

THE SIGNS OF A MYSTERY

PART THREE

THE GREAT
DAWN

NIKOLAI NAWRI

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by

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I think over again my small adventures;
my fears, those small ones that seemed so big,
for all the vital things I had to get and reach.
And yet, there is only one great thing, the only thing:
to live, to see the great day that dawns
and the light that fills the world.

– Adapted from a traditional Inuit song

PROLOGUE

So, there was the girl they had been searching for, the one who had unwittingly eluded them for months. Here, in the overgrown cemetery of the old Rosary Chapel, surrounded by the dead, her luck had run out at last. They had finally caught up with her, and they would not lose sight of her again.

She looked completely unremarkable; a person one passed in the street without noticing; one of many ordinary lives and ultimately expendable, although it seemed as if she still had an important role to play – unless, of course, they were mistaken again.

This time, there had to be absolute certainty. This time, they had to succeed. There had already been three deaths, and still the truth about the events of an increasingly distant past was as elusive as ever. There could not be any further complications. This was possibly their last opportunity to obtain the crucial information they needed. As annoying as it was, their next actions would therefore depend on this plain girl who was currently standing by her grandmother's open grave, hapless and miserable.

How much did she really know? Had she been able to talk to the old woman before her death? And how much, if anything, had she been told before? What exactly was her involvement in the old conspiracy? There was now the possibility that the girl was the only person left who knew where the *Atlantis* had been sunk, and what powerful secret the old submarine, with some

luck, was still guarding against the restless waters of the North Atlantic.

It would be easy to abduct her that very night. But chances were that, just as with her friend, they would get no information out of her, either because she had not been inducted into that treacherous alliance, or because she was too frightened of the consequences of giving anything away. Then, in the end, they would have to kill her as well – once again, without having achieved anything.

No, a better strategy was to be patient now, to wait and to watch, and to follow her wherever she went. She might lead them to more significant conspirators, perhaps even inadvertently reveal the location of the hiding place. And then, when the right moment arrived, they would act decisively.

Despite the setbacks to their quest, they had already come a long way since the summer, since they had joined the Order, and since they had first heard the story of the lost submarine, which had only been revived the previous year.

Many of the original members of the Order had already passed away by that point, and the knowledge of the mysterious wartime events that had led to the formation of their secret organisation had gradually slipped out of living memory over the intervening decades, until it had become regarded by the younger generation as nothing but a foundation myth, rather than the factual truth.

Then, just before the collapse of East Germany, something had happened that had stirred up the forgotten stories once more. At great risk to himself, with the Socialist regime crumbling around him, a former submariner had contacted some of the

founding members. He had managed to bypass the strict state censorship and had indicated, in carefully disguised words, that he hoped that the old union was still intact and continuing the early attempts to recover the precious Atlantean artefact that had been lost during the war. And so, in the summer when they had joined the Order, the origin stories had once again been a frequent subject for conversation, and had soon been shared with the newer members.

A recovery operation for the lost artefact would be difficult and time-consuming to organise, and would have to be conducted under the guise of an oceanographic research campaign. Everything else, even an archaeological project, would rouse too much public interest. It would require financial support from the Order, which would only be forthcoming if a sufficient number of influential members could be convinced again of the existence of “The Secret.”

To discuss this Atlantean relic during their elaborate ceremonies and dinner parties was one thing – as long as it was as elusive as the Holy Grail. It had lent these otherwise dull meetings a certain mystique. However, no one had been willing to set out on an actual quest to rescue this remnant of the great civilisation from the sea – a reluctance that stemmed either from privileged complacency, or from fear of drawing attention to the Order. Especially now that the first generation was dying out, what was needed was proof, undeniable physical proof that the old stories were more than just a foundation myth.

It had taken months to reassure the other members that their interest in the Secret was serious and honourable, but their per-

sistence had paid off. After sufficient trust had been established, an old couple who had been centrally involved with the Order from the beginning had finally confided in them something they had withheld from all the other members for decades. Contrary to what was believed at the time, the wife and daughter of one of the key conspirators had not been apprehended and eliminated during the war, after they had fled Germany and gone over to the British.

Fifty years later, it had been straightforward to find the old woman through the phone directory, indicating that she had remained in England since. The daughter, however, was not listed anywhere under her maiden name. Through the General Register Office, they had intended to look up her marriage certificate but had discovered instead that she had died in her late twenties.

The conspirator's wife had to have known about her husband's subversive activities, otherwise she had never undertaken that perilous journey with her young daughter. This supposition had compelled them to endeavour to establish whether, at least for a while, she had been reunited with her husband, whether she still was in contact with some of the other conspirators, or whether perhaps she was the last person alive who knew about Ultima Thule and the Secret.

Gaining access to the old woman's home, while she had been away in church, had been easy enough. But once inside, even the most thorough search had not turned up any useful information, anything at all that would have been related to the wartime events. Nonetheless, the framed photographs that stood about in every room had been of interest. Most of them showed the evo-

lution of two girls as they grew up together. They bore no family resemblance and looked too close in age to be siblings. But one of them was likely to be the conspirator's granddaughter.

Going over the photo albums they had found in one of the cabinets in the living room, the annotations had revealed the two girl's first names. The orderly collection of letters kept in another cabinet had then added their last names and had established that one of the girls indeed was the granddaughter. And although the other girl did not appear to be related, in her letters, she too had addressed the old woman as "Gran."

The real granddaughter had been the most obvious target for coercing the widow to divulge everything she knew about the conspiracy. Inside the book by the telephone, they had found the girl's new address in Cambridge, underneath an address in Aberdeen that had been crossed out. However, when they had discovered a different name on the doorbell plate, there had been two possibilities: either the old woman had made a mistake, or the Dannreuther girl had been staying there temporarily. In the end, there had been only one way to find out.

The resulting attack on the wrong girl had wasted far too much time. To make matters worse, after the media attention around the old manor house had died down, and they had begun searching for the Dannreuther girl again, she had somehow vanished. When they had seen the other girl – Alison – visit the old woman, she had come there alone. From then on, they had therefore focussed their attention on her.

Upon searching her flat while she had been away at work, the bags and boxes they had found piled up in the bedroom had

reinforced their suspicion that the Dannreuther girl had been abroad. They had also found the folder that Alison had compiled, summarising her meticulous research into the carefully staged murder in the manor house. She, sooner than anyone else it seemed, had recognised the significance of that old building and had started to gather information about it. There was, therefore, a good chance that she had been aware of the role it had played in the past, and that she had at least some knowledge of the conspiracy. Otherwise, her interest in the case was hard to explain.

Alison's plans to travel abroad had presented them with a perfect opportunity to execute the abduction with such efficiency and secrecy that her absence had still not found its way into as much as the local news. However, the days of interrogation in the manor house had been a frustrating experience. Even the realisation of what had happened to that other girl had not been enough to get Alison to talk, either because she had no knowledge of Ultima Thule and the Secret after all, or because she would have been in extreme danger from the conspirators had she divulged any information that was important to them.

But then, quite suddenly, coincidence had played in their favour. Initially, it had started as just another ordinary news report on the television about a fire on some Antarctic research base that had occurred two days previously, and about the evacuation of the team. But then a photograph had been shown of the members of that team, standing on what appeared to be the access tower of the base, with a Union Jack flying in the back – fifteen men and one woman – and they had recognised that woman instantly.

There she was, the Dannreuther girl, doing research on Antarctica, initially for more than a year, but now she would be back in England very soon.

This had been the ideal moment to dispose of Alison. After six days, she had been kept in that manor house for too long already. It had become too risky to drive out there twice a day, once very early in the morning, and then again late at night. Eventually, someone had been bound to see them. It had therefore seemed to be the right time to purge themselves of that burden, to be free to go after their original target again.

Of course, the shock and regret had come promptly the next morning when the first news reports had revealed that the Dannreuther girl had somehow managed to get herself lost during the evacuation of the base and had been left behind. After almost three days out in the cold, she had been presumed dead. This could well have meant the end for their plans and had been the darkest moment of their quest.

During the subsequent four anxious days, their activities had been reduced to following the repetitive and sensationalised news reports about the ongoing rescue attempt of a German team, until finally it had been confirmed that the evacuation by land had been successful. The girl would leave Antarctica on a German icebreaker, which would arrive in Germany within the next six weeks. It would be impossible to miss her.

However, after only three weeks, a short note in one of the British newspapers had alerted them to her early return. She was supposedly back in the country, yet nowhere to be found – neither at Alison's flat in Cambridge, nor at her grandmother's

house in Norwich.

Over the course of five days, they had split up to watch the two addresses, waiting in parked cars, day and night, in the cold and stormy weather. But again, the wretched girl had escaped. Then, their patience had run out. Although initially they had been reluctant to contact the old woman directly, now it was time to act. But how could they have known that she had been so frail? The truth about what had happened to Alison, and the implied threat that a similar fate was going to befall her granddaughter if she did not cooperate, had evidently been too much for her. According to the obituary in the newspaper, she had died of heart failure later that same day.

But none of this mattered now. With the girl back in their sight, all these complications could be left behind. They could now look ahead and focus on achieving their quest.

If only ... Somehow, the memory of Alison on that last evening – her defiance and, admittedly, her bravery – was hard to shake off. Particularly troubling was the sudden change that had come over her at the very end, as if the certainty of imminent death had given her exceptional strength. There had been something disconcerting about her demeanour. Even when they had taken her away, down to the lake, she had remained perfectly calm. She had not pleaded with them anymore, had not tried to pretend any longer that she had no knowledge of the conspiracy. It could have been the numbing effect of shock, but she had seemed completely lucid. Her last words had been spoken with such cold precision and confidence. Most likely, there was nothing behind

them at all, just empty threats. And yet . . .

The sun may be sinking now, but it will rise again. It will be a fine sunny day, and you will have left this world.

These last words still echoed in their minds and left them with a strange feeling of unease. Yes, Alison had proven to be a far more formidable opponent than anticipated. She had recognised the right motive behind the other girl's murder and had seen through the guise of a Satanic ritual, long before anyone else had. She had kept her secrets, even under immense pressure. And she had been confident that she would be avenged. But by whom? If she really was supported by some powerful organisation, why had it been so easy to get at her? And why had there been no retribution?

The funeral had meant to provide the answer at least to the question about who else was still involved in protecting the old Secret, but it had been disappointing. Judging by the assembly that had gathered around the grave – elderly acquaintances, for the most part, perhaps former colleagues – no one of any significance was left of the original conspirators.

However, if this was true, Alison would have known that. What then had been the source of her confidence? What else was there that they did not see? It almost seemed as if somehow Alison had imagined to be able to return from death, to pursue them herself, and to take revenge on them. In reality, of course, she had vanished forever. She had become just another mystery that lay hidden deep down in that dark lake, and her memory would leave nothing behind but fear and confusion among those

who missed her.

Her spirit would not ascend again from the watery depths and haunt them, nor would there be any avenging angels descending from the heavens. In the end, it had been they who had prevailed. It was they who were the anonymous faceless spectres who managed to operate in plain sight, yet always unseen, eluding police forces across the country – unstoppable and invincible.

But there was the Dannreuther girl, dropping a bunch of flowers onto the coffin, as swirls of dead leaves rustled around the gravestones. Against all odds, she had returned from the dead. She had thankfully not managed to get herself killed on Antarctica after all. And so, the time taken to observe the funeral had not been entirely wasted. She had finally come within their reach.

Although, having invested all that effort into tracking her down, seeing her now in person came as a terrible disappointment. The girl looked pathetic. She cried silently as she limped away from the grave, accompanied by another girl who supported her by her arm. Whether she too was involved in all this, they would have to find out. Walking with the two was the old postman they had seen passing in the street where the old woman had lived. Then, slowly, followed the other attendants of the funeral.

The Dannreuther girl seemed completely clueless. She certainly gave no indication that she realised how narrowly she had escaped capture so far. Was it possible that she really was the only one who was left of those who knew about the conspiracy? Or worse, was it already too late? Could it be that none of the conspirators had felt confident to entrust her with the carefully

guarded Secret? Had the line now been broken? Had the Secret already been lost with the old woman's death?

The girl's next actions would show. All they had to do was to keep a close watch on her. As there was nothing she could do on her own, whom would she turn to for help? Who was ultimately working in the background?

The girl, with her two companions, came closer now on the narrow path that led between the rows of graves. If she only raised her head, she would see them, standing there among the trees, next to another recent grave. She would see them, but she would not know who they were. No one did. Their true identities had been washed away. There was no social baggage left that would make them vulnerable to threats of violence, no one through whom they could be traced. They had selflessly sacrificed their own personalities to dedicate themselves entirely to this great quest.

Only for a fleeting moment, the other girl glanced over to them, apparently following some sudden impulse. She seemed to shiver slightly, as if being caught by a particularly cold gust of wind. In an involuntary reaction, she held her friend's arm more tightly. But the moment passed. The little group walked on without paying any more attention to them.

At the entrance to the cemetery, the two girls said good-bye to the postman and went on together. There was no urgency to follow them closely. They would undoubtedly go back to the old woman's house. There was time enough to catch up with them later. And when the girl had played her part in the quest, she too could be eliminated. Even if she was not involved in the con-

spiracy herself, her life had been forfeited by her grandparent's betrayal.

One way or the other, Siobhán Dannreuther would die.

CHAPTER ONE

THE LOST SUBMARINE

Surrounded by hedges and trees, the cottage stood well back from the quiet residential street, immersed in the warm glow of the late afternoon sun. Although it was well-preserved, the walls looked genuinely old, made of dark red bricks and covered in ivy, with a tall thatched roof that sloped down to just above the row of white-framed windows on the ground floor. It had the appearance of a traditional North German family home, rather than that of a historical archive.

The flower beds were empty, but the immaculate lawn had survived well throughout the winter season. A narrow drive led up to the entrance, on which the pebbles were still raked into a neat wave pattern. They crunched indignantly, seemingly reluctant to yield their meticulously maintained order to the tread of invading feet. Clearly, there had not been many other visitors that day.

The shiny brass plate next to the green front door confirmed that indeed it was the *U-Boot Archiv*, with the curator's name engraved beneath it – Günter Karsten.

Everything about the building and its neighbourhood suggested that time had sufficiently moved on for the dark events of the past to be viewed as a part of history and, as such, to be studied with

a sense of objective detachment.

In response to the pleasant chime of the bell, the door was opened with only a few seconds' delay.

'Mrs Dannreuther, welcome. Did you have a good journey? It was not difficult with the bus from Kiel?'

'No, not at all. But I'm sorry I couldn't make it a little earlier. I hope you didn't have to wait in the office especially for me.'

'But I beg you, that is really no problem. I live here, you know.' Mr Karsten beckoned Siobhán into the hall and took her jacket. 'The archive is sadly quite small compared with what you have in London, and it is privately funded. Therefore, I am very honoured that you decided to come here in person, all the way out to Laboe. As I mentioned on the telephone, I could have sent you the information that I found with the post.'

'Oh, it was no bother at all. I have some days off from work, and I wanted to take the opportunity to visit the place where my grandparents lived, and where my mother was born. But I haven't seen much of Kiel yet.'

'How did you find out about the archive? I was very surprised when you telephoned from England. Normally, I get only enquiries from Germany.'

'I contacted the research department of the Imperial War Museum in London, told them I wanted to find out about the German submarine force during the Second World War, and they immediately referred me to you.'

He seemed pleased. 'Yes, I am glad to have very good contacts in England. It is not possible to study the German sub-

marines during the Second World War without getting involved with the Royal Navy. So, I contact the War Museum myself occasionally. In fact, I did for your enquiry, as you will see.'

Mr Karsten led the way into a cosy living room with dark wood panelling and matching leather furniture. The last rays of sunlight just managed to slant through the windows underneath the overhanging roof.

'Take a seat here, please.'

He indicated three armchairs grouped around a low table, with an elegant blue-and-white porcelain tea set laid out, together with a thin folder.

He removed the pot from its silver warmer. 'I hope the tea is still hot ... yes.'

He poured out two cups and then gestured towards a plate at the centre of the table. 'There is also cake, if you like.'

Siobhán recognised it as the same kind of sponge cake topped with caramelised almond flakes that her grandmother had used to make and, in a moment of bittersweet recollection, found that it tasted just the same.

'So, Mrs Dannreuther, here have I collected all the information about your grandfather that I could find.'

He pulled the folder towards himself and opened it, somewhat reluctantly. 'Now, before I begin, I think I should warn you. I am sorry that this is not good news. Of course, it is the war we are talking about. So, if you look through these documents, you see it again and again: all these young men, the submarine commanders, they get their first boat, they are very brave and motivated to serve their country, and then they start to go out on war patrol.

If they are lucky, they survive for a while. They become famous, they receive medals – national heroes, you know – and then, suddenly, in one short moment, it all ends. Their boat is sunk, and the entire crew dies. So many ... This is a list of losses in 1940. It starts with *U-55* sunk in January, then *U-41* and four others in February; at least one boat every month, as you can see; *U-13* sunk in May; *U-122* went missing in June, and so on. Until here: *U-112* lost with all hands on 11th December 1940.'

He hesitated, looking up from the document with an apologetic expression. 'The commander of *U-112* was *Kapitänleutnant* Johannes Dannreuther. Do you think that he was your grandfather?'

'I ... It's possible, yes.'

'I could only find one officer with the name Dannreuther who served in the submarine force of the *Kriegsmarine*. Maybe you recognise him from this photograph?'

He pulled another document out of the folder, a single sheet this time, and pushed it across the table. It was a short biographical sketch, prepared by *Oberkommando der Marine*, with an old black-and-white portrait attached to the top right corner. The commander appeared to be in his late twenties, no older than early thirties – still far too young to carry the responsibilities of war.

It took but a thumb to cover up the uniform at the bottom of the picture. What remained was a self-confident young man who wanted to do what he thought was right for the people who mattered most to him. He had alert eyes, handsome features, and dark hair, just like her mother.

‘You’re right. This must have been my grandfather. Gran always referred to him as Hans, that’s why I wasn’t sure for a moment.’

‘Yes ... I am very sorry, Mrs Dannreuther. I wish I could have given you better news.’

‘No, it’s fine. I never seriously hoped to be able to find him alive after all these years.’

Although, in truth, she had. And now the search was over before it had properly begun. But Siobhán’s grandmother had been right about one thing: her husband had not betrayed her or his country. The rumour about a defection had to have been created in the chaos of war. It might have been an error during the hurried transmission of coded messages. Something had got lost in translation, and a sinking had become a defection – a simple misunderstanding, nothing more.

Mr Karsten seemed genuinely concerned. ‘I am sure this must be a big disappointment for you. But maybe you still want to see these other documents that I have collected?’

‘There is more information about what happened?’

‘Oh, yes. I have to tell you, Mrs Dannreuther, I am very glad you contacted me. Since you telephoned, I have been working on this case. I even got some documents from England, as I mentioned. And the more I find out, the more questions I have. But if it is too painful for you at the moment ...’

‘No, please. Whatever information you can give me ...’

Mr Karsten looked pleased and eagerly straightened out the papers in front of him. ‘Very good. Then I will tell you two stories.’

He picked up the document with the photograph again. ‘First have I here your grandfather’s personal file, that you saw. It says that 1935 he joined the submarine force in Kiel, and 1938 he became *Kapitänleutnant*, or Lieutenant as it would be in your navy. That year he also commissioned the *U-112* and started to do training and reconnaissance patrols in the Baltic Sea. About two weeks before the war began, he departed Kiel for his first patrol into the North Sea and around the British Isles. He was quite successful when the fighting started, and after a few months, he received the Iron Cross 1st Class, which you can see on this photograph. He was stationed in Kiel until the spring of 1940, when he took part in the Norwegian Campaign. After the successful invasion, he was transferred to Narvik, which is in the north of the country. And, as I said, towards the end of that year, his boat was sunk by an enemy warship. That is all I could discover from his personal file.’

Mr Karsten put the document to one side and pulled a few more sheets of paper out of the folder. ‘In the records about the *U-112*, we find a bit more information. She was a Type VIIB Atlantic boat, attached to the 7th Submarine Flotilla and, unlike many others, managed to survive the first year of the war. So, by the time of her loss, as bigger and more advanced submarine types were introduced, she was a little outdated. On the day of her sinking, she was patrolling the Norwegian Sea about 160 nautical miles west-southwest of the Lofoten, when she was detected and attacked by an English destroyer. A radio message about the enemy contact, giving the approximate coordinates of her final position, was picked up by several German stations in

Norway and passed on to the Navy High Command in Berlin. No further transmissions from the submarine were received and, as far as we know, she never reached any port. A few more details about what happened may have been recorded in the last war diary but, obviously, that went missing with the boat. So, based on what we know, we have to assume that *U-112* was sunk.’

Mr Karsten looked up from the documents. ‘Normally, at this point, I would have considered the case closed – and at first, I did. But then, I kept thinking over it. For many submarines that were sunk during the Second World War, we have very little information about how it happened and exactly where. So, that is not unusual. But there were many more open questions than just about the sinking of *U-112*, and I started to ask myself: What was the boat doing up there in the first place? Why was she stationed in Narvik, all by herself, years before any other submarine? Why was she separated from her old flotilla, when the other boats were transferred to Saint-Nazaire after the invasion of France? Why would she go on patrol that far in the north, still one year before the first Arctic convoys were sent out by the Allies? The only solution that I can think of is that she must have been on some special mission. I therefore checked your grandfather’s first logbook, which covers the period from the beginning of the war until after the invasion of Norway, just before the transfer to Narvik. This is the original, but I made photocopies for you of all these documents.’

Mr Karsten revealed a thin volume, bound in black leather, and opened it at the title page. It contained a few typewritten lines, together with several annotations and signatures, and one

prominent stamp, in old German lettering, at the top of the page: *Geheim!*

Mr Karsten slowly leafed through the diary – page after page of tables with an identical structure, and with neatly handwritten entries in each field. ‘I would be very happy to translate this for you, but I am afraid it is very boring.’ He glanced up. ‘Suspiciously boring, perhaps. It only records the routes of routine patrols, with a few enemy contacts, regular comments on the weather and the sea state, the general performance of the boat, some technical problems, but nothing significant – nothing that would give us any clue about what might have happened afterwards. I also found nothing in all the other documents that have survived the war. So, what was going on up there? What kind of activity was so secret that it was not recorded anywhere?’

‘After I could not find the answers here, I decided to cross-reference with the English records. I telephoned my colleague at the Imperial War Museum. He has done research in the London archives for me before, although I never met him. You have maybe spoken with him? I asked him if he could find information about any engagement between English warships and German submarines near the Lofoten in December 1940.

‘I did not have to wait long. Here is one of the documents that he faxed me this morning: a report about the sinking of a German submarine by HMS *Laplander*. And you can see here: date and location are consistent with the attack on *U-112*. The report confirms that incident as recorded by the Germans. But ...’, he put on his glasses, ‘... here we find more information. This is what it says. The *Laplander* was travelling towards the Lofoten

for a raid on the German fish oil factories and glycerine stores on the islands. The first attempt, five days earlier, had failed because of bad weather and the strong tidal currents around the archipelago. In the darkness of the Arctic winter, another troop transport that took part in the raid had got off course. According to their last radio message, they had hit the skerries west of Fareøya and were sinking. Then, the contact broke off.

‘Around 0400 GMT on 11st December 1940, at approximately 66°57’N and 5°03’E, the *Laplander* spots a German submarine, possibly Type VII, fully surfaced, at about half a mile on the port beam. Since it is in a perfect position for an attack on the destroyer, this is a very dangerous situation for the English. The *Laplander* therefore quickly turns about and begins to head towards the submarine at full speed, intending to ram her, while opening fire by the 4.7 inch guns. Immediately, the submarine gets up to speed herself and crash-dives. They pick her up on hydrophone and sonar, and deploy depth charges. She is last heard to descend rapidly, and then they lose her. No further sound emerges from below, and no wreckage surfaces.

‘They know that all submarines of the time have a very limited range underwater and can only spend about two days submerged, at most, before they run out of electrical power and breathable air. The *Laplander* therefore continues to patrol the area, waiting for the German boat to surface but, after more than two days of silence, they are convinced that it was sunk. As the weather is getting worse – with another blizzard approaching – the raid is postponed. Instead, they continue patrolling over a wider area, looking out for other German ship movements, but without any

success. Only once, they intercept a distant radio signal in encrypted Morse code on the German submarine-to-shore high-frequency band, but from well outside the diving range of the attacked submarine. They conclude that this has to be another boat and again widen their search area, moving closer to the Norwegian coast, without sighting any vessels whatsoever. And that is as far as this report goes.'

Mr Karsten carefully arranged the German and British records next to one another. 'So, if we put the two documents together, they seem to tell the whole story. Given the date and location, the German submarine that HMS *Laplander* attacked and sank – I am sorry to say, Mrs Dannreuther – it must have been your grandfather's boat.

'And that was not the first time the two vessels had met each other. That had been on 14th April that same year, after the Second Battle of Narvik. Your grandfather notes here in his war diary, if I translate: 'During retreat, HMS *Warspite* with full destroyer screen in excellent firing position. Three torpedoes launched at the battleship and one at Tribal class *F76* – that was the *Laplander* – but none detonated.'

'Torpedo failure was a big problem during the Norwegian Campaign. The magnetic detonators used by the submarines had never been tested at high latitudes before, so close to the Magnetic North Pole. And within the narrow Norwegian fjords, they were also affected by the iron ore deposits in the surrounding mountains. Ironically, that was exactly the natural resource that Germany wanted to exploit in northern Scandinavia, and one of the main reasons for invading Norway. These deposits distort the

Earth's magnetic field and can hide even a big steel ship from the torpedoes – although, of course, you can still see it very clearly with your own eyes.

‘A failed attack like this is always dangerous for a submarine because a submarine is only as safe as it is undetected. If you fire a torpedo and it explodes, you have given your position away. If you do not sink the enemy ship, you are in trouble. In direct engagement, you have no chance against a destroyer. They are much faster and much better armed than submarines. Your only option then is to dive as deep as you can, stay there for as long as you can, and pretend that you are dead. In that first incident, the torpedoes did not explode at all, and the visibility was poor. Therefore, *U-112* was not detected and managed to get away. Sadly, the second time, they were not so lucky.

‘What wonders me is that there are no inconsistencies between the different documents. They all confirm each other. The information in the German records therefore seems to be accurate, and we still have no explanation for why *U-112* was stationed in Narvik. Why not at one of the established bases in Bergen or Trondheim? Or with the 7th Flotilla in France? I could not find the answer in our records here, and first I thought I would have to give up. But then, my English colleague found something else. And this is where the second story begins that I would like to tell you.’

With reverence, he pulled another fax from the bottom of the thin stack of papers. ‘Here have I a report by the commander of HMS *Winslow* from 19th December 1940 – so, eight days after the sinking of *U-112*. Since then, the weather has improved,

and the *Winslow*, an old escort destroyer, is heading north to join HMS *Laplander* for another attempt to destroy the oil factories. At around noon, just after sighting the *Laplander*, the *Winslow* also spots a submarine, fully surfaced and at a complete standstill, about ten nautical miles north-northeast of their position. By radio, they immediately warn the *Laplander*, which is cruising at about the same distance to the west of the submarine. Through their binoculars, they recognise it as a German boat. They are able to see people on the bridge, as well as on deck. The German submariners seem to be having a problem. They are getting the life rafts out of the bow compartments and start to inflate them, as if they were planning to abandon the boat – although, at least at this point, there is no indication that they are listing and are about to sink. Then, one of the English lookouts notices several other low silhouettes, less than a mile southeast of the submarine – possibly a group of submarines. But before others can verify the sighting, the silhouettes disappear. Suddenly, the men on the surfaced submarine make preparations to dive. They stop inflating the life rafts, let them glide into the water, with no one inside, and hurriedly go under deck. Shortly afterwards, the submarine picks up speed and submerges. At the same moment, there are two explosions in quick succession. In the dark, the *Winslow* lookouts see an orange flash of light above the surface where the submarine went down. On the hydrophone, they pick up the faint groaning of a small steel vessel breaking up and sinking. Then, there is silence. Now, of course, both English ships are on high alert, convinced that soon they themselves will come under attack – but nothing happens. The other

submarines, if they really were there, simply vanish. But because of the unexpected strong presence of German submarines, and the possibility of warships hiding within the many fjords of the islands, the raid is postponed again until the following spring, when it is conducted successfully.'

Mr Karsten put down the fax. 'This is how far the report goes, and it leaves us with even more open questions. Now, instead of one unexplained submarine in northern Norway, we have a whole group of them – a wolfpack, as it was called.'

He leaned back in his armchair. 'You know, Mrs Dannreuther, there are many gaps in our knowledge about what happened during the war, so many tragedies that will never be understood. That is why my father started this archive here, to find out as much as we can about the German submarines; to make sure that all these documents are not simply filed away somewhere and forgotten; that family members, such as yourself, can find out about their relatives. We collect everything we can, and still so much is uncertain. But never, in all the years since I took over from my father, have I ever seen such a mess. What was going on up there? What were all these submarines doing? Why are their movements not recorded in the German documents? And what were these explosions?'

'Naturally, the English lookout could have been mistaken about the other submarines. It was midwinter, a few days before solstice. The sun was very low above the southern horizon, and the reflections on the water must have been confusing. So, let us say that the other submarines were an illusion. But unless she was a ghost ship – some kind of a *Flying Dutchman* – that one surfaced

submarine definitely did exist. And something did explode just beneath the surface.'

Mr Karsten placed the two British records side by side. 'You see, here we have two events. First, a German submarine goes missing. Then, we have one too many.' With a conspiratorial glance over his glasses, he pushed the two sheets of paper together, one on top of the other. 'What do you think?'

'Well, I don't know. Is it possible that *U-112* could have survived the attack after all?'

'Under normal circumstances, I would have said no. You see, it is not only a question of electric power, but also of lack of oxygen, together with a build-up of carbon-dioxide and other poisonous gases. Two, and at most three days underwater would have taken *U-112* to her absolute limits. As I mentioned, during that time, they could not have got very far, less than hundred miles underwater. And the English knew that. Therefore, with the destroyer patrolling over an area with that radius, constantly watching and listening, *U-112* really had no chance – normally.

'But this is clearly a strange situation. And if we assume that *U-112* somehow managed to survive the attack by HMS *Laplander*, we can connect the two events. Let us say that, after two days, *U-112* surfaces again near the location where she went down. During the attack, the submarine has somehow been damaged and is not manoeuvrable anymore. Over the next six days, the crew gets very lucky and somehow the destroyer does not see them while they try to repair their boat. But they fail. Maybe the pressure hull is too badly damaged. They expect that the boat will sink and get the life rafts ready. Precisely at that moment,

the *Winslow* arrives. The German submariners notice the arrival of the second English destroyer, which is heading straight for them. They attempt to dive, but hydrogen gas from some burst lead battery cells ignites, and the fuel tanks explode. I would say that that is a possible scenario, even if it is not very probable. But we still do not know what *U-112* was doing, all by herself, all the way up there in the Norwegian Sea.'

Mr Karsten picked up the folder again. 'With the information that I could find, I could not make any more progress about your grandfather's boat. Then, I thought that I could try to find some information for you about that part of your family who still live in Germany. I thought that maybe you would like to meet them while you are here. I had not asked you about your grandmother's birth name. But Dannreuther is not a very frequent name, especially here in the North. So, I simply began to look in the city archive and register office in Kiel. If necessary, I could have extended my search. But, right away, I found ... Mrs Dannreuther, I hope this will not shock you, but I found this.'

He pulled two sheets of paper out of the folder. 'These are the death certificates for Elisabeth Dannreuther and her only daughter, Lena, who both died on 22nd December 1940 and were buried in Kiel. The cause of death is not mentioned, but it must have been an accident, or an air raid.'

Although the documents were written in German, the two names were unmistakable. Together with their relationship as mother and daughter, it could not be a coincidence. It would explain her grandmother's reluctance to talk about the events leading up to her escape from Germany, and about her husband. But

why would someone take on another person's identity – the identity of a German Christian? A Jewish woman might have done so to be able to survive in Germany, but not for the purpose of fleeing to Britain.

‘Mr Karsten, I'm sorry, but this is just ... You see, I can't remember my mother at all. She died only a few days after I was born. But I know that the woman who brought me up, who worked so hard to enable me to have the kind of life that she may once have hoped to have for herself ... I know that woman was my grandmother. She was not some impostor. I have her eyes, and I have her hair. I am her descendant, and these documents are wrong.’

Hearing Siobhán's shaky voice, he hastily pushed the death certificates back into the folder. ‘Then we will forget them. So many people died during the war, documents get lost, names get confused. I have seen this before. At first, I did not want to show you this at all. I expected that the news of your grandfather's death would be difficult enough for you. I can only apologise, and I am sure you are right.’

He refilled their tea cups. ‘But then we have to ask ourselves, why did she go to England, your grandmother, with a young child? That was very difficult at that time, and very dangerous. How did they do it? They were not Jewish. They could not claim refugee status. They would have been treated like enemies and arrested immediately.’

‘But that's just it. They were arrested and interned until the final year of the war. The thing is ... I have a hypothesis. It's based on something my grandmother told me. Basically, what

happened was, she fled the Nazis because she was told that her husband had gone over to the British, with his boat and the entire crew, and that she would have been arrested had she stayed in Germany.’

With a resigned smile, Mr Karsten sank back into his arm-chair and took off his glasses. ‘This is not making things more understandable, Mrs Dannreuther.’

