

PART TWO

THE BLACK MIRROR

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

William Shakespeare in *Hamlet*, Act 5 Scene 2

PROLOGUE

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

No one would find her in that remote place – that was the simple truth. After the police investigation had finished, and the media attention had finally died down, the old manor house lay just as abandoned as it had for decades – or so it would seem from the outside.

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

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

At this point, Elisabeth apparently was the only one still alive of those they thought were involved in the conspiracy – the only one they had been able to track down, at least. However, given her age, most likely, they were reluctant to go after her directly, thinking that she may not be concerned enough for her own life to be able to put pressure on her. And so they had been looking for a younger family member.

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

And then, fifty years on, it all began again – with a rare mistake for these shadowy figures, and a lucky escape. But since the erroneous attack on

Kathleen, it seemed they had successfully executed all their plans with ruthless precision, proving that they were determined enough to follow up the initial murder with a whole series of violent crimes, until they had achieved their objective – and that objective had to have great significance for them.

As they were not in any way psychopathic, there had to be a strong motive for their actions. They were well organised and highly intelligent individuals. They had been able to follow her around for weeks, without ever becoming more noticeable than a cloud of vague fears. They had tools and skills that had allowed them to enter her flat without leaving a single trace. They had to do this for a reason.

Tracking her down in the first place would have been easy enough, once they had found Elisabeth, which they could have done simply through the phone book. Elisabeth's regular daily routine, especially her predictable visits to church, early every Sunday morning, would have given them more than an hour to search the house. They would have found not only her own, but also Siobhán's temporary address at Kathleen's – recognising her as a direct relative based on her family name.

They would then have gone to Cambridge, but seen only Kathleen's name on the doorbell plate. For a while, that might have perplexed them enough not to act immediately, wondering whether Siobhán had not moved in yet, or whether she was only planning to stay there temporarily.

They would have continued to observe the apartment building, while probably also keeping an eye on Elisabeth's home in Norwich. Simultaneously, they had possibly been pursuing other activities as well, all related to their great plan. With these distractions, and with Siobhán's irregular schedule and frequent absences for the various training courses, they must have kept missing her.

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

person lying in bed, it was already too late. They had to go through with their attack to preserve their secrecy. So, they staged that horrific murder.

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

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

Her abduction had then been carried out with a timing that was too good to be a coincidence. They had to have known that she would not be missed at work for a few months. And they had to have known this before attacking her. They had to have been inside her flat at least once before. They had to have seen the confirmation letter from the broadcaster, stating the exact period of her sabbatical. At the same time, they would also have found the train ticket to Dublin, together with the information about B&B's from the travel agency. In fact, it may have been her visit to the travel agency that had motivated them to search her flat in the first place, suspecting that she might be planning to leave the country.

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

Still, no matter how carefully planned and executed the abduction had been, her disappearance could not go unnoticed forever. Eventually, she would be missed ... or her body would be found. Either way, the police would enter her flat. They would check for any clues about her whereabouts or possible motives for her murder. But would they find the message? And if so, would it be understood? When even she still did not know what these few words really meant. When she herself had failed to recognise the most important implication of the few snatches of the conversation between the assailants that she had been able to overhear – while they had sat around in her flat, talking quietly, completely indifferent to the traumatic situation that they had forced her into, waiting until late at night before taking her to their car and beginning the long drive north.

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

Either way, for one more year, Siobhán would be safe on Antarctica. That was the one thing the perpetrators with all their resourcefulness had not yet been able to find out. From their repeated questions it was evident that also Kathleen, probably as much trying to protect herself, had not told them anything about Siobhán, had most likely denied that Siobhán had ever stayed in her flat, or even knowing her at all. So, there was one more year for the police to find the truth, to uncover the real reason behind these crimes. Would that be enough? When Siobhán returned, would she be warned? Would she be safe?

Resigned as Alison was to her own fate, these thoughts, this endless loop of worries kept going through her mind, as she stood by the window, gazing down at the sloping lawn and the lake beyond it.

Temperatures had clearly dropped over the course of the afternoon, turning drizzle into light snow. A thin layer of ice had started to form along

the edges of the water. The wind had picked up as well, buffeting once more against the mullioned bay windows, which, despite their age, gave no indication of even the slightest rattling or any form of weakness. They were set between narrow columns of brickwork, with individual glass panels held together by a solid metal frame. They were not intended to be opened, except for the small tilting panel at the top, which was far too small for anyone to squeeze through.

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

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

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

The one thing of note in the room was the large mural above the fireplace: the painting of a young woman with long blonde hair, sitting on the parapet of a high castle tower, and looking out over the nightly landscape deep beneath her. She was clad in a long white gown and crimson cloak, with a light armour protecting her torso. A winged helmet, together with a spear and shield were by her side. Notwithstanding these tokens of her identity as a mythological warrior, at first glance, she appeared vulnerable and even simpleminded. Only upon closer inspection of her features, it became apparent that hidden just beneath the surface resided a boundless, quiet determination and energy. She was someone who, given a task, would carry that out until the very end, no matter the obstacles that would be placed into her path.

Then a noise could be heard on other side of the building, faintly at first and muffled by the whistling of the wind around the windows, but gradually getting louder – the engine of a car approaching on the bumpy track that led up from the main country road that wound its way along the foot of the mountains. They were earlier than usual. Normally, they waited until

complete darkness had settled, before coming out to the old manor house. And they were driving faster than usual too. She could hear the harsh crunching of the breaking tyres as they dug into the layer of gravel on the forecourt.

A few seconds later, three car doors slammed, the sound echoing down the narrow valley.

Then rapid footsteps reverberated in the large entrance hall. They really seemed to be in a hurry this time. Something had happened. Something had stirred them into action.

The footsteps were coming up the old staircase now. Instinctively, she knew that this was the end. If she had managed to keep track of the time correctly, it was Wednesday, 30 January 1991. A day like any other. A day, that would never go down in history.

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

This one last task she had to accomplish. Then she could rest, knowing that the end, which was now rapidly approaching, would not be in vain.

At that thought, the cold dread of a lonely death left Alison. She would not be crying anymore. They would not find her lying in bed or cowering in some dark corner. She would be facing them, on her feet, looking them straight into their eyes – the only parts of their faces that were visible behind the masks.

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

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

CHAPTER ONE

SHADOWS OF DOUBT

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

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

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

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

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

‘You call this recovered? My word, just look at you: all pale and with sunken in cheeks – only a shadow of your former self. No, you clearly lost a lot of weight. Good thing you had such a healthy figure going into that adventure. I can see you’re still limping, and it’s no good pretending that your ribs have healed in that short amount of time, Siobhán. Well, at least your face is all right again; frostbite they said – such an awful thing. I was shocked, when I heard, remembering my dad when he came back from Norway – all his toes gone. And with that, we had to be glad that he still had the rest of his legs. That was during the War, you see. Terrible time ... Anyway, in the end, the only thing that matters is that you are safely back in England, isn’t it? But why didn’t you tell us when you went off the German ship?’

‘I ... yes, I was thinking about it at the time, but then ...’

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

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

‘No, that’s all right. I can stay with my gran in Norwich. Most of my stuff is at her place already, in my old bedroom. I deposited it there, when I gave up my flat in Aberdeen.’

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

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

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

‘But now that I remember: can’t you stay with your friend again, here in Cambridge? Alison was her name, wasn’t it? I met her, you know. She was here to pick up the letters and film rolls you had sent back after the holidays. She also asked if she could send a message to you, so I directed her to Personnel Section. Lovely girl – very pretty, isn’t she? And she was ever so polite. But she did give me the impression of being in a bit of a hurry – and nervous about something, if you ask me. From Personnel I heard that she was your primary contact. They tried to reach her after the fire. First at work, but they were told that she would be on a sabbatical until the end of April.’

Then they repeatedly tried her home number, but only ever got her answer phone. So, finally, they had no choice but to inform your grandmother, although you had specifically requested not to contact her about anything serious. But eventually we had to tell *someone*, hadn't we? And ... I was very sorry to find out like that that you are without parents, dear. There was so little time to get to know you, wasn't there, before you left.'

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

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

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

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

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

all. And we wouldn't want that to melt now, would we. Just think what would happen then ...'

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

‘And things *are* changing fast these days, aren’t they, in all sorts of ways. It’s such a nice change to have you here, Siobhán. And so glad he was, Professor Taylor, when he found you – you know, when we heard how well you managed down there. After all, it is quite a rough place, isn’t it, for ... well, anyone really. But what a shame you had to take over under such unfortunate circumstances. On top of everything else, just before you left, that horrible murder of your poor friend. When, all of a sudden, it was unclear whether the police would let you leave the country, with their ongoing investigation. How they could ever suspect you, I really don’t know. Then, when things were sorted out at last, Professor Taylor away on his well-deserved holiday – that’s when it happened, the explosion and the fire. And just when we thought the evacuation was going to be successful, the news came in that you had got lost on the way to the aircraft. Now you’re telling me that these were only coincidences? Well ...

‘Of course, we knew the base was getting old, didn’t we? That’s why they’re already planning the next one. God knows where all the money will be coming from, now that we have to advance the schedule. Only recently, we had that new satellite system installed, as you know. And looking at our budget, I’m not at all sure if we’re going to have a team on Aurora during the next year. Not surprisingly, the Germans are getting nervous now. If

we're not going back at the end of this year, they'll be pretty lonely down there. They already have to get through the coming winter on their own. What if something happens on their base? And that one is even older than ours, if I'm not mistaken ... Helios, yes. They must be thinking about building a new one too, although they've probably got plenty of other things to worry about right now – have to rebuild the whole eastern part of their country, haven't they?

'But I can still remember when we began the construction nine years ago – "Aurora IV, the most remote outpost of the British Empire. Keeping the legacy alive." That's how we'd sold the proposal to the Government, you know, just before we went to war on the Falklands. Now it's all different. Don't even mention the Empire these days, or you get yelled at, in addition to being blown up. These days, it's all about "international collaboration," isn't it. That's how we're selling the new base, at any rate. But that it would happen so soon ... we'd expected Aurora IV to be habitable for at least two more years. An electric failure in the generator room, they were saying ... well, I don't know.'

'So, the base is beyond repair?'

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

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

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

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

‘They’re fine, dear, both out of hospital now; no permanent harm done to anyone. Although, I imagine Andrew is still recovering at home. But that reminds me, Siobhán: you’ll have to take a proper medical examination as well, just to be sure.’

‘Another medical? But I’m much better.’

‘No, you’re not. Just look at you.’

‘I am simply tired from the journey.’

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

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

‘Makes no difference, Siobhán. You still need to ...’

‘But I was rather hoping ... Do I really have to?’

‘Yes, dear, and that’s final. I saw the report that the German doctor telexed to us – a woman, apparently – Monika Something-or-Other ... Did she look well after you?’ Mrs Evans leafs through various documents. ‘She sent us her report in English, so that was considerate of her. I’m no medical expert, of course, but I do understand the meaning of concussions and contusions, severe blunt trauma, fractured ribs ... I was quite sure I had a copy of it somewhere. Listen, why don’t you come back on Monday. Then I’ll make an appointment for you with one of our own doctors in the Medical Unit. Mind you, this is not to reflect badly on the German doctor. I’m sure she is quite capable. But we have much better facilities here, than what they have at their base or on the ship – x-rays and these things, you know. This is important, dear, for you and the Institute. We’ve had enough problems already, without you suffering from some delayed complications. And you’re on sick leave, with full pay, at least for the next month or so.’

