance hall, and through the parlour into the drawing room.

The French window now stood open, and the curtains were moving gently in an unfelt breeze. Framed between them, Siobhán could see the little girl slowly walking down the lawn towards the lake.

There was not a single second to lose. But as Siobhán tried to step through the door, she felt the flowing curtains brush against her and then, suddenly, wrap themselves around her arms, grabbing her, holding her back, and tying her to the accursed building.

Desperately pulling against the restraints, Siobhán had to watch as the little girl walked away from her, getting closer and closer to the edge of the lake. Again she had to muster all her desperation to pull away from the curtains. But by the time she had managed to free herself, the little girl had almost reached the jetty.

Still feeling the malicious pull of the walls behind her, Siobhán struggled across the patio as if treading through water. Only when she finally stepped off the stone tiles onto the lawn, the power of the building lessened, and she was able to run more freely down towards the lake.

Apparently, the little girl had heard her. She halted at the beginning of the jetty and turned back. When Siobhán reached her, the girl held out her hand, as if she did not want to take these last few steps alone, steps she had already taken a long time ago, and was now bound to take again.

She gripped Siobhán's hand tightly and with a comforting smile – yes, comforting and compassionate. The little girl was the one consoling and pitying Siobhán, as if it was she who was setting out on her last journey onto the lake.

And so, over the rickety boards they walked together, suspended precariously above the darkness that opened beneath them. At the end of the jetty, the lake stretched out into the distance, completely unperturbed. And reflected in it was Siobhán, looking up from below the surface – Siobhán alone because the little girl was no more.

Siobhán was left standing on her own, lost at a dead end, as her reflection fell away from the calm surface, to be swallowed up by the impenetrable depth and to vanish forever.

A beam of icy moonlight came flooding through the window. Even the air inside the room had become deathly cold. But despite that, somehow, Siobhán had managed to fall asleep for a second time that night.

Still sitting curled up in the armchair, her thoughts had been carried away once more into an uneasy dream. But this one felt real and intensely personal, like the distorted memory of something that had actually happened, even if it had been many years ago.

There, in front of her and sharply illuminated by the silvery light, was the jetty, that uncertain pathway out onto the lake. The longer she looked at it, the more convinced she became that it had an important role to play. But which was that? Which event in her own past had significantly involved such a jetty?

And suddenly, a recollection came flashing back into her conscious mind.

Alison and she, still very young, perhaps five years old. They were both out on a jetty, feeding the ducks – or rather, Siobhán was feeding the ducks, and the swans. Alison was engaged in some pretend ballet dance, imagining the rough planks to be her grand stage. And her grandmother was there as well. She was distracted away from Siobhán, her attention focussed on Alison. She was worried about her, telling her to be careful, and not to dance so close to the edge.

But where had that been? A jetty by a lake, similar to the one outside the window, also surrounded by mountains. Although the image was a little hazy, some of the details were too clear to be purely born out of her imagination. It had to have been somewhere by Lake Windermere then – during the first summer holiday they had spent there.

It was Alison's idea to go out onto the jetty, although her grandmother had told them to stay in the shallow water by the shore, and not to go away while she went to chat with some other grown-ups nearby. But there were the swans, near the end of the jetty. Alison loved swans, and she was the brave one.

'It's all right, Shivy. Don't be scared. You can take my hand. Gran is over there. She can still see us if she wants, even if we go and say hello to the swans.'

Her grandmother spotted them as soon as they began walking towards the jetty. She immediately came after them, telling them

to wait for her, as she collected a few leftover slices of bread from their lunch.

There were some ducks among the swans, with their young. They never got any of the bread because the big swans with their long necks snatched up everything first. Siobhán needed to lean over and reach down to the ducklings, to put the crumbs right into their little beaks.

Suddenly, in a whirl of flapping wings and excited squawking, she felt the impact of a paralysing cold, the indistinct humming of water against her ears, wavering green light from above, long strands of algae closing around her legs like slimy fingers, pulling her down – an attempted scream, the stinging pain of water inside her lungs – and darkness.

Then, there was her grandmother, dripping wet, holding her tightly in her arms, while Alison crouched alone on the grass some distance away, crying and being ignored by everyone.

Because it had been Siobhán who had fallen into the lake – just north of Bowness. That was what this was all about. The growing sense of unease, the vague foreboding that had overtaken her when she had walked out onto the jetty, it had not been the premonition of some ancient evil lurking beneath the surface of the lake, nor had it been the psychic perception of a little girl's tragic death half a century ago. It had not, in fact, been about anything that had happened at the manor house. It had simply been the distant memory of a traumatic childhood event, which had been stirred up and temporarily disguised under the influence of a ghost story; just echoes of her early fear

of water in the aftermath of that near-drowning, being afraid for months of even getting into the bathtub. Then, one day, this fear had turned into an obsession, the desire to learn to swim; starting with the frightening first lessons, gradually becoming more confident, the training getting ever more serious, leading up to her successful participation in school competitions. Simultaneously, her interest in the oceans had grown, until she had finally gone off to university to study marine zoology and had learned to scuba dive – an evolution that had led all the way to the British Institute for Polar Research, and all the way to Antarctica.

But while this seemed to explain her apparently irrational reaction to the atmosphere that surrounded the lonely building, it answered none of the questions that were raised by the old rumours. How much of them was true? Had there ever been a hidden child? If so, why had it been hidden and from whom? And what tragedy had befallen it? The need for secrecy during the last days of the child's life would then suggest that some form of criminal activity had been involved, even if its death in the end had not been the result of murder.

Considering how strongly that death appeared to have affected the couple who had looked after the child, they might well have established a secret memorial at some place that was neither linked to them, nor to their old home, but was still not far away.

Now that there was at least the possibility that another and far more recent death was somehow connected to whatever tragedy had occurred at the manor house half a century ago, even the smallest chance of uncovering something previously unknown could not be ignored.

And so, as a new morning slowly approached, one final clue remained to be followed up – a clue that the police with their professionally conducted enquiry could never have found, as it lay hidden in local myths and unsubstantiated rumours. Nonetheless, if these stories were to be believed, this obscure clue might lead to a solid piece of evidence that was literally written in stone.

CHAPTER EIGHT

THE LAST DRUID

From the vantage point of the dunes, the blend of farming and fishing cultures of the small community became apparent: the patchwork of crofts on either side of the country road, dotted with simple farm houses; and closer to the coast, a few fishing bothies and ice houses, with nets draped over drying poles; all of it held together by scattered groups of sheep that wandered about aimlessly.

Towards the west opened Clachtoll Bay, its white sandy beach framed between two rocky headlands. Up on the one in the south, somewhat removed from the other buildings, stood a little chapel. Despite its prominent location, it had a simple dignity about it, humbly blending into the surrounding rocks.

Clouds were building up along the coast, the vanguard of a storm advancing from the sea. Through them, sparse afternoon sunlight still twinkled on the water. But the waves seemed agitated, their crests already suspiciously white.

Anne walked out to the very edge of the dry sand and let the waves run up to her wellington boots. She deeply inhaled the fresh wind from the sea, then she glanced over to Siobhán. ‘For me, this place will do. I may not have seen as much of the world as others have, but I don’t need to see any more before I’m happy to settle down here.’

‘It’s lovely, yes – easy to see why people would choose to

make this their home.'