‘But perhaps it does. As a matter of fact, if we accept that possibility, everything makes perfect sense. Here’s how I see it. *U-112* was involved in some secret activity, outside the normal scheme of naval operations. Let’s say they were testing some new technology, nicely secluded in this remote part of northern Norway. Then, something happens and, for some reason, they decide to collaborate with the British. The British records are deliberately incorrect to cover that up. I mean, what if there are German spies on their side? If they ever saw those records, the Germans would be warned. In that case, HMS *Laplander* wasn’t near the Lofoten for a sabotage operation at all. They were there to meet *U-112*. But the first attempt fails. As you said, the weather was bad. They might have missed each other in poor visibility. Or they needed to go alongside the submarine, to exchange people or some cargo. Therefore, they try again when the sea is calm. On that second attempt, they and that other ship are approaching the meeting point. But, in the meantime, the Germans have somehow found out about the conspiracy and have sent a group of submarines to intercept and sink *U-112* before they can make contact with the enemy. When *U-112* dives, they are not trying to escape the British destroyers at all. They have

seen the other submarines. But it's too late. The Germans have already launched their torpedoes, and *U-112* is hit just beneath the surface – twice. That's what these explosions were. Then, the Germans would have wanted to cover that up as well. Obviously, submarine crews who go over to the enemy, and having to sink your own vessels is not exactly great propaganda, is it? And so, officially, *U-112* was sunk – during faithful service – by HMS *Laplander*.'

Mr Karsten looked thoughtful, but only mildly impressed, and methodically cleaned his glasses. 'And the life rafts? On a calm sea, they would not have needed them to approach the English ships.'

'The life rafts . . . Yes, all right, there are still some open questions. But you have to admit, this hypothesis explains at least some elements of the recorded events.'

'Well, I don't know, Mrs Dannreuther, a defection does not seem very plausible, especially at this stage of the war. A much more likely scenario would be that, instead of sinking *U-112*, the English had managed to capture her, with all the important material on board, the codebooks and everything. Then I agree that the English would have tried to cover that up because that is exactly what they did when they caught *U-110*. But now, all the records from the war have been declassified, and there is nothing about *U-112* being captured. Especially for the scenario that you describe, if that really happened, the cover-up was done very well on both sides. And people alive today, for some reason, would still be silent about it.'

'Only . . . I'm sorry, Mr Karsten, I don't mean to be bother-

some. But isn't it a bit of a contradictory argument to say that a conspiracy cannot exist just because we don't know about it – when that's exactly what one would expect from an effective conspiracy?'

He nodded slowly. 'Yes, okay, you are right. I can see that you have an argument. Then we can try to think about it in a different way. Let us look at the motive for why someone would do something like that. We can say that a big conspiracy needs a big motive, yes? So, let us think about the political situation at that time. Things were going very well for the Germans in 1940, when *U-112* disappeared. Everyone thought that they were going to win the war. Almost all of Western Europe was occupied or allied. Only very few countries were allowed to remain neutral. And even Britain was in very serious danger. They had failed to defend Norway. They had been driven out of France, their last position on the Continent. The Channel Islands had been occupied without any resistance whatsoever – these were desperate days for your country, Mrs Dannreuther. Meanwhile, here in Germany, the opposition to the Nazis was at the lowest point ever. We were still allied with the Soviet Union. The worst bombings, the disastrous Eastern Campaign – and the Holocaust, of course – none of these terrible things had happened yet. Despite all the losses that we saw, looking at the successes, the submarine force especially was doing very well, and the Royal Navy was only slowly catching up with effective countermeasures. So, in that situation, why would a German submarine commander have decided to go over to the English? Even if you forget the rest of the crew and only think about your grandfather, did he have a good

reason to betray his country? Did he hate the Nazis so much – enough to abandon his wife and young daughter? Think about them. As you said, they would have been arrested immediately, and your grandfather would have known that. The secret police would have interrogated your grandmother, to find out exactly who else was involved. That would have been extremely brutal. Then, if she refused to talk, or when they had found out all they could, they would have put her in prison, or a concentration camp, or ...’

Mr Karsten broke off and impulsively pulled the death certificates back out of the folder. He stared at them as if seeing them for the first time. ‘But you said ...’

‘Yes, Gran survived the war. She managed to escape, and the Nazis made a mistake. They got the wrong woman.’

The other woman – Ingrid. Although, in that case, she would have been caught in Germany already, before or during the escape, not later on in London. Could her grandmother have misremembered that just before her death?

The steady ticking of the tall clock standing by the row of bookshelves emerged from the silence that settled over the room, as the pendulum, with indifferent precision, swung to and fro.

Mr Karsten had sunk back into his chair again, clearly shocked by the possibility of this new scenario. For a while, he remained deep in thought, then he stirred slightly. ‘Does it not worry you what this would say about your grandfather, such a betrayal?’

‘It worries me what war says about all humans. I have no illusions left. All I want to do is to uncover the truth.’

‘The truth ... I fear that could be very depressing, Mrs Dan-

nreuther. I still cannot imagine that your grandfather would have decided to betray his country and his family like that. But what you said about secret tests of some kind of technology – maybe you are right. I am starting to think: what if there are no naval records about the activities involving *U-112* because the navy only played a small role in them? What if another branch of the military was behind that? What if *U-112* was simply a transport vehicle for some kind of weapon?’

‘You mean . . . what? A rocket perhaps?’

‘Normally, I would say that this was very unlikely in 1940. The first attempts to launch rockets from submarines, that I am aware of, were made two years later and from bigger boats. Also, as far as we know, rockets were always tested in Peenemünde, on a little island in the Baltic Sea. I find it very difficult to believe that they would have done other tests so far away from there. Of course, to be sure, we would have to find the last logbook of *U-112*. But since we are speculating, it could be that they were experimenting a few years earlier – maybe with rockets, maybe with something else – and it went wrong. Maybe the disappearance of *U-112* was in reality a failed experiment that had to be covered up. It would explain the explosion that is mentioned in the English report.’

‘Yes. And then, if *U-112* had the weapon on board, possibly the only prototype that ever existed, it would have gone down with the sub.’

‘In that case, we will never find it. The ocean is more than thousand metres deep where the boat was reported to have gone down.’

‘True. Although, they did find the wreck of the *Bismarck* recently, didn’t they, well below four thousand metres.’

Mr Karsten became slightly more excited. ‘You are right, they did.’

‘The *Titanic* a few years before that. And underwater technology is getting better all the time.’

He nodded thoughtfully. ‘But these are very big ships, much bigger than *U-112*. It would be a lot more difficult to find a submarine on the ocean floor, even if you knew exactly the position at the surface where she went down. And you would have to have a very good reason to go looking for it.’

‘I suppose those submarines and any weapons of that period – even experimental ones – are pretty much outdated now.’

‘Oh, completely, yes. The few surviving submarines and rockets from the Second World War are now museum pieces. In fact, you can see a submarine, very similar to *U-112*, down by the beach, near the war memorial – that tall tower that you may have noticed when you walked here from the bus stop. The submarine itself is a museum now. Maybe it would be interesting for you to see it.’

But even if *U-112* had become redundant as a weapon, someone might nonetheless have become interested in the old submarine for a reason that had nothing to do with its technology.

Siobhán, you must ask yourself: why is it beginning again, after all this time?

Why had her grandmother been so insistent about that? Why had she been so convinced that Alison’s disappearance was some-

how connected to the disappearance of her husband and his submarine half a century ago? Could it really have been because of some secret activities the crew had been involved in?

Mr Karsten watched Siobhán out of the corner of his eye while he distractedly rearranged the documents on the table.

‘Mrs Dannreuther, I don’t want to be curious, but I am wondering why you have come to enquire about your grandfather now, after such a long time?’

‘That was because my grandmother died a few days ago. It was her final wish that I should find out about what had happened to her husband. I’d grown up thinking that she must have hated him for deserting her and their little daughter, forcing them to flee Germany. I realise now that, whatever the truth is about her husband’s disappearance, she didn’t blame him at all. She did try and find him after the war but, with the chaos that existed at the time, eventually she had to give up.

‘I regret now that, in more than twenty years of living with her, I never once asked her about what happened during the war. When she told me about her escape, I simply took for granted that her husband really had defected, never asking – as you have just done – why he would have done such a thing. And worse, I never realised that Gran herself, despite having been forced to leave her home, did not believe the rumours. But, of course, what she believed was of secondary importance. As long as the Nazis believed it, she and her daughter were in mortal danger – as you described.

‘And then, when I never asked any questions, Gran didn’t bring up the subject either, probably thinking it would be best

to let the past rest and move on – until just before her death, when suddenly the old memories were triggered again. Was it her life flashing before her, as we sometimes hear, when someone has a near-death experience? Or was there something else? Something that triggered her heart failure? At the hospital, they told me that the cause of death might have been stress cardiomyopathy. Whatever it was that revived the past for her, she was anxious that I should finally find out what happened. Apparently, she hoped that I might somehow be more successful now, after so many years. I just don't see how.'

'I am very sorry to hear about your grandmother, Mrs Dannerreuther. Of course, anything I can do to help ... But it will be difficult. You have seen what I have here. It is true that there is something mysterious about the loss of *U-112*. But I am sure that your grandmother was right, and your grandfather did not betray her. It must have been a misunderstanding in the confusion of war. As you suggested, a secret weapon test could have been the reason. That would explain everything we know, from the German and the English documents. But, unfortunately, I think we will never know with certainty. It must be very disappointing that you came all this way, and I could not answer your questions.'

'Oh, not at all, I'm very glad I came. And I really appreciate the effort you put into collecting all this information. If anything, I should have come much sooner – years ago, and together with Gran. After all, this is where she was born and where she lived for many years.'

'I am glad to hear that. Then you will be staying in Kiel

tonight?’

‘That’s the plan, yes. But I also have some friends in Hamburg. I’ll phone them this evening and see if they are in. Perhaps I can stop by on the way back to England.’

CHAPTER TWO

FOREIGNER

The ringing across the long-distance phone line was faint against the background noise of the busy pub, and going unanswered for a third time. Then, there was only the relaxed chatter of the professionally attired patrons, perhaps ending their day's work with a quick drink after a boring business meeting, until a fourth ring dissipated into an empty flat miles away. This was bound to end in yet another answerphone greeting, another thread that was about to break . . .

'Ja, hallo. Das ist Korina.' She sounded slightly out of breath.

'Hello. Pardon me for speaking English. I'm trying to get in touch with Stefan – Stefan Lau.'

'Oh, hello. Well, Stefan, he is . . . Wait, Siobhán, is that you?'

'Yes, this is she.'

'Wow, what a surprise. I'm Korina, as I said – Korina Xenakis, Stefan's girlfriend. I don't know if he ever mentioned me. We live here together. At least, I moved into his flat when he went to Antarctica, and now we just have to see how things work out.'

'I'm sorry, Siobhán, but you know, Stefan is not here right now. He has gone to see his parents. They live in a small town at the coast, a bit north of here. I think he'll be back fairly late tonight – not too late, I hope, because tomorrow morning we'll

fly to Greece on a three-week vacation. We'll stay until after the Catholic Easter weekend, but we'll get out before the start of the Orthodox holidays.

'Where are you right now? Back in Cambridge? Stefan and I have been talking about you. We would have phoned but ... I still can't believe he never asked you for your phone number when the two of you split up at Heathrow. Sometimes, he's a bit dreamy, or shy, I don't know. Germans are like that – up here in the North, anyway. Well, at least you managed to find us.

'But you know, that whole adventure really affected him – not like you, of course. He wasn't injured, or anything, never in any particular danger, according to what he told me. Although, I suspect that wasn't entirely true. Still, if it was at all possible, I would say that he has become even quieter than he was before he went to Antarctica. Half his mind is still down there, I think.

'Sorry, Siobhán, where did you say you are right now?'

'I'm actually ... I didn't say, but I did get safely back to Cambridge and am currently enjoying my early retirement.'

'Retirement? They didn't kick you out of the institute, did they?'

'Oh, no, not at all. They just put me on sick leave for a month or so, until they worked out what to do about the biology programme at Aurora. With luck, I could be back in action for the next Antarctic summer season.'

'Oh, that's good to know. Stefan told me a little bit about how they found you in that burnt-out station. Sounded pretty scary. They were all very impressed with how you managed to pull through, by the way, after everyone had expected you to be

... I mean, they didn't necessarily expect you to be alive when they got there. In fact, I had the feeling that they never seriously expected to find you at all.'

'Well, it seems I slept through the worst, while everyone else had a hard time over me. But listen, Korina, when Stefan comes back tonight, could you say hello to him?'

'Sure, he'll be ever so pleased. As I said, we were all wondering about you. And now, you're living in Cambridge again – that's brilliant. I was there myself, three years ago, only for six months, but I absolutely loved it. I'm studying to become an interpreter, you see. It's such a beautiful city, Cambridge, with all the old colleges and millions of students. It was totally rad, but not exactly cheap, obviously, and I couldn't come up with a way of supporting myself there. Instead, I managed to get an internship here. I'm not complaining. Germany is an exciting place at the moment. Everything is changing, with new opportunities popping up everywhere. And then, of course, I met Stefan. He's not too bad, really, if he's around.' She sneezed. 'Oof, but I do miss the sun.'

'Yes ... Incidentally, I tried to phone Monika earlier on – you know, Stefan's station manager down at Helios – but she wasn't at home. Do you know if she has returned yet?'

'No, I don't think so. I remember that *Polaris* was scheduled to get back to Bremerhaven not before next Monday. But Monika is so nice. I met her before they left for Antarctica. She lives here in Hamburg as well, and I'm sure she would love to hear from you.'

'Yes, I shall try again later next week. Now, Korina, I hope

you don't mind my saying, but you don't sound very German.'

She laughed. 'Thank you, I will take that as a compliment. And you're right, of course: I'm from Greece – Crete, to be precise. It's my parents we're going to visit tomorrow. Well, keep in touch, won't you, and drop by any time you want. Then Stefan and I have an excuse to visit you in Cambridge.'

'Sure, will do. Although, I'm still in the process of settling in after the return from Antarctica, a year sooner than expected – moving about, you know ...'

* * *

'U-Boot Archiv, Laboe – Günter Karsten.'

'Hello, Mr Karsten. This is Siobhán Dannreuther. I came by the archive yesterday.'

'Yes, of course, Mrs Dannreuther, I remember. How are you? Where are you? It sounds like a train station in the background.'

'It is, yes. I'm still in Kiel. I walked around the city last night and again this morning. It's a really nice place, and I'm glad I got to see it now. Then, I was going to take the train back to the Hook of Holland when, suddenly, I had an idea. It occurred to me that there must still be surviving relatives of other crew members of *U-112*. Perhaps, if I could talk to them, I could find out more. I mean, there must have been tens of men on these submarines. And before they disappeared, some of them may have mentioned something about secret or unusual activities they were involved in to their wives.'

Mr Karsten chuckled. 'The Type VIIB boats had a crew of more than forty men, yes, and that is a very good idea. But I am

a little bit ahead of you, Mrs Dannreuther. Indeed, I am very glad you telephoned because I wanted to tell you, but I did not know how to contact you. Just after you left here yesterday evening, I thought of exactly the same thing. So, I began to look up other officers who had served under your grandfather, but I could not find a single crew list for *U-112*. That was very unfortunate, and I got a little angry at this point. As I said when you were here, I never before had so much confusion and missing information.

‘But I did not give up, and I thought about the other submarines that had operated out of Kiel. At the beginning of the war, this was the largest submarine base in Germany. It had tens of boats in several flotillas. At least some of the officers on the other boats must have known your grandfather and the other officers serving on *U-112*. They would have had regular contact with each other, professionally at least, but probably also socially. I therefore looked for information about any officers who, in 1940, had been stationed in Kiel. Most of the German submariners did not survive the war, or they have died since then. But then I found Ralf Behring, the former commander of *U-115*. He commissioned his boat in April 1941, when it became attached to the 1st Flotilla in Kiel, but he had been stationed there already since before the war. And this is where it gets a little confusing. It says here in his personal record that he had been First Watch Officer on *U-46*, which was a sister boat of *U-112* in the 7th Flotilla. The problem is that another person is also listed as First Watch Officer on that submarine for the same period. Without more information, it is impossible to say which of the two personal records is right. Behring became very famous dur-

ing the war, one of the most successful submarine commanders. Because of that, we could say that his record is the correct one, unless . . . I think you know what I am thinking.'

'Yes, unless he served on *U-112* before the sub was reported as being lost, when in reality it was never sunk at all, but rather hidden away somewhere. Perhaps you were right when you suggested yesterday that *U-112* may have been a transport vehicle. Only, instead of a secret weapon, it was carrying something of financial value, such as gold or other precious articles that had been stolen from Jewish families. The plan was to use the submarine to get that treasure out of Germany and to deliberately sink it in shallow water along some deserted coastline, such as in the recently occupied northern part of Norway. Then, they would wait until the opportunity presented itself to get these items onto the black market. I suppose for a group of people who wanted to fake their own deaths, they got lucky not to be sunk for real by that British warship. Those crew members who refused to be part of the conspiracy were probably murdered; others may have gone into hiding in South America; some, like Mr Behring, managed to remain in Germany, after their service records had been falsified.'

Mr Karsten hesitated for a moment. 'I don't know, Mrs Dannreuther. I am getting very confused with all this unorder in the documents. But I am starting to think that maybe you are right. There are so many open questions, and the story of *U-112* is definitely becoming a little bit . . . strange, I would say. I therefore got interested in Mr Behring and I . . . Do you want me to tell you now? Do you still have enough money for the telephone?

Or is your train leaving? I could send you all this information with the post.'

'No, please, I'm curious about what you found. I'm using a brand-new phone card, and there is no rush to catch any particular train.'

'Very good, but I will try to keep it short. So, Mr Behring and his *U-115*. After only two months in Kiel, in June 1941, they were transferred to Brest, in the north of France, together with the rest of the 1st Flotilla. They were stationed there until May 1942, when they were transferred again, this time to Norway, and attached to the 11th Flotilla stationed in Bergen. From then on, they were moved more and more north: in June 1943, with the 13th Flotilla to Trondheim; and finally, in December 1944, with the 14th Flotilla to Narvik. There they were until the end of the war, in May 1945, when the German forces surrendered, and they were captured by the Royal Navy. They were interned in a prisoner of war camp near Watten, in the very north of Scotland, until March 1946. This is as far as Ralf Behring's wartime record goes. But I found here a handwritten note by my father, from a few years after the war, when he began to collect documents before they got lost. As I said, Behring was an important submarine commander, and my father must have tried to contact him for information about his service in the submarine force. My father notes here – in German, of course: "From marriage register: Ralf Behring and Emma Lohmann, 4th May 1941 in Kiel." That would have been just before they were transferred to France. Then, my father notes: "Oliver Behring, born 16th June 1948 in Stralsund." Stralsund is the city where Ralf Behring was

also born. The couple must therefore have returned there after his release from captivity. By the way, this is very close to the Army Research Centre in Peenemünde that I mentioned yesterday, where they tested new military technology, such as rockets – but okay.

‘A few years later, the separation into East and West happened, and they ended up on the other side. Now, the border is open again, and I thought that maybe they are still living there. I hoped that we could clarify the uncertainty about Behring’s wartime career before he took over *U-115*. And really, I found his son’s telephone number in Stralsund. I called it this morning and spoke with his wife, Ulrike. She knows that her father-in-law was a famous submariner on *U-115*. But she never heard of *U-112* or your grandfather. Ralf Behring’s wife died young after a heart attack. He left Germany not long ago, after the opening of the border, and moved to Fareøya, a small island in the Lofoten, not very far from Narvik. Mrs Behring said that he had liked the region when he was stationed there, and went back for his retirement. So, he is a bit difficult to reach now. But Mrs Behring said that her husband could know more. He is more interested in this part of the history.’

‘Ralf Behring retired to Norway? I heard that life up there is quite expensive. How could he afford that, coming from East Germany?’

‘I have myself wondered about that, Mrs Dannreuther. But, of course, I did not want to ask on the telephone.’

‘No, I understand – although this is curious indeed. Mr Karsten, after what you just told me, I’m beginning to think that it would

be a bit premature for me to return to England. Somehow, I have a feeling ... I don't know ... I have a feeling that there is something about Mr Behring that isn't quite right. The uncertainties about his wartime record, his retirement in the Lofoten ... I think it might be interesting to talk to his son at least.'

'I agree completely, Mrs Dannreuther. But when I spoke with Mrs Behring on the telephone, I found out that her husband is in long-term medical care after a heart attack he had about one-and-a-half years ago. He seems to have inherited a weak heart from his mother. He used to be in the army, working at a military radio station in a small village not far from Stralsund, called Lindenthal. Mrs Behring mentioned – I had a very nice conversation with her – that the radio station is hidden in an underground bunker. It was so secret that, before the collapse of East Germany, not even the nearby residents knew what really happened there. They thought that the compound was just a normal army barracks. I had heard about these radio stations after the Wall came down. They were important communication centres of the Eastern Bloc. In case of a nuclear attack, when everything above ground was wiped out, it still had to be possible to communicate from there with the command centres in the east and to co-ordinate a counter-attack. After that, sooner or later, the people down in the bunker would have died as well because they had no world left to return to. Scary time, the Cold War. But, fortunately, we do not have to worry about that anymore. After the border to the West opened, the Russians took away all their classified documents and decoding machines and such things. Then, the bunker was closed. It has been abandoned for a few

months now.

‘But, as I said, Oliver Behring is still in a special hospital in Stralsund – *Ostseeklinik*, it is called. If you want to talk to him, to find out more about his father’s activities during the war, it would probably be good to visit him there. But it will not be easy. The situation in the East is still quite chaotic. The train service, as I experienced it, is catastrophic, and I would definitely recommend to rent a car. Also, for you, a problem would be that most people who grew up in the East do not speak English.’

‘Yes, I was worried about that. Back in Secondary School, my grandmother encouraged me to take up German, and I did somehow manage to master the basics. Since then, it has become a bit of a distant memory. But now, surrounded by the language, I notice that a few things are coming back. I should probably give it a go if there is a chance that I might get some interesting information.’

‘Very good. If you want to continue the investigation into what happened to *U-112* and her crew, you should not be shy to telephone Mrs Behring. She is very friendly. After I spoke with her this morning, she will know what it is about. And I am sure that somehow you will find a way to understand each other. Maybe she can get you in touch with her father-in-law. She said that he lived in England for more than a year after he was released from the prisoner of war camp. He worked on farms for a while, to earn the money for the journey home. After that, he must speak good English. I cannot find the phone number here in the office at the moment. It is possible that I left it with my notes in the library. But you will find it easily yourself in the

phone book for Stralsund. And if you decide to visit, to talk to Oliver Behring in person, you should definitely take some time to see the Baltic coast. You could stay in a hotel on the island of Rügen, for example. During this part of the year, it would not be very expensive, and it is very easy to reach over a bridge from Stralsund. There is a national park with a very old forest and, along the coast, there are white cliffs and beautiful beaches. It would be a shame if you would come here, to the country where one half of your family is from, and only think about the war and terrible things like that.'

* * *

The chill wind from the sea was getting stronger, while the sun gradually descended behind the island. But for Siobhán's lonely figure, the exposed pier lay deserted now, as the few other visitors had retreated into the shelter of the cafés and hotels along the promenade.

Already a day had gone by since she had arrived in the town of Sassnitz, on Rügen's northeast coast, with its turn-of-the-century architecture, and the row of grand mansions along the waterfront, their white facades dominated by heavily ornamented *art-nouveau* balconies.

What, under other circumstances, could have been a pleasant sojourn in the tranquil town, surrounded by unspoilt nature, continued to be plagued by the same indecision and doubts that had brought her there. Instead of confronting the inevitable challenges immediately upon her arrival in Stralsund, she had decided to retreat onto the island, to gain some time, and to think

about her situation in the peaceful atmosphere of the resort during its off season.

And yet, all she had managed to do was to turn over the same thoughts that had nowhere to go without any fresh information – until, as evening settled, the chance of doing anything productive and perhaps learning something new had been squandered. Now, it was too late for a phone call that would be difficult enough to make within a civil time-frame, and much too late for a visit to the clinic.

Despite that, the main resistance towards taking the first step did not stem from a desire to avoid a confrontation with potentially ugly truths, nor did it derive from the language barrier. It was primarily the concern that, if there really was something devious behind the loss of *U-112*, contacting Ralf Behring, or even his son, could set in motion a chain of events that was unpredictable and potentially catastrophic. This was not something that could be done carelessly.

Nonetheless, the following day would have to bring a decision about how to proceed. As comfortable as it would have been to finally do what everyone had recommended since her return from Antarctica, to take the opportunity to relax and recover, it would require a solid reason to extend her stay on the island – especially as the uncertainty about Alison was ever present, still hanging over the western horizon like a dark cloud, with no news from the police since her departure from England.

Siobhán, you must ask yourself: why is it beginning again,

after all this time?

What if her grandmother had been right about Alison? What if something had happened recently that had stirred up the old wartime events? Events that had taken place, at least in part, in northern Germany? What if the police enquiries into Kathleen's murder and Alison's disappearance had so far failed to turn up any results because they were focussing on the wrong place?

If the trail really led to Germany, the trigger for the recent crimes could well be related to the opening of the border between East and West. In that case, there could be a political motive behind them. Alternatively, politics could only be an incidental factor. Perhaps it had been the breaking down of barriers that had brought people back together – people who had been separated for decades. And when that happened, things that had lain hidden during all that time surfaced again.

If there was one lesson that could be learned from her detour into the Scottish Highlands, it was that secrets could occasionally be hidden in plain sight. Sometimes, all that was required to recognise them was to abandon a direct approach and to take a step sideways for an oblique view of the situation.

A former military radio station ... In a scenario in which not all was what it seemed concerning *U-112*, what role might that play? The workplace of the son of one of few surviving submariners from the Second World War. A submariner with a questionable wartime record who, following his time as prisoner of war, had spent more than a year in Britain, had then returned home and, soon afterwards, had been caught behind the Iron

Curtain. And the moment the border had opened again, he had got out of Germany, leaving his son and daughter-in-law behind, and had retired to a remote island in northern Norway – near the place where *U-112* had once been stationed under mysterious circumstances. And he had been able to do so most likely with the financial support from someone else.

Something was not right about this. And with that amount of uncertainty, any approach that was too direct could easily have unpleasant consequences. Therefore, as tangential as it might seem, the investigation of an abandoned military compound could be the appropriate first step to take. Had there been something else going on at that high-security site, beyond operating a radio station? Continuing perhaps a project that had begun during the Second World War? Some kind of special operation in which *U-112* had been involved?

Although she was not likely to find the answers to any of these questions, visiting the site of the decommissioned nuclear bunker was one thing she could still accomplish that evening. There was nothing to be lost, and it could well be the safest way forwards.

From the pier, she could see the white hatchback that she had rented in Kiel glowing golden in the rays of the low sun.

As she walked towards the car, she promised herself that, if she could find the small village that Mr Karsten had mentioned, she would not do anything rash. She would not climb over any fences, and she would not step on any landmines. She would simply take a quick look around. How dangerous could that be? Just a quick look.

CHAPTER THREE

GOING UNDER

The few detached houses, surrounded by modest gardens, were lined up along the left side of the only road that led through the small community.

Stretched out towards the right was a patchwork of fields and a small wooded area – a rather noticeable collection of trees, spaced too regularly and with edges too straight to have grown naturally. If there was one place in the otherwise open rural landscape where a military compound could be hidden, this was it.

A brand-new sedan – perhaps another visitor from the West – stood out from the line of smaller cars that were parked along the garden fences, which were all remnants of the Socialist era.

Past the last house, the quiet residential street came to an end in a roundabout, while a narrow road led off towards the trees. Its coarse unmarked tarmac surface suggested that it had never been intended for ordinary traffic.

Siobhán carefully manoeuvred the rental car around the deepest potholes that looked as if they might have been created by heavy lorries or tracked vehicles over the past decades. Conscious of the exposure while driving in clear view from the front room of every house along the street, she forced herself to keep her speed casually low.

As she finally got among the trees, the sunlight was briefly scattered into individual bundles of rays. Then, a clearing opened

up only a short distance ahead. Just before reaching that, the road was blocked by an olive-green gate, with a prominent warning sign on the right.

This, then, was as far as it went in that direction. It was probably not far enough away from the outer edge of the group of trees for the white shape of the car to be hidden from the houses. With hindsight, leaving it parked along the residential street would have been less conspicuous, but that could not be helped now. Going back and forth would only have attracted more attention.

Soon, the sun would be gone anyway. Already, an ominous gloom descended over the grounds, with an eerie twilight shimmering over the clearing.

The moment Siobhán stepped out of the car, she was struck by the total silence that hung all around. Normally, in such a grove, there should have been birds singing in the evening. Had something disturbed them recently? Or had they long sensed the presence of a darkness there that was related to some evil underground?

In any case, darkness was coming. She therefore got the electric torch out of the compartment for emergency equipment in the boot of the rental car. She briefly switched it on, glad to find that the batteries appeared to be fully charged.

On either side of the gate, the enclosure of the compound was formed by a double fence, which had carried high voltage at some point and was topped with several strands of barbed wire. Immediately behind the gate, on the right side of the road, stood a guard-house, painted in a camouflage pattern, with a dog kennel next to it. Beyond it, the road led farther onto the compound

until it was lost from sight within the trees on the opposite side of the clearing.

The main gate for vehicle traffic was secured with a thick chain, in addition to the normal locks. But then Siobhán saw that there was something wrong with the smaller gate for pedestrians. The frame at the side of the lock was slightly bent. It was hardly noticeable even when standing directly in front of it, but the lock must have been forced open, probably with a crowbar, and not too recently, as the scratches had already begun to rust.

Understandably, she was not the first person who had become curious about the decommissioned military complex. The immediate neighbours at least would have wanted to find out what had really been going on there, having lived next to it for years.

The slight squeaking of the bent gate provoked no response of any kind – no alarm, no challenge from a concealed sentry. There did not seem to be anyone about, nor was there any sign of recent activity. At least above ground, the compound truly gave the impression of being abandoned, having been made redundant at the end of a war that never came.

A few camouflaged single-storey barracks stood alongside the road, their windows boarded up. Even after only a few months of being left uninhabited, they already looked rundown.

Past the barracks followed a succession of garages. All their doors were closed, with some fuel drums lined up outside. An army lorry with a flat tyre had been left standing by the side of the road.

All the buildings were regular brick constructions that could not have been intended to withstand a nuclear attack, or even

the direct impact from regular bombs. They were no more than a futile gesture of defiance in a conflict with mutually assured destruction – unless, of course, they were decoys, built for the purpose of drawing attention away from the main installation that was hidden somewhere else.

At the edge of the clearing, the paved road came to an end. From there, two paths continued into the shadows among the trees. A narrow trail led off towards the left, where various smaller structures could be seen in the undergrowth. They were too small for access tunnels, but might have been vents.

Siobhán carried on along a wider gravel path that led straight ahead, towards the dark outline of a metal tower that was topped by a two-tiered platform, about fifty feet high, and loaded with antennas of different types.

Shortly before reaching the tower, the path widened into an open space of compacted earth, bounded on the right by an artificial wooded hill that covered an imposing block of concrete, with five massive gates leading into it. They were all closed, but appeared to be garages, most likely for military or emergency vehicles that were considerably larger than ordinary lorries.

Straight ahead was a lower mound, also overgrown, and with an opening that had used to be closed by a solid steel door. That door now had a hole cut into it, just big enough for one person at a time to climb through. With steel at least two inches thick, this would have required considerably more effort than forcing open the gate at the entrance to the compound. Someone had worked there with a flame cutter for many hours, and likely motivated by more than simple curiosity. Traces of rust indicated that this too

had not been done within the last few weeks.

On the other side of the door, a tunnel led underground, steadily descending at a shallow angle. The beam of light from the torch faded away before reaching its end. Not a single noise emerged from the dark.

Several cardboard boxes were stacked along the side of the tunnel, waiting to be taken away. Some were filled with various components of dismantled electronic equipment, others with rolls of copper wire. Although the old bunker had lost its strategic significance, it nonetheless still contained something that was of value to someone. More importantly, beyond theft and vandalism, if it really had become the base for some other subversive activities, the answers to many open questions could well be hidden down there.

Siobhán carefully squeezed past the sharp metal edges along the crude opening in the door. Installed along the ceiling of the rough concrete tunnel was a line of lightbulbs. Not surprisingly, though, the lights did not flicker to life as she flipped the bulky switch near the entrance. As the electricity had clearly been cut off, it now depended on the batteries of the torch to hold up long enough for the exploration underground.

Away from the entrance, as the tunnel continued downwards in a straight line, a growing number of echoing footsteps assembled in the narrow space, taking on a life of their own, moving up and down the passage, wave after wave, as the faint glow of the setting sun receded behind her. The gradually shrinking opening to the outside world was perhaps a hundred yards away as the tunnel made a sharp turn to the left.

Beyond the bend, the passage levelled out and led towards another steel door. This could be locked with two giant hydraulic bolts, but it now stood open, revealing behind it a succession of three similar doors. They appeared to form part of an airlock system and would have been the actual entrance to the bunker.

The first chamber housed the pumps that controlled the pressure within the airlock. Then followed a tiled room with showers, which would have served as a decontamination area in emergencies. This, finally, led into what used to be the control room, now stripped of its electronic equipment.

Past the airlock system, an empty corridor ended at a staircase that led farther down, leaving no other options but to follow it, or to retreat.