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

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

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

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

Sick leave ... Upon second thought, that might be the best thing that could have happened. It would provide the opportunity to focus entirely on Alison. That must be the main priority right now, to find out where she is, to meet up with her, and then try and get everything back to normal again.

On the surface, it is all quite unremarkable. She was depressed after a personal tragedy, requested and was granted a sabbatical from work, told others that she was planning to leave on her first day off, and then she left. That is all there is to it. And since everyone knows how desperately she wanted to get away from everything for a while, nobody else is alarmed by the fact that she has not been in contact with anyone for almost four weeks.

It all seems proper and above board, except for one thing: she told everyone when she was planning to leave – but me. Why would she go away without telling me, without leaving a message here with the Institute? Where was she on that Sunday, when we had agreed to speak again on the phone? On her last day in Cambridge, when she could have – would have told me about her definite plans for leaving?

No, this does not feel right. I need to get the spare key from Gran and check out Alison’s flat tomorrow. If there is no indication as to where exactly she went, it is time to get the police involved. After almost a month of silence, something needs to happen.

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

‘Sorry, dear. Took a bit longer. With all the excitement, I almost forgot about the tea and biscuits I had promised.’ She puts the tray down on the lounge table. ‘And there is something else too. Before your team-mates went on holidays, they prepared this little present for you and left it with me, to give to you once you got back.’

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

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

Mrs Evans nods encouragingly. ‘Go on, dear – read it aloud.’

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

‘Never mind that, dear. Just read it, do.’

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

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

It is light and supple, and we both know what it contains ... even before the twine is unknotted, and the wrapping paper falls open.

I never imaged to see our old flag again, or to hold it in my hands; to feel the worn-out cloth between my fingers. Through the memories it evokes, it still seems to give off the dry smell of the vast, frozen landscape above which it flew, through sunshine and blizzards, unperturbed and staunch.

Although it is only three weeks since our hasty departure from Aurora, these events and everything leading up to them might well belong to a different life.

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

* * *

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

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

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

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

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

He picks up his phone and dials a number. His attitude has changed completely with the mentioning of Kathleen. There is now a real sense of urgency in his behaviour. Any reference to the case evidently still attracts immediate attention.

The officer hangs up and indicates “he’s coming.”

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

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

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

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

‘Yes, of course. I remember her well – both of you. How ...’ He hesitates and then checks his watch. ‘We should talk somewhere else. We can use one of the witness interview rooms. But I’m afraid I can’t spare much time right now.’



The room is significantly friendlier than the one that was used for the interrogations, with a round table in the centre, a few chairs – cushioned this time, and without a tape recorder. Instead, there is a window opening onto the snowy park. On the other side, the acute spire of Our Lady can be seen through a line of bare trees, pointing up into a cloudy sky. How grey England is in winter ... even the snow has none of the crisp sparkle that it has on Antarctica.

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

‘No, thank you, Chief Inspector.’

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

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

‘I remember that she works for a regional news programme.’

‘The current affairs edition, yes – *Focus East Analysis*. But here’s the thing: she’s been on a three-month sabbatical since 28 January.’

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

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

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

‘They are. But she could have left a message with my institute, only a few words, and they would have telexed it through to the base. She also hasn’t contacted my grandmother since the last time she visited her in Norwich,

either on 22 or 23 January, Gran wasn't quite sure if it was the Tuesday or the Wednesday.'

'She and your grandmother are close?'

'Yes, very. Gran basically raised us together.'

He nods. 'And what were your grandmother's feelings about Miss Conway's absence.'

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

'Miss Dannreuther ...'

'No, please, I am trying to explain. It is true that Gran knows about Alison's planned departure. She also knows how depressed Alison has been ever since the murder, how much she wanted to get away from here for a while – and everyone encouraged her to do so, Gran included. She thought that Alison simply needed a clean break for a while, when she didn't hear from her. And so I guess ... Yes, all right, she didn't seem overly worried about not having heard from Alison since her last visit.'

'Not worried at all, then?'

'No, but ...'

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

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

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

'She planned to take the train via Holyhead.'

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

'No.'

'Did you have an argument, for example?'

'No ... not really.'

'Then you did have an argument?'

‘Not an argument, just ... Alison was very upset the last time we spoke on the satellite phone from Antarctica – depressed, as I said. I didn’t know how to help her, or what to say. Obviously, we couldn’t meet and talk it over in person. So, there was nothing I could do; and I may have come across as uncaring ... I don’t know.’

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

Yes, they do ... and is that it? Has Alison truly changed that much within the last few years? Did she resent my abandoning her here after all – although it had been she who encouraged me to leave as planned? Despite that, was she trying to show me – consciously or not – how it feels to be abandoned, by leaving home herself, without telling me?

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

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

‘Miss Dannreuther, the flat?’

‘No, it’s all as you might expect, no sign of a break-in or struggle, no indication that she left in a hurry. The door chain wasn’t broken, and I know she always put that up, when she was at home, at least since the murder. Also, the fridge is empty and cleaned. Only this isn’t about Alison’s flat. In that case, I wouldn’t worry. This is about her.’

‘All right ... Are you familiar enough with her belongings to be able to say whether anything is missing?’

Here we go ... ‘Her large travel bag is gone, and so are many of her clothes.’

‘And her passport?’

‘I couldn’t find it.’

He does not even bother to respond, and simply looks at me with more pity. He probably thinks I am losing it. ‘Either way, it’s only been ...’

‘Four weeks on Friday since she was last seen by anyone, or since anyone heard of her. Even if she had been angry with me at the time, she had cooled off since then, and got in touch with the Institute.’

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

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

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

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

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

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

‘She would never do that.’

‘... cause self-harm?’

‘Never.’

‘Are you aware of any vulnerability? For example, does she need regular medication or treatment?’

‘No.’

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

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

Alison ... standing on the gallery of Tarbat Ness Lighthouse, looking absolutely radiant, with her hair streaming in the wind, and the sun sinking over Moray Firth behind her.

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

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

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

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

‘And the other bills?’

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

‘Does she keep a diary?’

‘No, not that I know of.’

‘Does she have access to a vehicle?’

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

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

‘Most likely, yes.’

‘Then this is consistent with her being abroad?’

‘Unless ...’

‘I understand. And I assure you that we will be taking this case very seriously – just like all the other missing person cases we get.’ He closes his

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

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

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

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

He hesitates for a moment. 'I don't know how much you know about this case, Miss Dannreuther, and what you read or heard about in the media. Sadly, the news reporting has been rather poor overall. Briefly, then, stripped of all sensationalised speculations and supernatural trappings, here is what happened. Sometime between 10 and 15 December last year, Miss Reed was abducted from her home in Cambridge and brought to the abandoned manor house at Loch Cuirinnein in the Scottish Highlands. Forensic analysis indicates that she was kept there, for a short period, in a room different from the dining hall, in which she was found. We do not know what exactly happened to her during that time. Her body showed no signs of any kind of violence prior to her death. But we do know that she died of an overdose of heroin, in combination with a sedative-hypnotic drug, about two to three days before she was found by Ullapool Police. If the group of young people who found Miss Reed's body really arrived at the manor house when they said they did, she would have been killed only a few hours previously. Based on the information that you mentioned, we arrested all these cult members.'

While the prosecution is mounted against them, they've been put on remand, pending the jury trial in summer. Regarding these other individuals who were at the scene of the crime – whoever they are, and whatever their involvement is in this case – we're doing everything in our power to apprehend them and to bring them to justice.'

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

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

'And the owners of the manor house?'

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

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

'Not since we completed our investigation.'

'I need to know if Alison is there.'

'You don't think that ...'

'Why not? Nobody would expect it to happen again so soon, at the same spot. The people behind Kathleen's murder clearly feel safe from prosecution. Otherwise, they'd never denounced all these cult members in a manner that makes it blatantly obvious that they'd been there too. They're confident that, in that remote place, they can continue to come and go and do anything they please, without being discovered. Once they brought a new victim there, they simply leave and stay somewhere else. And if anyone finds the person, that abduction too will be put down to some "Satanic activity," which, I'm sure, has nothing to do at all with anything that is going on.'

'All right. I do understand your concerns.' He glances at his watch once more, realising that to humour me is probably the best way of getting rid of me. 'I shall contact Northern Constabulary and ask them if they can send a car up from Ullapool to check on the manor house again, just to be sure.'

However, we will have to get the owner's permission, before we can enter the building and search inside. By tomorrow morning, we should have the answer. Then you can contact me again. But now, I'm afraid, I have other duties to attend to.'

CHAPTER TWO

THE MESSAGE

A deadly silence pervades all rooms. Although far away, the dampened sounds of the outside world are still audible – the occasional passing of a car, or the church bells ringing in the Sunday service – on the inside, no sense is left of the previous vibrancy. Nonetheless, this abandoned flat is the one remaining point of contact with Alison.

So, this is where the search must begin. Somewhere in here, perhaps encoded in seemingly insignificant, minuscule details, must be some information about her last days in Cambridge; some clues about where she might be now, and about the cause of her disappearance.

If she really was abducted from her own flat, as Kathleen had been – with the chain at the door still unbroken – an attack on her could only have been carried out if the perpetrators entered her flat while she was away at work. They would have picked the lock while most residents were at work, and then they would have waited, feeling quite safe. If they had watched her for days, they would have known that she lived alone, and never brought anyone home with her.

Returning from work, she would have unlocked the apartment door and stepped into the corridor. She would have deposited the keys at the usual spot on the chest of drawers. For a moment, she would then have been standing in front of the mirror, able to see behind her – the dark opening of the door to the kitchen. She would have switched on the light in the corridor and walked over to the coat rack, away from the mirror. While she was occupied with hanging up her coat, a figure might have stepped out from the kitchen, put a hand over her mouth to prevent her from screaming, and threatened her with some kind of weapon. Then, very quickly, the others would have emerged. Physically fit as Alison is, and not easily intimidated, it would have taken at least two to pull off an assault against her without creating a lot of noise.

That would have happened in the late afternoon or early evening, when there was plenty of movement throughout the building and out on the streets, as everyone else too returned from work. This would have made an

immediate attempt to take her away very risky. So, they probably would have waited until later that night, during which time they might have sedated Alison in the same way as they had sedated Kathleen, and then ... placed her on the bed, most likely.

Would there have been someone with her in the bedroom? Cramped as it is with half of my stuff – piles of bags and boxes in every available corner – with barely enough space to move about, and without any comfortable way of sitting, other than on the bed next to her? Would they not rather have left the door open, to be able to hear when she began to stir, and waited together in the adjacent living room? In that case, if Alison was not too heavily sedated, she might have had the opportunity to leave some kind of message, the smallest hint, some indication that she had been attacked and was about to be taken away.

Nothing obvious – otherwise, the intruders would have found and removed it immediately. Nor anything that was too well hidden or disguised, as that would have defeated its own purpose.