Anne nodded. 'But many do leave, those who can't manage to support themselves. The idyllic landscape alone does not put food on your table. My family has been living in this region for generations, but it's getting more and more difficult. The old way of life is dying out, both the farming and the salmon netting. After I left school, I moved away myself, down to the city, hoping to make some money. That was about twenty years ago now. I wasn't terribly successful with the job search, but I did find a husband with work. Everything went all right for a while, until it began to go bad for the steel industry. When the marriage didn't survive the years of unemployment, I got divorced, reclaimed my family name, left Glasgow, and moved back up here. Tourism was picking up a bit at that time. So, with some support from my father, I bought what was then an old farm house and turned it into the B&B. It's been going well so far. Recently, I was able to pay back my dad, and now it's mine. But usually it's quiet during the winter months.'

'As I mentioned, I'm only passing through at the moment. But seeing this, it would be grand if I could stay for a few days and relax.'

'I imagine you could do with a break, after everything that happened – although, I suppose you still got away lightly, considering.' She smiled and laid her hand on Siobhán's shoulder. 'I did not want to bring it up before, but I immediately recognised you from the news reports on the telly.'

'About what happened on Antarctica? Yes, it seems I did have a little luck with me down there.'

‘I noticed you’re still limping.’

‘It’s not so bad. I just need to get a bit more exercise, to walk it off. As a matter of fact, I wouldn’t mind strolling up onto the headland over there and taking a look at that little chapel. It’s sitting in such a beautiful spot.’

‘It is. From the outside, it looks lovely. But the interior, at least in my opinion, has been spoiled by renovations. I can show you, if you want. I’ve got the key here. I was put in charge by the community as our local tourist guide of sorts. Especially now, when the campsite is closed, the few visitors we get end up staying at my place anyway.’

‘There have been recent renovations inside the chapel?’

‘Not particularly recent, no – about fifty years ago now. The chapel had been in a steady decline since the Highland Clearances. By the beginning of the Century, it had therefore fallen quite badly into disrepair. There was no money for restoration or even maintenance in the community until, early during the war, a generous donation was made by a rich couple. They were from London, apparently, but no records seem to survive anywhere about who these people were. As I understand it, the agreement was that they would renovate the chapel, it would still belong to the community, but they would be allowed to put up a memorial stone for their daughter, who had died recently.’

‘All the way up here, despite the fact that they were living in London?’

‘Yes. They had probably seen the chapel on one of their travels and liked it. Then, when their little girl died, they remembered it and wanted to have her memorial here, in a peaceful

location, away from all the fighting and destruction. London, of course, was horribly destroyed at the time, under constant attack from the air, with bombs dropping all over the place, including the cemeteries. No one was safe in the city, not even the dead.'

Anne led the way along an overgrown path up onto the headland. Although not much higher than the beach, the wind there was noticeably stronger, as it whistled over the steep cliff that abruptly rose out of the waves.

With its weathered exterior, and constructed from locally quarried stones, the little chapel gave the impression of having grown naturally – except for the arched iron gate that barred the low entrance.

Anne selected an old key from her bunch and inserted it into the lock. After some jiggling, it turned and, with a reluctant screeching sound, the gate allowed itself to be opened.

Two shallow steps led down into a small room with a vaulted ceiling. A narrow glassless window was set into each of the two sidewalls. Through the one on the left, a slanting beam of sunlight fell onto the centre of the floor.

Set low into an alcove in the wall facing the entrance was a memorial stone. Clearly visible near its top, above an inscription of bronze letters, was the elaborate engraving of a flower. And this time, there could be no doubt about what kind of flower it was.

'Is that a rose on the memorial stone?'

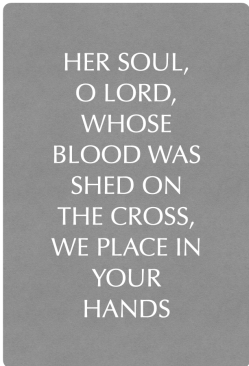
'Yes, and very well crafted, isn't it, with all that intricate detail? Someone put a lot of effort into it. And there is a matching rose on a flagstone in that corner over there.'

Anne pointed to the right of the entrance where an identical engraving was set into the floor.

‘Two roses ... That’s a bit unusual, isn’t it, up here in Scotland?’

‘Well, the couple who renovated the chapel were English. But I suspect the real reason is that the girl’s name was Rose. Otherwise, the epitaph is somehow incomplete.’

She nodded towards the memorial stone.



HER SOUL,
O LORD,
WHOSE
BLOOD WAS
SHED ON
THE CROSS,
WE PLACE IN
YOUR
HANDS

‘You see, it appears as if the rose engraving at the top is a substitute for the name.’

‘Yes. Although that is a bit strange as well. I mean, why would they choose to keep the memorial anonymous?’

‘I don’t think they would have seen it that way. Perhaps it was too painful for them to spell out their daughter’s name, now that she was dead. But you’re right, Siobhán, I have often thought that there was something strange about this inscription. For example, consider the combination of an engraving in stone with this bronze lettering – a weird artistic choice. Surely, to be consistent with that sophisticated rose symbol, you would expect the

words to be engraved as well. And then there is the inscription itself. Normally, this type of epitaph, with this type of lettering, is found on memorials to famous people. In here, within this plain chapel, it looks far too extravagant and out of place.’

These words were certainly intended to be noticed. Moreover, there was the significance of the roles played by two London couples, in close temporal and spatial proximity. That could not be a coincidence. They had to have been the same people, which confirmed that there really had been a tragedy that had befallen the owners of the manor house, a tragedy they had to keep secret, involving the death of a little girl.

Nonetheless, albeit anonymously, they had felt compelled to leave such a conspicuous memorial – almost like a challenge for someone else to uncover the secret that they themselves could not reveal. In that case, there had to be something else hidden in the chapel, something that either solved the mystery, or at least pointed in the right direction. But in an empty room, with solid walls, there were not many hiding places.

‘Anne, that other engraving back there in the corner – it’s curious, isn’t it? Similar to the bronze lettering, it’s out of place – literally, I mean. After all, it’s rather strange to put so much effort into decorating one of the flagstones, only to put it into such an unremarkable location. That seems a bit random, doesn’t it? Do you think there is any chance that, since the renovation, the stone has been moved there from a more prominent location? Or could it be that it already existed at the time of the renovation, and that it was moved into the corner then?’

‘I don’t know. But as you said, you would not usually expect

to find a rose engraving in a late medieval chapel in Scotland. I'd therefore suspect it was put there during the renovation, together with the engraving on the memorial stone. Why they chose to put one engraving into that corner I honestly don't know. But with the irregular shapes of these flagstones, the floor is like a jigsaw puzzle. You would have to rearrange many of the pieces to make them fit again as closely as they are now. I can't imagine that any of them have been moved since the floor was laid down initially. But I agree, it is a little weird. Almost as if the person who made these engravings wanted to practice on a similar type of material before tackling the memorial stone. I suppose the explanation could be as simple as that. But here, take a look at this.' She indicated the top edges of both sidewalls. 'They are somewhat eroded now, but you can still make out the original engravings, dating from the period when the chapel was built – Thirteenth Century, as far as we know – and still very much in the Celtic tradition. You can see the beautiful knot pattern running along just below the ceiling; and woven into it, the Celtic crosses; together with the clarsachs, those harps there and there; and of course those magnificent rampant lions over there.'