Suddenly, Siobhán registered a soft touch against the tip of her right foot. Then, a clanging erupted in the silence, metal on metal, as a small object, a screw possibly, tumbled down the steps and vanished out of sight.

For a few breathless seconds, its descent continued to echo along the unseen passages on the lower level. Then, silence settled again, more oppressive than before, as a feeling built inside her of newly-awoken senses that reached out from the darkness below.

And not for the first time, she reminded herself. She had been there before. The last time she had allowed her imagination to run away, her feet had been quick to follow. That could not happen again. This was just another sad abandoned building, accommodating no more ghosts than the cellar of the manor house. And as long as the torch gave no indication that its light was

growing faint, there was no excuse to terminate the exploration at this point.

At the bottom of the staircase, several passages led away into different directions. From the one immediately to the left originated an unpleasant smell of fungi – the first indication of the presence of organic life inside the bunker – together with the distant regular dripping of water, no doubt from the remains of the internal water supply.

Then, she noticed a sudden movement on her right. Surely, something had just moved at the periphery of her vision, only for a second, a dark shape that flitted silently out of sight – there, behind that door, now standing ajar – or had it been open like that before? She tried to picture the corridor and the doors as she had seen them only a few seconds ago, before these details had appeared to be important, but she could not be certain now.

Not a sound was audible anywhere, other than her own fast breathing. And yet, she was convinced that she had seen a dark shape move.

Dark shapes that moved without a sound – or shadows, as they were commonly known among sensible people. It was only shadows, she reminded herself, just like the last time, simply shadows and nerves.

She cautiously looked around, not knowing how extensive the underground network of passages and rooms was. The corridor straight ahead, leading away from the central staircase, looked most likely to contain offices that could give an indication as to what activities had taken place inside the bunker, or were continuing to take place.

Unlike the bare concrete surfaces elsewhere, the floor of the narrow corridor was covered by linoleum, with three ordinary doors on the right.

The first room only contained a collection of firefighting suits, still hung up along the walls, together with other firefighting equipment.

The second door opened into an archive. Except for a desk near the entrance, the room was filled with several rows of shelving units, a few empty, but most still lined with folders – all labelled by date, and neatly arranged in chronological order.

Row after row of the same type of folders, with the same type of labels, and the same type of contents: endless lists of dates and times, with several columns of numbers. The units of measurement were all written in Cyrillic letters, and the annotations appeared to be in Russian, interspersed with lines of number and letter codes. As they had been left behind, they were not likely to contain anything more interesting than a record of the technical details of routine transmissions.

All the effort that had gone into compiling and arranging this information ... Now, everything in the archive was redundant, with the dust of time settling over it.

The dust of time ... It occurred to Siobhán that if somewhere amongst the uniformity something unusual was hidden, something that was still being referred to regularly, there could be traces showing in the dust.

And then she found it. On one shelf at the very back of the room, the dust along its forward edge had clearly been disturbed not long ago, when three folders had been pulled out and then

carefully returned in the correct order.

But what was so special about these few weeks of September 1986 that they had become important again? The three folders were identical to all the others, containing the same type of transmission logs. Nothing out of the ordinary – nothing obvious, at least – and no indication that any significant number of pages had been removed.

She was just checking the shelf behind the folders when a soft grating sound entered from the corridor, as a heavy steel door slowly swung on its hinges, gently closing against its frame. Then, she heard the faint creaking of a hand wheel, as the bolts slid shut.

It had to have been the door at the beginning of the corridor, leading back to the staircase. But from which side had it been closed? There were no approaching footsteps. Everything had fallen completely silent again. Whoever was out there, were they now lying in wait? After all, they had to know that Siobhán was there. Anyone closing that door would have seen the light emerging from the archive. Even before that, they must have heard her coming down the stairs. And if they had arrived later, they would have seen the car parked right outside the entrance to the compound.

Suddenly, a harsh metallic banging erupted, distant and echoing through the underground passages. Its origin was hard to locate, but it seemed to be emanating from the same level. It had to be someone who had returned to continue the dismantling of the electronic equipment, perhaps breaking down another door somewhere. Or was there something more sinister happening?

Cautiously, Siobhán went out into the corridor. It lay as deserted as it had done before and, as expected, the steel door at its beginning was now closed. It had no ordinary lock, but it appeared as if the bolts could be operated by a hand wheel from either side. If she unlocked the door, what dangers would she have to confront? What had been the point in closing the door, if they could not lock her in? What were they playing at? Trying to intimidate her, forcing her to hide?

One thing was clear: regardless of what activity was unfolding on the other side of the door, it would be advantageous to find an alternative way out.

The room at the end of the corridor contained several bunk beds, but had no other door. Past that room, another airlock system led to what had once been an emergency exit. The stairs had since been removed, and the vertical shaft had been filled in from the top with sand and gravel. Any attempt to dig a way out from there would have resulted in a crushing landslide.

The only exit from the corridor therefore led through the locked steel door. The banging on the other side had stopped. But whoever had been responsible for that was most likely still there, now engaged in more subtle tasks.

With one ear pressed against the steel surface, faint noises could be heard – a muffled rumbling, as if originating from a great distance, gradually getting louder, and growing to a steady roar.

Whatever awaited her on the other side, it was pointless to tarry any longer. She could not afford to get trapped inside the corridor if, for example, a fire had broken out.

There were Russian and German instructions painted around the hand wheel, no doubt indicating the right direction for opening or closing – *auf* or *zu* – in whichever direction the wheel allowed itself to be turned – *auf*, then.

The locking mechanism was difficult to set into motion at first, but getting easier after a few turns. A promising creaking and sliding sound emerged from inside the thick steel door, as the bolts slowly retracted. It started to loosen from its frame – and then slammed wide open, pushed by an irresistible force from the other side.

Siobhán fell over backwards while a piercing pain exploded across her chest. Then, she felt the hard contact with the floor, and the paralysing impact of a liquid cold, as a wall of water came crashing down.

Briefly, the light from the torch continued to flicker sickly brown in the murky flood, then there was nothing but darkness and disorientation – her head spinning, her muscles cramped – unable to swim against the torrent that was funnelling into the narrow space – being swung around by the whirlpool forming at the entrance to the first room as part of the wave front was deflected inside – a rough collision with the door frame – something to hold on to, at least, as the suffocating dense mass continued to stream past.

A blinding cone of light flared up from the direction of the staircase. Obscured behind it, three indistinct figures could be seen standing motionless on the dark landing above the water.

Then, the door frame slipped out of reach, as her cold fingers lost their grip. She was carried farther away from the exit by the

relentless current until a return wave reflecting off the blocked-up entrance at the other end collided with the last amount of accumulated water still pressing into the corridor. Smaller waves continued sloshing back and forth for a few seconds, gradually getting weaker, as the water's surface settled.

The light from the top of the staircase had gone. The lower level of the bunker lay in complete darkness again. And aside from the occasional gurgling, the deathly silence that had reigned previously had returned.

The layer of water was too deep for Siobhán to stand in, while the ceiling was less than an arm's length above – close, but leaving enough air to breathe.

The cold was her main problem now, far more dangerous than anything or anyone else down there. Whether the others had left or were still waiting in the dark, she needed to get moving before the muscles in her arms and legs became too numb and too cramped to keep herself afloat.

With a few gentle shakes, the torch flickered back to life as a stream of water drained out of the casing – although, after the time spent submerged, the light was already much weaker than it had been, just barely bright enough to illuminate the staircase.

The three figures had disappeared, leaving the exit unguarded. After setting that dangerous trap, they had simply walked away, entirely indifferent to the outcome of their actions.

* * *

With a soft breeze, the air outside felt even colder than it had underground, while Siobhán's wet clothes only helped to remove

the remaining warmth from her body.

The sun had set now. Not even the moon was up. And the torch had become almost useless, its light, unsteady and dim, struggling to pick out the gravel path that led away from the entrance to the bunker.

The dark shapes of the trees on either side looked menacing, as if their branches might reach out at any moment, to grip and ensnare her.

Then, there were the uncertain spaces between them – who knew what might be lurking there. But nothing seemed to move. And the only sound to be heard was the sinister rustling of leaves high above.

That night, fleetingly, the phantoms had detached themselves from the surrounding darkness. But now they had merged back into it again and vanished out of sight.

Outside the trees, the last light from the early night-time sky faintly illuminated the dark band of the paved road that led past the garages and barracks. For a while, Siobhán stood shivering at the edge of the clearing but could not see anyone else about. As the shock over the sudden violent confrontation subsided a little, she became more acutely aware of the renewed pain in her chest and legs. She needed to get back to the entrance of the compound.

Outside the gate, the car still stood by the side of the road, without any obvious indication of having been interfered with. The windows were unbroken, the locks intact, and the tyres fully inflated – although that was probably to be expected. If things had gone differently, if the trap had been effective ... Some-

time later, someone would have become suspicious about the car parked outside the abandoned military complex. They would have gone to investigate and eventually would have found the dead body floating down in the bunker. If the car had been vandalised, this would less likely have been the result of an accident.

The moment Siobhán opened the door, she became conscious of the welcoming crisp smell of the brand-new interior, against which the putrid stench of rotting water stood out even more starkly than it had before.

Naturally, all her clothes were back at the hotel, together with everything else that would have been useful now – except for the beach towel, which was still lying on the back seat.

It was futile to attempt a proper clean-up now. It would require more than just a towel to get rid of the sickening feeling of a slimy residue all over. The best she could do was to dry her hair and then cover the driver's seat. Beyond that, she could only hope to be able to sneak into the hotel unnoticed. Otherwise, her appearance would require some difficult explanations.

There was a last view of the compound as the engine started up and the headlights came on – the whole area deceptively quiet and deserted once more, but still hiding a dark underbelly. Now it was time to turn the car around and to get away from there, before anyone got alarmed by the nightly activities. Theft of military equipment and vandalism were too serious to get entangled with – in addition to whatever else there might be going on.

The windows of the houses along the residential street were illuminated now, projecting a civilised domesticity in the sleepy

atmosphere that covered the rural landscape.

And the silver-grey sedan was gone – of course. In retrospect, it had been suspiciously out of place. Whoever these people were, and whatever their agenda was, one thing was certain: they were completely ruthless. The way they had stood there, at the top of the stairs, looking down and making no attempt to help when they had seen her getting hit by the wave ... They had not even waited to find out if she would emerge from the bunker later that night. They had simply got back into their car and driven off.

For a moment, when Siobhán had showed up, with the little piece of metal clanging down the stairs, that would have come as a surprise to them. But in the end, she had been no more than a temporary nuisance. They had coolly carried on with their clandestine pursuits, entirely unconcerned about any collateral damage.

As outsiders, they were not likely to be responsible for the break-in and the dismantling of the electronic equipment. Chances were, they had only benefitted from other people's hard work in obtaining access to the bunker. What was it then they had been after? What was it that had been hidden in the archive, inside or behind these three seemingly ordinary folders? Was it other documents, or something else?

Regardless, after they had found and removed what they had been searching for, they had wanted to prevent any further access to the archive, to wipe out their tracks, and to cover up the fact that something had gone missing. For that purpose, they had damaged the tanks of the internal water supply and flooded the lower level of the bunker.

As they could not have known how much water would be left inside the tanks, they had to wait and see how high it would rise. In the meantime, having seen Siobhán enter the archive, where they themselves had likely been only a few minutes earlier, they had not wanted to deal with her unless it became absolutely necessary. They had therefore cordoned off the corridor, knowing that she would have heard the door closing, knowing that she was bound to work out that she had not been properly locked in.

Then, they had stood there, outside on the staircase, as the water level rose, gradually retreating up the steps and wondering whether she would have the courage to come out, wondering when desperation would outweigh cowardice – almost as if they had been curious to see how she would react, as if to test her. And as the water had risen higher and higher, still she had waited, like a cornered animal, cowering and trembling inside its den, while the predators lay in ambush outside.

They would have asked themselves who she was. Initially, they might even have considered the possibility that she had been after the same thing that they had come to recover. But then, they had lost interest and decided that she was clearly not someone who needed to be taken seriously; that she was all on her own, only some clueless fool who had stumbled into their path, without posing any threat to them whatsoever.

Yes, clueless and ineffectual – that just about summed it up. All she wanted to do right now was to lock herself into the cosy room at the hotel, with the quaint old furniture and the stylishly ornamented balcony, with the nice view over the sea during the day, and the soothing sound of the waves at night. She would

then take a steaming hot bath and scrub off the filth left behind by the oily water, crawl into the freshly made bed, pull the duvet over her head, and cry.

But now was not the time for that. Now she had to focus on driving – driving on the right side of the road.

CHAPTER FOUR

BURNT OUT

The front of the white cliffs glowed golden in the light of the rising sun, as the sky turned a deep blue, accented only by a few scattered clouds high above. The most zealous seabirds tentatively began testing the early morning thermals along the steep coastline, while the Baltic Sea herself still rested peacefully, breathing calmly and deeply, each expansion of her wide chest sending waves up onto the pebbled beach with graceful regularity.

She, of course, had not had her ribs broken again, just when they had finally begun to heal. She did not know how it felt having to push against the pain barrier with every shallow breath. Nor did she have to walk with freshly aggravated contusions on both legs. And, of course, she did not care about a severely bruised ego.

In that serene environment, how easy would it have been, as it was for the rest of nature, to ignore the nearby military complex and the nefarious activities that were carried out there secretly underground. How lovely would it have been to be able to lead a normal carefree life again, to have nothing more stressful to do than to spend the morning hours by taking the soiled clothes to the laundrette, to wait in one of the cafés on the promenade until the washing and drying had finished, and then to return to the hotel room to iron shirts, standing by the open door to the

balcony, with a fresh sea breeze playing in the curtains, listening to music or watching a German soap on the telly.

Instead, it was obvious that she could not languish there on the beach forever, that she could not pretend that the world outside that idyllic little island did not exist. Eventually, she would have to admit to herself that it was just a temporary sanctuary. She would have to drive over that bridge again and back onto the mainland, to face reality, and to attempt to answer at least some of the questions that had brought her all the way to this eastern part of Germany.

Now, in addition to the confusing stories about *U-112*, there were these other dubious goings-on to worry about. The dismantling and theft of electronic equipment, in which no official agency appeared to have any residual interest, was the least troublesome aspect. It only mirrored what was happening on a larger scale, to an entire country, whose inhabitants had experienced, from one day to the other, how the culture in which they had grown up, and everything they had worked for, had been declared outdated and redundant.

Ordinary people in a situation like that might get desperate enough to break into an abandoned bunker and salvage from the past whatever they could. But it had been a very different type of characters whom she had encountered down there the previous evening.

Who operated like that, with that cold calculated efficiency? Secret agents would, undoubtedly. But they should have had more than enough time to clean up after the collapse of the old regime. What was it then that had got left behind in that bunker,

unbeknownst to first the East German government, and then the West? Or did they know about it, but considered it irrelevant? East and West . . . How many more sides could there be? What other key players were out there? And what was their agenda? Were they able to read something out of these routine transmission logs that was invisible to everyone else?

Of course, it might have been the fact that these records truly had become part of a useless bureaucracy that no one was likely to ever look at again. Perhaps it had been this very redundancy that had made them a safe hiding place for some other documents.

But then, how had they got left behind? Where had the person been who had hidden them there, or who had known about their existence, when the bunker had been abandoned and closed? It had to have been someone who, up to a certain point, had been able to access the archive, but had then lost this ability without any warning. How could that have happened? If they had been transferred to another military base, there should have been sufficient opportunities to pack their bags and collect everything of importance to them.

That suggested that it had been something unforeseen – such as an accident, a manoeuvre that had gone wrong – and the person had been killed. Or it might have been a medical emergency – a heart attack, for example.

Yes, a heart attack, as a result of which Oliver Behring had ended up in hospital, and later in a clinic. Then, while he had remained in long-term care, the whole political system had broken down, and his former base had been abandoned.

If that was true, whatever clandestine activities he had been involved in, and whoever these people were who continued to work with him, his father might well be involved too. Then, somehow, these recent events might in fact link all the way back to the disappearance of *U-112*.

There was only one way to find out. And this was a meeting that could not be put off any longer.

* * *

The nurse at the reception desk shook her head. ‘*Einen Augenblick.*’

She turned to her colleague. ‘*Claudia, kannst du bitte mit der Dame reden? Sie spricht leider kein Deutsch – nur Englisch, scheinbar.*’

The younger girl was in the process of making entries into a brand-new computer, awkwardly typing with two fingers, and was clearly reluctant to leave her work. ‘Yes?’

‘Hello. I’d like to visit Oliver Behring.’

‘Do you have a date?’

‘No, I’m afraid not. It was a spontaneous decision of mine to come by today. I’m just travelling through.’

‘Are you a family member?’

‘I... We never met. My part of the family left Germany many years ago and relocated to England. But I heard that Oliver had a heart attack a while back. As I’m here on some business for a few days, now that the border is open again, I thought I might introduce myself. Would it be possible for me to see him?’

‘But you know, Mr Behring is very weak. He had three vis-

itors yesterday morning already who had not been here before. Normally, only his wife comes to visit. Mr Behring was very exhausted afterwards and nervous.'

She looked at the clock behind her desk. 'And this is also not visitor time. We had lunch before a short while. The patients are resting now, probably sleeping.'

'I understand, and I certainly don't want to disturb Oliver. But while I'm here, couldn't I quickly check in on him? If he's sleeping, or if he's too tired, I promise I'll leave straight away and come back later today.'

Claudia was still reluctant, but equally anxious to get back to work. She glanced over to her superior, who was busy with some paperwork. 'Okay, Mr Behring is in Room 147. If you go down the corridor, through this glass door, it is the last one on the left. But if he, or his room neighbour, are sleeping, you must really leave.'

The automatic sliding door closed quietly behind Siobhán – just as, at the other end of the long corridor, another frosted glass door, apparently leading out into the garden, swung back behind a small group of people leaving the ward.

All doors on either side of the corridor were closed, without the sound of conversations or of music to be heard in any of the rooms. The patients did appear to be resting. If necessary, she would simply wait in the garden for an hour or so, and then try again.

But first, she would check if anyone was awake in Room 147. With nothing left to lose, there was no point worrying about the language barrier now.

After two careful knocks, she received no audible answer. Although there was some kind of noise within the room. It sounded as if strong gusts of wind were entering through a window – but on a calm day like this? There had to be something wrong in there.

A fire raged in one corner of the room, the flames shooting up from a bed by the window, catching on to the curtains and racing up the wall.

The intense glare made it impossible to see through but, judging by the nauseating smell, someone had to be caught inside the blaze. The duvet and mattress had turned into an inferno, without any sign of movement inside it. Any person still lying there had ceased to struggle and was now beyond help. He had to have been surprised by the fire in his sleep. And with the flames still limited to the one corner, this could not have happened more than a few minutes ago.

A feeble shout emerged from the opposite corner of the room. The second occupant was still alive, trying to get out of bed, but lacking the necessary strength and falling back again.

There was no time to lose, no time to run back to the reception desk to alert the two nurses, and then to return to the room to carry out the rescue. Already, a billowing grey cloud was spreading out across the ceiling and crawling down the walls.

The second man was making another panicked attempt to get out of bed. Seriously confused and disoriented, he must have just woken up. At first, in his desperation, he tried to walk, but then he allowed himself to be helped into the wheelchair that stood next to his bed.

He seemed to be well into his sixties – certainly much older than Oliver Behring would be. He coughed incessantly between desperate gasps for air. Time was running out for him.

He raised a shaking arm to point at the burning bed. ‘Behring!’

‘I know. I’m sorry, but there is nothing we can do for him.’

He tilted his head back to look at Siobhán with shocked incomprehension as she wheeled him past his dead roommate and out into the corridor, which was now also beginning to fill with smoke. Still, the fire detector was several yards away, and something inside the room could blow up at any moment.

The shortest way out of the building was through the garden door. However, as sunny as it was, it would be cold outside, and the old man was only wearing his thin pyjamas. Additionally, he was undernourished and in poor health. Judging by his pale complexion, his circulation was weak. The duvet from his bed would have been useful, but it had become impossible to enter the room again.

‘Here, take my jacket. You can use it as a blanket. It’s all right, I’ll tuck you in. You just concentrate on your breathing. And don’t you worry, I’ll get you out of here.’

He clearly did not understand a single word she was saying.

‘Everything will be all right now – *es ist gut*. We’ll be out shortly – *wir sind außen*, you see – there, *in der Garten*.’

Despite being fully conscious, the man did not respond. His pupils were dilated, his breathing shallow and fast. He did not even cough anymore. This was getting serious.

Finally, the fire alarm went off when already half the corridor was filled with thick smoke. Approaching from the other end,

the two reception nurses were barely visible, trying to determine where the fire had broken out. The elder of the two resolutely took a fire extinguisher from the wall. She at least appeared to know what she was doing. And as there were still no flames emerging from the room, it might not be too late to get the fire under control.

But first, the poor invalid needed to get out into the fresh air, before he suffocated.

The glass door opened onto a spacious patio, with several chairs and tables neatly positioned at regular distances from each other, and a wide lawn stretching out towards the sea.

This being the rest period, there was currently no one outside – except for a group of people down by the beach, assembled for a photograph. They had evidently heard the fire alarm from inside the clinic and would then have noticed the cloud of smoke that followed Siobhán out of the corridor, as she pushed the old man in his wheelchair.

It was high time for her to get away from there. Very soon, there would be too many questions she would not be able to understand, and certainly would not be able to answer. Who was she? Why had she wanted to talk to Mr Behring, only moments before he had burnt to death? Why had she lied about her connection to him? Who were these other people who had been there the day before? Why had Mr Behring been so affected by their visit?

She would never be able to explain the situation at the clinic – even less what had happened down in the bunker. Under these awkward circumstances, she could not afford to be arrested and

interrogated, possibly by the same people who, until very recently, had worked for the notorious East German secret police.

Going back into the smoke-filled corridor and out through the foyer was out of the question. The safest way back to the parking lot at the front of the building was through the garden – but she had to be quick, before any more staff assembled, and before the police got there. Already, at a distance, a siren could be heard – ideally that of a fire engine.

The old man continued to stare at Siobhán with wide unblinking eyes, but his breathing was beginning to recover.

‘Look, I’ve got to go now. But you’ll be safe here. They will take care of you.’

He clung to the jacket that covered him with the strength of desperation – and hands that were ice cold. There was no choice but to leave it behind. For the next stage of the journey, she would have to invest in a proper down parka anyway.

She only took the car key out of the pocket. Otherwise, there was nothing left inside that would link the jacket back to her.

The man remained speechless. Hopefully, in his shock, he would not remember much, including Siobhán.

‘Good luck, and ... I’m very sorry you got dragged into this.’

CHAPTER FIVE

THE ANGEL OF STRALSUND

There she was again, surrounded by the same picturesque scenery at the beach. Only now, the hopeful golden glow of the morning had faded away, and the front of the white cliffs had begun to turn grey, casting longer and longer shadows out to sea, as the sun receded behind them.

And, as before, the tide was gently coming in, with waves smoothly running up the pebbled beach in regular succession.

It felt to Siobhán as if the Baltic Sea were still taunting her with that peaceful breathing, as she sat there all by herself, trapped in helpless indecision, pathetically coughing her lungs out, each time tearing apart her fractured ribcage a little further.

Even worse than the microscopic particles from the smoke that clung to the inside of her lungs, the smell that had emanated from the burning bed, simultaneously cloying and acrid, still appeared to linger in the air around her, and no amount of coughing would purge that from her memory for a while.

A flooded military bunker and arson in a clinic – these things did not register in that sheltered realm. Nature steadfastly refused to be troubled by the petty and transient human dramas that Siobhán had got drawn into. And so, life on the island continued as if the horrific death nearby had never happened, as if that bridge to the mainland were a gateway to some other reality.

In this harsh world on the other side, there could be no doubt

that the fire had not been the result of an accident. It could not have been the result of someone falling asleep while smoking in bed. Given the speed at which the fire must have flared up, and the intensity of the flames, leaving the sleeping man with no chance of survival, there had to have been some type of accelerant involved. The bedding and the mattress alone would not have been combustible enough to support that.

Since Siobhán's return from the clinic, she had watched the evening news report on the fire as it had been broadcast on the regional television channel. Judging by the significant police presence at the scene, still hours after the fire had been extinguished, the officials seemed to have formed a similar suspicion. What then would they make of it? Would they discover the motive behind the murder and the other criminal activities that were connected to it? Would they apprehend those who were responsible?

Perhaps the morning edition of the local newspaper would contain more information about what had happened. With the help of a dictionary, the printed account might then turn out to be more comprehensible than the fast-talking news presenter.

There was bound to be a larger scheme at work. With the fire happening less than a day after the flooding of the bunker, it was hard to imagine that this was a coincidence. At least before his heart attack, Oliver Behring did appear to have been involved in some kind of clandestine activity that, ultimately, had cost him his life – some form of espionage, most likely, as a result of which something had got left behind in that bunker that should not have been there; something that had not lost its significance

with the end of the separation into East and West.

Now, someone was cleaning up, with ruthless efficiency. And whoever that was, they continued to be no more than a few minutes, or even seconds, ahead of Siobhán. They had to be very close, yet always out of sight – or plainly visible, but unnoticed.

The situation was clearly becoming too dangerous for her to continue to blindly stumble about in the dark, to get drawn into a conflict that might have originated during the Cold War, or might even have been the fallout of events that had happened during the Second World War.

On the other hand, while the possibility existed that the recent activities linked back to the disappearance of *U-112*, it felt inexcusable to abandon the quest that her grandmother had entrusted her with, not to honour her last wish, and to admit defeat in a moment of weakness. With still no news about Alison, a return to England would have been pointless anyway. She would only be sitting alone in her now lifeless childhood home, surrounded by old memories, unable to find rest – day after day, and one sleepless night after the other – with nothing to do but to wait for news that was becoming more likely to be tragic the more time passed.

How long would it be before she could focus on her work again – the research on the dolphins, those happy days that had used to mean so much? She had reached a point at which she felt emotionally disconnected from that earlier part of her life. By comparison with the open questions she was chasing now, everything else had lost its previous significance.

She already knew that, wherever her journey would take her

in the end, there would be no easy way back.

* * *

Expectantly, the pigeons came pecking closer to the table at which Siobhán sat, no doubt attracted by the smell of the fresh buns and the coffee, and not yet spoiled for choice. After all, no one else seemed willing to take their breakfast at that early hour, outside in the chilly morning air. The promenade along the waterfront, past the row of cafés and hotels, still maintained a sleepy atmosphere, while the deserted pier leading out towards the rising sun was shrouded in fog.

But the early start to the day could turn out to be essential. With shadowy figures roaming the mainland, and surrounded by uncertainty about when and how they might strike next, Siobhán had become desperate for any bit of news. Unable to find sleep, she had got out of bed well before sunrise and had sat on the balcony of her hotel room, watching the stacks of newspapers getting dropped off, and waiting for the kiosks and the cafés to open.

The *Strelasunder Morgenpost*, with its broadsheet format, certainly looked respectable enough. On its front page, it appeared to be concerned with matters of international importance – one matter in particular: the *Zwei-plus-Vier-Vertrag*, somehow involving Germany and the wartime Allies.

But several pages towards the back, in the leading article of the local news section, she found what she had been looking for. The top of the page was taken up by a large photograph of a fire engine on the parking lot of the clinic. The window in one of the

corners on the ground floor was broken, with a blackened wall above.

Somewhat smaller, farther down the page, was a grainy black-and-white photograph, obviously taken from a distance, but lit well enough by the early afternoon sun – the two of them, instantly recognisable, emerging from the smoke-filled corridor out onto the patio, the poor old fellow limply slumped into his wheelchair, wrapped in Siobhán's jacket, and looking terrified and confused.

That clearly had the potential to complicate things. With that photograph out there, the situation could get nasty. But she was relieved to find that Oliver Behring's name was the only one that was mentioned in the article, suggesting that there had been no further fatalities. It seemed that they had managed to bring the fire under control before it had spread into the neighbouring room or onto the floor above.

Even without the dictionary, several keywords readily jumped out: repeated references to *England* and *englisch*, somehow standing in connection with *junge Frau* and *mysteriöse Verschwinden*, and also referring to a *Jacke*. It did not require much imagination to connect the dots: a young woman from England, or at least speaking English, had come to visit Oliver Behring shortly before the fire had broken out and had then vanished mysteriously, leaving her jacket behind.

With hindsight, it had definitely been a mistake to run away – a rash decision that could still have unpleasant consequences. Instead of panicking like that, she should have phoned Mr Karsten, asked him to explain the situation to the police, and to act as a

translator.

But that could not be helped now. The damage was done. That suspicious behaviour was irreversible. If she was arrested under those circumstances, chances were that she would be charged with arson and murder. And then, if put on trial, even without an ultimate conviction, she would not be returning to Britain for a very long time.

There was no telling how big this story was going to get. But a murder enquiry involving a foreign national could quickly escalate from a curiosity published in a local newspaper to a nationwide police search. When that happened, airports would become too dangerous, which only left the ferry for the journey north – the journey she was now determined to make.

Her quest for answers about *U-112* needed to be brought to a conclusion soon. Living as she had done for the past weeks, without proper sleep, and with exhaustion gradually building up, she felt that her judgement was becoming impaired. During barely three days in this eastern part of Germany, she had already blundered into two dangerous situations. And with the island surrounded by these unseen dark forces, another careless decision was not likely to go unpunished.

Ralf Behring would probably visit his daughter-in-law once he had been notified of his son's death, at least for the funeral in a few days' time. As she could not remain in Germany for much longer, under the constant threat of being recognised and arrested, she would have to catch him before then on the remote island in northern Norway where he lived.

However, it would still require several hours to organise the

journey – which would also have to include doing her laundry. This left her with one more day of peace in this little safe haven. But then, sadly, the moment would come to say good-bye to the white cliffs, the pebbled beaches, the gentle waves, and the carefree birds; to leave all that behind and to return to reality – whatever that might reveal itself to be.

* * *

‘Mrs Dannreuther, I am very pleased you telephoned again. And you are not in a train station this time. I can hear seabirds in the background. Are you still on Rügen?’

‘No, I’m afraid not. I drove back to Kiel this morning and returned the rental car. I’m at the harbour now. Unfortunately, I won’t have enough time to come out to the archive before I continue on. But I wanted to say thank you very much for all your help, just in case I ... well, just in case I don’t get the opportunity to meet you again.’

‘It was my pleasure, Mrs Dannreuther. I am glad that you directed my attention to the *U-112*. And I am sorry that there are still so many open questions. Since you were here, I have thought about this. I am quite sure that the documents that we have are mostly correct, especially the English ones. But they are surely incomplete. There is something essential that is missing. On the basis of what we know, we can read different stories out of the documents. But no matter how we look at the events involving your grandfather’s boat, something does not make sense. So, between the lines, there must be another story hidden – the true story. It is just that, unless we can find some new informa-

tion, we will never see it. I was therefore wondering, Mrs Danneuther, will you be interested to continue the investigation?’

‘I am, yes. As a matter of fact, at this very moment, I’m waiting for the ferry to Oslo. While I was on Rügen, I decided to go up to the Lofoten. I don’t know how and where this secret story of *U-112* began, but I think that this is where it began to go wrong. Something unusual went on up there. And I have a feeling that Ralf Behring might know the answer. I could phone, of course, but if I meet him in person, perhaps it will be easier to speak with him. After all, this could still be a difficult subject for him, even many years later.’

‘I agree, and I am very glad to hear that. It will be a long journey, but it must be very nice up there. And if you are able to speak with Mr Behring, you could find out about many interesting things that happened during the war. Also, I am now thinking, maybe you want to write an article for the magazine I publish for the society that supports the archive. It is called *Echolot* – depth sounder, you know – and it comes out quarterly. Normally, there is not much to write about, only biographies of commanders, or the description of sea battles. But it would be interesting to have a special edition about *U-112*, maybe in summer. For example, we could have a – what we call a *Gedenkschrift* – some publication to remember the lost men. We just missed the fiftieth anniversary of the sinking, but that is not so important. And who knows, it could be that someone who reads the article remembers something. Also, if you wanted to write about your grandmother’s story, that would be very interesting for the members of our society, to find out what the consequences were for

the families of the submariners. You see, here in the archive, in all these documents, there are only men. That is all we ever talk and write about. And so, it is very easy to forget that, during the war, there were also women and children involved. You would naturally write in English, but I could translate for you, if you want.'

'Write an article ... Yes, sure, I can do that, if ... once I've returned from the Lofoten.'

'Very good. And, Mrs Dannreuther, whatever you find out about your grandfather, you should not ... You know, the war, that was a terrible situation and very difficult, even for good people who were simply trying to do the right thing, as they saw it at the time. Had they done exactly what they did, but for the other side, they would now be celebrated as heroes.'

'I understand. At this point, I've completely given up on seeing the world as a collection of heroes and villains. But I'm afraid I've got to go now. They are beginning to board.'

* * *

The leafy suburbs of Kiel slipped past as the ferry steamed through the gradually widening firth on its way north. Among the trees on either side, clusters of residential buildings could be seen, where the Sunday afternoon unfolded in a tranquil atmosphere.

Reclining in a lounge outside on the upper deck, wrapped in a woollen blanket, Siobhán realised that, if the mysterious events that had driven her mother and grandmother away from Germany had not happened, she might well have grown up there, under a different name, and speaking a different language – together with

a father and siblings, perhaps.