Considering that, the likelihood of finding any clue that Alison was abducted is exceedingly small, unless there is something here – or something missing – that would be apparent to someone who knows her and her flat well, but is invisible to anyone who does not; something hidden, possibly in plain sight, the intruders would not recognise. Moreover, this would most likely be noticeable only to someone actively searching for it; someone who already was suspicious about Alison's absence. And how long would that have taken?

Even now, given the circumstances surrounding her disappearance, given that no one else knew of her increasing and persistent fears of being followed around and having her flat invaded, her absence has not yet raised any suspicion – except for me, of course. And I am not supposed to be here; just a ghost, haunting a once familiar world, which has turned lifeless and empty.

Her bedroom ... still exactly as it was three days ago; still nothing out of the ordinary to be seen here – no message underneath the pillow, nor underneath the duvet, or even the sheet.

Beneath the bed ... only a biro. The style suggests that it belongs to the little notebook lying on the bedside cabinet, which is still brand-new and has never been written in – nor are any of its pages missing.

But all of this is far too easy anyway. Any fool without any inside knowledge of Alison would think about these locations when looking for a message. This will require far greater ingenuity – a flexibility of mind that I simply do not possess. And yet I need to work this out now, all on my own, because just for once there is no clever big sister around to bail me out.

Or am I trying to make too much out of this, create drama where none exists? Has it come to that, that I choose to fear the worst for Alison, rather than accept the possibility that the two of us grew apart more than I realised during the past six years since I left Cambridge? When previously it had always been I who moved away from her; when it was I who was unavailable, who put other priorities before her, who took her for granted, neglected and deserted her. After repeatedly leaving her behind, what right do I have to expect her to let me know, at each moment, where she is and what she is doing?

In fact, it is precisely this selfish attitude, that sense of entitlement to the old friendship, that caused me to walk in here and rummage through Alison's personal belongings, as if they were mine as much as hers. By doing so, am I still a welcome friend in times of trouble, or have I myself turned into an unwanted intruder into her private life?

Undoubtedly, to anyone else, these questions would appear socially obligatory – when in reality there is no merit in them at all. In the end, the terrible truth is that I am not mistaken about Alison, about the closeness of our friendship. Alison would never have left for this long without a single word to me, no matter how depressed or frustrated she may have been after our last phone conversation. And this leaves only one alternative: there is something seriously wrong here, something I need to discover.

A message ... that is what we are searching for. From a scientific perspective, a message is some piece of information that is passed between different individuals. The transfer of information requires a signal. A signal is a recognisable pattern relative to a specific background. This pattern cannot be too regular for it to contain a sufficient amount of information; nor can it be too complex for it to be comprehensible.

Therefore, we need to identify perturbations in the normal state of this flat, irregularities in some sense, that show a certain regularity in themselves. But this is far too elaborate. Alison would never have had the chance to leave such a message while being assaulted.

Then again, messages come in different forms, including sound. Whatever happened here would have produced some noise; and if that was stored somehow ...

If there was a struggle – as there was bound to be, if Alison really was attacked – maybe she got away, if only for a few seconds, not long enough to use the phone. So, she ran into the living room, over to these shelves with the stereo, and perhaps managed to press the record button on the tape recorder, unnoticed by her assailants.

There is a self-recorded mix tape inside the right drive. Being stopped in the middle, it could not have shut off automatically. Still, to be sure, if we rewind it just a little ... hit playback – and the chorus of “Life on Mars?” breaks into the hushed stillness of the flat.

I am obviously clutching at straws now, while looking for something I do not want to find; and I still need to make the best effort, even though there is nothing here, nothing unusual.

The row of photographs on the shelf above the stereo is unperturbed, standing exactly as it always did – her life in a sequence of snapshots. On the far left, the old baby picture with her parents. This is followed by the two of us, five or six years old, playing at the shore of Ullswater – Gran only visible as a shadow, taking the photograph. Further on, our old hockey team; Alison standing in the back, glamorous as ever, smiling confidently, clearly the leader of the pack; and squatting in the front, chubby me, the solid appearance not improved by all the protective pads. But chubby and shy as I was, I did support Alison quite effectively in those days, on the playing field at least, allowing her to focus ahead and get on with scoring – which is more than can be said about me recently.

What happened? Our lives used to be so closely entwined for so many years. Although these photographs are meant to tell her story, aside from the first one, I am always there with her: here at the graduation ceremony in the yard of Senate House; here all dressed up again outside the Albert Hall, this time for the Proms; up until the very last photograph of hers – just an empty frame now, the glass cover reflecting my own worried face against the black cardboard, worn out and haggard compared to all those years ago.

But I cannot indulge in nostalgia now. I cannot allow myself to be taken over by sentimentality. There must be something here, something tangible.

Whether deliberately or not, a violent act, such as an abduction – if indeed it took place – must have left a mark somehow.

The only room left to investigate is the little office. But here too, everything looks completely ordinary.

The letter from work, granting her the sabbatical ... it arrived two days before our last phone conversation, and only serves to confirm the generally accepted scenario.

No new messages have been recorded on the answer phone since Thursday. And there were only few before; beginning with my own awkward message from Aurora, the evening before the fire, desperately trying to sound cheerful among the static crackle of the long-distance satellite connection; followed the next day by the nervous message from Personnel Section, desperately trying to sound calm. But all others who would normally be likely to phone Alison, evidently expect her to be away.

Also, among the papers on her desk, even a more careful examination reveals nothing that would seem suspicious in any way ... nothing of significance inside the waste paper basket either.

Then there is the tidy folder with newspaper clippings about Kathleen's murder, together with copies of several documents collected from different archives – still lying openly on her desk, suggesting that she was not quite ready yet to let go of the case.

Finally, the small stack of letters that arrived since Alison disappeared, and therefore cannot provide any clue about what happened here before. It contains no personal communication, nor anything formal that would seem urgent – except this one, potentially, from the Central Library. After everything else, it would just be Alison's luck to get an overdue notice while being abroad on a sabbatical ... and it is, for *The Secrets of Narnia – A Guide to the Magical World of C. S. Lewis*. The book was due on 4 February.

Now that *is* curious. Well-organised and meticulous as Alison is, she would never forget to return any borrowed items before going away for an extended period – under normal circumstances, at least. Of course, given the state she was in before planning to leave, it is quite possible that a library book was not high up on the list of things to think about.

Either way, it must still be here somewhere. So, perhaps, the only thing I can do for Alison at the moment is to find and return it for her.

But where is it? A library book with the special cover and the stickers stands out. It should have caught my attention already. It is not lying about on any of the tables; nor put by accident onto any of the book shelves in the living room.

Curiouser and curiouser ... Now a book has gone missing as well – and that is definitely suspicious.

Unless it is in the bedroom.

Neither on the bedside cabinet, nor inside any of the drawers. That only leaves her large wardrobe and the dresser, and there is no real chance that the book could have ended up in there.

Although ... there are several stacks of old children's books on top of the wardrobe. Nothing that might be a library book ... but there is our shared album with the photographs from the primary school years. As nice as it would be to leaf through it again, after so many years, it is difficult to reach ... and even harder to wriggle out from underneath the other albums and books lying on top of it. It might be worth getting a chair from the kitchen – but it is already too late. With the album half out, the rest of the pile topples over backwards, at least one book falling behind the wardrobe, by the sound of it.

It got stuck near the top. But upon a small shift of the bulky piece of furniture away from the wall, the book drops, dislodging another one that had got stuck farther down – the library book.

That is why Alison forgot to return it before she went away. Cleaning up one day, distracted as she was, and in a hurry before her departure to Dublin, she had put it on top of the wardrobe, together with her other children's books. Then later, just as I did, she must have failed to recognise it in the dim light underneath the ceiling. And so, at least the apparent absence of the library book has a perfectly rational explanation.

The damage done to it by the fall is minor, with only a few pages bent – but there, on the notice with return dates taped to the inside of the front cover is some handwriting, a few words in shaky letters:

Ultima Thule
Where is the Secret?
Who guards it?



Nothing ... there is nothing here, in any of the newspaper clippings and other documents, not a single reference.

Ultima Thule ... Why would these words have such a significance to Alison that she would write them into a library book? Did she truly find something out about the murder of Kathleen that everyone else missed? If so, the intruders would have most likely removed any incriminating material from the folder, anything that linked these words to the murder. Alternatively, if these words are not related to Kathleen, what else occupied Alison so strongly prior to her disappearance?

That it was Alison who wrote these three lines, about that there cannot be any doubt. Although it is not her usual neat handwriting, if the previous lender had written straight across the list of return dates, the notice would have been replaced.

Also, the colour of the writing matches that of the biro that lay underneath her bed, which might suggest that she wrote these words while waiting to be taken away. In that scenario, since she had a notebook lying right next to her, she would have written into the library book for the very specific reason of hiding a message.

On the other hand, the colour of the pen is not rare at all. And even if it was that pen, it could have been used anywhere in this flat, at any time – in which case, this could just be a note to herself.

Either way, it would require extreme circumstances for Alison to write these words – and into a library book, no less. Likewise, there must be an explanation for the unclear writing. Being in a hurry would not be sufficient to account for that. Instead, she must have been seriously intoxicated, either due to the sedative drugs given to her by the assailants, or due to alcohol.

Under the former scenario, this would again be a message to others and a cry for help. Under the latter, this could have been written possibly weeks before she disappeared, while she was most depressed. Maybe she woke up one night, after a bad dream and still drunk, having fallen asleep here on the sofa. She felt she urgently needed to write something down, afraid of forgetting it, and with nothing else around but the library book. Then, tidying up the next day, not remembering anything that happened during that night, she simply put the book on top of her wardrobe by mistake. Intoxication by alcohol ... Is that enough to explain the misplaced library

book as well as the writing inside it? What would the police make of this? What kind of conclusions would they draw? That Alison was in a rather unstable frame of mind? That she did something stupid, to harm herself?

One thing is certain: I cannot sit here on this sofa any longer, turning over the same thoughts inside my head. I need to get out. If really something terrible has happened to Alison, there is no more time to lose.

There are far too many open questions for which there are no answers contained within these walls. There are far too many things I do not understand, too many bizarre concepts. Satanic rituals, witchcraft ... I need to find out about these things. Let the police do the sensible thing and follow their routine enquiries – rationality for a rational world. Meanwhile, I need to follow Alison, go off in another direction and see where that leads.

I need to talk to someone who has experience with unconventional beliefs; someone, who does not tell me to be sensible, when just for once, all I want to do is scream; someone, who is irrational enough themselves to believe me.

Most importantly, I need to talk to someone who understands the power of emotions.

I need to talk to someone like Claire.

CHAPTER THREE

THE WAY BACK

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

St Andrews ... despite the stormy weather, what always seemed to be a sleepy and dull little town, now has a welcome mundane atmosphere. Even back then, I must have been happy here, in a restlessly detached sort of way. And here I am again, just passing through; bringing with me something of the darkness from the distant world of satanic rituals, abductions, and murder – by no means topics of polite conversation in this civilised society.

With Claire too, I need to be careful about approaching the subject, diplomatic and patient. On the phone, she did come across as being more or less the same as always – after overcoming her initial surprise – but I cannot be too direct. I cannot come back here, having been out of touch for years, and start asking weird questions.

With all the concerns about Alison, I did not even remember to get a present for her. And now it is too late to change that, because here it is, the familiar blue door, with only Claire’s name left at the doorbell – but its sound, emerging muffled from inside, still the same.