Anne stepped closer to the memorial stone. 'Now look up there, above the alcove. There is another more recent inscription. It is a bit hard to read in the dim light, but it says: "And at the Great Dawn, the Truth shall be revealed by the Flames of Heaven".'

'Blimey . . . What do you believe does that mean?'

'I asked myself that question many times – myself and others. No one around here knows the answer, but everyone is convinced

that the inscription was put there during the renovation, together with the memorial stone.'

'I don't know ... I have to say, I find that rather disturbing.'

'Agreed. Of course, it's touching, in a way. The couple were understandably devastated by the loss of their young daughter. And if it hadn't been for their support, the chapel would now lie in ruins, like so many other religious sites in the Highlands. But as much as I sympathise with their grief, there is something about all this that gives me the creeps.'

'Although both inscriptions are clearly religious.'

'Oh, yes, no doubt about that. The epitaph on the memorial stone is quite standard. In a different context, I doubt it would attract much attention. But the other inscription above it, that is a different story. It's not a direct quote from the bible, at least not from the *King James Version*. The closest match I can think of is in the *Book of Revelation* – you know, on the Day of Judgement, when all hidden truths are revealed, all injustices uncovered, and all wrongs righted; the ultimate battle between good and evil, during which the Saviour will return with his flaming sword, vanquish and cast down all wrongdoers, and bring back from death all those who are worthy of resurrection – the dawn of God's kingdom on Earth.'

'That's a bit ominous and gloomy for a nice chapel like this, isn't it?'

'Well, I guess it's an allegory for our own daily struggles, small as they may be by comparison, to find the right path through life. But you're right, Siobhán. In here, it does come across as being just a little too grandiose. We probably must remember

the conditions that existed when these inscriptions were put up, at the height of the Second World War. In the context of that time, with these horrific air raids every night, apocalyptic writings would have been interpreted as being much less allegorical and far more factual than now, when fighting is happening a long way away from home. Think about the book with the seven seals that is mentioned in *Revelation*. Evidently, the first four of the seals had already been opened, with the four horsemen of conquest, war, famine, and death galloping all over Europe. Then, as the violence and oppression spread, and the cries of the innocent victims of persecution and extermination rang out more and more loudly, it would have felt as if the fifth seal too had been opened. And with no end to the fighting in sight, it was natural to assume that all this would ultimately lead to the opening of the sixth seal, to the total destruction of all cities, and to the blocking out of the sun by smoke and ash.'

Anne walked to the window on the left, through which broken sunlight still fell, and squinted out across the sea. As her voice trailed away, the room became filled with the soft noise of the wind streaming by, bringing with it, more distantly, the rushing of the waves.

'And the seventh seal?'

Anne hesitated for a moment, then she turned away from the window. 'Silence . . . The calm before the inevitable storm, when something bad has happened, and everything has gone quiet, with a foreboding of something even worse to come; when the whole world appears to be holding its breath, the birds stop singing, and time stands still. But you know that, very soon,

the clock will begin ticking again, and your grace period will be over. That is when the seven trumpets sound, the sea turns to blood, and the bottomless pit opens.'

There certainly was silence in the chapel – and fear. Not of things to come, but of terrible events in the past. Everything inside the room, the old stones themselves, seemed desperate to scream out the truth, echoing perhaps the cries of at least one innocent victim. Only, there was no one there to listen. And until someone was prepared to do that, the secret would remain hidden, encoded in that fearful silence.

But at the right moment, when the sun would rise, what might materialise in an empty space? Or what might become visible that was already there?

'Anne, those bronze letters on the memorial stone – I suppose they would glow, wouldn't they, if the sun shone directly onto them?'

'Most likely, yes.' She looked a little confused. 'Oh, I see. You're thinking about a truth that might be revealed by the Flames of Heaven. But that could only be ... let's see.' She glanced out through the entrance to get her bearings. 'Well, it would have to be very early in the morning, immediately after sunrise. Later during the day, the sun is too high in the sky and too far south – coming in through this window here, in fact, as it does now.'

'The Great Dawn.'

'You're right, Siobhán.' She got more excited and walked up to the memorial stone. 'But you can read the words anyway, at any time of day. What difference would it make if the sun shone directly onto them?'

She crouched down in front of the inscription and wiped across it with her jacket sleeve. ‘See here, they are really just ordinary bronze letters.’

As the thin layer of dirt was removed, the metal surfaces obtained a faint golden glow in the diffuse light from the window. It would certainly have been more intense in direct sunlight, but that would have been all. The letters could not rearrange themselves. No new words could be formed that would reveal the truth about the death of a little girl all these many years ago. On the other hand, it was hard to accept that the inscription above the memorial stone, together with the orientation and the layout of the chapel, was just a coincidence. But rather than bringing with them new information, perhaps the rays of morning sunlight entering the chapel were intended to point out and illuminate something that was already there, information that simply needed recognition and proper interpretation. Instead of the deliberately obtrusive inscription in bronze lettering, the real clue might lie in the more inconspicuous engraving of a rose at the top of the memorial stone, it in turn pointing to an otherwise unremarkable flagstone in a corner.

Clearly, this investigation was not over yet. There was more to be done and possibly more to be discovered. But it would have to be done alone, and at night.

‘Sorry, Anne. It was only a silly idea that popped into my head. Somehow, there is something about this place that makes supernatural occurrences seem more likely than they normally are.’

She ended her inspection of the memorial stone and stood up

again. ‘Yes, I know exactly what you mean. I have often thought that the chapel should be restored to its original state. I could try and find out who exactly is in charge of it. Maybe we can get it scheduled and properly protected.’

She shivered. ‘Let’s go back to the house. I can make us some tea, if you like.’

‘That would be nice, thank you.’

She led the way back outside. ‘Just pull the gate shut. It will lock by itself.’

A small pebble lay near the entrance. With a soft kick, it rolled into the corner of the door frame. Then, the iron gate jammed against it, without locking.

Anne did not notice. She had turned away, gazing north across the bay. ‘Incidentally, these inscriptions inside the chapel are not the only mystery around here. If you look over there, to the other headland, behind the netting station, on top of the natural rocks, you can just about make out a mound of fairly regular stones. These are the remnants of Clachtoll Broch, an Iron Age roundhouse. It’s almost entirely collapsed now. But when it was built, more than two thousand years ago, it would have been an impressive structure, forty feet tall, or so. No one knows exactly what it was used for – as a storage tower perhaps, to protect vital supplies from raiders, or even as a residence for the rulers of this region.

‘But whatever its role was, according to a local legend, it became the final resting place of the Last Druid.’ She winked conspiratorially. ‘Now, if you remember from your school days, it is generally accepted that, in Britain at least, the druids were

systematically wiped out by the Romans as they retreated farther and farther west into Wales and eventually onto Anglesey. Sadly, they left no written records. Theirs was a purely oral tradition. Therefore, when all the druids were murdered in one vicious attack, with them also vanished their entire knowledge and culture.

‘Which leaves us with that perennially tantalising question what it was about the druids and their society that worried the Romans sufficiently to devote so much effort to their complete destruction – especially as that was not the Romans’ usual attitude towards other religions, and towards the Celtic deities in particular. *Aquae Sulis* is an excellent example for that. The Romans came across the hot spring on their way to Wales. And just as they built a magnificent temple and bath complex dedicated to the same goddess that the Celts had worshipped there for centuries, not far away, they ruthlessly slaughtered the last remaining druids.