Siobhán was startled out of her thoughts as she saw the tall tower of the Naval Memorial in Laboe appear on her right, with the sleek outline of the old submarine on the beach beneath it. It reminded her that what to most others was an increasingly distant past might crucially influence her own personal future.

But until she had to confront that past, she still had the whole day and the next morning on the ferry. Despite the chilly headwind, she was determined to spend as much of the time as possible outside in the sun.

The few other passengers that occupied loungers on the upper deck were also wrapped up in blankets, either engaged in relaxed conversation, or simply allowing their thoughts to wander casually, as they headed off into the Easter holidays.

Siobhán wanted to take the opportunity to catch up with events back home in Britain before turning her attention to the newly acquired Norwegian phrase book. Although *The Daily Ray* was not generally known as the most reliable source of information, it was the only English-language newspaper that was available on board. It would therefore have to do.

Certainly the main headline was not something that even the most creative tabloid would dare to make up: “The Birmingham Six Release – More Shocking Revelations of Police Conspiracies.” And in the text underneath it: “fabrication and suppression of evidence” ... “perjury” ... “perversion of the course of justice.” The six men had then been innocent after all. That would keep the nation occupied for a while. And it was remarkable how quickly the conservative publication had switched sides. After

years of advocating the death penalty for Irish terrorists, they were now calling for the resignation of the chief police officer.

But there, within the blue bar at the very bottom of the page, Siobhán spotted a single line in white print: “The Angel of Stralsund – A Miracle! See Page 3.” The Angel of Stralsund? What was that peaceful East German seaside town doing on the front page of a British tabloid?

The answer, of course, was found on Page 3, because there she was again – in full colour this time and almost as big as the topless girl – dramatically engulfed in a cloud of smoke, as she and the old patient in the wheelchair escaped out of the burning clinic. Short as the accompanying text was, it did reveal that the police had indeed been able to confirm that the fire in the clinic had not been an accident and was now being treated as a case of arson and murder. While as yet no arrests had been made, police were searching for three individuals who had visited the deceased patient the previous day, leaving him in a state of distress. And that, according to the article, was not even the greatest mystery.

Since the first news report had been published in the German paper the previous morning, the old gentleman had clearly been interviewed by some reporters, and he had recounted how he had been woken up by thick smoke in the room, unable by himself to get out of bed and into his wheelchair. He had begun to believe that he was going to die when, suddenly, this “angelic being” had appeared out of nowhere, had rescued him from the flames, and had then vanished again, leaving him her jacket to keep warm. All he knew about her was that she spoke English

with a “British” accent. So, if by chance the young woman were to read this article, would she please get in touch with the newspaper. The family would like to express their gratitude and return the jacket.

Although the wording had undoubtedly been adjusted, beyond a straightforward translation, the sequence of events as stated was true. Effectively, the patient had testified – if only to the media – that Siobhán had entered the room after the fire had started. The sudden vanishing was still unnecessarily suspicious. But, at least, she did not appear to be the prime suspect for a serious crime.

As much of a relief as that was, the photograph in *The Daily Ray* was clear enough for anyone who knew her to recognise her instantly. And, at that very moment, that edition was all over Britain, in every supermarket, in every kiosk, in every station.

With that realisation, Siobhán suddenly thought of Claire. If she saw that article, she would never forgive Siobhán; not after the media storm she had endured about the fire on Antarctica; not after Siobhán had promised her that something like that would never happen again.

She should have told Claire that she was planning to go to Germany, when they had met for the funeral. If only she could have foreseen how long the journey would last, and where it would lead. But, at the time, what could she have said, when it had seemed to be an entirely hopeless quest, not really knowing where to begin, or even what there might be to find? It had all appeared to be so utterly pointless and silly.

Now, of course, if Claire discovered through the tabloid what

Siobhán was up to, she would fly over straight away. And she would not rest until she had found her – faithful soul that she was.

CHAPTER SIX

ON THE EDGE

Moskenesvær . . . Through the windows of the dining room, the collection of modest wooden buildings of the fishing village could be seen gathered tightly along the shore of the sheltered bay, most of them painted in a rusty red, with a few others painted in dark green, ochre, or white scattered among them.

On the steep terrain, space to settle was hard to find, and the houses had been built on stilts, standing half over the water, with small boats tied up beneath them. Another row of houses clung to a narrow plateau a little further up the slope, evidently determined to avoid the exposed southern tip of the headland that wrapped around the bay.

Illuminated by the pale light of the morning sun, as it struggled to break through the clouds that hung low over the rugged mountains, the community rested peacefully.

It did not necessarily require an ulterior motive to move to a place like that for a quiet retirement, to get away from the memories of an oppressive regime that had immured and intimidated its own people for decades, or from the more distant memories of a horrific war.

Whether, by now, Ralf Behring had found out about his son's death? If so, did he know who these three mysterious figures were who were responsible for it? And did he know what their

ultimate goal was?

‘Good morning! Did you sleep good?’ Mrs Olsen bustled into the dining room.

‘Yes, thank you, very . . . good. It was such a spontaneous decision to come that I didn’t really know what to expect in the Lofoten, whether I would be able to find accommodation on these remote islands. Before I took the train north from Oslo, I therefore bought a tent and a warm sleeping bag, just to be prepared for all eventualities. But a proper bed is much better, of course.’

She was flushed and slightly out of breath from work. ‘I still heard you cough this morning, but you look better than when you came – a little bit, not so tired.’ She smiled candidly and slumped into a chair by the windows.

‘It was a long journey, but it was worth it. This is a lovely village you’ve got here. Yesterday evening, when I arrived on the ferry, it was getting a little dark already, and I couldn’t see it properly.’

‘You are sure you only want to stay one day?’

‘I’m afraid so, yes. I’m planning to take the ferry back to Bodø in the evening and carry on from there.’

‘A tour of the Lofoten? It will be even nicer here in summer, you know, with the sun all day and the blue sky. Now is the fishing season. The *skrei* have come south to lay their eggs. That is why Gunnar, my husband, is not here right now. He is on the sea with the boat.’ She gazed out of the window. ‘Otherwise, there is not very much to do at this time of the year. Many visitors like to paint. Do you paint?’

‘No. Somehow, I never managed to get into arts.’

She nodded encouragingly but was clearly too polite to ask what else Siobhán might be doing there all by herself.

‘I ... My grandfather was stationed in Narvik during the Second World War. So, when I heard about that, I got curious about this region.’

‘Oh, I see.’ She was relieved to have discovered a reasonable explanation. ‘Yes, the English were here at the beginning of the war. They tried to help us against the Germans, but then they had to leave. They were attacked as well, of course, like everybody else.’

‘That’s quite true. But I’m afraid my grandfather was German. He was in the navy, a submarine commander.’

‘But did you not say ...’

‘Oh, no, I am English. My grandmother left Germany during the war and fled to England with my mother. I was born there.’

‘I see ...’ She fell silent for a moment, looking thoughtful. ‘You know, it is interesting: there is a German living here, also a submarine captain, who was stationed in Narvik. He moved here last summer. He is retired now, but maybe he remembers your grandfather. His name is Ralf Behring, and he seems very friendly. He said he liked the Lofoten when he was here during the war, although this particular island was only inhabited afterwards. I think he is really sorry about all that, these terrible things that happened during the occupation. He speaks good Norwegian, and English as well. You could talk to him. I am sure he has many stories to tell.’

‘No doubt ... The sea battles must have been quite fierce

around the archipelago and inside the narrow fjords. I imagine there must be many wrecks around here.’

‘Yes, very many. They are mainly in the big fjord north of here, where Narvik is – ships and aeroplanes, and submarines too, probably.’

‘Has anyone ever tried to salvage them? I mean, to bring them back to the surface?’

‘Oh, no. You cannot do that, you are not allowed. They are protected – like graves, you know. But when you had breakfast, and you want to talk to Behring, he should be at home now. He cannot be far away on this little island. You see over there, on that slope by the harbour, a small path goes up to the row of newer houses. Behring’s house is the first, the green one there on the right. And while you are walking around, maybe you will also see another German. His name is Peter Janssen. He has been here for some years. He is also retired, but we do not know much about him. No one really knows why he is here. He is more quiet than Behring and does not like to talk about the past. Something very bad must have happened in his life, you can feel that. He must have had an accident with his leg, maybe during the war, I don’t know. Some of the people here are a little bit afraid of him. They say that maybe he did a crime, maybe he killed someone, and now he is hiding from the police. But I do not think he is so bad. Always when I talk to him he is very polite, and I do not think he is hiding. I think he is looking for something. That is why I call him the *Pilegrim*, you know – same as in English, I think? What he is looking for here, I do not know – peace, maybe.

‘Of course, this is not so interesting for you. But it could be nice to see our famous cave. People lived there about three thousand years ago, and you can still see their paintings of human figures on the walls. When you are up there, where Behring lives, if you walk past the last house and all the way to the end of the island, a little path goes down a steep cliff and over to the other side. Directly by the sea, there is the entrance of the cave. But be very careful on the shore. The water rises quickly, and the sea is very strong. The *Moskstraumen*, it has pulled many ships onto the rocks around the island – and still does, sometimes. That is why they called it Fareøya, the “Danger Island,” you know. When you are in the water, you have no chance to swim back to the land. Early afternoon is safe today, if you do not stay too long. But the water will be high again around sunset, between six or seven. And do not go far inside the cave. There is another tunnel underneath it where water flows in from the sea. At high tide, the water rises through cracks in the floor, up into the cave, and floods it.

‘Also, over on the other side of the mountain, you have to be careful. There can be rocks rolling down the steep slope. And if it will snow tonight – as they were saying in the radio – then there can be *snøskred*, you know, snow floods?’

‘Avalanches?’

‘I can show you, although you cannot really see it from this window. But when you arrived on the ferry, you have seen the high mountain behind the village – that is Brannberg, where the fires used to be for the ships at night, before they built the light-house on Værøy, the little island south of here. With a lot of

snow, do not go near the steepest slope on the other side of the mountain. It can be very dangerous there.’

* * *

Even as the sun rose ever higher in the sky, a fine layer of fog still lingered on the headland. Through this diffuse veil, the exposed vantage point nonetheless provided a picturesque view over the village that was nestled into the little bay below.

A narrow path continued towards the cliff. For a while, Siobhán stood there, undecided, contemplating whether she should carry on and visit the cave. As interesting as the historic site undoubtedly was, she realised that this would only serve as an excuse to postpone the uncomfortable meeting that had been the sole purpose of the long journey north. For this, she would have to walk back to the first of the row of houses behind her.

‘God morgen. Du valgte en dårlig dag for et besøk til denne øya.’

The man had quietly materialised out of the fog and remained standing at a distance of several yards. He looked to be well into his seventies.

‘Unnskyld meg, snakker du engelsk?’

He approached slowly and with a faint smile. ‘I was commenting on the weather. It is not the best day for a visit to the island. There is a storm moving in from the sea.’

His English had a slight foreign accent, but he had to have lived in England for many years. He was wearing an old sand-coloured duffle coat – typically English, and possibly Navy sur-

plus.

He had noticed Siobhán's scrutiny of him and was surprised by her suspicious attitude. 'You're a bit early for the tourist season. Are you on holidays?'

This was it. From now on, every step would count. But playing hide-and-seek would not lead anywhere.

'I'm trying to meet someone – a German. His name is Johannes Dannreuther. Do you know where he lives?'

In an instant, the man's benign expression vanished. While he struggled to regain composure, it was now he who scrutinised Siobhán with suspicion. 'I know every person on this island, and I assure you that no one by this name has been living here since I arrived more than ten years ago.'

He was bothered himself by his obviously evasive answer and was unsure about how to continue. His hair was pure white, making it impossible to guess its original colour. But even in the pale light, his eyes were of a deep blue.

'He may have changed his name. He doesn't know about me, but I'd like to meet him, if he's still alive.'

'Can you tell me more about him? I might recognise him from his description.'

'He was stationed in Narvik during the Second World War, as the commanding officer on a German submarine, the *U-112*. The boat was supposedly sunk by a British warship in December 1940. I've come to find out if that is true. I think he may still be living here on Fareøya. My name is Siobhán Dannreuther. I ... I'm his granddaughter.'

The man's suspicion turned to disbelief. 'Siobhán? But that

is not a German name.'

'I'm English. My grandmother left Germany during the war, together with my mother, when Mum was very young. I don't know exactly why, but I think it had something to do with my grandfather's disappearance. Do you know him?'

He hesitated for a moment. 'You better come inside. I live just over there.'

He pointed towards the last of the row of houses, then turned and walked ahead without a further word. Aside from a noticeable limp in his right leg, his movements were still fluid. He remained an imposing figure, with a strength and toughness that came from years of physical work. And although his shoulders were slightly hunched, he was easily a head taller than Siobhán. There would not be much of a contest between them, even if she herself were at the top of her fitness.

In whatever way he was connected to *U-112*, he clearly knew something about it, and there had to have been a strong motive for maintaining this secret for decades. Perhaps the rumours in the village were true. Perhaps he had killed in the past to protect it. In that case, he might well do so again.

But the small house looked friendly enough, with its wooden walls painted in the usual rusty red, and its white window panes. No television aerial was installed on the grey slate roof, and no telephone cable led into it.

The door was unlocked. The man stepped inside the short corridor and then turned back. 'Come in, please.' His expression was still grave, but he made an effort to be more hospitable. 'Let me help you with ... Yes, you can put your rucksack here.'

After hanging up Siobhán's parka next to his own coat, he walked ahead into the spacious living room. From the floorboards to the beams supporting the ceiling, it was dominated by wood. A bookshelf ran along one wall, while a few paintings of coastal landscapes decorated the other walls. But there were no images of people, no photographs at all.

'Please.' He gestured towards an armchair facing the windows and sank into the sofa on the opposite side of the coffee table.

He watched Siobhán carefully, waiting until she had taken her seat. 'The events you mentioned happened a long time ago. Why have you come now?'

The tone of his voice was friendly and relaxed. But if this was going to be an interrogation, she had to have hit a nerve – and he made no secret of that. He wanted her to know that he was aware of the strange wartime events. He was trying to draw her out, to discover how much she knew herself.

'If you're his daughter's child, why do you still have his last name?'

'Mum wasn't married. She . . . I never knew her.'

'Then . . .'

'Yes. She died of pneumonia – and of me, I guess – soon after I was born.'

Against the dull light from the window, his reaction was hard to judge. But there was shock in the involuntary movement of his arms, and grief in the subsequent lowering of his head.

He swallowed hard. 'Then it must have been your grandmother who told you about her husband. You must have met

her. You must know her maiden name.'

'Gran also died, just over two weeks ago.'

His fingers tightened around the armrest of the sofa. 'Elisabeth? Elisabeth von Derschau?'

'Yes.'

He leaned forwards. By now, he had to be able to see the tears in Siobhán's eyes.

She had never imagined it to be like this, these past days that she had been looking for him. As finding him had been such a remote possibility, not once had she stopped to think about how it would be to come face to face with him; how he would take the news of his wife's death, and the much earlier death of his daughter, whom he had never seen growing up.

The Pilgrim . . . Was that what her grandmother had been trying to tell her? That her grandfather and she were more alike than she would care to admit? Always the restless wanderer, always searching for something elusive that would forever remain just below the horizon.

He got up again with some difficulty, walked heavily across the room and back to the entrance. Without a comment, he put on his coat and then held Siobhán's parka out towards her.

'What, you're throwing me out again? Just like that?'

'I want to show you something, outside. You can leave your rucksack.'

Without any further explanation, he followed the path towards the cliff, but then stopped several paces short of the edge.

He glanced back over his shoulder and nodded towards the

open sea. ‘Take a look.’

At the cliff’s edge, the ground dropped off to a bleak shoreline about a hundred feet below. The cliff would have been hard to scale were it not for the path along a narrow slanting ledge that time and repeated usage had worked into its sheer face. The waves were still strong, although the water now had to be at its lowest point, revealing several sharp rocks that would otherwise have been submerged. An impressive scene, but without anything unusual to see.

Faintly from behind, Siobhán could hear the careful steps of the man as he slowly approached her. He really had to be determined to protect his secret, and now she would never find out why. Down in the village, life would go on as if nothing had happened. Even when she would plunge down into the abyss, any involuntary scream would merge with the noise of the waves breaking against the cliff, and with the cries of the seabirds sailing above. In the evening, the high tide would come in and take her broken body away. Once her few belongings had been disposed of as well, no traces of her short presence on the island would remain. No one would ever know what happened to her.

‘Siobhán, you better step back. The edge isn’t very stable.’ His voice sounded genuinely concerned.

He reached out to grab her elbow, but he was still too far away. ‘Come on, step back. You’re making me nervous.’

He anxiously watched as Siobhán turned around. But standing with her back close to the cliff’s edge, she appeared to be strangely out of his reach, as if some force repelled him, preventing him from coming any closer.

‘Why did you want to show me this?’

‘This is where I last saw your grandfather. Now, could you ...’

‘Then it isn’t you?’

He shook his head with a weak smile. ‘No. Is that what you thought?’

‘I didn’t know what to think.’

‘You thought I was going to push you down this cliff. Why did you keep standing there?’

‘I don’t know. Perhaps I’m tired of it all – the uncertainty, the futility of the quest. Even if I found out the truth, whom would it serve, when everyone is dead?’

He seemed troubled by her despondent attitude. ‘Well, if you want to find meaning in the events of the past, I won’t be much help to you. For many years, I’ve tried to do that myself – and failed. But if you want to know the facts about your grandfather’s disappearance, there are some things I can tell you; things Elsbeth could not have known; things that happened after she escaped from Germany.’

‘Then, if you know about all that, who are you?’

‘My name is Peter Janssen. I was chief engineer on your grandfather’s boat.’

As soon as Siobhán stepped within his reach, he pulled her farther away from the edge, his arm tightly around her shoulders.

‘The sad truth is that your grandfather did die fifty years ago, somewhere out there in the North Atlantic. They set out on their final voyage from that shore down there. Only few crew members were not aboard at the time. I was among those who stayed

behind, and one of only two who survived the war. Somehow, I was never able to forget and to let go. Instead, I felt compelled to return here – hoping, I suppose, just like you, to find meaning in the tragic events someday.’

He was clearly more emotional than his rugged exterior would have suggested. There was a deep sadness in his eyes – but there was kindness, too.

‘And you’re afraid of heights?’

He tried to suppress his first cheerful smile. ‘I was a submariner, not a mountaineer.’

Briefly, there was an undisguised pride in his voice. Then, he returned to his former brooding attitude. ‘But that’s not it. I just don’t like this particular cliff.’

He released Siobhán and walked away from the edge. After several paces, he turned back and let her catch up with him. ‘I’m sorry to hear about all these deaths in your family. Elsbeth . . . ?’

‘She fainted, very unexpectedly, and died shortly afterwards of heart failure.’

He affectionately laid his hand on her shoulder. ‘For a moment, when you told me who you were, I hoped . . .’

‘You hoped what? When I told you who I was, why were you so suspicious of me?’

‘Because I believed that Hans’ only child . . . died during the war, when she was very young, together with her mother.’

‘No. I’ve seen those German death certificates, but they are wrong – they must be, I’m sure of it. Gran was who she said she was. She died only recently, and Mum in ’63, shortly after I was born. Gran told me once that Mum got very sick during the war.

She caught influenza during the escape from Germany. Then, during the long nights they had to spend in underground shelters, crammed into some unused tube station with hundreds of other people, it got worse and eventually developed into pneumonia. It wasn't dealt with until they had access to medical support again, after they had been put into an internment camp. But it was a bit late at that point, and Mum apparently had problems with her lungs ever since. When she got pregnant with me – during that cold and long winter – she got sick again with pneumonia. On top of that, there were complications during birth. She lost a lot of blood. In the end, it was just too much for her.'

'Lena, lovely girl . . . Did Elsbeth speak much about the time during the war?'

'Only when I pressed her on the subject, which I rarely did. I think that, after her escape, she also distanced herself emotionally from the old country. She certainly didn't maintain any contacts in Germany, not even with her own family.'

'I can imagine. But in England, didn't she have any German friends?'

'No, not that I know of, definitely no close friends. There were only a few casual acquaintances. When we were out shopping, it would occasionally happen that Gran met other German ladies of about her age. I remember hanging about the trolley bag for a few minutes while they chatted in a language I didn't understand. Gran never tried to teach me German when I was very young. I think she wanted me to grow up as English as possible, to make it easier for me to integrate. I only began to learn the language later in school, for a few years, at least.'

He remained silent, his face expressionless, as he gazed out to sea, his thoughts far away.

‘Peter, you said you could tell me about what happened to my grandfather. You must have had a lot to do with him, if you served on the same submarine.’

He visibly dragged himself back into the moment. ‘I did.’ His voice sounded choked, and he cleared his throat. ‘As a matter of fact, we became very close friends, Hans and I. I met him in the summer of ‘38, the year before the war started. He’d just commissioned his first boat, the *U-112*, and I was assigned as chief engineer. We were stationed in Kiel, which was our main submarine base at the time. At first, I didn’t quite know what to make of him. I and the rest of the crew were all from working-class families. Half of us came from the industrial heartland, lads who had grown up in mining communities and were used to working with machines in confined spaces. The other half, including myself, came from the coast, having grown up with families who had been living from fishing for many generations. And there he was, Hans: an upper-class boy from the Bavarian Alps. Of course we made fun of him, behind his back – imitating his accent, and so on. But we realised soon enough that he knew pretty well what he was doing. He wasn’t as dashing and daring as some of the other submarine commanders, but he was methodical and reliable. During months of wartime patrol duty, we were quite successful. While other boats were sunk by the dozens, he always managed to get us back. Over time, we came to respect that.’

‘And what was your role? I mean, what did you do as chief

engineer? Did you design the submarine, or did you develop any special equipment or weapons?’

‘No, not really.’ He was surprised by the somewhat pointed question. ‘I just made sure that everything was running all right, calculated the fuel requirements for each patrol, and supervised certain aspects of the diving manoeuvres.’

Nonetheless, there was something he was omitting as he gave her a gauging look. ‘Siobhán, I don’t know what you’ve heard about what happened back then, but the events that caused your grandmother to flee Germany, ultimately, have a fairly ordinary explanation – although, I’m afraid it’s a sad story.’

‘Whatever it is, I’d like to know. But if you want to go back to your house ...’

‘No, we can sit over there, by these boulders. Let’s make use of the little sun before the weather turns bad. We’ll have a nice view out to sea. And some stories are best told outside. There are certain ghosts of the past that are better not conjured up inside your home. Also, there is something else out here I want to show you later on.’

Peter wended his way across the headland, which was strewn with the many rocks that had rolled down the steep mountainside over the years, until he reached a flat boulder lying on its side a few yards back from the cliff’s edge. ‘Mostly, all these rocks just lie around on the same spot, day after day. Then, occasionally, something dramatic happens, an avalanche washes over them, and they get thrown about a bit. Life is like that, I find, for us humans as well.’

He sat down on the edge of the boulder, his legs outstretched,

and closed his eyes. ‘So, my role in this tragedy . . . I think, for you to really understand what happened, I need to tell you how it all started.’

He half opened his eyes again, squinting towards the distant horizon, which was already obscured by dark clouds. ‘When we prepared for war, it was clear that we only had a chance of winning if we could defeat the British. We knew they would never ally themselves with us. Nor was it likely that they would remain neutral. For us in the submarine force that meant that, sooner or later, we had to take on the might of the legendary Royal Navy, who had ruled the waves for centuries. And, naturally, at that time, there was no doubt in our minds that we were going to put an end to that. In our little boats, we were going to go up against a superior enemy, with only courage and cleverness on our side. It was going to be David versus Goliath, and it seemed very heroic, somehow – at least before the war began.

‘What we didn’t know was that the German navy was nowhere near to being sufficiently rebuilt for yet another major conflict, having been completely dismantled after the loss of the previous war. But when, against all warnings from the Admiralty, the submarine force was mobilised again, we were among the first boats to set out into the North Atlantic.

‘We started patrolling between Shetland and the Faroe Islands, waiting for news about the outbreak of war. When the first reports eventually came in, we were in quite a unique situation out there on the ocean, being able to receive the radio broadcasts from both Berlin and London. We therefore couldn’t possibly fail to notice the obvious contradictions regarding who

had begun the hostilities. But, in those days, we still believed our own people. We didn't consider for one moment that our leaders would lie to us.

'Initially, the fighting was limited to the Continent. But two days later, we got the confirmation – just a short radio telegram from the Commander of Submarines. It simply read: "War with England." And then it all began: the siege of Britain, our attempts to cut the island off from its supply routes and to starve the country into submission.'

'So, during these patrols, how many ships did you sink?'

Peter hesitated. 'Siobhán, you have to understand that ...'

'No, I do understand, and I still want to know: how many ships did you sink?'

'From the beginning of the war, we were on regular patrol duty for about half a year. During that time, we sank eight merchant ships and one warship – and I can remember every single one of them.'

'And the crews?'

'Most of them died, I imagine: tens on the cargo ships, more than a hundred on the destroyer. We could never stay long enough to find out what happened. In naval warfare, human casualties aren't the issue. It's the number of ships or the amount and type of material you manage to sink – that's how success is measured.'

'I see. And what did Gran have to say about that? I can't see her being impressed by killing people for whatever reason.'

'Well, fortunately, she never had to witness any of the fighting. And I doubt that Hans would have told her much about it.'

In wartime, there is always the unspoken understanding hanging over everything that only one of two parties can survive. If we managed to get back alive, the obvious implication was that, most likely, someone else did not. In a situation like that, you celebrate the return of those you love and don't complain too loudly about the deaths of others, whom you've never met, and the killing of whom you didn't witness. You limit your attention to a small circle of family and friends, and you become short-sighted to the tragic events elsewhere.

'Elsbeth definitely knew what being in the navy was all about. Her father was an admiral who had served in the Imperial Navy. And the prospect of marrying a naval officer evidently didn't trouble her very much – even under a Fascist government. She would have known that submariners were part of an elite fighting force, with twice the pay of a comparable rank in the regular navy. Also, Hans was a handsome fellow, and I'm sure he was very nice to her. But in any case, they clearly fell in love with each other, and they got married the same year as I did, in '34. Your mother was born the following year.

'By then, the political and social situation in Germany was already extremely unpleasant, with open discrimination and violence directed especially against Jews, but really against anyone who opposed the government in any way. The year leading up to the war was particularly bad, with the worst attacks on Jews yet. Thousands of people were arrested and deported, or murdered on the spot. Homes, shops, and even hospitals were raided and destroyed, while synagogues burned all over Germany, including in Kiel. Hans and I were out on a training patrol in the Baltic

Sea when that happened, but Elsbeth was at home. Did she never tell you about that?’

‘No. As I mentioned, she rarely spoke about her time in Germany. The earliest she told me about in some detail was how she escaped to England. That seemed to be a new beginning for her.’

Peter nodded gravely. ‘This may be difficult for you to imagine, Siobhán, but your grandmother was very patriotic before the war. Her family were part of the aristocracy, you know, back during the days of the old Empire. Right from the outset, they would therefore have mistrusted the Nazis, mainly because they saw them as uncivilised troublemakers and revolutionaries. But that pogrom in ‘38, that was different compared with anything that had come before.

‘Over the years, through her interest in literature, Elsbeth had befriended a Jewish couple who owned a book shop not far from the synagogue. I met them once – very decent people, upstanding German citizens. Their two boys had been in the army during the previous war, and neither of them had returned. When the violence erupted, Elsbeth got worried and went to check on them. Before that, however, she left your mother with Ingrid, my wife. After Hans and I had met earlier that year, the two women had become close friends and helped each other out while we were at sea. Our daughters were of the same age – about three at the time. When Elsbeth arrived at her friends’ place, the mob had already been there. They had broken into the shop and the flat above, looted and vandalised the whole building. The couple had managed to get out at the last minute, and they were just returning to see what was left. Elsbeth took them in for the night,

while Lena slept over at our place. As that was extremely risky, immediately the next morning, the Jewish couple fled to Hamburg. They had relatives there, and they probably hoped that the anonymity in the bigger city would make it easier for them to hide. But I don't know what happened to them, whether they survived the war.

'Elsbeth was never the same again after that. It changed her whole attitude – in general, not just towards the country. But notice, Siobhán, it wasn't that traumatic event that caused her to flee. As a matter of fact, in the summer of '39, when it became clear that yet another long and bloody conflict was unavoidable, far from running away, she decided to make her contribution to the war effort by volunteering for a nurse's training course. Whether she was more committed to the country or to her family is immaterial. We all simply carried on. Hans and I continued our patrol duty, Elsbeth finished her nursing course, while Ingrid looked after the two girls. And that's how we entered the Second World War.'

Despite the casual tone of his voice, a sense of deep remorse was shown in his stooped posture and haunted expression. But more than reawakening some distant memories, Siobhán's unexpected arrival had opened old wounds that had never properly healed. A violent past experienced personally could never truly be history. It would never leave you alone.

'It's crap, war, isn't it – if you think about it.'

Peter smiled with a sidelong glance. 'If you say so, Siobhán.'

He relaxed visibly, as he continued to look at her, studying her features more closely now, perhaps trying to discover a family

resemblance.

‘All right, you went to war for the Nazis. But then, what happened? What made you turn against them?’

‘Is that what Elsbeth told you?’

‘Didn’t you?’

‘It wasn’t that simple, Siobhán.’

‘Then tell me, please. I’ve come all this way to finally learn the truth.’

He nodded. ‘But first, I’d like to know: when your grandmother told you about what she thought had happened, about her reason for leaving Germany, how did she . . . When she spoke about Hans . . .’

‘She didn’t hate him. And she never truly believed that he’d meant to abandon her. When she was forced to flee because they were going to arrest her, she must have assumed that something unforeseen had happened. Something obviously had gone wrong for her husband and his crew. Ultimately, I think she was proud of him. I was with her when she died, and her last words were about him. That’s why I’ve come, to find out what really happened.’

Peter fought back his tears, rigidly looking out to sea. He did not turn, even when he felt Siobhán’s hand on his.

‘Tell me what went wrong, Peter, and how you ended up here.’

His expression became dark, a combination of anger and grief. ‘A lot of things went wrong, Siobhán – and some of them I’m only now beginning to understand.’

He took a deep breath to steady his emotions. ‘So, how did I end up here? Well, as I said, for the first few months of the

war, we were on routine patrol duty. But then, one day in early April 1940, without any explanation, we received orders to abort our current patrol and to return to our home base immediately. Hans was given a sealed envelope that he was only allowed to open upon receiving a specific code word via radio. It was all very mysterious, and we knew that something big was about to happen.

‘Finally, after several days, our new mission was revealed. It was the start of the Norwegian Campaign. Thousands of soldiers were to be landed at various locations along the coast. And we, with a group of sister boats, were to escort the surface fleet all the way up to Narvik, which is still a good distance north of here.

‘The Norwegians had never planned to be involved in the war, and we were able to capture their garrison in Narvik with little resistance. But we were quite sure that the British would eventually react. Norway was too strategically important for them to let us take it as easily as that. We and two other boats were therefore ordered to guard the entrance to the fjord in which Narvik is situated. Since the disembarkation, the weather had got steadily worse. By evening, we were engulfed in a proper blizzard, with dense swirls of snow streaming through the narrow gaps between the steep mountains and racing across the water. We were convinced that the British would not risk an attack under those conditions and believed it would be safe to rest most of the crew.

‘I woke up very early in the morning, with the boat bouncing on the waves, and couldn’t get back to sleep. I therefore went up onto the bridge to take a bit of fresh air. I was chatting with the lookouts when suddenly the dark silhouette of a destroyer

appeared out of the blowing snow and the fog – right in front of us and frighteningly close, its superstructure towering above us. Soon after, we could distinguish several other outlines of the same type. Against all odds, the British expeditionary force had arrived – at night, with poor visibility, and amongst all these islands. Even at the time, we had to admit to ourselves that that had been a remarkable feat of navigation. It certainly reminded us of what kind of an enemy we were facing. And these weren't outdated convoy escorts, such as those we'd been dealing with during our routine patrols. These were state-of-the-art warships, more than twice as big and twice as fast as *U-112*, and much better armoured and armed. Had they known we were there, they could very easily have sunk us simply by running us over, without a single shell or torpedo fired.

'But they didn't spot us. And even as the British ships steadily glided past, we still had the possibility of turning the tide in our favour. If we could engage them as they entered the fjord, perhaps we would be able to damage or even sink some of them, at least slow them down long enough for our surface fleet to prepare for battle. If we could accomplish that, we would have them trapped, and we could take them down one by one.

'We therefore roused the crew and radioed a warning to the other vessels. Then, we went down to periscope depth. We were in an ideal position for an attack. With several big targets straight ahead, there was no way of missing. From then on, it was just going to be the same old routine of a regular patrol: the forward tubes are loaded and flooded as quietly as possible, bearing and range are determined through the periscope, and then the torpe-

does are launched in rapid succession. As they race towards their targets, usually there is a period of nervous waiting as the seconds on the stopwatch slowly tick away, counting down to the estimated time of impact. During that period, nobody talks. The boat itself seems to be holding its breath in anticipation. But in that instance, it all turned out differently. We could hear two detonations almost immediately, well before the torpedoes reached their targets, while the other two failed to arm at all.