In an instant, quick footsteps descend the old staircase.

The door opens ... and there she is. ‘Hello, Si. So good to see you again. And you’ve had your hair done – love the pixie, Si, very classy – for that trip to Antarctica, was it?’

‘Good to see you too, Claire. But let’s not talk about my hair. I know it’s ghastly at the moment. The most awkward in-between length possible ...’

‘Just keep it short. It suits you. Or give it a few months and let it grow into a bob. But do come in, in the meantime. It’s a bit nasty outside, isn’t it? They were talking about snow again later on.’

She begins ascending the stairs to the upper floor, still wearing the same kind of long polo neck jumper, designed to be more tight-fitting than it is around her, together with the compulsory leggings, and the thick woollen socks substituting for slippers.

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

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

‘When really it’s been at least seven hours and fifteen days.’ Claire laughs, attempting to break the ice. ‘But I’m glad you still feel at home in our old flat. Just put your bag down here for the time being, it looks heavy.’

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

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

‘Now I can give you a proper hug. It’s lovely to have you back. For a while I thought I might never see you again.’ After a brief embrace, she quickly backs away at arm’s length. ‘But Si, you’re not well at all. You’re way too skinny.’

‘Now look who’s talking.’

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

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

With a sceptical glance, she releases me. In an effort to keep her feet dry, she carefully sidesteps the puddles that start spreading around me.

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

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

Claire disappears through the familiar kitchen door, while I am left in a flood of memories ... coming home late in the evening, tired after hours of lab work and training, dropping off the big duffle bag with diving equipment, hoping to catch some delicious smell still lingering in the air, the promise of leftovers from Claire’s tea or dinner.

And there is Radio Fife still playing in the kitchen, with the same jingle after the news and weather; the same DJ, with a valiant effort to sound

cheerful and upbeat, telling us to make the best of the blustery Monday afternoon, his voice blending into the opening bars of “China In Your Hand.”

As if the last couple of years had never happened; as if Aberdeen and Antarctica were only part of an illusion; as if the dreams I had of leaving this quiet town and moving out into the exciting world of adventures had remained just that – until they came to an abrupt end in a burnt-out base, buried deep down in a frozen wasteland.

And from that rude awakening, I was sent back here, back to a familiar place and time – almost like a warning, to start over and not to go down the same path again, to do things differently; as if something went wrong here; as if at some point in the past, I made a wrong decision. But how? Nothing dramatic ever happened here, nothing of any kind of significance – besides finishing my doctoral degree. And there cannot possibly be anything wrong with that.

Claire stands in her favourite corner of the fitted kitchen, looking out over the bleak gardens behind the house, quietly singing along to the music, just as she always did – with the usual decoration of rowan branches in the window, now leafless.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

She still uses the same water kettle, but the cooker and all worktops are now polished to a shine – even the taps. There are no used dishes in the sink anymore, nor any coffee stained lecture notes spread all over the kitchen

table; only a few neatly folded pages of a newspaper, and a small stack of magazines, an issue of *Brigid* at the top.

Balancing on tiptoes, Claire surveys the contents of her well-stocked larder. There are no tins left in it at all. My former corner, reserved primarily for baked beans and instant coffee, is now taken up by an assortment of colourful and foreign-looking bags and boxes. Everything is meticulously arranged.

How can you live like that without getting in your own way? And why, during the years we lived here together, did she never indicate that cleanliness was so important to her? Then at least I could have made an effort. As it was, it must have been such a relief for her to get rid of me and to have the flat all to herself.

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

‘Sure ... for old times’ sake.’

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

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

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

As the water in the kettle begins simmering, she drops a handful of finely chopped roots into a teapot that is waiting on a tray, together with two cups.

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

‘Yes, it was, or at least it would have been. But, in the end, I got an unplanned crossing to South Africa out of the whole debacle. So, I can’t complain.’

‘You know, I first found out about you going to Antarctica through *The Apostle*. They have this column about what former students are up to now, and they reprinted an interview that you had given to King’s College for *their* Alumni Magazine – you traitor. I knew how chuffed you must have been about being selected. But I don’t know how you do it, Si – diving, I mean. If I think of the things that frighten me most, being underwater is pretty high up on the list, ever since ... well, maybe it’s because of these horrendous

floods that happened down South, back in the '60s. You probably don't remember, as you weren't affected, but my first clear childhood memory is of our living room under a few feet of water, and Dad carrying me out of the house. After all the horror stories I had heard about in church, I honestly thought the world was going to be drowned again, and we wouldn't get onto the boat. It was absolutely terrifying. But water doesn't scare you at all, does it?

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

Claire takes the whistling kettle from the cooker and pours the hot water into the teapot. Then she picks up the tray. 'Shall we go into the lounge?'

In keeping with the kitchen, the living room is likewise very neat and clean, with several new decorations, but no photographs of people at all. The rug is new, but aside from that, the room still contains much of the same furniture, positioned at the same places – including the old sofa, with its familiar energy-sapping softness.

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

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

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

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

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

'Negative energy?'

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

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

She deflates visibly. 'Sorry, Si, I forgot how exasperated you always get when people don't use the correct terminology. But there are different ways

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

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

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

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

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

'And leaving it open, rather than inserting some random narrative, is not an option?'

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

It was obviously a mistake to latch on to the negative energy issue. After Claire had already asked me outright what the problem was, I should have been just as open with her. It would have been easy to get on to the real

subject straightaway. Now, the characteristic twiddling of her hair indicates that she is rapidly becoming engrossed in the subject, making it difficult to divert the conversation into more fruitful channels.

‘... and he talks about the Big Bang, how time and space and everything was created back then – or somehow came about – and how it makes no sense to ask what was before the Big Bang, because there was ... no, *not* nothing. That’s exactly where my problems began.’

She stops twiddling to free both hands for gesticulating, and pushes herself into a more upright position. ‘I was never quite able to understand. But what he is trying to explain is that before the Big Bang there was no *was*, you see, no time and therefore no space to accommodate anything, not even nothing – ooph. It was really complicated, and eventually I had to give up. Still, it was very interesting.’

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

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

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

She is genuinely concerned about that possibility. Then she remembers the tea and pours out two cups. ‘In any case, lives are connected, aren’t they? Our individual timelines are all part of the same continuum. We inherit the past. We latch on to an older narrative, with a chance of rectifying previous mistakes. And if we fail, if we are overwhelmed by our challenges, isn’t it comforting to imagine that someone else may come along at a later stage and continue where we have left off? Wouldn’t it be sad if after all this time we spent down here ... you see, there it is again: after time – the same old

concept we don't understand. So, you must admit that, to someone like me, these scientific theories must seem entirely strange and supernatural, just as counterintuitive as my ideas seem to you.'

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

'All right, but what is proof?' She holds out her hands in a placating gesture. 'Si, please don't get angry with me. I am really trying to understand, and this is an important question, isn't it? Are we only willing to accept as reality what we can prove in a laboratory? For many that's too restrictive, you know. That's why so many people talk about faith. They accept certain ideas as part of their own reality, and then they try to find the justification for their beliefs within themselves.'

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

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

'So, it's one thing to know that it takes, say, a dozen steps from your bedroom across the hall to the bathroom. You're intuitively aware of that, since you've made that trip a countless number of times. But it still takes faith to walk even that short distance, because you never know, there may be a large black bag with diving equipment lurking for you in the dark.' She winks cheerfully.

'I didn't ...'

'Yes, you did – repeatedly. But that's not the point. The point is, Si, no situation is ever going to be either completely black or white. There'll always

be uncertainties, you know, shades of grey. And so, there may come a moment, while walking a dark path, when your senses and intellect can only tell you so much; but your faith in a higher power can give you the courage to go all the way. Sometimes, you have to listen to your instincts, even if they don't seem to be rational.

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

She snuggles back between her cushions. 'So, who's to say that, a few centuries from now, many things that we consider to be supernatural today, simply because we can't explain them scientifically, aren't in truth perfectly natural?'

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

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

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

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

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

She laughs too and gives up on the spilled tea. To cover up her embarrassment, she hides her face behind her arms as she lets her hair down again. ‘Basically, all I wanted to say was that there are powers and things in this world that we may never be able to understand; and even if we did, they’re still beyond our control.’

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

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

Oh, dear ... ‘Claire, where do you get these ideas?’

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

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

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

How could you dampen such wide-eyed excitement ... ‘You know, Claire, there was such an instance, now that you mention it. And it was during my first year up here – in ‘85, when Everton lost the cup final. Before extra time, I tried to phone Alison, but her line was busy. As it turned out,

precisely then, she was trying to phone me. I was in the pub, you see, but eventually I managed to reach her.'

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

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

'I like plays ... some of them.'

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

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

This meeting has gone off to a bad start – and it is all my fault; coming back here with selfish aims and under a false pretence; the secrecy and dishonesty purely because I hopelessly underestimated the closeness that could have existed with Claire for so long; a friendship prevented by my prejudice of seeing her as someone who could not be taken seriously, based entirely on the harmless superstitious beliefs she has.

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

Claire stands by the kitchen window again, gazing at the dark clouds that move across the sky. Despite the early afternoon hours, the sun has not risen high above the waving tops of the bare trees, and the noise of the wind blends with the hissing of the water on the cooker.

She shows no reaction as I enter the room, but she is not sulking. She immediately turns around as she feels my hand on her shoulder and returns my hug. Her body relaxes, as she lets her head sink onto my shoulder.

Her hair is almost black, in stark contrast with her pale skin ... but with a faint reddish tint, even in the grey light. And tousled as it is, it still runs softly through the fingers like a breeze of air.

When all uncertainty has been cleared up – about Alison’s disappearance and about Antarctica – I shall get my life under control again. I shall go back to my old job. I shall eat and sleep and exercise regularly. I shall fuss about my hair and live like a normal person. But until then, it seems as if I shall be on a journey by myself; a journey that is still as dark as it was before I returned here.

‘Claire, on the subject of dark paths: I can tell you with a fair amount of certainty that it does not take more than half-a-dozen steps across the hall from your bedroom, but that’s only the factual part. I’m afraid the faith you’ll have to provide yourself, just in case you have someone else with bad bag-depositing manners staying over.’

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

Suddenly, she raises her head. ‘You’re not going back to Antarctica, are you?’

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

Claire shakes her head silently, looking sad.

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

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

A shrill whistle erupts from the boiling kettle.

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

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

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

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

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

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

‘Like what?’

She looks embarrassed and throws out the teabags.

‘Claire?’

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

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

She shivers. ‘Let’s go back into the lounge. It’s a bit draughty in here, as usual. They still haven’t managed to replace the old windows.’

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

‘You make it sound as if I were an old woman. I’m fine, really. But let’s not talk about me. Instead, tell me more about yourself; about your work and

everything else you're interested in – witchcraft and all these things. Give me all the gory details.'

She sinks into her chair, looking stunned. 'Siobhán, are you running a temperature or something? I'm getting seriously worried about you. We've lived here together for almost four years, and throughout all this time, you never cared one tiny bit about what I was doing. The best I could get out of you in those days was a lecture on how silly my ideas were.'

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

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

'Well, about what you said, about me being the kind of person you needed when we met: in what kind of situation could you possibly need someone like me?'