‘So, if it wasn’t Celtic spiritual practices that bothered the Romans about the druids, what was it? Why did they deploy their victorious Fourteenth Legion against them – in Nero’s own words, his finest? The same legion that, prior to the conquest of Britain, had been involved in avenging the catastrophic defeat of Varus in the Teutoburg Forest. The same legion that would later go on to defeat Boudica’s overwhelming army after the sacking of Colchester and London. And speaking of which: why did the Romans allow this to happen in the first place? At a time when trouble brewed with the Celtic tribes in the east, why did they move this legendary fighting force away from their main settlements and into difficult and unknown terrain on the other

side of the island, to go after the druids with such determination and brutality? Not only to kill the men, but also to lay waste to all their shrines and sacred groves. What was the reason for this senseless fear and hatred? What exceptional powers did the Romans believe that small group of select people might possess that could threaten them? And to what extent were their fears justified? Sadly, we will never find the answers to any of these questions because the Romans were very successful in eradicating all meaningful traces of that culture.

‘However, our story goes that, during the final slaughter, one single druid did manage to escape. Alone, in a small boat or a canoe, he travelled north along the coast until he reached unoccupied territory. From there, he continued his journey on land, gradually moving northwards, always endeavouring to stay ahead of the advancing Roman forces, bringing with him the ancient wisdom of his people, and searching someone with whom he might share it, someone worthy of becoming a fellow initiate. But without any success.

‘Thus he became a restless wanderer, roaming the land like a ghost, moving from place to place without ever settling down, holding on to an understanding of the world that only he remembered, and hoping that one day he might find someone after all whom he would be willing to entrust with his secrets, before he could allow himself to pass over into the afterlife. Then, after many years, he arrived here, where he found shelter in the broch, very old and very weak by that point, and unable to travel any farther.

‘Now, there are two different versions of that story. Accord-

ing to one, the Last Druid, even at death's door, was unwilling to confide in anyone, deeming the local population of farmers and fishermen incapable of truly comprehending the old wisdom. And so, as he died, lonely and with a broken heart, the sacred knowledge of our Celtic ancestors was lost forever.

‘According to the other version, he was cared for by one of the local girls. And as he felt the end approaching, he suddenly understood that, all this time he had been trying to find his rightful successor, he had been searching for the wrong person. Throughout all his journeys, he had been looking exclusively for someone who was already learned and in a position of influence in his community. But, ultimately, he had always been disappointed by the leaders that he had met, realising that they were only going to use his powerful knowledge for their own benefit, to gain control over others, rather than for the good of the community. Now it became clear to him that the person most worthy of the old secrets was the young uneducated woman who so selflessly cared for him. He therefore told her who he was. And as he passed all his knowledge on to her, his spirit was released at last. His soul slipped away, and he died peacefully. But through the young woman and her descendants, the wisdom and the power of the Celts was preserved for many generations.

‘And there you have it: the two versions of *The Legend of the Last Druid*.’

‘Interesting. But I think I prefer the second one.’

Anne laughed. ‘Me too. Then let us assume that this is how the story ends. Admittedly, it's not entirely original. For example, there are some obvious similarities to the story of the Fisher

King who, wounded and old, becomes the last guardian of the Holy Grail. On the basis of that, some like to take our story further and say that the Last Druid not only brought his sacred knowledge with him, but also some powerful physical object, a secret weapon of sorts. They say that, before his death, he gave that weapon to the young woman, to hide it away, to keep it safe, until she or her descendants could use it to defeat the invading enemy.

‘But then the Romans left, defeated by ordinary forces on the Continent, only to leave the door wide open for another wave of invaders of the British Isles – the Saxons. According to the Celtic sources and the later Medieval romances, the Britons were then united by a new leader, King Arthur, who led them to many victories, until he was killed in the Battle of Camlann by the traitor Mordred. Through all this, Arthur carried his mighty sword Excalibur which, as you may remember, had been given to him by the Lady of the Lake.

‘Now, according to our legend, that sword was actually the magical weapon of the old Celts, guarded by the druids for many years, rescued by their last survivor from the Romans, and eventually brought here. The Lady of the Lake, of course, was none other than the humble country girl, whose contact with the sword had given her supernatural powers and eternal life. Some like to believe that, having saved Excalibur from Camlann after Arthur’s death, she went into hiding again, waiting for the right moment to return; or to pass the sword on to a new leader, to continue the battle begun by Arthur and, this time, perhaps to finish it; to accomplish what earlier generations had failed to achieve, and to

finally defeat the old enemy.’

Anne sighed. ‘The problem is there are no epic battles anymore, are there? The grief we get from the Saxons these days comes in the form of poll taxes and pit closures. A magic sword is not much use in mundane struggles like these. And in any case, it would be hard to find with all the many lochs we have up here in Scotland.’

‘I don’t know, Anne. Maybe it isn’t in a lake at all – and, moreover, very close to home.’

‘In the old broch, you mean? Yes, people have suggested that.’

‘Has it never been excavated?’

‘Some archaeological work was done by a university group a few years ago. They found several chambers in the remaining structure above ground. There is also the possibility that the tower is positioned over some underground passages or natural caves. But it would require some major effort to move all those massive blocks of stone that came down from the collapsing walls. And you know, generally speaking, I think that legends are best left undisturbed. They tend to be more exciting than the factual truth. So, perhaps, we should let the Last Druid and his secrets rest in peace.’

CHAPTER NINE

TWO ROSES

The wind was noticeably stronger now, as the gathering storm over the sea had inexorably moved closer to the coast. Through the thickening clouds that drifted ever faster across the nighttime sky, the bright luminance of the full moon was scattered into multiple roving beams of light.

Against that dynamic background, the lonely outline of the chapel stood out clearly at its elevated spot, larger and more imposing than it had appeared during the afternoon. And surrounded by the shifting pattern of light and shadow, it seemed animated, as if the ghostly secrets it concealed were about to come alive after nightfall.

Walking along the overgrown path from the sandy beach up onto the southern headland of the bay, Siobhán saw how, behind the chapel, the sea had turned into a heaving mass, intermittently revealed by the unsteady light that glinted on its agitated surface, as wave after wave rushed ashore and crashed against the rocks.

What had been an idyllic landscape under the afternoon sun had changed dramatically in the dark. As the sunlight had faded away, Siobhán's eyes had lost some of their observing powers, and other senses had gained ascendancy in assembling her own perceived world from the physical environment. Under their influence, she felt that, even as she walked over the same rough ground towards the exposed tip of the headland, she was enter-

ing a different reality that had been invisible to her during the day – a reality of dreams, in which the comforting restrictions of the laws of nature were suspended and replaced by a disquieting uncertainty.

Upon reaching the chapel, she was relieved to find that in the low entrance the arched iron gate was still jammed against the pebble and had not locked properly. With an uncomfortably loud screeching that was carried inland by the wind, the gate turned on its rusted hinges. For a brief moment, Siobhán had a vision of a wailing host of spectres as they rushed past her out of the gloomy opening.

After that onslaught, all that remained inside the chapel was a deathly silence, even as the wind continued to whistle around the outside of the old walls. For a few more seconds, Siobhán listened into the dark room. Then, she cautiously walked down the two shallow steps.

The ominous carved inscription in the alcove facing the entrance, just below the vaulted ceiling, was now obscured by shadows. But the words written in bronze letters on the memorial stone beneath it were still discernible in the pale moonlight that entered through the narrow glassless window on the left.