‘It was a complete disaster: none of our torpedoes worked. We’d had some difficulties with the magnetic detonators before, but not a total failure like this. And in those days, we had no idea why this was happening. It looked to us as if some unseen protective shield had been cast around the British warships – as if Nature herself had turned against us. Of course, from that point onwards, we didn’t stand a chance. We were unable to prevent the destroyers from entering the fjord, where most of our ships were still waiting to be refuelled. And the British were free to make two unopposed runs at the harbour before at least some of our ships were ready to fight back. As the other submarines had the same problems that we had, there was nothing we could do. We had to stand by and observe as one by one our ships went down into the sea. We could see and hear the men in the water, drowning or freezing to death. When finally the British withdrew, half of our fleet had been sunk or severely damaged.

‘Still more and more British reinforcements arrived, hemming us in, and the second battle three days later was even more devastating than the first. Our remaining warships were hopelessly outnumbered by then, low on fuel and ammunition. We were

stuck inside these narrow fjords without any air support. That's when we realised that we had to get *U-112* out of there. We couldn't risk being captured. We had on board not only our encoding machine and various codebooks, but also crucial information about the movements of the entire submarine fleet. And so, that night, together with one other boat, we slipped through the British blockade, the only two vessels that managed to escape the annihilation inside the fjord.

'The following weeks, we were engaged with guarding the supply route from Germany to Trondheim, to prepare the recapture of Narvik from the south. But just as our offensive was about to be launched, the enemy withdrew – vanished overnight, to support the evacuation of the Allied forces from Dunkirk. After that, Norway had no choice but to surrender, and we were allowed to return home to our families, after two long months at sea.

'Suddenly, after the crushing defeat at Narvik, things looked bright for us again. The occupation of Norway provided us with a long stretch of the northern coast to operate from. And after the successful invasion of France, we also gained access to important harbours in the south. There was therefore a very good chance that we would have to exchange our home base in Kiel for either the rough Norwegian Sea, or the warm waters of the Bay of Biscay.

'You can probably imagine how relieved we were when we were told that, beginning in autumn, our flotilla would be operating out of Saint-Nazaire. But that relief was short-lived because, soon afterwards, we received special orders to return to

Narvik – the only submarine to be stationed there. At first, we were convinced that there had to be a mistake, some kind of misunderstanding. As the Arctic convoys hadn't begun yet, we would be too far removed from all Allied shipping routes to be deployed effectively.

‘We had been on routine patrol duty right from the outset of war, with a solid track record, and had gathered far more experience than most other crews. For us to be relegated to this backwater, while the rest of our flotilla would be transferred to France, definitely felt rather strange, and we suspected there to be an ulterior motive – some kind of a mission that was being kept secret from us.

‘And so, we left Kiel again – for the last time on *U-112*, as it turned out – and returned to the site of our humiliation. After weeks of heavy fighting, much of Narvik had been razed to the ground. Most of the civilians had left the town, and the fjord had become a graveyard, with wrecks sticking out of the water everywhere, while more sunken ships and aircraft could be seen, ghostly distorted, down in the clear cold water.

‘You can't picture a more depressing place amidst this beautiful landscape in midsummer. Now, even the sun was conspiring against us, stubbornly refusing to sink and to place a mantle of darkness over a troubled world. Day and night, as we lay in the harbour, waiting for further orders, we were forced to witness the devastation we had caused.

‘By that time, the atmosphere on board had changed dramatically. It had become subdued and apprehensive. Before Norway, we had come to believe that we were essentially invincible. But

after the two battles up here, we had to be glad just to be alive. The war had only started and, right away, the Royal Navy had shown itself to be exactly as powerful as we should have expected it to be. We also couldn't help noticing that many of our mates from the navy training school weren't with us anymore, suggesting that we too were approaching the end of our life expectancy.

'Then, after endless days of anxious waiting, we found out what the purpose of our posting was: we were to conduct systematic tests of our torpedoes to determine the cause for the disastrous failure of the magnetic detonators. At first, that seemed reasonable enough. After all, this failure had resulted in a crippling defeat for us. And what better place to conduct those tests than where the problem had occurred. There certainly were more than enough wrecks around to use for target practice.

'After a while, however, we began to get suspicious. We noticed that nobody was particularly interested in what we were doing. We kept sending in reports with our results and recommendations but, as far as we could tell, they were being completely ignored. We therefore started to ask ourselves again what really was behind our remote posting, and how long we would have to stay there. By then, autumn was approaching, and it began to get colder. We wanted to wrap up the tests as soon as possible and return home for Christmas.

'But then, we received new orders that changed everything: we were to prepare the boat for a medium-range operation into enemy waters. No further explanations were given at that time, but it could only refer to the British Isles. Over the next days,

several detailed maps and photographs from aerial reconnaissance arrived, covering the coastline of a sparsely populated part of northern Scotland. However, as there did not appear to be anything of strategic significance in that region, just a multitude of bays and inlets, the situation only became more mysterious.

‘Eventually, we received precise instructions. On paper, the order was simple enough: we were to land in a particular bay of the northwestern Highlands, and make contact with a group of British double agents. From them, we were to receive maps and aerial photographs of all radar installations and military airfields in Britain, together with the number and type of aircraft stationed at each. This information, of course, would be crucial for any strategic bombing campaign.

‘But what that meant was to get past the Faroe Islands, by then occupied by the British, past the reinforced garrisons on Shetland, past the entire Home Fleet stationed among the Orkney Islands, to approach the Scottish coast with its newly developed defensive lines and, finally, in near total darkness, find a way to navigate into one of many narrow bays in a rugged coastline. Then, after collecting the various secret documents, we had to make the whole journey in reverse. And we knew that, throughout all this, we would be on our own. For the purpose of secrecy, all communication with command centres in the south had to be kept to a minimum. Even the other submarine crews were not informed of our plans.

‘From the outset, it was clear that this mission was essentially impossible. Until then, no one in the armed forces, or the secret service, had ever succeeded with an undetected landing on

the British mainland. And so, after our initial indignation about effectively having been taken out of action, this special mission was a rather dubious honour. We realised now that we'd been posted to that remote place under the cover of a torpedo testing programme because Navy High Command had to assume that there would be double agents on our side as well. Also, with British attention focussed mainly on our new bases in France, we would be able to sneak in through the backdoor from the north – at least, that was the idea.

‘Our mission was to be carried out around the winter solstice, to take advantage of the long hours of darkness. That gave us less than three months to come up with a viable plan. The main difficulty was that *U-112* was a standard attack submarine. It had been designed specifically to detect and sink surface vessels. Therefore, dives were seen as a sign of weakness and were exclusively performed in emergencies, trying to avoid being spotted, or while being under attack yourself. Submarines at that time were hellish to live on, and they were bad at doing what their name suggested – being underwater. For power, they relied primarily on their diesel engines, which can only be run at the surface. During underwater operation, one had to switch to the electric motors, which required a large number of gigantic battery cells.

‘At this early stage of the war, the strategy of operating primarily on the surface appeared to be working. Anti-submarine defences aboard British warships were still quite poor, and there was a lot of confidence on our side that it would stay that way. But now, of course, our objective was different. The new prior-

ity was to remain secret and not to engage in combat. For our special mission to succeed, we had to travel most of the way submerged. We knew that, the closer to the mainland we would get, the more aircraft specifically hunting for submarines we had to expect. The rough wintertime seas would then work in our favour by eliminating our wake and making us invisible from above.

‘After some deliberation, we had to admit to ourselves that our old boat, which had faithfully got us through the first year of the war, just wasn’t up to the task. It would force us to stay exposed at the surface for far too long. No submarine at the time had the diving capacity that we needed. Therefore, isolated as we were – completely outside of regular naval operations, and cut off from the ordinary supply routes – given only whatever material we had available locally, we had to build a proper submarine.

‘First, we had to streamline the hull, to conserve energy while travelling underwater. We did this by removing the deck guns, spray deflectors, net cutters, and railings. Without the deck guns, there was no need for ammunition, which freed up the magazine. The torpedoes we could dispense with as well, which also made the compensating tanks redundant. These modifications saved us enough weight and gave us enough space to install additional batteries – if we were able to find them.

‘This was where we could benefit from the wrecks all around us, which included one of our submarines. It had been waiting for refuelling when the first British attack had begun. Although it hadn’t received a direct hit, the hull had been cracked by bombs exploding nearby. The boat was still moored to the quay, held

up only by the ropes. It clearly wasn't seaworthy anymore, but still accessible through the bridge. Before abandoning it, the crew had removed all sensitive material and had destroyed the instruments. However, despite some water that had accumulated down in the battery compartments, the cells themselves were still intact.

'With all the other modifications, it took us two months to salvage them and to install them in our *U-112*. But then, with twice the normal underwater range, we could spend the most dangerous parts of our journey out of sight of the enemy. We would only run at the surface for a few hours each night to ventilate the boat, recharge the batteries with the diesel engines, determine our exact location from the stars, and then disappear again. If necessary, we could stay submerged for about two days at a time, which would take us near the limit of our oxygen supply. But if we reduced movement around the boat to a minimum, at least on paper, it looked as if we might have a chance of succeeding with our mission.

'Over the following weeks, after a series of successful test dives, our optimism increased even further. As a matter of fact, I was starting to look forward to the journey – we all were, I think – anything to get us away from Narvik. It seemed as if the romantic notion that submariners were the lone adventurers of the sea, which had lured us into the service in the first place, would finally become a reality.

'Gradually, more details arrived about our British collaborators. They were working for Military Intelligence and were officially involved in an operation that had been set up to break a

special German code that was ostensibly used for planning and ultimately conducting an invasion of Britain. The coded messages, of course, were fake, broadcast from a station in Germany specifically for the purpose of leaking false information to the enemy. Meanwhile, these British double agents were collecting vital information for our side. An English couple – both fervent Nazi sympathisers – owned a building near the bay where we were supposed to land. It had been turned into the headquarters for the operation, and all secret documents were to be collected there until we were able to pick them up.’

‘Yes ... Sorry, Peter, I was just wondering, do you remember the name of that bay?’

‘Well, I couldn’t be certain anymore, after all these years. On a map, I’m sure I would find it again, but the name ... something beginning with a C, I think, Loch ...’

‘Cairnbawn.’

‘Yes, that’s right. You know it?’

‘I’ve been there.’

But what was the connection?

‘Is it nice?’

‘Lovely.’

Because, how many coincidences could there be?

Peter looked at Siobhán with a curious glint in his eyes. ‘Right ... Anyhow, eventually, we got green light to commence our mission. We removed all insignias from our uniforms, anything that would enable the enemy to identify us in case we were captured. We installed scuttling charges so that we could sink the boat, rather than have it fall into the wrong hands. As a final

touch, we painted our own unique emblem on the sides of the tower and, henceforth, always referred to the submarine as *Atlantis*, our new elusive home beneath the waves.

‘Then, about a week into December, we put out to sea, travelled down the fjord from Narvik, rounded the southern tip of the archipelago, just over there, took the last accurate bearings to the land, and then headed southwest into the open sea.

‘At first, everything went smoothly, as we travelled alone across the vast expanse of the North Atlantic Ocean, without ever encountering a single ship. Then, very early on the second day, your grandfather and I were up on the bridge to take some fresh air before our next dive, when one of the lookouts spotted a warship. It was only a black shape against the dark sky, but the basic outline was unmistakable, and it wasn’t one of ours. It was heading north and was going to pass us probably less than a mile to the east. Apparently, they hadn’t seen or heard us yet. There was a good swell, and the low silhouette of *Atlantis* was hidden among the waves. Although we couldn’t take any chances, there was no reason for concern. To evade a single warship was nothing compared to what we had to expect later on. It was no more than a good drill. So, we calmly went down into the control room. Hans gave the order to dive – and then it all went terribly wrong.

‘Within seconds, the alarm was raised. Water was entering the engine room through the ventilation tube, and the boat was flooding at an alarming rate. There could only be one explanation for that. During the night, while we had been running at the surface, it had got very cold, and big chunks of frozen sea spray

had built up all around the conning tower. We had been working routinely on removing them, but the smaller of the two air intake valves on the side of the tower had nonetheless got stuck and wasn't closing properly anymore. We had no other option but to abort the dive.

'When we got back to the surface, the warship had got a lot closer, and we had no problem identifying it as a British destroyer. For a few minutes, we worked feverishly to remove the ice from the air intake until the valve closed. Simultaneously, we operated the pumps at full power to get the water out of the boat. We also used the opportunity to send out a radio message about our unexpected enemy contact, in a part of the ocean that we'd believed to have to ourselves.

'Then, suddenly, the destroyer turned bow on us. They had seen us and began attacking at full speed, all guns blazing. It was high time to get down again. There was still some water left in the boat, but that couldn't be helped. Slowly, we gained depth – but in a minute, they were upon us. When the first depth charges came raining down, we were just over thirty metres beneath the surface. *Atlantis*, and everything inside, got thrown about. One lightbulb after the other shattered. And as darkness gradually spread through the boat, the noise of the explosions from outside became ever more prominent and threatening.

'Finally, we got down to a safe depth of about one hundred metres. For a while, detonations could still be heard at a distance, but eventually they stopped. Then, with everyone holding their breath, the groaning of the steel hull and the ominous gurgling of water against it were the only sounds that could be heard. It

seemed as if, for the moment at least, the British had lost us. But we knew that the warship was still prowling up there, in ever increasing circles, watching and listening out for us. We knew they would never want to miss out on a chance of capturing a German submarine. At least they would make sure that we were actually dead. No doubt they were intending to suffocate us, knowing that, in two or at most three days, we would have no choice but to resurface, probably less than a hundred miles from where we'd gone down. After that, it would have been easy for them to force us to surrender.

‘Only, it wasn’t as in the old days. Submerged, we weren’t sitting ducks anymore. The determination of the British to stay within this relatively small area now played into our hands. With the additional batteries, we could easily dive out of this deadly circle in any direction we chose, without having to worry about running into them again, at least within the next few days.

‘But the first depth charges had done their work. Several small leaks in the pressure hull added to the water that had already been in the boat before the attack. Moreover, several men had sustained injuries, some serious. It was clear that we had to abort our special mission at that point. We would have to return to Narvik and mend the boat before making another attempt at reaching Scotland.

‘Running at silent speed, we therefore headed back towards the northeast until – after two days, almost out of power and breathable air – our sonar soundings suggested that we got closer to the coast, as the water became increasingly shallow.

‘Submerged for all this time, we had lost track of our exact

position and, when we surfaced, it was almost completely dark outside. Additionally, as there was thick fog all around, it was impossible to see any land. With *Atlantis* now dangerously waterlogged, we carefully continued eastwards until we saw the familiar jagged outline of the Lofoten Islands. Eventually, we found a small and reasonably sheltered bay where we anchored. But even a precursory glance around and at our barometer told us that the weather was deteriorating rapidly. Given the state of our boat, not knowing exactly where we were, it was pointless to go back out to sea and to attempt to find the way to Narvik, before the storm hit us.

‘With the diesel engines running again, we temporarily managed to pump the water out of the boat. But even so, everything inside was still damp, and the bunks were dripping wet. To carry out all necessary repairs would require at least one day and, under the rough weather conditions, it was only a question of time until water would leak into the boat again. After the long dive, we were all weak from carbon dioxide poisoning and lack of sleep. Really the only safe option for us was to wait out the storm on solid ground – especially for the injured, who were in urgent need of medical treatment. Using our life rafts, we therefore ferried everyone ashore, together with everything we could find that might be useful for building some shelters.

‘But we still didn’t know on which island we had landed, and whether there was a settlement nearby. To establish this, we decided to send out a small reconnaissance party. As I felt a bit better by then and hadn’t been injured during the attack, I volunteered, together with three others. We realised that it would

be too dangerous to clamber along the exposed western coast of the island while the wind threw ever bigger waves against the rocky shoreline. It would also have been a futile attempt as any village was likely to be located on the more sheltered side facing the mainland.

‘Therefore, we began climbing up the steep slope, hoping that from a higher vantage point we might get a better idea of where we were. But it was hard going, exhausted as we were. And even as we slowly ascended, the view did not improve very much. The fog that had piled up against the seaward side of the mountain simply merged into low clouds hanging above the summit. This wasn’t helped by the constant darkness of the Arctic winter. And when we managed to get up onto a narrow ridge, we still weren’t able to see very far. There were hints within the clouds of high terrain to the north, but no lights from villages, or any other clue that might have helped us to identify our location. We therefore decided that we had to at least try and get up onto higher ground.

‘And that’s when we met the others. Without any warning, they silently emerged from the grey haze ahead of us. There were also four of them, and they were as surprised as we were. They each carried an automatic carbine slung over their shoulders. We only had two handguns on our side, both stored away in uniform pockets. From their green berets we could tell that they were part of one of the recently formed British commando units, which meant that they were well trained and very dangerous. As submariners, of course, we had no training in armed combat whatsoever – although, fortunately, the British soldiers couldn’t know who we were.

‘In that instant, if any one of us had tried to reach for their weapon, the encounter would have ended in a bloodbath. But nobody moved. We just stood there, silently, facing each other across the barren landscape, as if seeing ourselves reflected in a dull mirror. There was another group of men with the same haggard faces, the same beards, the same hollow sleepless eyes, the same worries about their loved-ones and about the future. And yet, they were the enemy. These were the people we had been taught to hate. These were the people we were supposed to kill, even if that meant giving up our own lives.

‘I cannot remember what eventually broke the spell. At some point, we simply began walking towards each other. When we’d got to within a few paces, there were several moments of awkward silence, with all of us desperately trying to find the right words for such a situation. My English was very rudimentary at the time. I therefore said the only thing that came to my mind, which was: “How do you do?”

‘For a few seconds, the others struggled to suppress their grins until one of them responded, in German, that they were fine – which was patently untrue. They looked terrible, undernourished and weak, much worse than we did. But at least we had managed some kind of cordial exchange. We then had to make the right decision, without being able to consult with one another.

‘It wasn’t difficult to work out that the British didn’t intend to be there any more than we did. The only explanation for their presence on the island was that they, as we, had got stranded there during some kind of special operation when, for whatever reason, their deploying vessel had sunk. Unlike us, however,

they weren't on hostile territory. And so, the fact that they had not managed to get help suggested that we had landed on one of the unoccupied islands. As we knew that there hadn't been any fighting since the capitulation of Norway, the British must have got shipwrecked during bad weather. The last major storm affecting the Lofoten had been a few days before we had left Narvik, which meant that they would have been on the island for a week at least, most likely surviving on meagre rations, if they had any food left at all.

'One of them carried a signal lamp. Apparently, they had climbed up onto the mountain, hoping to be able to attract the attention of one of their ships, and were now on the way back to their camp. What they couldn't know was that a destroyer had indeed been sent to search for them, or to make another attempt at whatever they had been planning to do. Nor could they know that the ship had been delayed by the encounter with us, and that it was because of this encounter that we had got stuck there as well.

'We only had seconds to think about all this, but one thing was clear: we couldn't simply walk away from each other and pretend that nothing had happened. As Christmas was approaching, we were united by an unspoken agreement that a truce would be the most dignified way of dealing with the situation. A far more formidable opponent than any one of us was on its way, and it was going to affect both sides equally. We were all stuck on the same remote island. And now that coincidence or fate had thrown us together, we had to postpone our hostilities and find a way to work together.

‘By then, the situation in the mountains had already become quite dangerous. The wind was getting stronger, temperatures were falling and, with the first flurries of snow, the steep rocky slopes were beginning to get slippery. On the way back to the shore, we continued our conversation in a blend of broken English and German, and so were able to relate to one another that they had found some kind of shelter, while we could assure them that we had plenty of food for both groups. As badly prepared to handle the harsh environmental conditions out in the open as we were, and as famished as they were, that seemed like a good enough basis for a collaboration.

‘Although, there was one tense moment when we came down from the mountain and they saw the ominous outline of *Atlantis* lying in the dark bay. By then, most of them had probably lost comrades to one of our boats. Consequently, of all the branches of the German military, the submarine force was the most feared and the most hated. They were unwilling to approach the “U-boat,” as they called it amongst themselves with undisguised loathing in their voices. But they were evidently desperate for food. They therefore agreed to wait while we went to inform our commanding officer of this unexpected situation.

‘When we got back to the others, we discovered that our own situation had become desperate. The makeshift tents made of tarpaulin, which our crew had tried to erect, were torn down or blown away instantly by the wind. We really weren’t equipped for survival on land in the middle of a blizzard. Due to the restricted space on board, we only had enough warm and waterproof clothing for our lookouts and the officers who occasionally

had to spend time outside on the bridge. To weather the storm inside *Atlantis* also was not an option anymore. Already, the boat got thrown about on the waves. And even with the pumps working constantly, it was uncertain whether in its damaged state it would survive.

‘Therefore, Hans took the news about our meeting with the British far more positively than I had expected – although, there may have been another reason for that as well. This was not something that he would ever have admitted, and I’m sure that up to that point it had never affected any of his decisions. Throughout his service in the navy, he had been fully committed to our cause. But I genuinely believe that he regretted the war against Britain.

‘As I said earlier, he was from a rather affluent family. His father was in the diplomatic service. Sometime during secondary school, his parents had therefore sent him off to Eton for a year – back in the Roaring Twenties, when the Great Depression and the Nazis hadn’t happened yet, and memories of the previous war had sufficiently faded away. He’d told me once about that, and I’d got the impression that he’d enjoyed that exchange. In any case, he was the only one of us who knew the people and spoke their language fluently. He agreed that, in this particular situation, collaboration rather than confrontation was the only sensible solution.

‘We therefore packed up as much as we could carry of the food that didn’t require cooking, all the blankets that were still reasonably dry, and our medical supplies. From the bunk beds we fashioned stretchers for our injured and walked back to where

we had left the British. It was evening by then, and we followed them, scrambling southwards along the rocky shore, in the light of our torches, until we reached the entrance to a large cave. Its main part was flooded during high tide, but there was a passage branching off towards one side, which always remained above water. In that passage, the British had established themselves a camp.

‘There were only eight others of them left, and we were shocked when we saw in what a bad shape some of them were. As emaciated as the four were whom we had met on the mountain, they were still among the fittest. It was obvious that time was quickly running out for the group. But so far, the cave had kept them alive. The shelter they had found was dry and out of the wind. It was quiet in the confined space, as the roaring of the storm and of the waves was pushed away into the distance.

‘We settled in as well as we could. Although we huddled closely together, we kept to our separate groups at first – the British eating, while we tended to our injured. But as the evening wore on, our uneasiness around each other diminished and, despite the language barrier, we ended up having a fairly relaxed dinner together. Hans continued chatting with the British until very late – about what, I don’t know, but it sounded casual enough. I remember recognising a few place names in southern England. One by one, the others dropped off and, eventually, I managed to fall asleep myself.

‘Given the circumstances, we passed the night quite comfortably – far more comfortably, in fact, than a typical night on board. But we had to wait another whole day before the worst

part of the storm had passed. Then, the following morning, Hans took our crew a little way away from the others to reveal how the situation was to be resolved. We were to take the British off the island, heading southwest into the open ocean, where the destroyer was probably still patrolling – either searching for us, or waiting for an opportunity after the storm to rescue the stranded soldiers. We would be counting on seeing the large ship before they would be able to spot us in the near darkness and among the waves. This would give us enough time to get the British into our life rafts, with a sufficient supply of distress flares, so that they could attract the attention of their compatriots. And by the time the lookouts on the ship would have seen the flares and the decision would have been made to approach the position, we would have long vanished.

‘I honestly don’t think that there was any other honourable solution. The few life rafts in which the British had got washed ashore when their ship had sunk, and which they had pulled up into the cave, wouldn’t get them far. And what chance did they have of being found on the island when no one could know for certain where they had been stranded, and whether any one of them was still alive? As for us, we couldn’t possibly abandon them and leave them to starve to death. Ethical considerations aside, we had to assume that they would attack us and attempt to take control of the boat by force if we tried to leave without them. It was therefore clear to most of us that the only way off the island was for both groups to stay together.

‘We were quite sure by this point that the goal of the British had been to launch an attack on our garrison in Narvik, or to raid

the nearby fish oil factories. They in turn must have assumed that we had been on regular patrol duty around the islands specifically to prevent such an attack. This would have suggested to them that the Lofoten were better protected than they really were in those days. With us alerted by the encounter, they were not likely to attempt another raid immediately. Instead, they would probably return to Britain and assemble a new force. This would give us enough time to warn our main bases in the south about the presence of enemy warships up here, and about the possibility of future raids. And so, the war would go on.

‘But before we could leave, we had to make *Atlantis* seaworthy again. Hans decided that, while the rest of us made the necessary repairs and bailed out the boat, he would wait with the British. As he was our highest-ranking officer, this was an unspoken sign of good faith to indicate that we intended to keep up our end of the bargain. English fair play, of course, was legendary. That a German officer had volunteered to stay with them ensured that they would honour the agreement as well.

‘However, there was one major problem: *Atlantis* was already at maximum capacity with our own crew. As a matter of fact, space was so limited that two or three blokes on different shifts had to share one bunk. It was therefore decided that, when *Atlantis* was ready to leave the island with the British, our injured would remain in the cave. They were much better off there, on solid ground and in the fresh air. Additionally, one of the petty officers, who had been trained as our medic, was to stay behind to care for them.

‘The crew weren’t unanimously behind this arrangement. And

although most weren't in a position to question the commander's decision, the First Watch Officer had voiced some concerns. Hans then determined that he would take full responsibility for the agreement that he had reached with the British, and that the three other commissioned officers on board – which meant the First and Second Watch Officer and myself – were to wait on the island as well. Hans argued that that would protect us from prosecution should our interaction with the enemy soldiers ever come out. We never discovered how much of a difference that would have made in front of a military tribunal. But dangerously overcrowded as our boat was, I was happy to stay on the island with the injured. The others would then pick us up on their way back to Narvik.

'After two days, *Atlantis* was ready to go out to sea again. From the bay in which we had landed, we brought the boat around to the cave where Hans was still waiting with the British. For us, who had been busy making all the repairs, time had flown. But from the way he greeted us, I could tell that it must have seemed like an eternity to him. I wonder whether he even considered the possibility that we had decided not to go along with his plan, and had abandoned him there with the enemy soldiers. In any case, I only had a few moments with him because most of our crew, together with the British, set out immediately. The rest of us, standing on that bleak rocky shore, watched *Atlantis* disappear into the fog – and then we waited.

'The following day already, we saw an aircraft approach from the south, heading towards Narvik. For a while, we could hear it circling low over the fjord, then it passed us again on its way

back.

‘The next morning, one of our landing crafts arrived, disembarking an elite unit of paratroopers who must have been air-dropped over the hills around Narvik the previous day. After they had secured the beach and ascertained that there were only German submariners inside the cave, they took us back to our garrison – for debriefing, as they put it. They treated us reasonably well, but with a lot of suspicion, and it was quite clear that we were effectively prisoners.

‘Over the next three days, we were all kept in separate rooms and under constant supervision. One after the other, we were taken to several long interviews. They wanted to know what we’d been doing on that island, where the rest of our crew were, and what had happened to our boat. That was a tricky situation. We had not considered the possibility of being picked up by someone before the return of the others. And afterwards, we had not been given any opportunity to talk with one another and to come up with a consistent story.

‘I told them what, under the circumstances, seemed to be the most plausible scenario: that after the attack, we had been stranded on that island; that we had waited out a blizzard for a few days; and that, afterwards, most of the crew had gone out in *U-112* looking for the British destroyer, leaving the injured and a few others behind. But it was evident from their persistent questioning that they didn’t believe me. I also got the feeling that they were far less interested in what had happened to *U-112*, than in what had happened on the island.

‘Between the interrogations, based on what I knew then, I

therefore tried to work out what was going on. The paratroopers, who had been flown in as reinforcements for our garrison in Narvik, had definitely not responded to the radio message we had sent out just before the attack by the British destroyer. In that case, they could not have known that we would end up on this particular island of the Lofoten. Also, when they picked us up, it was obvious that they were prepared for a fight. They must therefore have found out about our meeting with the enemy soldiers. But how was that possible?

‘Since we had arrived on the island, knowing that the enemy ship was still patrolling nearby, we had maintained complete radio silence. We knew that the British were listening in on our frequencies. Their vessels were equipped with direction finders. And even if they couldn’t decode our message, the radio signal itself would have given our location away. They would have started to hunt for us again, either realising that we hadn’t been sunk after all, or thinking that there was another submarine patrolling near the islands. After the two disastrous battles, we had no major warships left at Narvik. We couldn’t count on our bases in southern Norway to receive the signal and to respond fast enough before the British got here. And so, the last thing our people should have heard from us was that we were coming under attack well over a hundred nautical miles southwest of the islands.

‘Clearly, against the strict instructions from our commanding officer, someone had broken the radio silence and sent out another message, after our meeting with the British had taken place, but before the others had left the island. I was convinced

that this could only have happened while most of us had been distracted with making the repairs on *Atlantis*, after the blizzard had passed. And it had to have been in response to that second radio message that the paratroopers had been deployed, to root out the remaining British soldiers.

‘There was little doubt in my mind that they would have succeeded. Outnumbered and in their weakened state, our companions from those stormy days on the island wouldn’t have stood a chance. Looking back, I think that this was when the change began to happen. It is hard to describe, but the conflict looked somehow different from a broader perspective which also covered the situation of the enemy. I suddenly noticed how glad I was that the British had managed to get away, and how proud of Hans and the others I was that they had made that possible.

‘Of course, that instantly raised the question about what had happened to them. At first I hoped that they were still out there somewhere, perhaps on their way back to the island, or on to Narvik after they had found us gone. But as the days went by and there was no news of our boat and the rest of the crew, it became more and more obvious that something had gone wrong.

‘My initial thought was that they had got too close to the British destroyer and had been sunk. But then, I started to think about the strange behaviour of our own people. Why were they only marginally interested in the whereabouts of *U-112*? Exactly what information had our command centres in the south received through that second radio message? Had they been told not only about our meeting with the British soldiers, but also about the plan to take them off the island? What would the reaction have

been to that? Would the Navy High Command have believed in a defection? In that case, they would have taken this very seriously. So much so that, in addition to carrying out the raid on the island in case the enemy was still there, they would most likely have sent out a group of submarines to intercept *U-112*. At the time, the harbours of southern Norway were occasionally used by individual submarines as temporary bases during longer patrols, but the nearest full flotilla was stationed in Germany. From there, I estimated that it would have taken two to three days to reach the spot where we had encountered the destroyer. If the British ship was still patrolling that general area, our crew would have attempted to cast the British adrift somewhere nearby. And as I added up the days from the moment that the other submarines could have left Germany until their arrival at the potential meeting point with *U-112*, and as I considered the approximate time of arrival of *U-112* at that location, it occurred to me ...’

‘You’re right, Peter.’

‘Sorry?’

‘Your calculations were correct: *U-112* was sunk by a group of German submarines.’

‘How do you ... ?’

‘Before I came here, I went to a submarine archive in a small town just north of Kiel – well, you know the place, Laboe. There are no details about the sinking in the German records. But the incident was observed from another British warship that had been sent up there to rendezvous with the destroyer that you encountered, to attempt another raid on the oil factories. It wasn’t

mentioned in the British records which submarine had been sunk, and how exactly it had happened, or why. But based on what you told me ...’

Peter had become pale and agitated, breathing heavily.

‘I’m sorry, Peter. I shouldn’t have ...’

‘No, it’s all right. I was quite sure anyway. As I said earlier, I knew they had perished somehow. Otherwise, they would have come back for us. It was inconceivable that they would have defected, and I was also convinced that the British would not have betrayed our confidence by attacking the unarmed crew, especially as we had told them that we had rigged the boat with scuttling charges. I also couldn’t believe that they would have made the mistake of getting too close to the destroyer, knowing it was out there. But the arrival of the German boats they could not have anticipated, of course. That must have caught them off guard, if they ever noticed them at all.’

‘They did. They were in the process of inflating the life rafts and getting the British soldiers off the boat when they saw the other submarines. It is easy to imagine how the situation would have looked to the Germans: their renowned *U-112* – on a top-secret espionage mission – surfaced and at rest within visual range of two enemy warships, with several men out on deck, some of them part of a British special unit – they could only assume that *U-112* had either been captured or had defected. To preserve the secrets on board, they would have seen no other option but to sink the boat. Anticipating this, my grandfather must have given the order to dive. But with all those men on deck, it took too long to get everyone back inside. The Ger-

man submarines had enough time to launch their torpedoes, and two of them hit almost simultaneously. According to the British records, there was a massive explosion just below the surface. So, it must have been very quick for the men on board, mustn't it?'

'Let's hope so, with two direct hits . . . That certainly explains why the interrogations weren't much about what had happened to *U-112*. They already knew that perfectly well and were only putting on a show. Instead, they were mostly concerned about the extent of our involvement with the enemy. Apparently, in the end, they realised that the encounter had been essentially harmless, and we were told that we would be allowed to return to Germany. But it was made clear to us that we had to stick to an official story, which was a modification of the version of events that I had given. According to that story, *U-112*, on regular patrol duty southwest of the Lofoten, had been sunk by a British destroyer, while some members of the crew had been left behind at the garrison in Narvik due to influenza.

'Then, finally, the day before Christmas Eve, they put us on a plane home. Immediately upon arrival at the airfield in Kiel, I was taken aside by a navy official. He told me that, just the previous day, my wife and daughter had tragically died in a fire at your grandparent's place. I went to see their house, and it really was burnt out completely. But you probably already know this, if you found their death certificates in Germany.

'The following day is like static in my memory – just random noise, without any meaning. Then, on Christmas Day, I was home alone when there was a knock on the door. At first,

I wanted to ignore it. I was sure there would be someone who either wanted to wish me the compliments of the season, or to express their condolences if they had heard about the deaths. But they persisted. They obviously knew I was home. Finally, by the voice, I recognised the person as our neighbour and managed to drag myself out of bed to talk to her.