She sets out to speak, but then reconsiders and takes a slow sip of her tea. 'I was in a bad state back then. It was ... basically, it's a bit of a long story. I grew up in Kent – Tonbridge, as you may remember. And if that wasn't bad enough, at the earliest opportunity, I was bundled off by my parents to an Anglican prep school for girls, and to a similar boarding school later on. Then, when I moved up here for the undergraduate programme, I felt like I had a lot of partying to catch up with. You always thought the town was a bit conventional and boring. But for me, coming from that conservative background, student life was quite a revelation. I was finally responsible for myself, but still had plenty of money to spend from my parents. So, I was spoiled and inexperienced and desperate for any kind of excitement. And, predictably, I made a complete mess of it.

'I went to any party I could find, met all sorts of people, and after a few weeks, I joined the Magick Circle, as it was called: a group of university students, who got together on weekends for some occult rituals and séances. I don't think that, at least initially, the majority of participants honestly believed in any supernatural powers. I certainly didn't. But it was a bit creepy – in a thrilling sort of way: putting on clothes and makeup in a gothic style you wouldn't dare wearing otherwise, and speaking in some solemn pseudo-archaic English ...' She giggles, amused and a little embarrassed by her own recollection. 'Anyway, when we were all assembled, for whatever we were going to re-enact ... and I must say, we weren't terribly creative about that. Usually, we'd be sitting around a table, sometimes with a spirit board, or around a pentagram drawn on the floor, with a circle of black

candles burning around us. Then someone would be selected to lead the conjuration of various spirits and demons, with invocations of different powers, all copied out of some rather questionable reprint of a Medieval or Renaissance grimoire.’

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

‘For a few months, during the winter, we met at someone’s flat. Then, when the weather got nicer, we started to go out at night, to some of the abandoned buildings around here – Crawford Priory was our favourite. We never caused any damage; and for the first time in my life I felt as if I was part of a group of “cool” people, you know. So, after the first year up here, I moved out of the university residence and into a house shared by several members of the Magick Circle.’

‘By then, I had got myself to believe that there may actually be something about these supernatural powers, that they were simply hidden from our mundane eyes, but still there, all around us, that they can be experienced and even made use of, if you can manage to broaden your consciousness. For that, alcohol is useless, of course. It only makes you dull and tired.’

‘Conveniently, as it seemed, it was around that time that these new pills began to appear – amphetamines undoubtedly – meth or MDMA perhaps, I’m not sure. Certainly back then, I had no idea what they were. They looked like the harmless little sugar pills you give to children – but their taste was quite bitter, and their effects were astonishing. It starts with an unmotivated euphoria and a warm feeling of closeness to those around you, being part of a loving, caring community. But it isn’t just an emotional response that you might also have from alcohol. In addition, you get the impression that everything becomes clearer, moving into sharper focus, as if up to this point you’d been seeing the world through a dirty window, which has suddenly been wiped clean. Inanimate objects seem to come to life. They begin to move about and to talk to you. You start to see spirits and other beings all around you, pleasant ones at first, friendly and inviting. For a while,

everything is fine, until the initial high is over – and then the demons come for you. It gets dark, as once again the nature of your surroundings changes. Outside, it might be the jagged walls or turrets of a ruin against the night-time sky that turn into a horned head, while the empty windows become malicious eyes. You come to believe that there are malevolent entities all around you, lurking in the dark corners of your ordinary consciousness, waiting for the right moment to strike. That is when you start to believe that you need the drugs to heighten your senses, to be able to penetrate those shadows, and to see the evil within them. And so the vicious circle begins.

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

‘With all that, I got weaker and weaker. I was constantly ill, my immune system being shot to pieces. I began to struggle to keep up with the programme at university, terrified to think what would happen if I failed any of the course requirements, and my parents found out. They would have withdrawn their financial support immediately. And so, by the end of the third year, I was wildly swinging back and forth between panic attacks at one extreme, during which I practically lived in the library, desperately trying to get some work done – and a complete lack of motivation at the other extreme, when I was struggling to even get out of bed. I barely scraped through on pass grades at the end of Candlemas. Then, during the summer hols with the group, away from St Andrews ... well, it got out of hand; and I realised, at last, that it had gone too far.

‘So, when I got back here, I went to see Professor Harris. I didn’t really know him at the time. But during my second year, I had taken a module with him, and I liked his subject. More importantly, there was something about him that made him the one person I trusted. Fortunately, he agreed to

become my Ph.D. supervisor, *if* I succeeded in getting the M.A. at the end of Senior year. So, I moved out of the house I was living in and, through Harris, I found this flat. That's why I got such a bargain on the rent, incidentally. But it was a bit big, just for myself. Also, I was scared to be alone. I didn't trust myself, coming down from the drugs. On the other hand, I didn't want to live with anyone I knew at the time. So, I went to the letting agent, to advertise for a flatmate, and there I met you.'

She attempts a cheerful smile. 'You were ... different, unlike anyone I'd ever met before. All my beliefs in supernatural powers, whether benign or evil, were total nonsense to you. You looked after yourself, although your nutrition was, shall we say, pragmatic – and still is, apparently. But you had no time for drugs. You were always on the move – active, out there in the real world, doing things you were excited about, with people you genuinely associated with, with whom you shared common interests. I also liked your friends, but I always felt a bit silly among them, and I didn't want to embarrass you. – Yes, Si, I know. That's just how I felt at the time.'

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

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

‘Sorry, Claire, I really had no idea. I did notice, when we met, that you weren’t well; I simply assumed that you were recovering from some illness. I should have asked, I suppose ... But now, what’s your goal in life? What do you hope to get out of your research – for yourself, I mean?’

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

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

‘Don’t despair, Vawny, dear. But here, let me be more specific for you. Basically, all cultures have developed a concept for some kind of afterlife, the existence of a special place, or places, where spirits or souls go when they leave their earthly hosts. Think, for example, about the Celts here in Britain, during the time before the arrival of the Romans. Among the few things we know is that, in addition to certain geographical features – such as isolated hills, caves, lakes, or groves of oak and yew trees – they also included the sun and the moon in their rituals. To them, sunsets were associated with the departure of the soul, and what lay beyond the western horizon was seen as the otherworld. Normally, our world and this place of the afterlife are separated by an invisible boundary. But during Samhain, the Celtic New Year on 1 November, that boundary gets very thin, and spirits are able to pass through, to roam the land once more, and to interact with those they left behind. Now, compare that with the beliefs of the Inuit. You may not remember, but I mentioned once their way of interpreting auroras, when we got talking about Antarctica. You probably thought that I was just being particularly ...’

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

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

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

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

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

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

She interrupts the twiddling of her hair and leans forwards. ‘Here, imagine a coin being tossed. It turns and turns as it first rises and then descends again, finally landing on one side. The bringer of light is up, and you’re being born. After a while, the coin is flipped, and the bringer of death appears. So, what you have here by reinterpreting the original symbol of the raven is a new symbol for dying. But not all is lost at this point, because now you do something very clever: you flip the coin a second time. The bringer of light is up again, and what you get from this reinterpretation is a new symbol for rebirth. You see, Si, even within our objective natural surroundings, the meaning of signs isn’t fixed. We decide ourselves what significance we want to attach to each, and so, to some extent, determine our own reality.

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

‘And I wasn’t a particularly good person to talk to about this, was I.’

‘Well, you were always very busy. You had to work so much harder for your degree than I had to. There were whole weeks when you practically

lived in the lab, going over your sound recordings and doing these signal analyses. The few short moments I saw you then, you always looked like a ghost – all the while telling me, of course, that there were no such things.’ She giggles and ties her hair up in a bun.

‘Yes, but still ... The thing is, Claire, what troubles me about these ideas of yours is that they sound very impressive, like the kind of ghost stories you tell by the fireside during Christmastide. These stories are great to listen to, they give you the creeps, and afterwards you may dream about them. But then you wake up in the morning, and all the spooky images dissipate. Take your example of the raven: in the cold light of day, it’s a simple enough biological item called “a bird.” But now you attach two different meanings to it, both of which it intrinsically does not possess, and then you say that, as both states are related to the same thing, you can go from one to the other as easily as turning over a coin. In stories, this might work very well. It’s just that in real life, we can only flip the coin one way – once.’

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

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

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

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

For a moment, Claire holds her breath. ‘Siobhán, have you lost someone recently?’

‘No ... no, I was just thinking. Practically, how is this supposed to work?’

Claire is unconvinced. She knows I am hiding something from her. And there is that creeping foreboding getting stronger again, the certainty that something has gone terribly wrong.

Claire tries to read my mind, leaning forwards again. ‘What’s wrong, Si? Tell me.’

But it is not that easy. Talking about it to the police ... that was different. I was angry then, angry with society for caring so little about a person who means so much to me; and I wanted to blame someone. With Claire ... she is going to believe. She is going to care. She is going to worry. And that will make it real. But it might also make it bearable. In any event, she is not going to let it pass.

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

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

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

‘And you don’t believe that.’

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

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

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

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

‘Now, this is going to sound a little strange, but I suspect that Alison’s disappearance may have something to do with the murder of Kathleen Reed last December. Alison knew her. In fact, it’s quite likely that she was the last person who saw Kathleen, before she was abducted. I’m sure you heard about the case. And you may remember what was said about Satanism in that context. So, before I came here, I had been wondering ...’

Claire nods. ‘I understand. But you know, Si, neither Druidry nor ceremonial magic have anything more to do with Satanism, than they have with witchcraft. And why do you believe that Alison’s disappearance is connected to Kathleen’s murder? Was Alison into Satanism as well?’

‘No, and neither was Kathleen – that’s just it. I don’t think that any of this has anything to do with Satanism. I am convinced that this is only a cover for something else.’

‘I agree with you. Accidental overdoses happen all the time, when you’re dealing with hard drugs like heroin. But what happened in that old manor house was carefully staged by someone whose knowledge of Satanism

appears to be derived from horror films – or at least for the benefit of people like that. There are still many prejudices in our society against anyone following an ideology other than the officially recognised religions. But someone must really hate the members of this little group to set them up for a sadistic murder like that, and then denounce them to the police.’

‘Or their involvement is entirely incidental. Perhaps they stumbled into it by accident. Perhaps, by going out to this lonely place, they disturbed something, some kind of ... evil, I suppose, something that was already there, but lying dormant.’

‘If that is true, we are dealing with powers that go beyond anything that I’ve ever experienced. This wouldn’t be the random madness of a psychopath. There is deliberation and a certain logic to it, even if it is perverted. This is not something you can invoke or banish with a simple incantation, or control with a ritual.’ She shivers slightly and sinks deeper into her cushions.

‘Claire, in the context of ritualistic practices, did you ever come across the term “Ultima Thule”?’

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

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

‘Hmm ... It *is* a bit spooky, isn’t it?’ Claire looks at me with worried eyes. ‘But the last thing you need now is for me to tell you that “it’s going to be all right,” or other such uninformed platitudes. Instead, you need someone who can ask you the right questions, to help you work things out for yourself.’

She resolutely gets up from her chair. ‘In other words, you need to talk to Professor Harris.’

‘Your boss?’

‘Why not?’

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

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

‘Claire ...’

‘No, Si, go and see him. Then you’ll know what I mean.’ She grabs my hand and pulls me up from the sofa. ‘I won’t come with you. I would only be in your way.’