As was to be expected, the words were exactly the same as they had been in the afternoon, still the same anonymous cry for salvation. But salvation for whom? For an innocent child? Or rather for those who had felt compelled, by a feeling of guilt, to set up the memorial?

And then there were the two roses, intricately carved into solid stone with such loving care and attention: one placed in a

prominent location on the memorial stone and readily seen upon entering the chapel, the other almost hidden away on a flagstone in a corner by the gate. Two identical symbols, possibly referring to a little girl, and possibly indicating a connection between the memorial stone and the flagstone.

With some trepidation, Siobhán took the trowel and the cultivator she had found in Anne's garden shed out of her coat pocket. She took a moment to prepare herself for what she was potentially about to find. Then, she worked the three aligned prongs of the cultivator into the gap along one of the edges of the rose-engraved flagstone and carefully levered it off the ground, until she could lift it up with her fingers.

A mixture of relief and disappointment passed through her as all she found was a thin layer of soil above the natural rocks of the headland, nothing else – no concealed cavity, no secret burial site, no clue at all to the tragic circumstances of the death that was being commemorated inside the chapel.

She realised then that it was pointless to search any further. If no secret was hidden beneath the marked location, there would be no hidden secret anywhere beneath the floor. She let the flagstone drop back into its old bed where it landed with a definite thud. After she had brushed the loosened crumbs of dirt back into the gaps around it, everything looked as it had before. Only upon close inspection, the small dents in the side of the stone that had been left by the prongs of the cultivator were still visible, but they would weather away in the months and years to come, as time continued to wash over the chapel, removing whatever undiscovered traces of the past were still left. Then, all that

would remain would be a physical structure that was stripped of its intended meaning.

Tired and dejected, Siobhán sat down onto the engraved flagstone and leaned back into the dark corner. How had she ended up in this situation? Since her return from Antarctica, her life – as she now reflected on it – seemed to be shrouded in a mist. Already, she found it difficult to retrace her own steps from that remote spot in the Scottish Highlands to the point where she had arrived back in England.

After several nights of uneasy and interrupted sleep, she was beginning to struggle to keep apart her waking reality from her persistent nightmares. As at a great distance from herself, she remembered her restlessness during the days at her grandmother's flat in Norwich, immediately after her return, waiting by the phone for any news from the police. Simultaneously, driven by a vague feeling that there was something important she needed to find, she had always been drawn to Alison's flat in Cambridge where, by pure chance, she had eventually come across the overdue library book.

That had been the critical moment when her trajectory had suddenly changed. And before she knew it, that book, through the obscure clues it contained, had guided her into a world of myths and ghost stories where messages could materialise out of a ray of sunlight, a magical realm that should normally have remained safely hidden behind a wardrobe.

And yet, far more frightening was the possibility that the book itself had been hidden behind the wardrobe. In that case, everything would change, and reality would get very dark. All the

horrors of the magical realm would then suddenly come bursting into ordinary life.

Alison had talked about that, about the premonition she had experienced of phantoms closing in on her, of some kind of evil returning from the past. What if she had been right? What if her fears had been justified? What if, someday, a gateway from another place and time had opened onto her life and unleashed some malicious forces on her?

If Alison had indeed hidden the library book behind the wardrobe, where in this world of shadowy evil was her message meant to lead? Into which direction did the mysterious words she had written point, and what would it take to decipher them?

As these questions passed through Siobhán's mind, she had to ask herself if perhaps it was true what everyone else was saying. Perhaps all she needed was some rest, to finally shed the constant physical and mental exhaustion. If only she allowed herself to sleep properly for a few nights in a row, rather than climbing out of bedroom windows in the dark and rifling through other people's garden sheds ... If, rather than going ghost hunting, she stopped behaving like a ghost herself, perhaps she would get her former sanity back, at which point all other apparitions would simply vanish.

Instead, just as in Alison's flat, there she was again, having given in to some vague notion that there was a vital clue that she might discover, something that everyone else had so far failed to search for, or had overlooked. And even now, despite having been proven wrong about her first hypothesis, the feeling that the chapel guarded some important secret had not quite left her.

In front of her, the bronze letters on the memorial stone occasionally glinted faintly in the unsteady beams of moonlight that slanted through the window on the left. The words they spelled out remained unchanged – but then again, dawn was still several hours away.

* * *

The sky was alight with billowing clouds of raging fire. Beneath it, stirred up by an infernal wind, the ocean churned and seethed. Standing by the window, Siobhán saw how, with regular ferociousness, wave after wave came crashing over the headland and swirled around the walls of the chapel.

Towards the east, she looked out across a wasteland where all that was visible in the red light from the fire above were the stark outlines of blackened trees, and the burnt-out ruins of farm houses and fishing bothies. The distant horizon was obscured by a layer of thick smoke, which no light from the rising sun would ever be able to penetrate.

By the arched entrance, the screeching iron gate swung wildly in the violent flood that continued to wash over the headland, sounding like the cries of lost souls on the other side of death. Even so, if Siobhán had any chance of escaping from the chapel, it was through this unearthly portal.

As she cautiously approached the steps leading up to the entrance, she felt the intense heat of the inferno surrounding the little building.

Then, she heard a familiar voice behind her.

‘Where are you going, Siobhán?’

Alison stood in front of the memorial stone, dressed in a white robe, her long dark hair streaming behind her in the blasts from the burning sky.

‘Where are you going? Are you leaving me again?’

‘Ally, I’m sorry I wasn’t there for you when the phantoms came. I’m sorry I didn’t realise they were real when you told me about them. But I was looking for you. I came back from Antarctica, looking for you.’

Alison did not respond. She only stood there, a lonely figure, illuminated by the blaze outside.

‘Ally, the fire and the water – it’s coming. We’ve got to get out of here.’

But she did not react to Siobhán’s outstretched hand. ‘Why do you always run away? What are you afraid of?’

‘Alison, please ...’

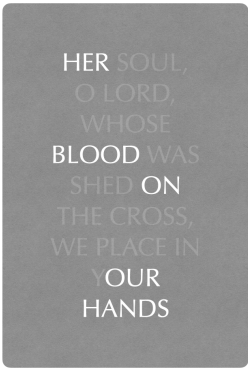
‘Why did you have to leave me when I needed you most? And where is Kathleen? Where did she go, Siobhán? Where did she go?’

‘Ally, please, let us get away from here – together, as it always was.’

‘Too late, Siobhán. It is too late.’

Alison raised her arms and disappeared in a vortex of flames that suddenly engulfed her ...

... while fiery letters erupted from the memorial stone.



HER SOUL,
O LORD,
WHOSE
BLOOD WAS
SHED ON
THE CROSS,
WE PLACE IN
YOUR
HANDS

The words glowed golden-red in the otherwise dim chapel, as the first light of the rising sun came streaming in through the entrance. The silent scream that had reverberated inside the ancient walls for half a century had now finally revealed itself.

For all this time, the message had always been there, once again hidden in plain sight, waiting to be found. It was encoded in almost imperceptible perturbations of the physical reality. But from close up, and specifically looking for them, the slight differences in the way the letters were angled on the rough surface of the memorial stone became apparent, a systematic pattern that was disguised among seemingly random irregularities. Only if viewed from the right direction and under the right light, the true meaning emerged – not by magical addition, but by subtraction of all extraneous details.