‘She told me that, in the immediate aftermath of the loss of *U-112*, rumours had somehow spread inside the Navy High Command, saying that a part of the crew had taken the boat over to the British, and the distress message had been false, to cover up the disappearance. In response to that, orders had been issued to arrest Elsbeth that same night, and to bring her in for interrogation, as she was the wife of the commanding officer. Our neighbour had found out about that from a friend who worked as a secretary at the local police station. We’d all met once, at our neighbour’s flat, for the christening of their child – just the previous summer, in fact, after Hans and I had returned from the Norwegian Campaign. Therefore, the secretary recognised Elsbeth’s name on the arrest warrant and was sure that this had to be a mistake. As there was nothing she could do to prevent it, during her lunch break, she quickly ran to tell our neighbour. And so, through that lucky chain of connections, Ingrid found out about the planned arrest and was able to warn Elsbeth, just in time. The official story about the fire was wrong, designed to cover up their escape. No doubt, the police had laid the fire themselves, after they had searched the house for any evidence.’

Peter sighed. ‘When I think of how the women must have felt during that night, and what they might have thought about

us ... You see, the problem was that Hans and I never managed to tell our wives about that secret mission to Scotland. We were allowed to send personal letters back from Narvik after we'd received our new orders. But all our communication was being monitored, and there was no chance that the censors would have let that kind of information through.

'During our last summer together in Kiel, Ingrid had found out about the transfer of our old flotilla to France and had asked me about it. But, at the time, all I could tell her was that we would be separated from the other boats and return to Narvik. Still, it was clear that we'd be involved in some kind of special operation, and I suppose Ingrid and Elsbeth would have realised that too.'

'Gran certainly did. She told me about it just before she died. Of course, she couldn't guess any more than you did what kind of operation it was going to be. But in the light of these rumours, she must have assumed that something had gone wrong, that you had vanished under circumstances that looked suspicious to your own people, and that you would not be able anymore to prove your innocence. Somehow, it all added up, and the risk of staying in Germany, with the two little girls, seemed greater than trying to find refuge with the enemy.'

'I think you're right, Siobhán. Until I met you today, what had been troubling me for all these many years was the thought that my wife and daughter may have fled Germany believing that I had betrayed them. Now, I finally know the truth.'

The truth ... So many parts of that story were still just as mysterious as they had been before. What exactly had happened

to Ingrid and her daughter? How had she and Siobhán's grandmother become separated? How was it that her grandmother had survived the war, and Ingrid, apparently, had not?

And then, there was the involvement of the manor house. A building with such a long history was bound to have a succession of shady events and rumours associated with it, without any reason to suspect that these events were related by more than geography. There was no more need to connect Kathleen's murder to a spy operation that occurred at that same location fifty years earlier, than there was for connecting Alison's disappearance to that murder. Nonetheless, why had her grandmother been so insistent that Alison had been "taken" by the same people who, in some way, had taken Ingrid from her? What information had she been given during that phone call that had brought on such a shock – and by whom?

Siobhán was startled out of her thoughts by the rapid flapping of the wings of a large glaucous gull that came sailing up the steep cliff in the strengthening wind and rushed past overhead.

Peter had been watching her. 'Everything all right?'

'Yes, sorry, I was just thinking about what you said – about all these coincidences and their tragic consequences. It strikes me how easily everything could have played out differently.'

'Indeed. The many times I wished I hadn't stayed behind, that I'd gone out with the others on *Atlantis*' last voyage ... It isn't nice, you know, to be the lone survivor, to be ...'

'Left alone.'

'Yes.' He looked at her even more closely. 'And then you showed up, with all of your grandmother's little mannerisms –

such as her way of squinting into empty space with a furrowed brow when something was working hard inside her head.'

He laughed quietly. 'Which thoughts are working hard inside your head, Siobhán Dannreuther?'

'I don't know, there is so much to digest – all this new information about what happened during the war, over on the other side; all these things I couldn't see before, but were still connected to my life. I'm curious, Peter, because there was nothing about it in the German records: after *U-112* had been sunk, what became of that espionage operation?'

'It was abandoned. All that subversive activity in Britain, it never came to anything. And without these documents that would have exposed the locations of radar sites and military airfields, effective bombing raids were basically impossible. Despite the horrendous destruction of urban centres, we therefore never got the air superiority that would have been necessary for an invasion. Moreover, as I found out after the war, these collaborators had also obtained information about the development of brand-new radar systems that were small enough to be installed inside reconnaissance aircraft and bombers – ideal for hunting submarines that were forced to operate primarily at the surface.

'There was only one way of dealing with this new threat, and that was to abandon the strategy I mentioned earlier, whereby submarines were essentially employed as conventional torpedo boats that were temporarily submersible. A new type of submarine would have to be introduced, with a streamlined hull, larger batteries, and more powerful electric motors – similar to what we'd done when we had adapted our old *U-112*.

‘Without the advance warning from the British double agents, by the time the importance of proper submarines was recognised in Germany, it was already too late. Although a new class of electro boats was developed and built, it was never ready to be deployed before the war was over. And in the end, the weapon that might have turned the tide in our favour only became a drain on our resources. Had we realised the threat of airborne radar sooner, within a year, we could have had the most devastating armada in history. It would have given us back the control over the North Atlantic that we’d had at the beginning of the war. We could have isolated Britain and effectively interrupted the Arctic convoys between the Western Allies and the Soviet Union. Had we done that, the war and all its associated horrors may well have lasted a few years longer, causing the deaths of millions more people. Perhaps, it might even have lasted long enough for us to come into the possession of nuclear weapons. Then, combined with the first guided missiles that we developed, who knows what might have happened. But when *Atlantis* sank beneath the waves, the German chances of winning the war went down with her. And so, you might ask, measured against all this potential death and destruction, what is the loss of a single boat – a single boat, and some of the finest people I have ever known.’

Peter gazed far out to sea, towards the descending sun. ‘Fifty years now since *Atlantis* disappeared into the fog, and sometimes I still miss them. After what we did, after everything God let us get away with, that was not how they were supposed to die when, for once during that wretched war, they were trying to do one thing right.’

But in that state of conflict, deciding on the right course of action had necessarily been based on a subjective assessment of the situation, from which further conflicts arose with unforeseen consequences. In that unpredictable chain of causes and effects, a specific event had to occur that dramatically altered a few lives, so that the world at large could remain the same. And it appeared as if the ripples in the fabric of causality that had been created by this distant event had now reached the present.

‘When you returned to Germany and found out about your family, the war had really just begun. After all this, how did you manage to carry on?’

‘I don’t actually remember it all that well, the rest of the war – not like the beginning. Looking back, it seems more like a surreal nightmare. I simply dragged myself from one day to the other. The former First Watch Officer on *U-112* was promoted and commissioned his own boat, the *U-115*, and I was assigned again as Chief Engineer. We went back on regular patrol duty, initially from Kiel but, after just a few months, we were transferred with our new flotilla to Brest. There, we stayed for about a year. Then, the Arctic convoys started, and we were transferred north again, first to Bergen, then on to Trondheim and, during the final year of the war, back to Narvik.

‘During all that, we were never exposed to the bombing raids in the big cities, or to the atrocities along the eastern front. About the holocaust we only found out afterwards. For the most part, we were trapped inside the submarine, adrift somewhere out there in the North Atlantic, while the war escalated and turned against us. As more and more of our boats were sunk, younger

and more poorly trained crews were recruited into service, many of whom were killed within days. But while others died, somehow we always managed to get through. We were doomed to continue the fight against the very country that, with some luck, now gave shelter to my own family. Then, when it was all over at last, we were ordered to surrender to the Royal Navy. *U-115* was scuttled north of Ireland, and we became prisoners of war.

‘The more dangerous you were deemed, the more remote the place they put you in. I, together with many other submariners, ended up in a high-security camp in the very north of Scotland, where we were thrown together with the worst sort of fanatics and war criminals – concentration camp guards and such people. But out of a bad lot, we were considered to be some of the better ones. And so, after a while, we were kept separate from the hardliners and were allowed to work on the farms outside the camp – cattle and sheep, mostly. I liked it there, keeping in mind the overall situation. It was nice to be able to work on solid ground and in the fresh air for a change. There was good trout fishing in the lake, and we always had enough food.

‘Although we were released after about a year, most of us continued to work for pay. Some of the younger lads even ended up marrying local girls. I only worked for another year until I had enough money to travel. Then, I hitched a ride down to London as someone had mentioned the possibility of finding work at the docks there. The number of able-bodied men, of course, was greatly reduced after the war and, eventually, I was hired to work on one of the shipyards.

‘I immediately tried to find Ingrid and Elsbeth, but I had noth-

ing to go on. Even if they had managed to enter the country, they had done so illegally, and it was highly unlikely that they were registered somewhere. To make matters worse, the whole system was still in a state of chaos at the time, unable to keep up with the many dead and missing people. Not surprisingly, neither the police nor the Home Office had any records on either of the women. I then used the first Christmas holidays that I got off from work to return to Germany and meet my and Ingrid's families, but no one had seen her. After more than two years since the end of the war, they still had not returned. At that point, I had to admit to myself that there was only one plausible reason for that.

'After the holidays, I went back to London because I had decent employment there. And within a few months, I got an even better position in Liverpool. I began to enjoy the work there, building rather than destroying ships. And Germany, whenever I returned ... the country didn't feel like home anymore. I did keep in touch with my relatives and visited them as often as I could but, one by one, the older generation died, and I haven't been back for more than ten years now.

'Towards the end of my working life, I had a well-paying job as an engineer for a large shipbuilding company in Liverpool, and I could have comfortably retired anywhere in Britain. But without the work, there wasn't really much for me there, except far too much time to think. The war suddenly kept coming back to me, and then I remembered the Lofoten. The memories of what happened here never really left me alone. When I found out that Moskenesvær had been established in the meantime, I

sold my house in Merseyside and moved here. It felt like a futile attempt to retrace my steps to the start of the tragic succession of events, and to try and find meaning in them. Until today, I never understood what drew me back to this place. I just had the feeling that there was something I still had to do. I've always wondered why. Now, I finally know the answer.'

Peter smiled at Siobhán but then became concerned. 'Sorry, I didn't notice you're getting cold. You're shivering.'

'It's all right. I'm simply a bit tired from the long journey.'

'Come on, then. Let's go back inside.'

He got up from the boulder and carefully stretched his legs. 'Just briefly, I wanted to show you something. Here, directly underneath us, is that cave I told you about, in which we survived the blizzard together with the British. I heard there is a narrow crack at the end of the passage that leads up onto the top of the headland and exits among these rocks over there. But I never tried to find it. The main entrance is down by the shore.'

Peter took a few careful steps closer to the precipice and watched a motorboat as it slowly rounded the headland to enter the little bay. 'Tomorrow, if you wanted to stay here for another day, and the weather has cleared up by then, we could get my boat ready. I haven't been out yet since last autumn, but if the waves aren't too strong, we could go on a quick tour of the islands, visit some of the other villages. Also the cave . . . I wouldn't want to scramble down the cliff to get to it, quite frankly, and I certainly wouldn't be able to climb up again. But, at high tide, we could take the boat right up to the entrance and take a look inside.'

'Sure, that would be great.'

‘I suppose you’ll be staying at the guesthouse down in the village?’

‘I was going to take the evening ferry back to Bodø, but ... Couldn’t I sleep on your sofa tonight? I’m not difficult to accommodate. I’ve got simple needs, you know, and my own sleeping bag.’

He seemed surprised.

‘Look, Peter, I know we’ve had a bit of a rocky start, what with you thinking that I lied to you about who I was, and me thinking you wanted to push me over the edge of the cliff as soon as meeting me. But from then on, I don’t know ... No hard feelings?’

‘None whatsoever, Siobhán.’

He smiled but then quickly turned away and forced himself to take a few more steps closer to the precipice. ‘I haven’t been back there once during all the years that I’ve lived on this island. But I suspect that, one day, in my mind, I’ll go down to the shore again. I’ll walk out to the water’s edge and, out of the misty depth of time, our old boat will quietly emerge and pick me up for my last journey. But that moment has yet to come. Until then, there are still things I need to do.’

His expression had become dark again, the same combination of anger and grief it had shown before. Although it had been he who had recounted past events, inadvertently, Siobhán had evidently passed on to him important information that had confirmed some long-held suspicions – elements of the past he was not ready to discuss.

‘Peter, why don’t you come to visit Britain again? This sum-

mer, perhaps. I could show you Norwich, if you haven't been there, where I grew up with Gran. Cambridge, where I began to go to university, is just around the corner. I'll also show you St Andrews, where I finished my studies. We can then go up to Aberdeen, where I live now, doing postdoctoral studies. From there, we can visit Moray Firth, where I do part of my research. You know how beautiful the north of Scotland is. You'd be coming as a friend now, a welcome guest, and you could finally close the book on history. As a matter of fact, if you moved there permanently, you could keep an eye on me.'

'And vice versa, you mean?' He smiled gratefully. 'Well, for now, I can still manage all right on my own. But I'm not getting any younger, I grant you that. Which also means, of course, that I can't move around anymore as easily as you can.'

'Just promise to think about it. And remember, it could only be for a holiday.'

'I'll do that, Siobhán. But anyway, I'm glad to know you'll be happy there. In the meantime, we should go back inside. The wind is turning easterly and is getting stronger. With the cold air from the continent flowing out over the warmer water, there will be plenty of snow tonight.'

CHAPTER SEVEN

PARA BELLUM

Peter hung up Siobhán's parka next to his own coat again. 'I shouldn't have kept you outside for so long. That was silly of me. I completely lost track of the time, and now you can't stop shivering – and your cough is getting worse too, I noticed that. Let's go into the kitchen. It's the warmest room in the house, and I'll make us some tea.'

He walked ahead, glancing back over his shoulder. 'But you're not just cold and tired, are you? There is something else troubling you. As soon as I saw you, I knew you weren't here on holidays.'

'How?'

'Siobhán, it's one thing to go camping in the wilderness for a few days, living under modest conditions, but you look awful.'

'Hey, I showered this morning. I even washed my hair.'

'Then you know what I mean. You must have seen yourself.'

Yes, she knew exactly what he meant.

He studied her critically. 'What happened to your legs?'

'It's nothing, just some bruises that take a bit longer to heal than perhaps they should, that's all.'

He seemed unconvinced and began rummaging in one of the kitchen cupboards. With a sceptical look, he pulled out a package of tablets and checked the expiration date. 'Here, take one of these now and keep the rest for later.'

He filled a glass with water from the tap and handed it to Siobhán with an encouraging nod.

‘And this works?’

‘If you believe in it. But you need something to eat as well. I don’t have a great selection of food to offer, and it’s a bit late for breakfast, but if you’re not too lofty for bacon and eggs . . .’

‘You know, Peter, that would be perfect right now.’

He lit the gas cooker with a match. Then, he put on a water kettle and a frying pan. But even as he went through the motions of preparing dinner, his mind was preoccupied with other matters, his thoughts still far away, out there in the past.

‘How about you, Peter? How did you get your leg injured?’

‘It wasn’t what you might think, just a silly accident at work. I didn’t even manage to get an honourable battle scar out of that damned war.’

As the strips of bacon began to sizzle, an appetising smell spread through the kitchen.

Peter watched her out of the corner of his eye. ‘Siobhán, please don’t hover about like that while I’m cooking, it’s making me nervous. If you’re that hungry, you should have said something earlier. Look, why don’t you sit down over there by that table, next to the warm stove, and tell me something about yourself for a change. For example, you mentioned these different universities you attended. What exactly did you study there?’

‘Well, at Cambridge, those were the undergraduate years, reading general courses in natural sciences. Then, at St Andrews, I got a doctoral degree in marine biology, specifically on the subject of “Spectral Analysis of Echolocation Signals and Sound

Communication in Bottlenose Dolphins,” which I continue to work on at Aberdeen. Basically, what I’m doing is to analyse underwater recordings of wild dolphins, to find out how they communicate, or how they use sound to navigate in murky water or in the dark – a concept we call “sonar.” But it’s a bit technical, you know, so I won’t bore you with that.’

Peter glanced up from stirring the scrambled eggs. ‘Don’t be cheeky.’

He tried not to show it, but he was clearly proud of her. Once again, Siobhán realised that she had gone on that journey much too late. The meeting with Peter should have taken place years ago, when her grandmother had still been alive. If only she had not ignored the past and had begun asking questions sooner . . .

‘So, you took a break from this research to retrace your grandparents’ steps?’

‘Technically, I’m on sick leave at the moment. Last autumn, I got a temporary position on one of our Antarctic bases. Then . . . Well, I had a bit of an accident down there – the legs, you know, but that’s a whole ’nother story. Anyway, I got back to England about a year sooner than expected. And just over a week afterwards, Gran died. As I said earlier, I was with her during her final minutes, and she began talking about her husband. It was her last wish that I should find out about what had happened to him during the war. Therefore, after the funeral, I went to that submarine archive in Germany, and now I’m here. But I have to say, Peter, it wasn’t easy to track you down.’

‘No, I can imagine – and I meant to ask you about that. But if it’s a long story, you better tell me after dinner.’

Peter fell silent again, following his own thoughts. But he looked up when he heard Siobhán chuckle. ‘What’s so funny, Siobhán?’

‘Sorry, but you sounded exactly like Gran just now.’

‘Did I? Why does that amuse you?’

‘I don’t know. I just thought that the two of you could have been good friends – as you were, of course. Don’t you have any mementos of your time together. I found nothing at Gran’s place when I looked through her things after she’d died – not surprisingly, as she had hardly anything left after the war.’

‘No, she would have been forced to leave most of her belongings behind in Kiel. And as I mentioned, your grandparents’ house there was completely burnt out. I still have some photographs that I could show you. Other than that, I’m afraid there is nothing left but memories. Although ... there is one other thing I could give you. It had been given to your grandfather, and I brought it back from Norway after the *Atlantis* had disappeared, when I returned to Germany. Now it’s sitting upstairs in a corner, wondering if it might ever become useful again, or otherwise remain obsolete. I’ll show it to you after we’ve eaten.’

* * *

Kneeling beside the old trunk, Peter reluctantly shifted the various objects inside it, with several sidelong glances at Siobhán, as if having second thoughts about sharing its contents.

Finally, he removed a small cardboard box and placed it on the floor. Then followed an irregular object wrapped in a white linen cloth, which he kept in his hand as he gingerly straightened

up.

‘This is Hans’ old service pistol. We only had a few firearms on board. Except on the occasion of being captured and boarded by the enemy, they were of no use to us. But Hans always kept this one in his locker on *U-112*. He gave it to me after we had landed here and I was about to leave with the other three to establish where we were – when we didn’t know if there would be people living on the island. As we scrambled up onto the mountain, I put the pistol into my pocket. And in the confusion afterwards, I forgot to return it.’

Peter indicated the cardboard box. ‘There are some rounds left from back then. Most of them should still fire. But they are standard 9-mm cartridges anyway, and you wouldn’t have any problems replacing them. The magazine is in the grip. You release it by pressing down this catch here, on the left side of the trigger guard. It pops out like this – you see? It holds eight rounds at a time and easily snaps back in, like so. If the magazine were full, you would preload a cartridge into the chamber by pulling back this toggle at the top of the barrel, as far as it goes, and then letting it snap back. Now, before you can pull the trigger, all you need to do is to release the safety by pushing this lever forward with your thumb.’

He held out the pistol with the grip turned towards Siobhán. ‘You can have it, if you want.’

‘What would I do with it?’

‘It’s your grandfather’s only possession I can give you. It’s very accurate and generally reliable; a bit old now, but it’s still a good weapon – a Parabellum.’

‘Has it been used?’

He hesitated. ‘Probably ... most likely, yes.’

‘By him?’

‘No, not for shooting.’

‘What else for, Peter?’

‘As backup.’

The metal was still cold from its stay in the old trunk. It was of a dull dark grey hue, with a multitude of fine scratches, and an engraving that read “Erfurt, 1911.” It had seen two major wars and survived. It was always the weapons that emerged from wars being the stronger for them. Those were the big impulses that kept their species evolving, while humans fell by the wayside and were left behind.

But old as the pistol was, it had no recollection of the past. It had no conscience. It was completely impartial – just a tool, nothing more – neither good nor evil. And on the ferry, it would not have been too difficult to bring it back to England – only for the purpose of what? How could it be used with a clear conscience? As backup? But backup for which eventualities?

It was well balanced and not difficult to hold steady with both hands, even with arms outstretched, the sight fixed at the centre of the window – and at her own reflection inside it. If Alison indeed had been abducted, was that how she had last been seen alive, down the barrel of a gun, trained on her dear face? Looking into her frightened eyes, now beyond hope but still pleading?

No, never. She did not plead – not she.

If you had the courage to look her in the eyes before you shot

her, if that is what you did, she would have looked straight back at you. And it's easy enough, isn't it? All you need to do is to pull back the trigger, slowly and steadily. With only a weak mechanical resistance, there is nothing to overcome but your own inhibition. But when I have you in my sight, will you plead? Or will you taunt me instead, thinking that I'm reluctant to do it, that I'm too weak? Too weak? After everything you took from me? Do you seriously think I'll let you get away with that? Do you? Do you really?

Yes, it would have been so easy. But no bullet could make another's work undone. And that was what they would have wanted her to do: to pull the trigger and become one of them, to become a shadow herself, and blend into the dark.

But there, in the window, her vague reflection still hovered at the thin boundary between light and darkness – the weapon lowered again to her side, a picture of dejection. True, for the moment, the great avenger was gone, and all that remained was someone who was lost, far from home, and even farther from the truth. But despite everything that had happened, she was still there, her reflection only getting clearer as the light outside slowly faded away. And, eventually, she would get onto their track, of that she was certain.

'I appreciate the offer, Peter. It's just that ... I wouldn't know what to do with it. I know it belonged to my grandfather but, to be honest, it means nothing to me.'

Eying her closely, he took back the pistol – just a little too quickly, perhaps. He hastily wrapped it up again in the linen

cloth and carefully placed it on top of the other contents in the trunk, together with the box of cartridges.

Then, with an inviting gesture, he walked over to the seating area. As he settled into the sofa, his grave look gave way once again to a friendly smile. ‘Tell me more about your part of the story. What did Elsbeth do after she left Germany? How did she manage to get to England, do you know?’

‘I think it must have been with the Jewish couple you mentioned – with some Jewish refugees from Hamburg, at any rate. They travelled together to the Hook of Holland. From there, they were taken across the Channel by Dutch fishermen who were involved with the resistance. At the shore near Harwich, they were met by friends or relatives of some of the refugees who brought them to London, where they had arranged accommodation for them in the East End. Then, two days before New Year’s Eve, that terrible air raid happened, as you probably know – “the Second Great Fire of London.” Gran and Mum spent the night in an underground shelter. Although there had been some damage done to the house they stayed in, the next morning, they had no choice but to return there. That’s when they were discovered by air raid wardens who came to check on the building, to see if it was still safe, or if there had been any fatalities inside it. Gran spoke next to no English at the time, and it was perfectly obvious that she was German. She and Mum were therefore arrested and taken to the nearest police station, where they were held for several days and interrogated. Rather than pretending to be Jewish, or inventing some other explanation for why she had decided to enter Britain, Gran gave her actual name and told the police that

her husband was the commander of a German submarine. She hoped that, if there really was something about these rumours concerning a defection, or if her husband had arrived in Britain for any other reason, they might be reunited. The police and the Home Office did make enquiries, but no one had heard of him or his submarine, and no one was willing to believe Gran's story. So, at a time when many internees were being released again, she was classified as high-risk enemy alien, and she and Mum were sent to the internment camp in Port Erin on the Isle of Man.

‘Through the Red Cross, she was allowed to send one or two letters to Germany each month. After a while, she got a letter back from her father. He told her that her mother had died “from a broken heart,” when she found out through Gran’s letter of her “desertion,” as he put it. But Gran said that her mother had been weak before.’

Peter nodded. ‘I think so, yes. I didn’t know the family particularly well. They were quite a bit above my station. I only saw them once or twice at some official navy function. But her mother seemed nice, and I remember Elsbeth worrying about her health.’

‘Exactly. And anyway, that was a terrible thing to say. Gran loved her mum. Then, to make matters worse, she got a similarly hostile response to her letter from her husband’s family. According to them, he had died a heroic death in the service of his country, and she had shamefully betrayed him and the entire nation. They never forgave her for going over to the enemy. I suspect that neither her nor her husband’s family ever told anyone about the letters they received from her. They would have

been so ashamed or afraid of the repercussions for themselves that, rather than publicly admitting her flight to England, they went along with the official lie that the women and children had died in the fire. But now that I think about it – what about your or Ingrid’s family? Wouldn’t they have told Gran that you at least were still alive, together with the truth about what really had led up to the disappearance of *U-112*?’

‘Definitely, yes; but Elsbeth wouldn’t have known how to contact them. She didn’t know them at all. Neither my nor Ingrid’s family lived in Kiel, and your grandmother never met them.’

‘I see . . . Anyway, she must have realised at this point that returning to Germany, once she was released from the camp, would be too unpleasant and quite possibly dangerous, if even her own relatives saw her as a traitor.

‘In the camp, she began working as a nurse in the medical unit, while Mum went to school. Away from the chaos of war, with a proper diet and care, Mum recovered from the pneumonia she had contracted in London; whereas it is probably safe to assume that, outside the camp, she would have died during that first winter. As a child, she wasn’t classified as an internee herself and was free to roam the village. There, in one of the shops, she made friends with an Irish lady who sometimes looked after her when Gran was working. The shopkeeper told Mum old legends and fairy tales from Ireland, and she got fascinated by that mysterious island which was so very close – as everyone assured her – just out of sight beneath the western horizon, and yet out of reach. I don’t think that Mum ever managed to visit Ireland, but

her choice of a Gaelic name for me goes back to that childhood fascination.

‘They stayed in the internment camp until the final year of the war. Then, Gran was told that she was no longer considered to be a threat and that she would be released. To be honest, I think they kept her in the camp as long as they did because it was the safest place for her and the little girl. It allowed her to do some meaningful work, rather than hiding all the time and struggling to find shelter and food, day after day.

‘This was just after the invasion of Normandy, and hospitals in Britain were overwhelmed with wounded soldiers returning from the Continent – in addition to all the captured enemy soldiers. Therefore, part of the agreement for Gran’s release from the camp was that she would continue to work as a nurse. Of course, she didn’t really have a choice. She had to support herself somehow.

‘She and Mum were therefore brought over to Liverpool and put up in the nurses’ home of the Royal Infirmary. By then, Gran spoke good English and, despite her accent, she said she never experienced any major hostility towards her. People simply assumed that she had to be Jewish. But for Mum, it must have been a major shock to leave that peaceful island and to be sent to a big war-torn city. She would have been nine years old by then – five when they had escaped from Germany and had been interned. At the time of their release, she would have had little recollection of Kiel and the few weeks in London. Whatever she had been told on the Isle of Man about what was going on in the outside world, she could never have imagined what war really meant. And then,

suddenly, to be confronted with this apocalyptic wasteland – it must have felt like a nightmare to her.

‘When the war came to an end, Gran contacted the Red Cross again to find out if her husband had become a prisoner of war, but they had no record of him. As there was still no news of him from Germany either, she finally gave up. She stayed in England and continued working at the LRI. Then, in the Fifties, she and Mum became British citizens.’

Peter reacted in surprise. ‘Elsbeth and Lena lived in Liverpool during all this time?’

‘They did, yes, in Everton.’

He leaned back with a groan. ‘And all it would have taken was a random meeting in the street, or in a shop somewhere.’

‘I know, and I am so sorry. But here we are, Peter – you see, we did meet in the end.’

‘We did indeed. So, you were born in Liverpool then?’

‘I was. After leaving school, Mum also became a nurse at the LRI. But, as I said earlier, she died soon after I was born. In addition to losing her daughter, Gran then had to look after a little bundle named Siobhán – named after her long-lost husband, as I realise now. She stayed with me in Liverpool for two years, at which point she was transferred to the main hospital in Norwich, where she worked until her retirement.’

Peter processed the new information quietly and without any outward signs of emotions. But hearing about the other half of history had clearly set a train of thought in motion.

‘Peter, I still don’t see why you were so suspicious of me when I told you who I was. It couldn’t have been because you’d

heard that my mother had been killed in that fire when she was just a child. You said yourself, even before we met, you had doubts about that, and you suspected that they might have escaped to Britain.'

He gazed thoughtfully at Siobhán for a moment and then nodded slowly. 'You're right. There was more to it than that. And I'm afraid this is where the story gets really dark. As I mentioned earlier, after my release from the prisoner of war camp, I immediately began to enquire about Ingrid and Elsbeth but, initially, without success. Then, I got in touch with a particular group of people, in the hope that somehow they had heard of them. That's how I found out about something that made me believe that your grandmother and mother had not survived the war.'

He hesitated again. 'You may know that during the first few post-war years, in a tragic twist of history, there was a violent upsurge of Fascism in Britain. Just as the Nazis had done after the end of the First World War, British Fascists preyed on soldiers returning from the battlefields, often seriously wounded, only to find their homes destroyed and their loved ones maimed or dead or missing. But not only lay the country in ruins, there was also the perceived loss of status and identity that came with the collapse of the old Empire, mirroring again what had happened in Germany. This grief and desperation was carefully exploited by the Fascists who told the returning soldiers that the British government was to blame for all the death and destruction, by fighting an unnecessary and unjust war; that the Germans had purely acted in defence of their homeland; that, after all, war had been declared by Britain on Germany, and not the other way around.

‘To make matters worse, a wave of antisemitism was stirred up by news of a Zionist insurgency and acts of terrorism against the British Administration in Palestine. And so, by the time I was released from the prisoner of war camp, there it was again: Fascists marching in the streets, waving their flags, singing their songs, attacking Jewish homes, and getting engaged in street fights with Socialist groups. It was the Twenties in Germany all over again, as if we had never fought the war; as if, like a dark cloud, the old evil had simply wafted across the North Sea.

‘But even more dangerous than that were the right-wing underground networks. They included some of the richest families in the country, leading industrialists who, more than anything else, feared a Socialist uprising in Britain and the overthrow of the monarchy, as had happened in Russia. To them, it was the empowerment of the uncivilised working classes that was to blame for the decline of traditional values and social order. In their minds, the Continental Fascists had been the only ones brave enough to stand up against the real enemy who, of course, was the Soviet Union. For years during the war, these people had entrenched themselves in their country estates, at a safe distance away from the embattled urban centres. They had weathered the storm. But now, with the Nazis defeated, their worldview was called into question – and they were not going to give up without a fight.

‘I heard about one of these groups through my former commanding officer on *U-115* who, in turn, had found out about them from some of the more fanatical prisoners in the camp in Scotland. As a former high-ranking Nazi officer, he had man-

aged to get an introduction to that group and had been invited to their regular meetings in London. He told me that I would be welcome to come along. I'm not sure what exactly his motives were; whether, even after the war, he still supported this kind of ideology; or whether, in those desperate times, he hoped to get financial support from them. For me ... I genuinely believed that there was a realistic possibility that Ingrid and Elsbeth, rather than being arrested and interned after their arrival in Britain, had somehow found shelter with one of these influential families that had been sympathetic to the German cause throughout the war. After everything else had failed, I thought that, through that group, I had one more chance of finding my family again, or at least discovering what had happened to them.

'The first meetings I attended were fairly innocuous gatherings in an old gentlemen's club, where politics was completely off the table as a subject for conversation. Despite the open demonstrations in the streets, being a Fascist continued to be very dangerous. Even years after the war, collaborators with the Germans were still being executed. After a while, though, I had established sufficient credibility for myself to be invited to the more secretive meetings. I suppose, from their point of view, I had the wartime record of a true German hero – one of very few survivors who had served in the submarine force right from the beginning. And having listened to Nazi propaganda for the past several years, I was abundantly familiar with the right kind of rhetoric for those occasions.

'As I got to know the group better, it became clear that they had in fact been part of the underground network that had sup-

ported our espionage operation. It was then that I realised that this was becoming a risky game. With the rumours that – not only in Germany, but also among our former collaborators in Britain – surrounded the disappearance of *U-112*, it was impossible to anticipate the reaction that I would have received had I revealed to anyone inside the secret organisation that I had been one of the officers who had served on the lost submarine. As the truth about what had happened had been covered up by the Germans, it would have depended on which of the two false stories had been accepted. This could have meant that either *U-112* had been sunk by the British, or that the crew had betrayed their special mission and had gone over to the enemy. Then, how would the former collaborators react to the news that not all crew members had been aboard *U-112* on that fateful day? In the case of a sinking, would they suspect that we, who had stayed behind, were the traitors and had somehow managed to alert the British, so that they had been able to intercept *U-112*? Or, in the case of a defection, had we perhaps refused to be part of this betrayal to our country and had therefore stayed behind? Initially, I had no way of knowing what the accepted truth had become. But over the next two or three months, as I continued to get closer to the inner circle of that secret organisation, I found out more about what had happened in Britain during the war.

‘The original network of Nazi supporters had been formed back in the spring of 1940, partly from former members of the British Union of Fascists who had been forced into the underground after the arrest of their leader, and partly from the old established elite. Faced with their perceived common enemy of

Socialism, this unlikely alliance of revolutionaries and conservatives had managed to build up a formidable organisation that had managed to infiltrate several branches of the armed forces, as well as Military Intelligence. But then, in the wake of the mysterious disappearance of *U-112*, something happened that split the organisation into two camps – the murder of a little girl.’