She glances at the clock. ‘A quarter past three ... it would be a bit early to go for tea. He should still be in his office.’

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

‘Ask him about Ultima Thule.’

‘And why would I do that?’

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

‘Did we?’

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

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

Blasted ... ‘Claire, I just remembered: I was supposed to show up at the Institute in Cambridge today to get an appointment for another medical.’

‘Oh, Si. Some things never change.’

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

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

‘News reports? What news reports?’

‘About the accident on Antarctica, silly.’

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

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

‘You mean it was on television?’

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

‘I was away, remember. Everyone I spoke with since then knew about it anyway, so I couldn’t tell. In any case, what were they saying?’

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

‘Dead? I wasn’t dead!’

‘No, I can see that now; but back then ...’ She fights back her tears and grabs my arms. ‘We had to wait until the evening to find out that the Germans had found you alive and were bringing you to their base. Your institute had obviously been trying to keep that out of the news until they had the confirmation from the Germans, one way or the other. But someone in Stanley, I imagine, must have noticed that you were missing from the team, and had leaked that to the British media. Even after the Germans had found you, we needed to be told in great detail about the fire, about how you’d got lost in the snowstorm during the evacuation, and how they had to leave without you; how lucky it had been for the Germans to get through to our base, how difficult that had been, and considering the long and dangerous journey back ... it never ended. Until finally, after days of speculations, they said that you had safely arrived at the German base and were going to leave Antarctica that same night by ship, expected to return to Britain around the

middle of next month. Only, by then, I was ...’ Her voice breaks. ‘Wait a second.’

She hurries into the kitchen. There is the noise of several tissues hastily being pulled out of their box.

I am such a git. There is absolutely no excuse. How could I forget about Claire like this? Simply walk away and move on, without ever looking back or keeping in touch, after all these years living here together. Throughout all that time, all I ever saw was a quiet, reliable flatmate, and I walked right past a good friend.

Claire clears her throat. Some paper is being shifted on the table – the rustle of a newspaper.

She reemerges from the kitchen, smiling defiantly. ‘Here, this is what the *Tayside Tele* had to say about you. You can take all these pages and judge for yourself. Read it on the train, but try and get some sleep as well. You need it.’

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

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

‘Claire ...’

With a busy wave, she retreats quickly into my former bedroom.

Getting myself ready ... that is easier said than done, if there is nothing to get ready with. But it is too late now, with Claire already talking on the phone; making an appointment with someone I’ve never met in my life, but who nonetheless knows everything about the embarrassing debacle on Antarctica – just like everyone else in the country, it seems.

Everyone except Alison ... Under no circumstances would she have ignored the news about the fire and the evacuation. She would have got in touch with Gran and the Institute immediately, and then returned to Cambridge. Of course, it is possible that the incident did not make the international news in any significant fashion. Perhaps it was lost among all the other monumental and incidental occurrences around the world.

And DCI Anderson ... his comment about me “being a little worn out after my adventure on Antarctica,” he was quite serious about that. He must

have thought that I might be under some traumatic strain and cannot think straight at the moment.

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

'Will he? What did you tell him?'

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

'Exactly. You've got nothing to lose.' She nudges me towards the door. 'Now get out of here.'

And so, once again, the moment has come to pick up my bag and move on.

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

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

‘I’ll do my best.’

She nods and pulls me into a tight hug. ‘Take care, Vawny. Don’t get mixed up with these weird things we talked about, these supernatural beliefs. It’s not your world. You’re too ...’

‘I understand. Don’t worry.’

The rain has stopped, but the sky is still overcast, and temperatures have dropped. Already, the wind is driving a few small snowflakes along the street and through the gaps between the houses.

Claire and our old flat, with its illuminated living room window, seem to belong to a different world. A world in which bad things happen to other people, and everything will be all right. That is the world I belonged to not long ago.

Here, outside in the cold, this is the real world of my present – darkening and stormy. This is the world in which I know that Alison is in great danger.

CHAPTER FOUR

ULTIMA THULE

‘Load of tosh!’

The book hits the inside of the metal waste-paper basket with a resounding crash that echoes down the old corridor.

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

He gets up from behind his desk and approaches with surprising agility and energy. ‘Pleasure to meet you at last, after I heard so much about you. Now that you’re here, we can probably close the door. It is rather draughty in these old buildings. And please do not worry about bringing in some of our inclement weather with you. At least you had the good sense to dress for the occasion. Here, let me put your coat over the radiator.’

Befitting the venerable academic environment, the walls of the office are lined with shelves, occupied to the last inch with old textbooks and decades’ worth of journals. No computer or even a typewriter is afforded space on the otherwise generous desk. Instead, there are several modern books from the library, some expensive-looking notepaper, and a line of framed photographs.

Professor Harris points to his visitor chair. ‘Please, take a seat. I promise I won’t make you tell me the story of your adventures on Antarctica. You must be tired of that by now.’

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

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

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

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

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

‘I then went to the police station to file a missing person report. They conducted some basic enquiries and established that Alison has not been involved in any recorded accident. They also arranged for regular broadcasts on the radio, asking Alison to either contact the police or her friends. Two days I waited by the phone. Then I got too uneasy just sitting around, doing nothing.

‘So, I went back to Alison’s flat to see if I could find any clues about what might have happened, and where she might be. At first, I didn’t discover anything of interest. But then, purely by accident, I came across a book into which, inside the front cover, she had written some words that reinforced my fears that her disappearance might be linked to the murder of Kathleen Reed, which happened last December, up here in Scotland, as you may remember. Alison knew her, and the crime – particularly the way it was discussed in the media – affected her quite badly. She did not believe the official explanation involving Satanic rituals. So, she began to do her own research into the case.

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

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

‘All right ... But the simple truth is that I don’t have a particularly good reason to suspect that Alison is not currently in Dublin. Everyone else is happy to accept that. It’s just that I’ve known her for as long as I can remember. And I cannot imagine that she wouldn’t have told me – or at least got a message to me – before leaving Cambridge. But then again, things do change, don’t they? We’ve been living apart for a while now – more than six years. In the end, I’m probably just being irrational, and I shouldn’t have come ...’

Seeing me get up, he raises a hand and leans forwards. ‘Please, before you go, if only to satisfy my curiosity – what made you phone Miss Golding, after the two of you had lost contact with each other for more than two years, if I understand correctly. More importantly, what made her refer you to me.’

As he fixes me with his eyes, my own image of him becomes blurred, my head spinning. That quick rising from the chair ... something is wrong with me ... low blood pressure most likely ... and then there is the persistent dull pain pulsating in both legs. I cannot go on like this for much longer. I should go and see a doctor. I should be resting at Gran’s and allow her to look after me until I am well again. But I also need answers.

Fortunately, Professor Harris does not seem to notice my sudden weakness, as he watches me sink back into the chair. ‘Given the nature of that murder and its location, I can see why you would consult with Miss Golding, once you had formed the suspicion that your friend’s disappearance might be connected. But what was it that made her suggest me as a possible source of information? She has far more knowledge about modern sects than I do, and she knows that. So, why would she send you to me? There was nothing in the media that would indicate that my own area of expertise might have any bearing on the case.’

‘There were two words I didn’t understand, and neither did Claire. But she thought they might come up in some ancient mythology and ... I better show you the book. I’ve got it here in my bag.’

Surely, this situation is too bizarre to be true. Ideally, it would turn out to be just a dream. But here, entangled in some underwear, is still the same old library book – very solid and very real.

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

‘Yes.’

He places the book on the table in front of him and opens it. His reaction is almost imperceptible, but that single twitch around his eyes was not due to old age.

He slowly closes the book again. For a moment, he sits deep in thought, squinting down onto his hands resting on the worn-out cover. Then he leans back in his chair. ‘And you found no other writing inside the book?’

‘Aside from some ordinary annotations in pencil, which were clearly written by someone else – no.’

He nods, fixing me with his eyes again. ‘Ultima Thule?’

‘Yes, Professor. Does that mean anything to you?’

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

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

And now I am crying and having a nervous breakdown in front of a complete stranger, in one of the most prestigious universities in the country. But no hole opens up in the floor to swallow me up. The old wooden boards under my feet are as unyielding as ever.

Professor Harris has appeared at my side and lays his hand on my shoulder. ‘Miss Dannreuther, I can tell you everything I know about Ultima

Thule, and that is quite a lot, I'm sorry to say. However, I cannot see any meaningful connection of that term to the horrific murder you mentioned – even less to your friend's absence. And that should be reassuring.'

He walks over to an old cabinet behind the door and inspects the bottles inside it. 'You know, I clearly remember having had a very nice sherry here, not too long ago, but somehow ...'

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

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

He smiles as he hands me my jacket. 'A quick walk in the fresh air will do us both good. And the food in The Saltire is quite excellent – that's the pub a few houses down the street.'

There is no other option now but to play along and see what dignity can be salvaged from the situation – if only for Claire's sake. And there was I thinking that my attire would be the biggest embarrassment today.



The ancient magic of alcohol ... As the heart rate increases and the blood vessels dilate, soothing warmth percolates down the tired and bruised legs, releasing tension in the damaged tissue along the way. The anxious noise inside the brain is muted somewhat as, simultaneously, the cultured humming of the assorted faculty in the busy pub recedes into discrete alcoves and behind glass partitions. Just now, I might actually be able to fall asleep – but this is not the right occasion.

Professor Harris has already observed my absentmindedness, covering up for what might be an awkward silence by preparing his pipe with measured deliberation.

From up close, he appears older than his energetic demeanour and strong voice might suggest – no doubt seventy already. He must have emeritus status to keep his office, and when he decides to leave the university for good, Claire will probably miss him.

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

'... quite all right, Miss Dannreuther.' He waves the topic away with a glint in his eyes. 'But it did remind me of the first instance I met Miss Golding. She was going through a very difficult period in her life; although

much of what I know about her circumstances at the time, I don't know from her directly, but from the police.'

'The police?'

'Yes. They spoke with her after they had found her.'

He falls silent as he immerses himself in lighting his pipe.

'Found her where, Professor?'

'On what she considered to be the way back here, apparently, only she had got lost.' He extinguishes the match and throws it into the ashtray. 'I think it would be good for you to know this. She was away with a group of people on a tour through the Western Highlands. It was late summer, a few weeks before start of term – the year you moved here, it must have been – '84, was it? Yes ... They were visiting several historical sites, especially buildings that had been abandoned.

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

'That was when Miss Golding panicked and ran away – alone, in the middle of the night. The tide was up, so she had to wade and swim to the shore. As I mentioned, I never talked to her personally about these events; but she must have been extremely scared and confused, possibly hallucinating under the influence of the drugs. Under those conditions, having to cross a lake in the darkness ... well, all we know for certain is that she did manage to do it.

'The others of the group waited until the tide was out again; and so it took a while for some of them to get to a phone and to alert the emergency services. This was also when Miss Golding's absence was discovered, and they began searching for her – first near the shore and along the road, then as it got brighter, by helicopter over a wider area. As they didn't see her body on the exposed seabed, they focussed their attention on the hills. After several hours, they spotted her far from the road, lying in a ravine. When the rescue team finally managed to get up to her, she was unconscious. They were able to revive her, but all she said was, over and over again, that she had to get

back to St Andrews and talk to me. Obviously, that had been her goal when she ran away. Under the influence of the drugs, she had pushed herself to complete exhaustion. By the time the effects wore off, and she realised what she had done, she was hopelessly lost. After a while, it seems she simply gave up. She had no serious injuries, but she was dangerously hypothermic; so they brought her to the hospital in Fort William, where she spent one night.