The death that these desperate words proclaimed could not have been an accident, although the anguish and intense feeling of remorse that they expressed suggested that those who had written them were not the perpetrators of the crime. They might have been mere witnesses, but nonetheless attached significant

culpability to themselves. They considered themselves responsible for a child that, most likely, had not been theirs.

Perhaps she had been a refugee from the Continent who, for some reason, continued to be persecuted by an enemy even after her arrival in Britain. Or she was from a British family, and the couple took her in after the death of her parents. However the little girl had come to be in their care, they had fled with her to their remote manor house. They had tried to hide and to protect her but, in the end, had been defeated, possibly by the same perpetrators who were responsible for her parent's death.

For this failure, they would blame themselves for the rest of their lives. And the shadow of the evil that had caught up with them these many years ago still hung over the old family home, as they were kept away from there by the recollection of the traumatic events that had never stopped haunting them.

But why did they leave this message in such an obscure fashion? For fear of prosecution from the legal system? If they were genuinely innocent of committing the crime themselves, it was more likely for fear of retaliation from the real perpetrators. Apparently, during the early stages of the Second World War, the couple had become entangled in some dark network that had established itself at the manor house. And it was that connection they still had to keep secret, even half a century later. Somewhere out there, the threat from a ruthless enemy remained – an enemy that could return at any moment and strike again. Now, with Kathleen's murder, perhaps it had. And, while investigating this crime, Alison might somehow have got too close to the truth.

Whatever had happened in the past, it was not over yet. The message, and the manner in which it had been hidden, was more than an admission of guilt. It was a challenge. That was what the memorial in the chapel was intended to do: to send out a lasting cry for justice, for anyone to hear who was not only willing to come out to that lonely spot, but also capable of identifying and reading the signs correctly; someone who was willing to step off the beaten track and see things from a different angle; someone resourceful and courageous. That was the kind of person the couple must have had in mind, an ideal hero of their old mythologies come to life; the one person in the crowd capable of pulling the sword out of the stone; someone worthy of receiving their message. It was their call to battle against the same enemy who had defeated them many years ago, in the hope that someone might hear it who was more virtuous than they had been – not someone who simply stumbled into the situation, blindly started digging in the dirt, and then got lucky, again.

But regardless of how Siobhán had received the message, it came with the same responsibility, the same burden of taking action against an invisible foe who was hiding in the darkest recesses of human society. And she was determined not ever to run away from the dark again. Nefarious activities had been secretly going on at the manor house for far too long. It was time they were uncovered.

As she knelt in front of the memorial stone, gently tracing the intricate engraving with her fingers, she tried to reach out across

the temporal divide to the young soul it represented.

Poor little Rose. How did you get drawn into this tragedy? How does your short life fit in with the fate of millions of other people whose lives were destroyed as the world was at war? When there was hardship everywhere, violence and injustice, what horror was it that befell you? What evil powers were they that took you away from your home? And what about your parents? When you were gone, was there anyone left who still loved you and who missed you? You know I cannot do that for you. But I will not forget you. And I will find out what happened to you – I promise.

CHAPTER TEN

A SUDDEN PAST

The humming and beeping of the printer filled Alison's abandoned flat as, gradually, line by line, the account emerged of the last six days since her hasty departure from that same place. Well-organised and displayed in the regular computer font, black on white, the bizarre sequence of events appeared to have been taken out of the realm of legends and carried over into the ordinary world.

It began to feel as if Siobhán were now looking back with waking consciousness at a dream that became difficult to pin down, a nightmare that slowly lost its threat as it faded away in the daylight. Normally, this should have been a reassuring feeling. But under the current circumstances of her life, it was the nocturnal realm that had established itself to be most relevant for defining her reality.

Ever since her return from Antarctica, she seemed to have walked within sight of her former life, but still disconnected from it. She had been forced to occupy previously inaccessible in-between spaces of the ordinary world, which contained all the frightening elements of a nightmare, but none of the magical tools of a genuinely mythological realm to counteract them; and leaving her with no chance of waking up until she found the way out again of this surreal maze.

None of the mysterious aspects of her experiences had changed

by putting them into writing. The hidden messages, the disappearances, the tragic deaths, and the murders were all still there. They had only been obscured by a sheen of rationality. Nonetheless, although it did not convey the true nature of recent events, the printed word could not lose its nerves and throw another tantrum, precisely when it knew that it could not afford to do so. It always remained calm and factual. And if that made it easier for the police to take the narrative seriously, and to probe more deeply beyond the rational surface layer into the strange circumstances that lay concealed beneath it, then the written account would have served its purpose.

Otherwise, there was nothing left to do. Without any news about Alison, without any important letters among her most recent post, and without any illuminating messages on her answer phone, there were no more leads for Siobhán to follow. Despite the startling revelations in the remote Western Highlands, there was still no unequivocal proof that Alison's absence from home was not exactly what it appeared to be. There was nothing to suggest that it was related to Kathleen's murder, and even less to link it to the tragic death of a little girl fifty years ago.

Still, the lack of any conclusive evidence for yet another tragedy did not succeed in allaying Siobhán's fear that Alison had been overtaken by the same dark forces; nor could anything diminish the guilty feeling of having abandoned her best friend in a situation where not only had she needed her mental support, but where she might also have been in grave physical danger.

Moreover, if the library book had really been intended to serve as a clue – a clue that Siobhán had failed to interpret correctly

– how many more clues could there be hidden in the flat that she had failed to find in the first place? How many more signs were there, clearly visible to anyone, including herself, which she did not recognise as clues and, therefore, could not interpret correctly?

Without anything else to go on, it all came down to the library book and the few handwritten words inside it, which were just as mysterious now as they had been before her journey to Scotland. It was as if the book were taunting her; on the one hand, refusing to let the letters, and with them the mystery, fade away; on the other hand, refusing to provide more information to allow the mystery to be solved.

Page after page of text and illustrations, with only a few unremarkable annotations in the margins that had doubtlessly been written by others. No note was tucked away inside the book, or folded up and hidden behind the spine.

The telephone rang out like an alarm bell over the monotonous noise from the printer.

A phone call on a Saturday – that had to be personal. Was finally someone else wondering about Alison and trying to get in touch with her?

‘Hello?’

‘Miss Conway?’

‘This is Siobhán Dannreuther. Alison . . . I’m afraid she’s not here at the moment.’

‘Miss Dannreuther, what a fortunate coincidence. It is you, in fact, I was trying to reach. My name is William Brenton. I’m

phoning from your grandmother's home and ... I'm very sorry to tell you, Miss Dannreuther, but your grandmother fainted and fell. She was taken to hospital, just a few minutes ago.'

'Gran? Why? What's happened?'

'Regrettably, I can't tell you that. It all came about so suddenly while she was on the phone. It was such a shock. I was here at the time. I'm delivering the post for her, you see, and have been doing so for a number of years now, since I was assigned the new district and Wingfield Road fell onto my route. But I had known her before. She cared for Evelyn – my late wife – when she was taken ill. I therefore recognised your grandmother when she answered the door. She had to sign for a registered letter, you see. That's why I'd rung. And so, since then, she has occasionally asked me in for a quick cup of tea. It's always nice when people do that, especially now with the rain and the snow, just to get a little warmth back into your body.