He fell silent, his head bowed and his eyes closed. Then, he looked up again. ‘You remember that couple I mentioned earlier, who owned the building in the Scottish Highlands, where we had planned to collect all this secret material? A few days before Christmas 1940, they were urgently called to London and a girl, about five years old, was given into their care by members of the underground network. The couple were told that the girl was the child of the German submarine commander whose crew had been selected for the espionage operation. But rather than helping to get important military documents out of Britain, they had planned to defect and to take the submarine, with all its secret equipment and codebooks, over to the enemy. Fortunately, the Germans had been warned just in time and had been able to prevent the defection. A few days later, the commander’s wife, who had fled Germany together with her daughter, had been apprehended by some of the double agents in a London Underground station that was used as a shelter, after they had attracted some attention there the previous night. During the interrogation of the mother, the daughter had to be cared for by someone else. However, the following day already, the couple were told that, to preserve the secrecy of the organisation, the mother had been eliminated, and now the daughter had to die as

well.

‘As dedicated to the German cause and the Nazi ideology as the couple were, they could not get themselves to become complicit in such a crime. They themselves were childless and had taken to the little girl immediately. They refused to hold her responsible for whatever treachery her parents may have committed. They therefore only claimed to have carried out the murder, intending to hide the girl in their remote home until the excitement had died down, hoping to be able to obtain a false birth certificate for her and to raise her as their own or an adopted child under a different name. They were convinced that she was no danger to the underground network; that she was still young enough to eventually forget her parents; that, at least, any lingering recollection of them could be dealt with by telling her about an accident in which they had died; that she would ultimately accept her new guardians if they only gave her a safe and loving home.

‘But the double agents involved in the underground network were suspicious. With the certainty of the death penalty hanging over them if they were ever discovered and convicted of spying, they could not tolerate anything that would threaten their secret mission. To them, the risk of the German child being correctly identified was too great. Therefore, one night, they showed up at the lonely building. The couple tried to resist, but the agents took the girl from them, and they ... they killed her. That is what the couple told me, in the strictest confidence. They only opened up to me after I subtly suggested that I knew more about the story of *U-112* than was officially acknowledged. I had the impression

they were relieved to be able to talk to someone at last, despite clearly still being scared of the consequences if these events ever became publicly known. I think they felt genuine remorse about what happened during the war, and I have no doubt that they told me the truth – except for one thing. Because of that, until today, I believed that this poor child really had been Lena.’

Unable to continue, he got up from the sofa and slowly walked to window. ‘I cannot even begin to imagine how Ingrid would have felt in that situation when they took Rosemarie away from her, and what else she and my little girl had to go through before the end.’

The tone of his voice was as hollow as the eyes of the ghostly reflection that looked back at Siobhán.

‘Peter, I’m so sorry, I don’t know what to say.’

He turned away from the window. ‘You’re here, Siobhán. That means more to me than words could ever express.’

He struggled to suppress his tears and remained standing, his back to the window, until his breathing had returned to normal. Then, he sat down again and reclined with a pained expression, apparently exhausted.

‘As I mentioned earlier, after the sinking of *U-112*, the espionage operation was abandoned. In response to that traumatic failure to protect Rosemarie, the couple distanced themselves from the more politically minded Fascists and, with several other members of the former underground network, founded that secret organisation I briefly joined after the war. They called themselves The Order of the New Atlanteans, and monthly meetings were held up in their place in Scotland although, otherwise, they

had moved away from there, back to London. They felt that their old family home would be forever haunted.

‘To escape the horrors of what they had witnessed, they retreated into a romantic dream world in which, during some pre-historic era, an advanced alien species had arrived on our planet and settled on the now lost island of Atlantis. There, drawing on their super-human cosmic powers, they had developed a society far more advanced than anything that humans have managed to accomplish in all the millennia since then. But even this utopia was destined to fail as their island and their civilisation sank beneath the sea after a massive earthquake. And so, they left Earth again for another world. The Order members believed that these Atlanteans were the true ancestors of the Aryan race, and they saw themselves as their rightful heirs.

‘While the war escalated around them and turned against the Fascist ideology, it seems they developed a foundation myth for their Order that may have given them hope. Through their previous involvement in the underground network, they had had access to information from both sides, some true, some speculative. They were therefore left with incomplete and conflicting rumours about either a defection of the crew of *U-112* to the British, or a sinking of the submarine by the British. Out of this uncertainty, and having lost the trust in their former allies, a new conspiracy theory grew that lay somewhere along the middle.

‘In one element, it was remarkably close to the truth. In the aftermath of the disappearance of *U-112*, they had heard about the sinking of a British troop transport in the vicinity of the Lofoten, only a few days before *U-112* had been reported as hav-

ing been sunk. They came to believe, correctly, that some of the British soldiers had managed to get off the ship and into life rafts, and had got stranded on one of the uninhabited islands. Shortly afterwards, *U-112*, heavily damaged by the encounter with the British destroyer, had arrived there as well. But then, the story they developed deviated substantially from reality.

‘They claimed that the British soldiers had found something incredibly valuable on that lonely island, a relic of the Atlantean civilisation that had washed ashore. The soldiers had recognised it for what it was but couldn’t do anything with it, as they were unable to leave the island and were faced with slowly freezing or starving to death. This all changed when, fortuitously, they met the German submariners. The two groups then conspired to collaborate. They left the island together on *U-112*, acquired another vessel, stored the Atlantean relic in *U-112*, and then deliberately sank the submarine by flooding the diving tanks in shallow water, somewhere near the Lofoten. The encounter with the British destroyer was then used as a convenient opportunity to disappear and to go into hiding in South America. When the war was finally over, they would return to Europe, raise *U-112* again, and continue the search for more treasures of the Atlantean civilisation, perhaps even for the lost homeland itself.

‘Precisely that was what the Order wanted to prevent. They could not stand the idea that something as precious as the sacred artefacts of their noble ancestors would fall into the wrong hands; that they would be exploited by an unworthy group of people for nefarious aims. They even believed that the recovery of the lost homeland would lead to a racially and morally pure

society that would be modelled on the lost civilisation of the Atlanteans. This utopia would then replace the violent and corrupt human cultures of the present, which were caught in an endless destructive cycle of warfare.

‘The Order therefore began to collect money to organise an expedition to find *U-112* – but no one knew where the submarine had been sunk. There are far too many islands in the Lofoten to launch underwater searches around all of them. They needed more specific information. But as the cover-up in Germany had been quite effective, any attempts to track down former crew members failed.

‘So, when I met them, a few years after the war, following the decisive defeat of the Nazis, the Order had abandoned all hope of finding *U-112* and, through it, at least a small part of that great Atlantean civilisation. They were still determined to carry on with their secret organisation, although they had decided that driving all the way up to the Highlands was too time-consuming. Their meetings had therefore shifted to London.

‘Looking back, and knowing what I know now, I find it curious that, with all their openness, the couple never told me that the girl who had been put into their care had not been the daughter of the commander of *U-112*. They spoke fluent German. They must have talked to Rosemarie. She must have corrected them vehemently when they called her by the wrong name. As she was far too young to be coached into telling convincing lies, consistently over a period of weeks, they must have understood then that the wrong child – and therefore the wrong mother – had been apprehended. I can only guess that they kept quiet about

the girl's true identity to prevent any further acts of violence in likely futile attempts to find the commander's wife.

'Before Ingrid got caught, Elsbeth and she must have got separated somehow, in the crowded bomb shelter most likely. Then, when Ingrid and Rosemarie had vanished, Elsbeth must have realised that she had to be very careful and probably stayed away from the public shelters as much as possible. By the time it had been communicated to the double agents that, in fact, two women with their daughters had fled to England, Elsbeth and Lena were safe in the internment camp on the Isle of Man, as you just told me.

'You can imagine, Siobhán, that I had no desire to spend any more time with these people as absolutely necessary. The dangers aside that came with infiltrating that secret organisation, I was in no position to act on any of the information that I obtained. As far as Britain was concerned, the most serious crime they had committed was the espionage operation. But I had been involved in that as much as they had, albeit on the other side – and as an enemy alien, my word would have counted for nothing anyway, especially against these influential people. Beyond that, I had no tangible evidence for the abduction and murder. Therefore, as I had apparently been unable to find out anything about my wife and daughter, I stopped attending the meetings.'

He poured more tea for them from the thermos jug. 'Are you going to tell me now how you managed to track me down in this remote place?'

'Sure . . . As I mentioned earlier, after Gran's funeral, I went to visit the submarine archive in Laboe, and it turned out that

there is very little information about *U-112* in the German records. But your mysterious posting back to Narvik, when the rest of your flotilla was transferred to France, seemed a bit dodgy, and it made the curator of the archive suspicious enough to dig a little deeper, rather than accepting the official version of the reason behind the loss of *U-112*. He then began to look up any surviving officers who had served on other submarines in Kiel, at the same time as my grandfather, hoping that perhaps they might be able to tell me something about him. That is how he found Ralf Behring. There were some discrepancies about his service record prior to taking over the *U-115*. And when the curator found out that Mr Behring had moved up here, soon after the opening of the border between East and West Germany, the curious bits of information started to pile up. To be honest, I don't know what I expected to find. I just had nowhere else to go. This was the last lead I had left, and I didn't want to let Gran down. I arrived here yesterday evening on the ferry. Then, this morning, I was told that Behring's house was up here on the plateau. But before I had the chance to talk to him, I ran into you. So, you see, our meeting was only a fortunate coincidence, as I'd actually been searching for someone else.'

'Hmm . . . Péter was visibly dissatisfied with this explanation. 'Siobhán, forgive me, but there is something you're not telling me. Earlier on, when I told you about that bay in Scotland where we'd been supposed to land during our secret mission, this clearly meant something to you, and not in a trivial way.'

'No, you're right, not in a trivial way at all – and it's complicated. At this point, I'm not sure myself if there really is an

underlying connection, or if it's simply a strange set of coincidences. The situation is this. While I was away on Antarctica, Alison, a good friend of mine, somehow disappeared from her flat in Cambridge. At first, everyone thought that she'd gone away to Dublin on a sabbatical, as indeed she had planned to do, but I couldn't believe that. I was quite sure that she would never have left without telling me, never mind how complicated communications are with Antarctica. I was therefore afraid that the same may have happened to her as had happened to a friend of hers, just over a month earlier. That friend had been abducted from her flat and had been found murdered a few days later in an abandoned manor house located up in the mountains south of Loch Cairnbawn. The building has a somewhat shady history – as I discovered when I became worried about Alison and went to check it out – with several rumours hanging over it, especially concerning military intelligence activities during the Second World War. There is plenty of evidence inside the building that the owners were heavily invested in Germanic mythology. But aside from that, I didn't find anything suspicious.'

Peter leaned forwards, clearly startled. 'You broke into someone's house looking for your friend? And into the New Atlanteans' old headquarters of all places?'

'Now, Peter, don't you get started on me as well. I was already reprimanded about that by the police when I told them . . . Well, I just thought it would help them in their investigation if they knew about these rumours and about the potential connection to a little chapel not far from the manor house. But I didn't break in, technically. I simply entered through the front door

because I found the key. And anyway, I didn't know anything about this Order at the time. All I knew then was that, leading up to the murder, the building had been used occasionally for some Satanic rituals – but I still have no idea how that fits into the overall picture, if it has any significance at all.'

Despite Peter's obvious concern and bewilderment, the corners of his mouth twitched in a flicker of a smile, as he leaned back again.

'The thing is, I was worried sick. I didn't think straight. I didn't know what was going on. But the official explanation for Alison's absence just didn't ... It wasn't good enough. That's the only reason why I behaved like that. Normally, I don't travel all over the place, willy-nilly, and I don't usually walk into other people's homes uninvited. But ever since I got back from Antarctica, I've been confronted with this endless string of tantalising clues, nothing but the vaguest suggestions of connections. I follow up on the possibility that Alison's disappearance might be connected to her friend's murder, and it leads me to an old manor house. I follow up on Gran's last request to find out about her husband's disappearance, and it leads me to the same manor house. Two disappearances potentially linked to the same building, although the two issues are completely unrelated – or at least they should be. But now that I heard your story, I'm beginning to suspect that Gran may have been right. You see, just before she died, she became distressed about Alison's absence, when previously it hadn't bothered her at all. Suddenly, she seemed to think that Alison had been abducted, as had happened to Ingrid during the war. She mentioned Ingrid's name, but didn't explain who

she was, and I never got the chance to ask. Afterwards, when I slowly began to process what had happened, I thought that Gran had simply been confused, you know, after the fall and having fainted. But there may at least be an indirect connection through the old manor house. After all, it's a creepy place, and creepy places attract creepy people.'

'But Elsbeth couldn't have known that. She didn't know about the manor house, or indeed any aspect of our secret mission.'

'No, you're right, Peter. She must have had another reason for making that connection, regardless whether she was right or not.'

The connection certainly seemed to be there, somewhere within the confusing cloud of words and phrases and names, tantalisingly close, but never concrete. All the disappearances of people and things – a sunken submarine, and a sunken island – Atlantis – The Order of the New Atlanteans – their search for a lost civilisation, for lost treasures.

'Peter, there is something I wanted to ask you. When I checked Alison's flat to see if there was anything that would give me an indication as to what had happened to her, I found a note she had written, apparently shortly before she disappeared. It said something about a guarded Secret, with a capital S, and there were two words that I can't really put into any relevant context. Perhaps they mean something to you.'

Peter leaned forwards again, looking tense. 'What were these two words, Siobhán?'

'It's how the note started. There were no proper sentences. It simply said "Ultima Thule."'

‘Ultima Thule ...’ He barely whispered the words. ‘Why didn’t you tell me this earlier?’

‘Why should I have? What does it mean?’

He wordlessly stared at Siobhán for a moment. Then, he got up and quickly walked around the table to pull her up from the chair with a firm grip above her elbow. ‘Who knows you’re here?’

‘No one. I told no one where I was going.’

‘Good, that’s something at least.’

‘Peter, what’s wrong?’

He checked his watch. ‘You must leave the island – tonight. You have just enough time to catch the ferry. No, Siobhán, listen: you must take this very seriously now. You are in great danger. You need to return to England immediately. You need to go to the police as soon as you arrive there – this is very important. They are the only ones who can help you. They have to protect you, you understand?’

‘Yes, but what is all this about?’

‘That secret organisation – The Order of the New Atlanteans – it seems they are still active, or active again, after all these years. How Elsbeth could have found out about this, I don’t know. But I want you to be absolutely clear about this: the people you’re dealing with are ruthless. They will not rest until they have found this elusive Secret. To this end, they are prepared to do anything – just as they were fifty years ago. You cannot run around like this anymore, digging up the past. You don’t know what and whom you’re dealing with, but I do. I encountered these people before, and I’m telling you, you have no chance. You’re up

against an enemy you cannot possibly defeat on your own.’

‘All right, Peter, I get it. But I still don’t understand. What is going on?’

He relaxed his grip around her arm. ‘Ultima Thule was the codename for the secret operation that we were involved in – or, more precisely, it was the name given to the larger plan of an invasion of Britain from the north, of which our espionage mission to Scotland would only have been the first step. In the conspiracy theories that developed afterwards, it became the name of this fictitious quest to find Atlantis. “The Secret” is how the Order referred to the unknown Atlantean artefact they thought had been found. As I said, shortly after the war, they had abandoned the search for *U-112* and the lost homeland of the Atlanteans. But something must have happened recently. Somehow these old stories have been brought back to life. Perhaps a new generation came along, found out about them, and believed in them to such an extent that they are prepared to make another attempt at finding this elusive Secret. Perhaps the old couple broke their silence and revealed to them what they had not dared to tell me many years ago, that the wrong girl had been killed during the war, and that therefore the wife and daughter of the commander of *U-112* may still be alive. As did the previous generations, they would have asked themselves why Elsbeth would have fled Germany if not because she knew of her husband’s plans. They would have assumed that she also knew of the location where *U-112* had been sunk. Finding her now would have been easy, I imagine. And through her, they found you. How your friends got involved in this, I don’t know. This is something you have

to find out. And for that, you must return home and talk to the police.’

‘Home? Which home, Peter? Where do you want me to go when everyone is dead?’

‘You don’t know that, Siobhán. Alison may still be alive. That’s why you have to get back to England, as quickly as possible.’

But Siobhán could see it all now. All those seeming coincidences, all that comforting implausibility – it had all vanished, all turned into crushing certainty. That fatal phone call to her grandmother – that had been the confirmation that Alison was no more, and the warning that Siobhán was going to be next, unless she revealed a conspiracy that never was.

All these things Siobhán knew now. In that brief moment, all at once had been made clear.

When Alison had got the confirmation of what had happened to Kathleen, while they interrogated her, when she understood what was going to happen to her – how long had love lasted? Had it really lasted forever? Or had she cursed Siobhán before the end?

All these romantic notions of their lives having been connected – and Siobhán had never even noticed when Alison had passed away. When she had taken her final breath, when her heart had beaten for the last time, the world for Siobhán had simply carried on. After that, how could she go back to an ordinary life, when everything had become so utterly meaningless.

How much easier was it to let go, to give in to the pull of gravity, just to stay there forever, right there on the floor, slumped

against the armchair – rather than continuing a desperate fight she was bound to lose anyway, sooner or later.

Peter was kneeling next to her, talking with an urgent tone in his voice, although his words were unclear in her mind.

‘Why, Peter? Why do I keep killing people? Everyone I get close to: Mum first, then Kathleen, then Alison, and finally Gran. I’m only here because of the sacrifices they made, in some form or other.’

And while she existed, it would never end. While she was in this world, the shadows of the past would always surround her. But she had no right to burden Peter with that, after the realisation of his own losses.

‘It’s all right, Peter. I’ll get up again. It was only a momentary weakness, but I’m better now. And you’re right, of course, I have to . . . move on.’

He steered her out into the corridor and handed her the parka. ‘I won’t accompany you down to the harbour. I’m too slow, and you have to hurry to catch the ferry. Let me know when you have returned to England. I don’t have a telephone up here. But if you contact the guesthouse where you stayed last night, they will pass your message on to me.’

He handed her the rucksack. ‘As you suggested earlier, I’ll see you in summer, when all this is sorted out.’

‘Yes, Peter, in summer.’

He stepped out of the door and glanced down the narrow path that led back to the village, past the row of houses that clung to the steep mountainside. In most of them, the lights were on now, but there did not seem to be anyone else about. In the

other direction, where the path carried on towards the cliff, the headland lay peacefully under the warm light of the low sun.

Seeing this, Peter relaxed somewhat. ‘All right, go now, Siobhán – run. Look out for yourself. And get in touch as soon as you can.’

CHAPTER EIGHT

INTO DARKNESS

The houses of the little fishing village still looked exactly as they had that morning, when Siobhán had first walked out onto the headland, as if in the meantime nothing had changed at all. The collection of boats still quietly bobbed on the rising tide, and somewhat off to one side from the pier anchored the motor yacht that had arrived that afternoon. Despite the storm clouds approaching from the open sea on the opposite side of the island, a peaceful atmosphere still prevailed over the bay. And on the dark surface of the water, the lights of the departing ferry shimmered unsteadily, as the last link to a troubled world finally slipped away.

Siobhán now realised that, ever since her return from Antarctica, there had never really been a way back to her former life. The sense of disconnect had not been an illusion. Her former life had already ended in a frozen wasteland. From then on, she had been left to chase a set of increasingly distant memories. While there had still been the great mystery to pursue – following one clue after the other, trying to detect and interpret correctly all the relevant signs along the way – even in the darkest hours, there had always appeared to be a small glimmer of hope. But now that the truth about the past had been revealed, there was nowhere left to return to.

Outside the island lay a world of painful and dispiriting for-

malities, of futile police investigations, with nothing specific to go on, and still the same vague threat hanging over everything – vague, yet ready to strike at any moment.

There was no concrete evidence to pass on to the police about the manor house and its owners. There was no detailed information about The Order of the New Atlanteans, who appeared to remain in existence after half a century, still as secret as ever, and no doubt encompassing some very powerful individuals. There was not even the slightest indication that would link that group first to Kathleen's and then to Alison's murder. Without that information, what was the point in going back? With her grandmother and Alison gone, what difference did any of it make? Meanwhile, Peter was still there, and that last thread to the past could not be broken. There was still too much to talk about, too much lost time to make up for.

The sheltered bay on the eastern side of the curving headland stood in stark contrast to the rugged shore facing the open sea, where the waves rushed up ever higher and with ever more vigour against the steep terrain, as the tide continued to come in and the wind got stronger.

Down there, at the bottom of the cliff, lay the origin of all the losses and of all the sorrow that had finally caught up with Siobhán; the origin of a delayed violence that, in itself, had been born of a chance encounter of two enemies during which violence had been rejected. If this was where it had all begun, it could now become the end of the journey, and perhaps the turning point for the way home.

At the foot of the mountain, the boulders stood about like a

group of silent watchers, their shadows creeping ever longer over the headland, as the sun sank lower over the western horizon. But the narrow path down to the shore was still plainly visible, even in the fading light.

She leaned her rucksack behind a nearby boulder and began scrambling along the path. The ground was loose, and the rumbling of dislodged rocks tumbling down the cliff seemed uncomfortably loud in the quiet evening.

As she approached the bleak shore, the tide was noticeably higher than it had been during the afternoon, with the larger waves almost reaching the foot of the cliff. But there was still some time left.

A short distance above the shore, the path continued along the base of the cliff, leading away from the village. Just around the headland, the entrance of the cave suddenly appeared in the sheer wall of rock – an imposing jagged crack, at least a hundred feet tall, and glowing warm in the remaining rays from the sun, which shone straight into the long passage.

Inside the cave, the ground gradually descended away from the shore. It was scattered with rocks of different sizes that, over the ages, had fallen from the ceiling. They were covered with algae and still slippery from the high tide that morning. After only a short distance into the passage, the sounds of the outside world – the waves and the wind and the screeching of seabirds – all became muffled, while the slow steady dripping of water became audible, like the ticking of a clock measuring the progression of a separate time in this static world underground.

After what had to be close to a hundred yards, the main part

of the cave came to an end. From there, a passage with a lower ceiling branched off towards the right, still continuing downwards. It was impossible to see far into it, as the faint daylight faded away almost immediately. But echoing out from the darkness came the churning of water that had to be pressing through cracks in the floor, up from the submerged channel below.

Siobhán walked halfway back up the main passage of the cave, where she had noticed a narrow opening in the opposite wall. It continued in a passage that led steeply upwards over rough ground and suddenly widened into a spacious chamber that was sufficiently elevated above the main passage to remain dry even at high tide. It was surprisingly cosy, with only a few rocks strewn across the floor, which had broken off from the ceiling over the ages. Most of these were carefully arranged along the walls, leaving a relatively smooth surface of pebbles in the middle. Even with the storm and the tide approaching, the cavern preserved a protective atmosphere.

When her grandfather had stayed there, with his own crew and the British soldiers, could he have imagined that Siobhán would be following in his footsteps, and why she would be compelled to do so? Had he known what the consequences of his decisions were going to be – not only for himself and his immediate family and friends, but for generations to come – would he have acted differently? Could he have acted differently, considering that, under the circumstances, the only alternative would have been violent confrontation and possibly the deaths of all those who were caught up in the chance encounter?

Had he been forced by the power of foresight to balance vi-

olence during a state of war against delayed violence during peacetime – to balance sanctioned killings against murder – which option had he chosen? To make a moral decision like this, how wide a circle does one have to draw around those who are directly affected by one's actions, and how far into the future does one have to be able to see?

As Siobhán crouched inside the cavern, she heard the distant sound of shifting rocks on the shore. She squeezed back into the main passage, just before the dark silhouette of a man appeared in the entrance of the cave, outlined against the low sun.

‘I was wondering where you would go next.’ His voice was that of an elderly person, but still energetic, and with a distinct German accent. ‘After you talked to Janssen, I was wondering where he would send you.’

Ralf Behring remained standing at the opening, evidently unwilling to step inside the darkening passage. ‘What’s wrong? Down in the village, they told me you speak English. They told me your name, asking me if I knew your grandfather.’ He gave a dry laugh. ‘Yes, I knew your grandfather – or at least the man you say was your grandfather. But that is not why you are here. So, what are you looking for?’

Behring pulled an electric torch out of his coat pocket and briefly shone it around the cave. ‘What was it that Janssen told you, that you had to come down here immediately, although the sun is setting soon, and the water is coming in? What is so important down here that you couldn’t wait until tomorrow?’

To get past him, standing up there by the entrance, would require an element of surprise. And running on this uneven ground

was going to be difficult. Siobhán therefore opted for a slow approach, one casual step after the other, that would gradually take her closer to the only way out.

Behring switched the torch to his left hand and made a furtive motion with his right, which was hard to see against the light. Otherwise, he remained standing motionless. ‘Who are you really? And why have you come?’

His voice now had a patronising tone. Perhaps he began to think that Siobhán did not know anything of significance about the old conspiracy after all. Perhaps he thought that she was lost and confused.

But she was not – not anymore. ‘I’m here for all the victims of your deluded ideology.’

He aimed his torch directly at her. ‘Because of what?’

This moment of surprise had somewhat unsettled his self-confidence. It would only take a few more steps.

‘Don’t be silly, girl.’

At the edge of the blinding circle of light from his torch, the barrel of a gun was now pointing straight at her.

‘Don’t underestimate me. I know why you have come. So, tell me what is hidden down here.’

‘There is nothing down here but the past – a past that you know much more about than I.’

‘Come on, stop wasting time. The water will be here soon.’

‘Ralf, this “Secret” you’re looking for – it does not exist. It never existed. It’s simply a desperate fantasy that came about when ...’

‘Don’t talk to me like this!’ With a sudden outburst, he stepped

into the cave. ‘What do you know about the Secret? What did Janssen tell you? What does he know? I always thought that he was not involved in the conspiracy because he was left behind as well. I really believed that he was an honourable man.’

‘Ralf, there wasn’t a single traitor among your crew, and there was no conspiracy.’

‘No conspiracy? Then why did Janssen tell you about the Secret, and not me, if he knew about it? No conspiracy – don’t treat me like a fool. As soon as we met the English, I immediately got suspicious. I wondered what they were doing on this island. And then the commander talking to them all night, coming up with this ridiculous plan to take them off the island. It wasn’t up to us to make truces like that. Dannreuther should have taken the risk and radioed for help. He should have described our situation and requested new orders and reinforcements. So what, if that had alerted the enemy? Maybe there would have been enough time for reinforcements to arrive before we were attacked. And if not, we would have died with honour. Anything would have been better than fraternising with the enemy. And when I finally got the chance to make the radio call, it was already too late. Then, when Dannreuther went off with the English . . . I admit, I didn’t know for sure when I made the call, but I was worried that they would defect, and I was right. They left us behind on this island, and they never came back. They betrayed us. And if I had not radioed for help, we would have died here. Dannreuther never found out that I had done that. He also did not notice, before they left, that I had taken the codebooks and many other important documents from board. I was not going to let them

fall into the hands of the enemy. I even took our last war diary, and I kept it for myself. I wanted at least one souvenir of our *U-112*. It was a good boat, and we were a good crew – one of the very best. That’s why they had given us that secret mission. Yes, of course, we had a bit of bad luck. But we would have succeeded the second time if our commander had not betrayed us. And for what? Why did he do it? He was not always like that. It must have been something very special for him to turn against us. So, what was it that the English offered him? What had they discovered?’

‘Nothing, Ralf. They had found nothing.’

Standing just a few paces away now, he aimed his gun directly between Siobhán’s eyes – the same type of pistol that Peter had offered to give her, which was now safely stored away again in the old trunk. He took another step closer. ‘Don’t waste any more time. The water is almost here. And if you’re waiting for your friends to come and rescue you ... Even if they come, I warn you: whatever happens, you will die first.’

‘Ralf, what are you talking about? Which friends?’

‘I said don’t treat me like a fool! I know what this is about. I know about your partners. I saw them arrive in their motor-boat, three days ago, cruising around the islands, pretending to be tourists, but constantly watching the village, trying to find out who lives here and who comes to visit. My son had contacted me only a few days before they arrived and told me about three people who had visited him in the clinic. They had said that they were acting on behalf of the New Atlanteans, but I know they lied. The Order would have told me if they had sent someone

over from England. Then, last night, you arrived here on the ferry. And this evening, I saw their boat again, in the harbour. So, don't pretend you are not together.'

'Ralf, I assure you, these people are not my friends. Whether they are somehow connected to this Order, I don't know. But one thing is certain: they are extremely dangerous. If you put that gun away, we can go back up to your house and talk it all over – together with Peter. Because, you see ... there is something important I need to tell you.'

'You want to lure me to your friends? How stupid do you think am I?'

'For the last time, Ralf: these others are not my friends.'

'Then which side are you on? If you're not working with them, or for the Order?' He was gripped by a sudden comprehension. 'Of course – *Du bist von der Stasi, nicht wahr, oder wie auch immer ihr euch jetzt nennt?*'

'What? What do you mean – Stasi?'

'*Tu' nicht so, ich weiß doch genau ...*'

'Ralf, you cannot seriously believe that I'm from the former State Security of East Germany?'

'You people have been after me ever since I tried to contact the old members of the New Atlanteans. I knew it would be dangerous to communicate with the West, especially while the last war diary of *U-112* was still in my home. I knew exactly what you thought about this kind of "Fascist" material, and how incriminating that would have looked to you. I know that you put me under surveillance, and that you searched my home when I was away. But you never found anything, did you? Because

I was cleverer than you. I gave the war diary to my son, and he hid it right under your nose, buried deep within your own bureaucracy. And now your regime is collapsed, your Socialist ideology is finished, and so are you.'

'How can you possibly think that I have anything to do with that? For goodness' sake, Ralf, look at me!'

'You failed. Just like the Nazis, you failed.' Clearly impervious to any logical arguments, he kept ranting on. 'But the future lies in a new race of people. I know that one day the descendants of the ancient Atlanteans will rule the Earth. Then, all unworthy life will perish and die out. There will be no more crime and no more diseases. Everyone will have a decent job and a decent life. No one will be poor anymore, and no one too rich.'

This was hopeless.

'Ralf, listen, I know you've been through a lot – these traumatic years during the war and, afterwards, the time in East Germany – I understand.'

'No more talk. Show me where it is.'

'Ralf, please. I really want to help you, but not like this. I can't tell you anything about this Secret because there is nothing to tell.'

'Of course you have something to tell. It was your grandfather who put you up to this, wasn't it? He told you where they sank the boat, probably not far away, in some sheltered fjord.'

'My grandfather died when *U-112* was sunk by your own people, out there, in the open ocean, at a depth of more than a thousand metres. There is nothing more to say. There never was a conspiracy. It was only a tragic succession of coincidences and

misunderstandings.'

'Is that what they told you, these traitors?'

'Exactly which traitors are you talking about now, Ralf? Your former comrades on *U-112*, or those who killed them?'

He waved impatiently with the barrel of his gun. 'Enough with talking – now walk. Back there, that's where you wanted to go before I interrupted you, wasn't it? Maybe the old boat was sunk by the enemy, as you said. But you are still searching for the Secret because they never took whatever the English had found on board. Instead, they hid it in here, and you know where it is. So, walk!'

Since the light from the sun had almost entirely faded away, he shone his torch down the passage and let Siobhán stumble ahead of him, following her own unsteady shadow. As the wind and waves outside the cave became more distant, the noise of the churning water in the darkness ahead got louder again.

Behring had no problems keeping up over the uneven ground. He was still fit and alert for his age and never let the beam of light stray far from Siobhán.

All the while, he kept muttering, as if speaking to himself. 'Forty years, forty long years was I trapped behind the Iron Curtain. When, at last, it seemed possible that the separation was coming to an end and I contacted the New Atlanteans again, I wanted to motivate them to try to find the location where *U-112* had been sunk, and to organise a salvage operation. But they said they were not interested anymore. They had given up, and they had stopped believing. I finally wanted to tell them the truth, that I had been part of the crew. But I could not prove it. If only

I could have got the war diary back, I would have been able to convince them. It would have shown that the official story about the submarine having been sunk by the English could not have been true. Then, after the border opened, I wanted to see this island and the cave again. I heard that, in the meantime, a village had been established here. I therefore came for a visit, and what do I find? Janssen had moved to the island. I recognised him immediately although he was many years older, and he recognised me too. Of course, I wanted to find out why he had returned. I suspected that the Secret was still hidden somewhere nearby. The Order gave me enough money so that I could retire up here, to keep an eye on things. For almost a year, nothing happened. I began to think that maybe Janssen had told the truth, that he had moved here for his retirement. Then, suddenly, you show up. I saw you talking to Janssen up there on the cliff for hours. So, what did he tell you? What are you trying to find? Just quickly show me where it is, and then we can get out of here.'

At the end of the main passage of the cave, the sound of the underground waves had become even more threatening than it had been before, as the water had continued to rise.

'Tell me, Ralf – now that we've come all this way – what exactly did you expect to find? Take a look around, there is nothing here but rocks.'

'Then why did you come down to the cave when the tide is coming in?'

'You wouldn't understand.'

'Come on, girl, don't be silly. Maybe the boat was sunk, but the Secret is still here. And you know where it is.'

‘Listen, Ralf, we need to talk about these people you saw arrive here, because ... I don’t know if you heard already about your son?’