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

‘Two days later, she did indeed come to see me, evidently unaware of the fact that, in the meantime, the police had contacted me about what had happened, asking me to get back to them, if, in a few days, I still had not heard from her. Now, there she was, heavily made up and still rather unwell, but seemingly sober, and she expressed a genuine interest in doing a Ph.D. with me. However, I still had to find out, indirectly, what she intended to do about this unhealthy drug habit of hers. So, I pointed out her irregular attendance of my class and asked her, perhaps a little too sternly, what kind of subject she had in mind, and what exactly her plans were. Then, suddenly, she had a bit of a mental collapse. She said she didn’t know what her plans were, or what she could do with her life. All she knew was that she did not want to die anymore.

‘When she had calmed down again, we got talking properly, and I was able to learn more about her situation. She told me that she was staying in a house with a group of others, but that she wanted to get out. Fortunately, through a relative of mine, I was able to find her the flat the two of you ended up sharing. It was still several days until the beginning of September, before she could move. During that time, I think she struggled quite severely with the symptoms of withdrawal. But she has made a remarkable recovery since then. She showed great interest in Celtic Britain, particularly the religious aspects of pre-Christian societies. She improved from Pass to First during Senior Honours, and still got the M.A. with a very respectable classification. She then went on to finish her studies with an excellent dissertation. She is

easily one of the most talented and sociable people I ever worked with. And to my knowledge, she has never taken drugs again – besides the few occasions when I was able to tempt her to join me for ... tea, as it were.’ He nods appreciatively at our Hot Toddies. ‘I tell you this in confidence, because you appeared to be unaware of the events that led up to your first meeting with Miss Golding, all these years ago. I thought you should know how much you meant to her, right from the start, and how sad she was when you moved away. You see, for a while, you were the only true friend she had. And she very much associates you with the end of a dark path, and the beginning of a new life.’

A dark path ... Claire knew what she was talking about. This conversation was no idle banter for her. And now she senses the darkness surrounding me.

‘The sandwiches here are quite good.’ Noticing my struggle to maintain composure, Professor Harris tactfully changes the subject.

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

‘Aren’t you returning to Cambridge tonight?’

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

He is glad to hear this. Then, puffing thoughtfully, his expression turns serious. ‘Regarding that note you found, there is something strange about the handwriting. It is clearly that of an adult, who normally writes well, but who, at the time of writing, was either in a great hurry or possibly ... under some kind of influence.’

‘Yes, that is what I’m worried about, that the nature of the handwriting might distract from the significance of these words. It is true that during the first few weeks following the murder, when Alison was most depressed, she did begin to drink more than she used to, at home and on her own, which she’d never done before. That was when she realised how quickly tragedy can strike and a life can end; when she kept thinking how close to being killed I had come, having lived in Kathleen’s flat until about a week before her abduction.’

He looks shocked. ‘I wasn’t aware of that. That must have been of some concern to yourself.’

‘To be honest, I wasn’t too troubled about it. I mean, these things can happen anywhere and anytime, can’t they. And it is generally accepted now that Kathleen wasn’t a specific target. But I can see how, if our roles had been reversed, I might have felt about Alison the same way as she did about

me. As it is, I'm more concerned about the fact that Alison actually knew Kathleen, whereas I never met her. And as I indicated earlier on, Alison had begun to do her own research into the potential background to the murder, essentially ignoring Satanism altogether and focussing instead on the location where the murder had happened.

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

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

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

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

‘If this is true, we are dealing with people who are well organised, well equipped, and well trained – rather than amateur opportunists, who just happened to abduct Kathleen for the purpose of performing some silly rituals. In other words, they are much more likely to be these unknown people who denounced the members of that Satanic group, rather than the group members themselves.

‘So, these dangerous individuals would have just managed to attack and probably sedate Alison with some kind of drugs, sometime in the early evening. Then they would have waited inside the flat until late at night, while they must have kept Alison in her bedroom, especially if she was sedated. But even so, she could not have been unconscious for several hours. Once she woke up, if she still pretended to be asleep, she had plenty of time to think about how she might be able to leave a clue about what had happened – and, crucially, why it had happened.

‘During her research about the history of the manor house in which Kathleen’s body had been found, she must have come across something related to a hidden secret that someone is guarding, something to do with Ultima Thule – whatever that means. These people and their secret had been quite safe in this remote and abandoned place, until a group of youngsters began using it for Satanic rituals. When that happened, it set off a chain of events. First, Kathleen got caught up in it, and then Alison. Why someone decided to follow Alison in the first place, I don’t know. It could not have been a coincidence. It had to have something to do with her connection to Kathleen. But in the process of following Alison, they would have observed her reading about the manor house in different libraries and archives. And before she herself realised how close to the truth she had got, it was already too late. They came for her, which must have confirmed to her that what she had found was important. So, she needed to find a way to leave a record of that information, to be discovered when, eventually, someone would come looking for her. If she was in bed, there was a notebook and a pen conveniently lying on the bedside cabinet. However, that would have been

too easy. The perpetrators would undoubtedly have found that. But there was the library book as well. Still pretending to be asleep, she waited for her chance. If she was being watched, maybe her guard briefly left the room, just long enough for her to scribble these few words. Together with the aftereffect of the drugs, that would explain the poor writing. Then, before she was taken away, perhaps as she got some clothes out of her dresser, all she needed was another few seconds to pick up the book from the bedside cabinet and shove it behind her wardrobe. And so ...’

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

‘Yes, and purely by accident. I had seen an overdue notice from the public library among Alison’s post earlier on, and I had been searching for it, thinking that I might return it for her – but I couldn’t find it. Then, as I was trying to get at some childhood photo album of us, stacked on top of the wardrobe, the pile toppled. Another book fell behind the wardrobe and got stuck there. Initially, I had thought that Alison had put the library book on top of the wardrobe too, by accident, together with her own children’s books – possibly days before she was attacked – and it had then fallen behind the wardrobe, when I disturbed the pile.’

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

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

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

‘But then ... that would mean that Alison *was* abducted.’

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

‘No, not really. It was only a hypothetical scenario. I was basically trying to get people to worry about Alison’s absence as much as I do, simply because everyone else manages to be so indifferent about it – in case something *did* happen to her. And it was comforting, in a way, to be told by everyone that

I was mad to believe that. But, in all honesty, I never seriously considered it to be true ... not emotionally anyway.'

He half manages to suppress a smile. 'Well, I have to say, the evidence isn't all that convincing. And it does seem to me that someone in a position of extreme danger ...'

'No, you see, that's just it, Professor. That's exactly the kind of thing that Alison *would* do in a dangerous situation like this. She never panics under pressure – on the contrary. It is true that occasionally she can come across as being a little distracted or absentminded. But when it really matters, she always pulls herself together. I've seen it so often, in harmless situations, admittedly – hockey matches, exams, and such – but I know that, if she was in a situation such as the one that I described, with time to think about what to do, she would definitely come up with something like that message in the library book.

'And she didn't have too many options, did she. She had to assume that, before they left, the attackers would clean up her flat to give the impression that she actually had gone to Dublin as planned. After all, there was the possibility that Alison had asked someone to periodically check on her flat while she was away, bring the post in and see if any important letters had arrived. The intruders would have been quite confident to come across anything that some unsuspecting person would have any chance of finding by accident, and that leaving a message in any effective hiding place would have been entirely pointless.

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

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

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

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

He smiles as he retreats discretely behind a thick cloud of smoke. But despite his outward optimism, he himself appears to be concerned now.

‘Professor, based on what I told you, do you really believe that Alison may have been abducted?’

He contemplates the question for a moment ... several moments too long. ‘It is hard to tell, based on the facts such as they are known. But if *you* consider the possibility, I imagine you showed this note to the police?’

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

‘For example, one thing that’s been puzzling me is how that book could have ended up on top of the wardrobe, together with the other children’s books and photo albums. The cover quite clearly marks it as belonging to a library. And so, the only explanation I could come up with was that Alison put it there in a hurry and being distracted by something else. That was yesterday, when I thought that these few words might be a note to herself about something she had found out about the murder or the history of the manor house. But what bothered me about this scenario was that Alison could not casually have placed the library book on a pile of other books at the top of her wardrobe, for the very simple reason that she and I are about the same height, and I could barely reach the bottom of the stack of books.

Alison would never have been able to neatly place the book at the top of the pile, without getting a chair to step on. Then, necessarily, she would have paid more attention to the book, realised that it was from the library, and returned it before she left. If, on the other hand, she deliberately hid the book behind the wardrobe, after having been attacked, suddenly everything makes sense – in a terrifying manner. And I still don't know why she was abducted and by whom. But if this scenario really is true, however she came across those few words, they must be absolutely crucial, and most likely related to the motive behind her abduction.'

'Yes, the motive ... that is what struck me upon seeing the note. I thought that finally we may be looking into the right direction, instead of being distracted by all this talk about Satanic rituals. Back in my office, I wasn't entirely truthful about not seeing a potential connection between the writing and your friend's disappearance. For one thing, I did not want to trouble you any further. More importantly, however, you had not mentioned then that your friend had been doing some background research on the manor house. You were away during the police investigation. Therefore, you may not have seen the many newspaper articles that were written about the case. Some of them showed photographs not only of the exterior of the building, but also of the inside. It must have been a grand place while it was still inhabited. But what particularly caught my attention were the large murals that could be seen in the background of almost all the photographs, depicting several scenes from Nordic and Germanic mythology. I didn't think too much about it at the time, but when you showed me what your friend had written, I was instantly reminded of them.

'There is no point in boring you with an extensive lecture, but both Thule and Ultima Thule have a long history in European mythology. It all started with two ancient Greeks and one Roman – a philosopher, an explorer, and a poet – all three writing about mysterious islands. Going back to the Fourth Century BC, Plato, in two of his surviving dialogues, describes a mighty empire that he said existed in pre-historic times, and which he called Atlantis. People on that island prospered while they lived in close connection with the gods, forming the most advanced society of their era. But their success made them arrogant. They thought that with all their technological accomplishments, they did not need the gods anymore. So, they turned away from them and became morally corrupted. They also began to invade the neighbouring lands, until eventually they tried to conquer Athens – and that

was their downfall. They were decisively defeated by the Athenians. And to make matters worse, their island was sunk by a gigantic earthquake. Sadly, the essential part of the second dialogue is missing. It is therefore unclear whether the sinking of Atlantis was an act of retribution by the gods, although the moralistic style of the rest of the writing would strongly suggest that.

‘A few decades on, Pytheas, after travelling across Northwest Europe, writes about an island that he describes as lying at the northern edge of the world, which he called Thule. We don’t know exactly where he landed; but we can assume that, most likely, it was some place in today’s Norway. The description he gives of the island, and the journey to it, cannot be linked to any real place, but he mentions the midnight sun. Since it is highly unlikely that he himself crossed the Arctic Circle, he must have retold stories that he had heard from others. If so, the Lofoten would be the best candidates for inspiring reports about Thule, especially as they are known to have had human habitation dating back to at least the Stone Age, unlike other Arctic islands.