'But I must tell you about today, of course. I didn't have any letters for your grandmother, but she saw me passing. So, she came out and asked would I like to come in for a little chat. I had read about you in the papers and had meant to ask her if you'd got back all right, and she said you had, and she told me everything about your adventure. I have to tell you, Miss Dannreuther, I was very impressed. She was going to show me some new photographs you had brought back from Antarctica, but then the telephone rang out in the corridor – we were sitting in the kitchen, you see. She excused herself and left the room, and then ... Obviously, I didn't pay attention to what she was saying, nor would I have been able to understand anything, had

I tried. But after perhaps a minute or so, I heard the telephone drop to the floor. Naturally, I got worried. I therefore went to enquire, and she had fallen – fainted, as I said.

‘When I took the receiver to dial 999, I thought the person on the other end might still be holding the line, but they weren’t. I assumed they must have realised what had occurred and had rung off to phone for an ambulance. But, all the same, I phoned the emergency services myself, just to be on the safe side, and they came as fast as they could, I’m sure. It took no more than ten minutes, but it felt like ages, I can tell you. Your grandmother was still breathing, thank God for that, so I didn’t try to interfere. I simply put a pillow under her feet and covered her with a blanket. The ambulance men said it was good I had done that. They took her to the casualty department at the N&N.

‘Afterwards, I allowed myself to check her address book, to see if I could find any contact information for you. I found the old number in Aberdeen, and I knew you weren’t living there anymore. Underneath it was another address and phone number in Cambridge. Your grandmother had told me you had been temporarily staying there during the training programme, prior to leaving for Antarctica. I therefore knew I wouldn’t be able to reach you there either. But then I found this number, and I remembered your grandmother telling me about Miss Conway, how the two of you have been close friends since childhood. And I’ve seen all the nice photographs of the two of you here in the flat, at different ages. I’m glad I caught you on the phone, Miss Dannreuther.’

‘Yes, thank you very much for all your help and for notifying

me. I shall go to the railway station straight away and come out to Norwich as soon as possible.’

‘All right. You know, of course, where the hospital is, where your grandmother worked all these years. And I would like to say, Miss Dannreuther, she is very proud of you – all this interesting research you’re doing, first in Scotland and then on Antarctica. She showed me the letter you’d sent back from there after the holidays, and she read parts of it to me. She was so excited. She appeared to be decades younger. You know that, after the tragic loss of your mother, she very much thinks of you as her daughter, and it gives her the greatest pleasure to see you realise your dreams, even if they take you to the ends of the world. Also today, she was so happy. I would like you to know all this, just in case . . . ’

His voice trailed off, leaving nothing but a suffocating emptiness. What was going on? Only a few days ago, her grandmother had been doing so well. And now, within an instant, Siobhán’s whole world was falling apart.

‘Miss Dannreuther?’

‘Yes, I’m still here. But I shall leave now. With luck, I could be at the hospital in about three hours.’

‘I’ll go on with my round then. I shall shut the door and put the key underneath the doormat, unless you’ve got a key yourself?’

‘I do.’

‘All right. But I shall leave my number here by the telephone. Please feel free to ring me up whenever you need local assistance, if there is anything I can do.’

‘I shall. Thank you so much again, and good-bye.’

‘Good-bye, Miss Dannreuther. And my best wishes for your grandmother.’

* * *

With calm determination, the matron led the way through the deadened silence that filled the sparse corridor of the coronary care unit.

‘They brought her in from Casualty about an hour ago. Initially, her condition was quite unstable, with an irregular heart-beat. But she is doing a bit better now, and she has been sleeping since she arrived here. You must therefore be extra-quiet in her room. Don’t touch her, and don’t sit on her bed. What she needs now more than anything else is rest. Should she wake up while you are there, under no circumstances is she to excite herself. Just talk to her calmly and cheerfully, all right? And most definitely, do not ask her about that phone call. We don’t know if it had anything to do with her collapse. It may only have been a coincidence. Perhaps she got up a little too quickly, took a few hurried steps ... At her age, a latent cardiomyopathy is not uncommon, and even harmless things like that can be enough to bring on a temporary heart failure. However, if the conversation did excite her for whatever reason, there is no point in reminding her. Meanwhile, you probably should try and find out who it was who phoned her. Maybe there was an emergency in your family – you can never know, can you? There is a public phone in the waiting room by the reception. If you need a phone card, you can get one in the shop on the ground floor.’

She slowed down in front of one of the rooms where grey curtains were drawn across the large windows to the corridor.

‘So, this is it. Very quiet now.’ She carefully opened the door.

Her grandmother looked ancient, her skin completely pale, almost transparent. But despite her weak appearance, she seemed to be sleeping peacefully, without having moved at all. The white cotton bedclothes were still smooth, as if they had not registered yet the presence of the frail human being they were meant to shelter.

Without any windows to the outside world, the room was only dimly illuminated by the displays of several instruments that were mounted on a rack on one side of the bed.

‘She’s being monitored then?’

‘Naturally, dear. This is a CCU. All our patients are being monitored around the clock. If there are any significant changes in your grandmother’s heart activity, we will be warned immediately.’

She pointed to the single chair by the side of the bed. ‘You can wait here if you want. Although, I’m afraid you’ll have to sit in the dark while she’s asleep.’

‘Right, I’ll leave you two alone now. But I shall be on the ward until the evening. If need be, you can get in touch with me through the reception desk – ask for Elaine Foley.’

* * *

Could that phone call really have been a coincidence? Even if, understandably, her grandmother’s heart was getting weaker as she got older, she had still appeared to be too healthy to sim-

ply collapse after getting up from a chair and taking a few steps. The last time they had walked together to the corner shop, she had given no indication at all of slowing down, or of breathing more heavily. Of course, these things could happen without any warning. But there was also the possibility that there had been something about that conversation that had disturbed her sufficiently to bring on such a shock that she had lost consciousness.

Siobhán could think of only one kind of bad news that had the potential to do that. It had to have been about Alison – the one phone call she had been dreading herself for more than a week. And once again, at the critical moment, she had been away, determined to follow her own private investigation, rather than staying at home, allowing herself to recover, and to trust the police to do their job.

Whether it had been an accident or something more sinister, it had to have been the police who had phoned, following up on the missing person report. And even if it had been someone else, the police would at least be in a position to trace the call. Either way, this was too important to speculate about it. While her grandmother was still asleep, this was the opportunity to go and find out.

‘Siobhán ...’

‘Gran, I didn’t mean to wake you. I just ... How are you feeling?’

‘Siobhán, sit down here and listen. You are in great danger.’

‘Don’t worry, Gran. Everything will be fine.’

‘Siobhán, listen, this is very serious.’

‘Gran, it’s all right. I’m here now. And I won’t go back to

Antarctica, I promise. I'm not leaving you again.'

'Siobhán, what are you talking about?'

'You don't need to worry about me anymore. I am safe now, and I'm sorry if the news reports upset you. Before I went up to Scotland, I didn't even know that the fire and the evacuation had been reported back here in England. It was all exaggerated, you see. In reality, it wasn't nearly as dangerous as they made it out to be.'

'Siobhán, I'm not talking about that silly accident on Antarctica. I always knew you would get through that. But you are in real danger now.'

'Don't excite yourself, Gran.'

'Siobhán, you must find him. That is the only thing that can save you.'

There was genuine panic in her eyes. Her hands were shaking uncontrollably. Her heart was not going to stand this. Why was there no alarm?

'Please don't excite yourself, Gran. Here, lie back down. You have to rest now. Then you'll be feeling better tomorrow.'