‘My son? What do you know about my son? What do you know about the fire?’ He was screaming uncontrollably now.

‘Ralf, I had no involvement in this.’

‘Don’t lie to me. It was you, of course, you killed him! I can see it all now. You are that woman who came to the clinic and then vanished. Ulrike told me about that. The police were looking for you, and for your three friends. Because of you, my son is dead, and there is nothing left for me to bury. I planned to go to the memorial service, leaving with the ferry tonight, but then you arrived, and you talked to Janssen all day, and I wanted to see what you would do then. So, tell me, what do you want?’

‘Ralf, I swear, I had nothing to do with the fire. These other three, when they came to the clinic for the first time, your son must have told them where the war diary was hidden, and they found it. After that, they thought they had all the information they needed, either to convince the Order to organise a search for *U-112*, or to do it by themselves. They didn’t know who else was trying to find the submarine. But to be safe, they decided to eliminate all evidence and all witnesses. They flooded the bunker, to cover up the fact that the war diary had been taken. And then, the next day, they went back to the clinic. They already knew where your son’s room was and must have got in through the patio, rather than through reception, as I did. And then ... Ralf, you have to believe me, the fire was already burning when I entered the room. Your daughter-in-law must have

told you that I rescued your son's roommate. I would have rescued your son too, but it was too late. At that point, there was nothing that anyone could have done for him. The other three got there only minutes before me. And I assure you, they are not my friends. I am really sorry for your loss, Ralf. I know exactly how you feel. I just lost ...'

The barrel twitched, as he slowly started pulling the trigger, fighting back his tears. 'You ... murdered ... my ... son!'

This was it then. After travelling so far, it would all come to an end there, in that cave. It was a cold world she would leave behind, as the last daylight faded away. Already, shadows filled the end of the passage, while a dark figure appeared in front of the fiery sky by the entrance of the cave – the first of the three phantoms. Having pursued her for months, they had finally caught up with her.

But the man seemed to be alone. He was tall and wearing a long coat that billowed behind him in the wind. He carefully stepped into the passage, visibly exhausted – and he limped. Yes, it was not only the rocky ground that made him stumble, he definitely limped.

'*Ralf, du Hund! Lass' sie gehen!*' Peter's voice blended with the roaring of the sea and the howling of the wind, and was amplified by the echoes within the cave.

Behring turned in surprise and flashed his torch back up the passage.

Peter was standing steady now, his pistol raised. '*Du wirst dem Mädchen nichts antun so lange ich am Leben bin!*'

He took aim, but Behring reacted swiftly, and the two shots

went off simultaneously.

One bullet grazed Behring's left arm, tearing through his coat sleeve, before hitting the rocks behind him with a splintering crash. His torch dropped, the light still on, but partly blocked by the rocks on the ground.

Peter's dark outline staggered sideways and merged into the blackness of the cave wall on the left. Through the ringing in Siobhán's ears percolated the clinking of rocks that were shifted by the impact of his body.

'Peter!'

Behring, hunched up in pain, continued firing blindly towards the entrance of the cave – twice, three times – before he gave up. With his injured arm, he began groping for the torch between the rocks, struggling to gain hold of it. Then, shaking intensely, he straightened up. The artificial light beam found Siobhán once again. Once again, the same gun was aimed at her, as Behring's twitching fingers flexed around the grip.

A single shot rang out.

With a howl of pain and rage, Behring dropped his right hand that was holding the gun. He quickly extinguished the torch before Peter got another chance of firing at him.

Darkness fell like a thick curtain, pressing hard against Siobhán's desperate eyes. After the echoing gunshot, silence took over – but only temporarily. Then, slowly the background of natural noises emerged again: the steady dripping of water from the cave ceiling, the crashing of the waves underground – even closer now.

But there was no sound from Peter, no sign of movement.

‘Peter, are you badly hurt?’

Another deafening explosion from Behring’s pistol. Splinters of rock were blasted from the cave wall, no more than a foot away from her.

‘Siobhán, get out of there! The water is coming.’

‘Peter, are you alright?’

One more flash of light out of the darkness, blindly aimed into the direction of her yell – another impact, even closer than the one before – much too close.

‘Siobhán, you must get out immediately. Remember what I told you about this cave. And for Heaven’s sake, keep quiet. It was bloody stupid of me to believe you would simply walk away from here. Incidentally, Ralf, I hope you realise who she is.’

‘She’s a liar. I never told you this, Peter, because I knew you were a good friend of the family. But I found out from the Order that Dannreuther’s wife and daughter were killed during the war – and it was not in the house fire.’

‘No, Ralf, they weren’t killed at all, not in the fire and not otherwise.’ Peter’s voice was steady and calm now. ‘Your friends made a mistake. Elisabeth and Lena survived the war. That is why Siobhán has come here today. You know, all this time since you moved here, I’ve been wondering why you had decided to return to this island. I thought you were just as haunted by the old memories as I was, compelled to retrace your steps to the very place where our lives had fallen apart, to possibly find another way forward – until today, when I found out that someone is still looking for this imaginary Secret. I immediately suspected that you were somehow involved in this. I wanted to talk to you

about it – peacefully, I hoped. But as soon as I stepped outside my house, thinking that by now Siobhán would be safely off the island, I saw you heading towards the cliff. I called out to you, but you didn't hear me against the wind. At first, I was confused. I couldn't work out why you would climb down to the shore, with the water coming in. I therefore waited, convinced that very soon you would come up again. Then, I saw the rucksack leaning behind one of the rocks near the beginning of the path – and that's when I knew.'

Behring did not respond. Only the furtive rustling of clothes emerged from his direction, gradually getting closer to Siobhán.

Peter continued talking to him in German – taunting him, by the sound of it – distracting him, drawing his attention away from her, to give her the opportunity to escape. But she could not leave Peter like this, injured and perhaps dying, while water already came creeping out of the flooding passage.

Siobhán could hear rocks being shifted, as Behring made a careless movement.

'Peter, let's work together – the two of us and the girl. Siobhán is her name? Perhaps you're right about Elisabeth and her daughter. Perhaps the girl is telling the truth about who she is. Then we cannot hold her responsible for her grandparents' betrayal.'

'How dare you, Ralf, talk about Hans and Elsbeth like that!'

Peter lapsed back into German, now audibly incensed, while Behring – as quietly as possible in the dark – scrambled closer to Siobhán. There was no way past him. And still the water in the passage behind her rose ever higher.

Suddenly, Behring stopped. ‘No, Peter, that’s unfair. Is that what you told the girl? I admit, it was a difficult situation after we had met the English. No one could have foreseen that. But warning the High Command was the right thing to do. I had the law on my side, you know that. Order 154 made it explicitly clear that we were prohibited from rescuing or in any way assisting enemy combatants.’

‘Don’t be ridiculous, Ralf, citing the old War Order again. This wasn’t about following the rules. This was about doing what was right – and that’s exactly what Hans decided to do. Can you still not see that?’

‘But Peter, ask yourself: what was the point? They were our enemies. If we helped them on that occasion, for what? We didn’t fight the war to rescue our direct opponents, only to kill them during our next encounter. Come on, don’t be so naive. And Siobhán, this fairy tale that Peter may have told you about your grandfather – he didn’t save the English soldiers for any noble reason. They shared an important secret with him, something very valuable and powerful. That’s why he decided to collaborate with them.’

‘Siobhán, don’t listen to this.’

‘No, she needs to know the truth. She needs to understand who is responsible for all these tragic things that happened afterwards. And Peter, I always liked you – really. I know you are an honest man. You were betrayed by Dannreuther as much as I was, as much as everyone else who was left behind on this island. And believe me, I always felt sorry that your wife and daughter got drawn into this. But it all began with Dannreuther,

when he betrayed our secret mission to the English, when he made a deal with them. And then his wife, when she found out about the conspiracy, rather than alerting our own government, she decided to go over to the enemy as well, somehow convincing Ingrid to come with her. Who knows what she told your wife. Come on, Peter, we've been through so much together, first on *U-112*, then on my *U-115*. Remember how we managed to get through the many attacks that were made against us, time after time? We were a great crew, weren't we? Of course we were, you remember. Whatever they threw at us, we were unsinkable – undefeated and strong, until the very end.

'And then later, after the war had been lost by others, when we had to hand over our boat to the enemy, and they sent us to Scotland ... During the imprisonment, we looked out for one another, didn't we? When they locked us up together with all those SS bastards, when we found out what they had done in the concentration camps ... That's not how the Empire was meant to be. It's only ordinary humans who, in their weakness, tend towards uncontrolled violence. A superior race does not behave like that, and that is why the Nazis failed. But there is still a chance. The solution to all our problems, the key to abolishing all evils in this world, lies hidden beneath the sea – the great civilisation of the Atlanteans, safely protected from those who are unworthy of it. If we can find it, if we can use it – imagine, what we can accomplish. We will put an end to all suffering. We will make good all the damage we did during the war. It will be our redemption, Peter. I know exactly how you feel about what happened back then, why you moved back here. The past

doesn't go away, does it – all the things that happened, all the things that went wrong. So, let's work together. We will contact the Order again. Together, I am sure we can convince them to support a systematic search for *U-112*. We will tell them the truth now, that we were part of the crew. We will tell them how we got stranded on this island, how our commander betrayed us, and how he abandoned us.'

'Abandoned, how can you believe that? They would have come back. They would have swum the whole way, if they could have, every single one of them.'

'Be honest with yourself, Peter. The simple fact of the matter is that we only had Dannreuther's word for what he had discussed with the English. He was our skipper, and we trusted him. How could you possibly know that he really continued to be on our side, rather than forming an alliance with the enemy soldiers, when he found out about all that wealth and power that could be found down in the ocean? How could you know that they didn't find something and kept it hidden somewhere? How could you know any of these things?'

'I know all these things because I knew Hans. That's good enough for me.'

'Peter, please, don't be so sentimental, especially now when we have so little time. After all that happened, how can you still have faith in people?'

'Faith . . . It's a curious thing, isn't it? You, Ralf, have faith in supernatural powers that might somehow be controlled by some ancient technology. I, on the other hand, have faith in my family and friends. That faith did not die with them. As far as Hans

is concerned, it's based, among many things, on the expression in his eyes when we said our final good-bye, right here, outside this very cave. It's also based on the fact that I'm still alive, and he isn't. But you're right about one thing, Ralf: our time on this planet is running out, yours and mine.'

Behring did not respond, but the stealthy shifting of rocks was very close to Siobhán now. Then, there was a splash and a suppressed curse. In the darkness, he had slipped on the overgrown rocks and had fallen into the water that had begun to flood the lower part of the cave. There was the sound of frantic movements as he scrambled a little farther away, back into the main passage.

'Siobhán, are you still there?'

Peter had heard the commotion. But any response, any noise at all from Siobhán would provide Behring with a target to aim at. Meanwhile, the escape route behind her was getting more and more dangerous with every passing minute. Lacking any light source, it would be a blind stumble into the rising water, not knowing whether the crack that led up to the top of the cliff was still open after all these years. At some point, Behring had to realise that holding her hostage would only get him into danger as well. He had to come to his senses. Then, they could all escape together through the main entrance of the cave.

'Siobhán, you must get out of there before it's too late.'

'You're crazy, Peter. It would be suicide. You're sending the girl to her death. She can't possibly get out of this passage. The water is already rising back here. Let's be reasonable about this. Let's work together.'

‘Siobhán, don’t listen to him. Get out and bring this to an end, once and for all. Forget what I said earlier on, about you not having what it takes to defeat your enemies. That was wrong. I was just trying to get you to go back to England and to talk to the police. But I’m proud of you. I know you can finish this – in your own way. It’s all up to you now.’

Peter’s voice was becoming more and more constricted. Alone, he did not have much time left. And with Behring persistently guarding the main part of the cave, the only way to resolve the situation was to get out through the dark passage, up onto the headland, and back down to the shore before the water reached the entrance of the cave. There might still be enough time. They might still make it out of there together. Although she would not be able to carry Peter, if she could keep him afloat, she might manage to swim to the path that led up the cliff, to get him above the high-water mark and out of the cold water. Then, she could go for help.

Behring had retreated a little farther from the encroaching flood, still arguing with Peter in German, but afraid of getting too close to him and risking another shoot-out.

This could be her last chance to get away unnoticed, while any splashing sound was masked by the roaring of the agitated water, which became knee deep after only a few careful wading steps into the passage.

Being pushed and pulled by the current, it was easy to lose the footing on the submerged rocks. More dangerous still were the unseen cracks in the ground through which the water pressed upwards, until it was sucked down again, as wave after wave

washed into the cave. For anyone who got caught in that maelstrom, there would be no way back.

The only guide in the complete darkness was the touch of the rough cave wall on the left, with its many protruding rocks, and with nothing but emptiness in front. How long could this passage possibly go on? It was consistently sloping downwards, while the water continued to rise. Some of the stronger waves already reached waist level, and their pull into an unseen abyss became harder to resist. Slowly, the ground seemed to disappear, as her feet began to get numb, although it remained as uneven and treacherous as before.

The cave wall became increasingly covered with algae, suggesting that the water in that lower part of the passage would ultimately rise to above shoulder level. Then, what would happen if she could not find the crack that led out of there? What if she simply continued to go farther and farther down into the rising tide until the way back was blocked by a violent mass of water?

Suddenly, a faint unsteady light sprung up in the darkness. Behring too had waded into the passage and, safely out of line of sight from Peter, had switched on his torch again. Peter, no doubt hoping that her escape was already well underway, must have refused to let Behring leave the cave through the entrance by the sea, to prevent him from climbing up the cliff and coming after her again.

Behring had caught her now in his beam of light, but he made no further attempts to shoot. Instead, he took a few careful steps deeper into the water, until he was swept off his feet by a par-

ticularly strong wave and almost got sucked into the chasm that was now clearly visible – a gaping hole in the floor, through which the water was pulled down in a powerful eddy. Just in time, Behring managed to throw himself back into the main part of the cave, and the light from his torch faded again to a distant glow.

But it had lasted long enough to illuminate the end of the flooding passage, which was only a few steps ahead, and seemingly nothing but an impenetrable wall of rock.

Now she was finally trapped. Already, with the waves routinely reaching up to her chest, wading had become difficult. Very soon it would be impossible even to swim, without getting bashed against the cave walls by the turbulent current that was sloshing back and forth. And latest at the beginning of the passage, there would be no way past the deadly whirlpool any longer.

But then she noticed that the air was not completely stagnant. She could feel a distinct chill on the wet skin of her raised hands, emanating from the wall straight ahead, more so than from any other direction. The crack leading upwards really had to be somewhere nearby, and it could not be entirely blocked.

Just then, the already dim light from behind vanished altogether. Shouts erupted, increasingly more desperate, and increasingly more distant – until Behring's hysterical screaming was cut off by a single shot.

One shot – surely, it had only been one shot. It had echoed along the cave, but it had only been one shot.

'Peter?'

There was no response, nothing but a deathly silence – and the crashing of the waves.

‘Peter, hang on! I can’t get back up this passage. The water is too high down here. But I found the exit, and I’ll be coming back for you – I promise.’

But where really was the exit? In now total darkness, the only thing that could still serve as a guide was the soft breeze that originated from somewhere above.

Half floating in the rising water, half climbing, Siobhán began to ascend the steep wall at the end of the passage, clinging to any protruding rock she could feel, while trying to remain within the soft current of air. Her fingers, already numbed by the cold, frequently lost their grip on the algae-covered surface, dropping her back into the water, where she blindly floated for several uncertain seconds until a wave pushed her back against the wall, so that she could begin her ascent again.

Finally, she managed to get herself above the turbulent water. A little higher still, the steep wall suddenly levelled out into what appeared to be a ledge. She could feel the ceiling of the cave no more than a foot above her head. As the breeze across the ledge was stronger than it had been farther down, she was convinced that she had found the beginning of the crack that would lead up onto the top of the headland.

It was a tight squeeze on the ledge, with just enough space to pull herself inside if she lay completely flat on her aching chest. But to her relief, after only a short distance, she felt the gap widen around her and noticeably slanting upwards, away from the inundated passage.

Now it was simply a question of keeping her nerves and hoping for a bit of luck. The most important thing was to avoid any wild movements that might dislodge rocks from the low ceiling. With one hand groping ahead, and using the other for support on the rough surface, every push with her bruised legs brought the freedom of the open air a little closer.

Slowly, the thundering of the water in the cave below receded. But just as her confidence began to build, and she started to relax into a routine motion, she felt a large boulder appear in front of her, and another one next to it. The crack was blocked.

Claustrophobia caught her in an instant. A surge of panic rushed through her, a feeling that the surrounding walls suddenly pressed against her more tightly, that the already narrow crack was constricting even further, that it was suffocating her inside countless tons of ancient rock.

Then, perhaps triggered by the soft sound of waves below her, she was reminded of her training as a diver. She imagined being underwater, on just another dive, where she needed to manage her oxygen carefully, where she needed to keep calm and to breathe deeply and regularly.

And then she remembered the current of air that she had felt all the way down inside the flooding passage, and she noticed that it was still streaming past her. The crack could not be completely blocked. It might only have a sharp bend and continue in some other direction.

To the front and on both sides was nothing but solid rock. She therefore carefully rolled over inside the tight space and was able to reach out into some emptiness above her. Apparently,

the crack was continuing upwards, but slanting back towards the seaward side of the headland.

Once she had squeezed past the tight corner, she was relieved again to find that the space surrounding her gradually got wider. The air began to smell a little less musty. The gaps between the rocks became filled with earth. And there was the hint of light from above, faint and of a dull grey, but undoubtedly the remains of daylight. The current of air intensified, the sound of the wind got closer and louder, until it turned into the howling of a storm.

In a dizzying instant, after the static darkness of the cave, the world seemed to spin around her as she crawled out of the crack and onto the rocky headland. Lying on her back, breathing heavily and completely exhausted, she saw the clouds racing overhead. Then, stumbling to her feet, she realised that she was standing only a few steps away from a sheer drop down to the violent sea.

By now, the shore had vanished completely, as wave after wave was driven in by the gale to break against the cliff – except directly beneath, where the surging water was swallowed up by the cave's entrance with a hollow crashing sound that reverberated through the rock.

In this churning flood, swimming had become impossible. No one left down there could still be alive. With ruthless regularity, the sea had returned to exert its unrivalled power over the land.

While Peter had sat there, wounded and with the water rising around him, the cold taking hold of his body, his mind slowly fading away – Siobhán hoped that, in that final moment, he had seen the *Atlantis* again, returning out of the gathering darkness

and the storm, to carry away the last faithful member of its old crew, on to a better place, a world in which the memories of those who had gone before were still truly alive.

Standing once more at the same precipice that she had looked down that very morning, she again realised how easy it would be to let go of everything, just to close her eyes and let death gently catch her in peaceful oblivion.

But having chosen the easy way out, what if things turned out differently? What if, instead, she entered an eternal abyss where she would never stop falling into her worst nightmares? An abyss filled with all her failures and regrets, where the memories of those who had gone before only served as constant reminders that they had died as a result of her bad decisions and lack of foresight.

If that easy exit was barred, where else could she turn to find the right path to carry on?

High above in the dark sky, the summit of the mountain preserved a golden-red glow, still illuminated by the sun that, viewed from below, had already vanished beneath the horizon. And emerging from the grey clouds, the first glittering snowflakes began sailing down to Earth.

There was then only one path left to walk. Its end was uncertain, and there might not be a way back, but at least its early stage lay clear ahead. Siobhán understood what remained to be done. She recognised the task that had fallen to her as the last survivor. Peter, the troubled wanderer, could rest now, his self-imposed mission accomplished. He could rest, while she took the final steps of the journey alone.

Alone but for the three figures that were doubtlessly moving unseen through the silent spaces among the irregular shapes of the large boulders that were strewn across the western side of the headland; still hiding in the shadows – mere shadows themselves – nameless, faceless remnants of a violent past.

Yes, as darkness fell around her, Siobhán knew these elusive figures would still be there. All along the way, they had always been there, always lurking in the background, always nearby and yet perceivable only through the consequences of their actions; always watching – watching and waiting for their opportunity to strike. They had followed her when they had thought she might lead them to a powerful secret. They had overtaken her and had left her for dead when they had thought they did not need her anymore. They had watched her when she had been clueless and undecided. They had watched her when she had been weak and frightened.

Well, they could watch her now, as she was about to lead them on their last journey together. For the moment had finally arrived to lure these phantoms out from the shadows – and then one would see how well they did in the light.

CHAPTER NINE

THE LAST ENEMY

The line of snow-covered peaks and ridges of the mountainous archipelago all lay beneath her now, stretching away towards the north as far as she could see in the dim grey light, while the vast expanse of the open ocean towards the south and west quickly vanished from sight without a true horizon. With nowhere else to go but down, Siobhán realised that she had finally reached the end of the journey.

The warmly glowing summit that she had started to climbing towards was now covered in near darkness, as the sun had abandoned the world at last. And with the moon mostly obscured above a thick layer of clouds, the brightest light that could still be seen emerged from the yellow dome of the tent that she had left behind on a narrow ledge halfway down the western slope. Large snowflakes swirled around it, driven by the strengthening wind from the east. They accumulated on the ground in an ever deeper layer, filling the many gullies that scarred the mountain-side, and gradually eliminating the single line of footprints that led away from the tent up onto the summit, to where she was standing now.

This track would not be visible from the headland far below. Looking down into the indistinct gloom at the bottom of the steep slope, Siobhán could just make out the irregular pattern of the boulders, and the edge of the cliff. At that abrupt precipice,

delineating safe ground from turbulent water, the boundary between a seemingly distant past and the present had been dissolved that day. This was where a tragic part of history that had lain dormant for two generations had inexorably invaded her own reality and claimed its last remaining survivors.

Anyone who was left down there – still watching and waiting, wondering about her motivation for setting out into the mountains, and wondering what might be hidden there – all they would be able to see was the illuminated tent, that lonely beacon in the dark.

And so the trap was set. Now there was nothing more to do but wait.

* * *

With all her activity suspended, it seemed to Siobhán as if time had lost its significance. It simply stretched ahead indefinitely, without pulling her along anymore, without life truly progressing.

Leaning back against her rucksack and sheltered from the easterly gales by a large boulder, she had let the blizzard pass over her. She had let the steady stream of freshly fallen snowflakes rush past her, as the wind swept unhindered over the exposed summit. She had taken comfort in seeing the dark jagged rocks around her acquire a fine white coating that brightened the seemingly endless night with a hopeful shine.

For uncounted hours, all she had been able to hear was the howling of the wind and the rustling of the drifting snow. Then, the storm had gradually begun to fade, the remaining low clouds

had sailed away out of sight, the wind had weakened, and the last swirling snowflakes had settled onto the desolate mountain top.

And still she waited, for what exactly, she did not know; some change in her surroundings; some indication that this stasis would eventually come to an end, and that fate would then play itself out.

Since the passing of the storm, she had strained her senses into the silent darkness that enveloped the western mountain slope, attempting to pick out any sign of any presence. But there was no sound of whispered conversation, no sound of furtive steps ascending towards her. There was no sound at all.

Yet, almost imperceptibly, a subtle change was already underway high above. One by one, the stars came out again, the nearest and brightest first. But as the sky got clearer, more and more smaller and fainter dots lit up inside the vastness of the universe. Then, gradually, much closer than the stars, another type of luminescence began to appear: only a pale shimmer at first, indistinct and diffuse – ethereal, like a thin flowing veil that was drawn across the world – but getting ever more intense until, in a sudden burst, the whole sky was alight with glowing green waves that faded to a deep purple along their edges.

And just as the gateway opened, with an ominous creaking and groaning, the ancient mountain came to life. The wait was over. The moment of truth had arrived.

Leaving her sheltered resting place behind, Siobhán approached the abrupt western edge of the summit.

Near the top of the steep slope, long horizontal fractures had

begun to form in the deep layer of snow that had been deposited there from the windward side. A little farther down, inside the gullies, the even deeper snow had already turned into powerful streams.

On the narrow ledge below the gullies, the tent now lay in tatters, having been cut open with a knife. Although the electric torch inside it had burnt itself out, nearby, in the unsteady shine of the northern lights, three figures could be seen struggling upwards against the glistening cascade.

Then, they saw her, standing on what previously would have looked to them like a deserted peak; the very spot they were now trying to reach with increasing desperation; the very spot they knew would, very soon, be the only safe place left on the entire mountainside.

To them, Siobhán was but a dark silhouette against the blazing sky, no more than a vague outline. But they knew who she was. And seeing her standing there, they finally understood the true reason for why she had come all this way, that it had been for Alison, for her all along, for what they had done to her.

In that terrifying moment, within the dark silhouette standing high above them, they could see Alison again, as clearly as they had seen her in life. As if returning from the other side of the flaming gateway, she had materialised on that summit.

They were reminded again of her unfailing confidence, her calm demeanour before the certain end. And in a sudden revelation, the meaning of her last words became apparent to them. In the rustling of the snow, they could hear the ghostly whispers of all those whose lives they had destroyed, telling them that now it

was their turn to leave this world.

Betrayed at last by their ideological fervour – their one fatal weakness – they had blindly followed Siobhán on that hopeless quest. They had climbed that snow-covered mountain in the dark, searching for priceless treasures or some supernatural object.

What they had found instead was that lone figure standing above them, that entirely ordinary person whom they had shadowed ever since they had first seen her at her grandmother's funeral. They had watched her struggle through grief and pain, through uncertainty and danger, but never giving up, never losing sight of her ultimate goal, in her ceaseless determination to uncover the truth behind past tragedies and their lasting consequences.

At that moment, the green flames flared up even more intensely above the snowy landscape – fire and water again, but it was different this time. It was fire that did not consume, but still illuminated the night. It was water that had evolved from a homogeneous mass into countless intricate ice crystals, each made unique by its own little imperfections; each individually frail and vulnerable, but together possessing a power they would not be able to resist. It was fire and water again. And they knew that, this time, the elements would be on Siobhán's side.

Still fighting against the dense layer of snow that was pressing down upon them, in an act of desperate hatred, one of the figures unslung a rifle from its shoulder and tried to gain a stable stance to be able to take aim – but it was too late.

The avalanche began in one fluid movement. Breaking off

from just below the summit, its billowing front grew rapidly as it accelerated down the steep slope, crashing onto the narrow ledge, rising up again in a breaking wave that engulfed the three figures, drowning their shouts of terror, and carrying them away, as it plunged farther into the depth, still growing, until it washed over the headland at the bottom of the slope, skipping over the edge of the cliff in a great jet, out to sea, and vanishing into darkness.

For a while, the distant rumbling of dislodged boulders could still be heard. Then, a hushed silence settled. The mountain was at peace again.

Fleetinglly, the silhouette of a solitary raven could be seen sailing rapidly across the luminescent veil, as if emerging from it. Then, with a final wave, the northern lights faded away.

Night had fallen once more.

CHAPTER TEN

THE GREAT DAWN

A stony silence still hung over the mountain. No sign of life ascended from the western slope where, hours before, the avalanche had vanished into the night. The relentless pursuers were no more, and no one else appeared to be around who would continue their quest.

With that, there was nothing left to fight for. The last enemy to be defeated was dead. And as the path forward had come to an end, the way back had vanished from sight. All that remained was a lonely summit, surrounded by dark depths. It floated above the rest of the world, entirely disconnected from it.

And so, the circle was about to close. Once more, Siobhán was left behind, alone, feeling her life slowly drain away into the unforgiving cold that took hold of her. Her second chance was used up. The borrowed time that had allowed her to return from Antarctica had run out. At the end of an arduous detour, after many losses, after many defeats and a brief victory, she was right back where she had started out on this journey.

Then, as the cold slowly faded into numbness, a heavy tiredness descended. Finally, for the first time in weeks, with no more need to struggle on, it would be such a relief to give in to the pull of the night.

Already, a great calm began to settle. And with her last fears dissipating, Peter's image returned to her mind. Had he not pre-

ceded her into the endless sleep, what would he think of her now? Would he still be proud of her? Would he recognise how tired she was, having come all this way? Or would he tell her to get up, to leave this place, and to let go of the past?

But the past was all she had gained on this quest. Everything else was lost. The only things left in this world were memories. And the last remaining images were beginning to fade into darkness, until it was only Alison who lingered, together with her grandmother. In her tired mind, Siobhán tried to hold on to them as long as she could, to reach out to them. As she felt her final waking moments arrive, she wanted to tell them how sorry she was for having abandoned them when they had needed her most.

I know, there were so many mistakes I made. There were so many things that went wrong, that I should have done differently. But, Alison, when you were gone, I never gave up. I never lost sight of you, all along the way. And, Gran, what you told me to do, I did it. It is finished. So, please don't think too harshly of me. Let me join you now, for I am ready. I can feel it, I can let go now. I am close to you already, so close. I am ready to move on.

A faint rustling of wings descended upon her. Then, there was some rapid motion off to her right, as a dark shape materialised at the edge of her vision.

A raven was now perched on a nearby rock, perfectly quiet and still, only its feathers stirring softly in the breeze. Even in the dim moonlight, it appeared to have seen her outline in the snow, slumped against a boulder, and had come to enquire if she

was dead already.

Well, my friend, I'm afraid you'll have to take a number and wait. But don't worry, it won't be long. Then again, you know that already, don't you? After all, you're the expert in these things.

The raven calmly gazed at her with unblinking eyes, only slightly cocking its head, but otherwise sitting completely motionless.

Now don't just sit there, awkwardly off to one side.

But the bird did not move.

What? You want me to turn around and look at you properly, to acknowledge the significance of your presence here?

Still, there was no reaction.

‘Come on, say something!’

Despite this outburst, the raven remained unmoved. No facial expressions betrayed its thoughts or emotions.

Silly bird!

‘There, is that better? See, you have my full attention now – and believe me, I know exactly why you're here. But quite frankly, right now, I couldn't care less.’

And neither did the bird, of course. It was serenely untroubled by the fragile feelings of human beings. There were no emotions built into the laws of nature. It was life or death, and that was all. It was simple and clear, without moral ambiguities, only ideal states of right and wrong, black and white – just like a black bird on white snow.

Although, as Siobhán looked more closely, she realised that the raven was not entirely black. There was a warm glow on its

shiny plumage that she had not noticed before, and it seemed to be intensifying.

At the same time, the cold wind from the continent behind her was getting stronger. The raven should turn around to face it, but the enigmatic bird simply refused to do so. Instead, it continued to gaze at her intently.

‘You shouldn’t be sitting there like this, you know. You’ll only get your feathers in a tousele.’

A few snowflakes were lifted off the ground around the rock on which the raven was perching. And still it did not stir, as if it were waiting for the right moment. But the right moment for what?

‘Why have you come here?’

Suddenly, a strong gust threw up a swirl of snow. Without a warning, in one effortless fluid motion, the raven took to the air. It was going to fly away.

‘No! Where are you going? You can’t leave me here!’

The raven remained hovering some distance above the ground, watching Siobhán struggle to get back onto her numbed feet. Then, with one last enquiring look, it flew off towards the mainland.

There, in the east, a narrow band of purple was stretched out just above the horizon. The distant snow-covered mountains were slowly turning from grey to blue. Soon, it would be the dawn of a new day. And so, life would go on.

Or was it death? Was that what death was like? To be standing alone on top of a tall mountain, high above the clouds and petty worries of everyday life? Standing above everyone else, without

enemies and without friends, without hatred and without love, and with a perfect view of everything that had happened?

Was that what it all led up to in the end, to be able to see things from the perspective of eternity? When, removed from the merciless progression of time, perhaps a meaningful pattern does begin to form from the apparent injustice and randomness of life? When it becomes possible to transcend the bounds of ordinary reality, to perceive what was previously hidden, and to regain what appeared to have been lost?

But in life, it is impossible to exist in such a timeless state, for it is the progression of time that gives life. It is therefore in the progression of time – in the lack of understanding of the past, in the fleetingness of the present moment, and in the uncertainty of the future – that meaning needs to be found.

As Siobhán looked out over the quiet world, she was certain that it could not end like this. There was still too much pain, too much that was unresolved. There were too many things that were left undone. She would live her life for those who had come before her, for those who had lived and died for her. The sacrifices they had made would become her responsibility. She would carry on with the tasks they had begun, so that their lives and deaths would not have been in vain.

And as the light gradually filled the world again, she knew that this moment was real and not a dream. This was life, and it was not over yet.

To a distant observer, the planet that was gradually emerging from the darkness of space would likely appear to be completely unremarkable, easily overlooked in the outskirts of an ordinary

galaxy, revolving around an ordinary star – one of many ordinary planets, and seemingly expendable. In the vastness of space, it might not be very special. But until death would send her back to beyond the great dawn of time and space from which the universe expanded, it was the only home she had – and it sure was beautiful.

Any moment now the sun would rise. A few low clouds and some morning fog still lingered along the coast, but it would be a fine sunny day.

The raven had vanished into the distant glow. Siobhán was alone again, and she knew she could not stay there forever.

It was time to move on.

PART THREE OF **THE SIGNS OF A MYSTERY**

Respecting her grandmother's final wish, Siobhán sets out on a journey to discover her grandfather's fate during the Second World War, after he seemingly disappeared during a secret mission.

Were her grandmother's dying warnings to her justified? Is Alison's disappearance connected to these past events? Is Siobhán herself in danger from the same enemy her grandmother faced during the war? What personal conflict played out embedded in global warfare, and why is it beginning again?

As Siobhán retraces her grandparents steps, her path converges with that of the old enemy, and finding the answers to these questions becomes more urgent.

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