'Siobhán, listen to me. This is about Alison – they took her. They ...' She broke off with a sob. 'I don't know. It's the war all over again. People vanish. People get killed. And I still don't know who does it and why.'

'Don't worry about Alison, Gran. She's just gone away to Dublin for a while, on that sabbatical, remember? She'll be ...'

'Siobhán, you must ask yourself: why is it beginning again, after all this time?'

'Please, Gran, you should be resting. I'll get the nurse. She'll

give you something so that you can sleep.’

‘Siobhán, listen to me! I don’t have long now – can’t you see that?’

‘No, please, don’t talk like that. Everything is going to be all right. You just have to rest a little.’

She tried to raise herself but failed and fell back onto the pillow with a sigh, her breathing getting more agitated.

‘He was so young, still so young and inexperienced – but very honest and very loyal, always loyal. I should have known. I should never have believed the rumours. But when we were warned – it was too risky, you see. The navy, the government, they all believed it. So we had no choice, we couldn’t stay.

‘But that journey, at night, across the Channel, in those little boats ... And in London, seeing the total devastation – the shame over what we had done. Then, the others got lost, exactly as I had feared. We should never have separated. I should never have let them go back down into that dreadful tunnel. I told Ingrid it was too dangerous for us. I knew it, and I let them go.

‘And Hans, of course, he did not defect. He did not abandon us. He never betrayed anyone, in his whole life. It was all because of that secret mission. That was when it started, and it’s still going on. Even before, he never said where they went on patrol and what they did during those long months at sea. But that mission, when they left Kiel for the last time, they all knew it was special, I could feel it. And then something went wrong, and they disappeared.

‘But you must find him, Siobhán. I know you can. You’re just

like him – a wanderer, restless, always searching. You’re named after him.’

‘Gran, don’t worry about the war anymore. It’s all over. Now, the only important thing for you is to rest and to get well again.’

She feebly shook her head. ‘Siobhán...’

She broke off but managed to sit up a little. The panic and uncontrolled agitation had left her eyes. Instead, they were now filled with a calm confidence as she intently looked at Siobhán.

Suddenly, she was overcome with emotions. Her fingers around Siobhán’s hand regained a convulsive strength. She tried to speak, to finish her sentence. She took a deep breath. ‘Find him!’

Then, all tension left her body as she calmly exhaled. She would be fine now. Everything would be all right. She would get up any moment and tell Siobhán not to fuss about her.

But her head dropped back onto the pillow. The alarm went off as the instrument lights began flashing.

People rushed into the room – determined people with clearly defined tasks. They all knew what to do. Their lives had a purpose, were well organised and following a meaningful routine. They still had their families, with all the associated reassuring little problems. They had their daily commutes, their fixed work hours, and their weekends.

And Siobhán was left standing alone, clueless, lost in a space without any point of reference, as the one person who had raised her and had cared for her fell away into the whiteness of the linen, dissolving into the blinding light that now flooded the room.

Surrounding her was the rattling of the cables against the empty flagpoles, the screeching of the gulls sailing carefree in the cold breeze, and the rhythmic rushing of the waves onto the shore. Yet, underneath that familiar blanket of natural sounds, Great Yarmouth Beach lay deserted in the evening light. The kiosk and the tea room were boarded up. And Britannia Pier rested dark and quiet – still hibernating, waiting for spring to arrive – while the cheerful music of summers past carried on the wind only as a distant memory.

The elaborate dream castles in the sand that Siobhán had once built with Alison had long been washed away. And her grandmother would never again be sitting there in a deckchair, reading, trying hard to resist the pull of a comfortable afternoon nap – too anxious about the two girls to allow herself to fall asleep.

Now she was at rest, after a long and turbulent life – another personal loss that weighed heavy on Siobhán's conscience. She should have been there, doing the one sensible thing that had been possible for her to do: to wait by the phone for any news about Alison, and to intercept the painful message that had become more and more likely with every passing day. Had she only answered that fateful phone call herself, everything would be different now. Her grandmother would still be alive, and she would finally know the truth about Alison. As it was, the agonising uncertainty continued.

That the phone call had indeed been about Alison had been confirmed by her grandmother's dying words. But why had the other person never tried to call back when the conversation had been so abruptly interrupted? And why knew neither the emer-

gency services nor the police anything about Alison? When they should have been the first to be notified in the case of an accident, or of any crime having been committed.

Equally mysterious was the association with the disappearance of her husband during the Second World War that had been triggered in her grandmother's mind by whatever she had been told on the phone about Alison. This had then apparently stirred up a sequence of traumatic memories of having to leave home, of the dangerous escape to the enemy, and of losing "the others," for which she had still blamed herself.

Who were these others? The wives and children of other crew members who had fled with her? The location where they had got lost – "down in that terrible tunnel" – that had to have been a bomb shelter in one of the underground stations. If these others had survived the war, by now, they would have surfaced again somewhere. It was therefore safe to assume that they had been killed during a bombing raid when their shelter had taken a direct hit. As they had been in the country illegally, they would probably not have been identified. They would not have been registered as deceased. And, eventually, they would have been buried in an unmarked grave.

With her grandmother gone, who was left to carry on the memory of her companions on that perilous flight? Had they already faded away into history? And who was left to remember her husband? During her grandmother's last moments, her greatest regret seemed to have been that she had never been able to find him again. Had she blamed herself for that, thinking that she had not exhausted every possibility? Had it been the fear

that he too might slip out of living memory that had caused her to urge Siobhán to find him?

It would have been disrespectful to rationalise away these dying fears and to attribute them entirely to the confusion that her grandmother must have felt after she had regained consciousness, for only a few more minutes, not knowing where she was, and probably not able to remember anything that had happened since the phone call. Instead, Siobhán was determined to do everything in her power to honour her grandmother's final request.

After all, in Britain, there was nothing left to accomplish for her. She had reached the limit of what she could do. The police were now in possession of all the information she could give them, every confusing clue, every tantalising hint, every outrageous speculation. And they had to take this very seriously now. They had to make every attempt to uncover whatever connection there might exist between the wartime death of a little girl, possibly by the name of Rose, and the abduction and murder of Kathleen.

The secret message in that little chapel by the coast proved that some tragedy had occurred in that area that could not be ignored, no matter how long ago it was. And even if no evidence had survived that connected the owners of the manor house to that memorial, the plausibility of that connection was strong enough for the police to conduct another forensic examination of the old building, to look for any evidence that would prove that Alison had been there, if somehow she too had got caught up in this dark affair.

Therefore, while Siobhán was still on sick leave, and until

the police investigation had revealed any new information, she would do everything she could to turn back the clock and to re-trace her grandmother's steps to a time when she had been about her own age.

In the fading light of the sinking sun, Siobhán's lonely shadow was cast over the windblown ripples in the sand and out onto the sea.

Over there in the east, hidden below the horizon, lay Germany – and a dark past.

PART TWO OF **THE SIGNS OF A MYSTERY**

Still recovering from her injuries sustained on Antarctica, Siobhán has returned to Britain. She is shocked to discover that Alison has not been in contact with anyone for almost a month.

Had Alison been right with her suspicion that the abandoned manor house in the Scottish Highlands was at the centre of hidden crimes, or other tragic events, that reach back in time?

Had she been justified in her growing fears of being followed? During her investigation, had she somehow got too close to the truth? And was that the reason for her disappearance?

Siobhán is determined to find out.

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