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

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

‘Specifically in Central Europe, the idea of lost lands in the North became romanticised. Influential societies were founded around the claim that Plato’s mythological account about Atlantis had been inspired by true events that happened during the early days of our planet in the distant land of Ultima Thule. This land, so it was said, was the proper origin of the Germanic peoples, having been populated once by a superior race of

humans, who had originally descended from the heavens – or, alternatively, depending on how religious you were, had arrived on Earth from outer space – and whose strong link to cosmic powers has since been lost, although our vague subconscious recollection of this former connection is still expressed through the various religious beliefs in some form of deity, which – as far as we can tell – have existed throughout human evolution.

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

‘As I’m sure you know, during the early part of this century, these ideas were picked up by the National Socialist movement in Germany, and thereby became part of a crude political agenda, designed to unite and mobilise the masses, to channel the discontent and frustration of an entire people into willingness to fight another war that would restore the nation’s former glory. Always an effective way of accomplishing this is to create fear and hatred of a common enemy – from within as much as from without. Since Jews were the largest minority in Germany at the time, and since their own mythology places the origin of their people far from the imaginary land of Ultima Thule, they became convenient scapegoats.

‘With these political developments, tensions soon began to develop between the older groups following an idealistic Atlantean spiritualism and the pragmatic fascism and antisemitism of the Nazis. In particular, the believers in a lost Atlantean civilisation thought that a revival of that superior culture would lead to a racially pure utopian society that would – by its own strength – conquer the world through an evolutionary process of the survival of the fittest, without the bloodshed of war and active extermination of

weaker races. Conversely, this mystical spiritualism was seen by many Nazis as being too soft and fundamentally incompatible with their aggressive drive towards another major war. And so, groups that had originally provided the basis for the National Socialist movement were increasingly suppressed by the very regime they had once supported, and were forced underground as secret societies.

‘That was what came to my mind when I saw these photographs of the murals inside the manor house, depicting several scenes from operas by Richard Wagner – specifically, from the *Ring Cycle*. In a similar building on the Continent, I would not have been surprised at all to see images like that. There, these stories had a revival during the late 19th and early 20th Century, especially among those who believed in the Atlantean mythology. But inside a manor house dating from around the same period in Britain, they looked conspicuously out of place. Victorian era interior design was diametrically opposed to these graphic and dramatic paintings. It was very intricate and heavily ornamented, dominated by abstract patterns with a distinctly Indian or East Asian flair, and certainly not Germanic. Of course, it is possible that these murals are the result of later redecorations. But even then, with the First World War and the subsequent growing threat of the Nazis, anything as essentially German as these images would have been seen as highly suspect in this country – which might explain why they are found in such a remote place, and might hint at the existence at the time of a group of people who had subversive interests in the outcome of either of the two World Wars. But I didn’t attach any particular significance to it, until I saw the reference to *Ultima Thule* inside the library book, and after you had expressed your suspicion that it might be connected to the demise of Kathleen Reed.

‘My initial reaction to that was one of surprise and – to be perfectly honest – concern. Spontaneously, I thought that perhaps this might give us an indication about what really happened and, crucially, why. But now, I’m not so sure anymore. If that death didn’t occur in the manner outlined in the media – as an accidental drug overdose during a Satanic ritual – then we are dealing with a very serious and carefully orchestrated crime, committed by people whose ulterior motives are as yet unknown. It would seem highly unlikely then that anything that happened at the manor house half a century ago or more, connected in some sense to the Atlantean myths, should have any connection to this present-day murder. Despite this, somehow your

friend came across the term Ultima Thule, which at least temporarily must have had some importance to her.’

‘Yes ... But maybe, as for you, Professor, it was seeing these murals in the newspaper photographs that got her investigating into that direction. And then she came across something that appeared to confirm that initial suspicion, something about a guarded secret – *the* Secret, in fact, with a capital S. Are there any clues in these old myths about what that could be?’

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

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

‘True ... Still, I don’t think we should automatically assume that the term Ultima Thule in this short note refers to the old mythological land. In reality, it might be the name given to any number of things. In which case, the connection between your friend’s writing and the manor house – as suggested by the murals – breaks down entirely, and is revealed as nothing but a coincidence.’

‘You’re right, Professor. However one views the situation, something is always strange and implausible. Ideally one could say, with absolute confidence, that it is inconceivable that Alison would have been attacked inside her own flat, drugged by the intruders for the purpose of being abducted, thereby realising that what she had discovered about Kathleen’s murder and the manor house was important, and then found the opportunity to write it down and hide that message behind her wardrobe. Unfortunately, the implausibility of that must be seen in comparison with the alternative scenario in which Alison, all alone in her flat one night and in an inebriated state, suddenly regards some random stuff she had read about during that day as being so important that she had to scribble it into a library book, then forgot about it, and stashed the book away – by accident – at the very top of her wardrobe.’

‘I agree. If you are indeed certain that these words were truly written by your friend, this in itself is quite disconcerting, one way or the other.’

‘Well, whatever the answers are to these questions, I won’t find them by sitting around. I need to go up into the Highlands and see the place for myself.’

‘Now, I hate to point out the obvious, Miss Dannreuther, but if you are right, and your friend’s disappearance is the result of her having got too close to a very serious crime – do you consider it wise to follow her footsteps? If there is even a remote possibility of danger, this is clearly a job for the police. It would be easy enough for them to check if someone has been back again inside the manor house.’

‘They did. After the first time I spoke with the detective in Cambridge, the Scottish police sent a car up to the building. Apparently, there was no sign of any activity since the police had left after finishing their investigation. The locks and windows were all unbroken, no rubbish had been left inside, nor were there any fresh pentagrams drawn on the floor. At first, I was hugely relieved by that. But as I sat by the phone at my grandmother’s place in Norwich, waiting for Alison to respond to the requests on the radio – all the while hoping that Gran wouldn’t hear them – I began to get worried again. If Alison really was abducted, and if she really was brought to the manor house by the same people who abducted and ultimately murdered Kathleen, broken locks or windows would be the last thing one would expect to find there. Nor could one expect a convenient collection of detritus scattered about and a big pentagram drawn on the floor – unless, of course, they wanted to set someone else up again. They’ve already demonstrated once how ruthless and efficient they can be with things like that.’

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

‘Don’t allow this to eat yourself up, Miss Dannreuther. I have the impression that, currently, you’re attempting to bat and bowl at the same

time. When you satisfied yourself that everything is as it should be at the old manor, you should return to Cambridge and trust the police to do the right thing – as they evidently are, based on what you’re telling me. And how are you going to get there? There is no public transport in that part of the country.’

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

He smiles. ‘From what I remember of the news reports, it is located up in the mountains by a lake – Loch Cuirinnein. The nearest settlement is a small village called Eyrie, situated at the foot of the mountains by the shore of Loch Cairnbawn. This is a long inlet from the sea, which you should be able to find on any ordinary road map. But you still intend to stay here overnight?’

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

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

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

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

‘It’s a deal, Professor.’

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

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

‘Likewise, Professor.’

He remains standing, already deep in thought. Reflected in a glass partition, our eyes meet one last time.

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

CHAPTER FIVE

GHOST STORIES

Ben Erne ... the craggy mountain rises steeply up from the undulating hills of the surrounding moorland, entirely dominating the scenery. The slanting rays of the afternoon sun glow on a thin layer of snow that covers its dark rocks – while, farther ahead at a distance, glints the water of Loch Cairnbawn.

Passing the mountain along its eastern flank, the unmistakable U-shape of its ridge gradually becomes apparent, with the opening framed by two massive buttresses. In the elevated central valley, still hidden from view, must be the lake and the old manor house, standing alone and isolated, with the crest wrapped around it looking indeed like the protective wings of a giant eagle.

Or perhaps the myths are true – these stories about phantoms and evil fogs – and the shelter is in truth intended for the outside world. Perhaps, through the ages, the mountain has been trying to contain some ancient evil that lurks deep inside the lake – in vain, sometimes, and then people die ... or vanish.

An overgrown track branches off from the road towards the left. Although occasionally lost from sight behind rocky outcrops or within gullies, it appears to be gradually winding over the uneven terrain up towards the hidden valley.

There is no sign by the side of the road, but this must be it. An air of inaccessibility and secrecy hangs over the place. Whoever established this grand building more than a hundred years ago was clearly in search of privacy and had no intentions of showing off or advertising its existence.

It has just gone past three o'clock. Given at least two more hours of sunlight, it might still be early enough to take a quick look. Then again, with an ordinary car, a rental car no less, it would be necessary to drive quite slowly over the rough track, which is bound to be getting increasingly slippery with the snow and ice higher up.

Even now, the jagged crest of the mountain starts to cast dark shadows into the central valley and down onto the slope leading up to it. The shadows getting closer again ...

No, it would not be wise to go rushing headlong into the situation, whatever it might be up there. This is private property after all. While there has not been another vehicle on the road for miles, that could change in an instant. And seeing a car drive up the old track would undoubtedly rouse suspicion.

A more sensible approach would begin down in the village, attempting to find out about any unusual activities in the area since Kathleen's murder, about any strangers repeatedly passing through, or any visitors that might have shown an interest in the manor house.

The lonely country road continues northwest, winding between the bleak expanse of moorland on the left and a thin stretch of stunted trees on the right, which stand along the southern shore of Loch Cairnbawn.

But there, around the next bend, a battered sign appears – Eyrie; and behind it, a narrow road branches off, just wide enough for one vehicle, leading down towards the water.

Straight ahead, a slipway for small boats becomes visible among the trees; while, towards the left, the road continues along a single row of old but neat white houses nestled into the curving coastline, with a nice view of the line of snow-covered mountains rising up again on the other side of the bay.

The first of the houses is identified as a B&B, but without any indication that it might be open at this time of year.

Then follows a little shop and post office, with dim lights showing through the windows. Nonetheless, no sign of movement is revealed within.

The rest are purely residential buildings ... except for an old-fashioned seaside café at the very end of the row. The dark green frames of its large windows stand out from the austere façades of the other houses, with the name written in Gaelic letters above them – The White Cairn. Encouragingly, an “Open” sign is displayed in the door – yet, paled by exposure to the sun as it is, this may well be its permanent state.

Past the café, the street ends in a small parking space. There is nothing more to discover of the settlement in that direction. So, this public meeting place – if indeed it is open – must be the starting point for the investigation.

No bell announces my arrival, only the creaking of the old wooden floorboards. And even if it did, there would be no one behind the counter to hear it – or inside the dining room.

This continued absence of human life is beginning to become disconcerting. It gives the small collection of houses the air of a ghost town, from which, for some reason, people decided to move away one day, and never returned.

Perhaps they had to flee, trying to escape some malevolent presence that descended onto them from the surrounding mountains; some evil power that took possession of their village, and forced them to leave everything behind.

This impression is reinforced by the interior of the café, which appears to be frozen in time, having remained unchanged for the past thirty years or so: the pastel coloured tables arranged along the window front, with matching chairs neatly pushed underneath them, the oversized coffee machine behind the counter, the mechanical cash till, the scales for sweets ... all relics from a bygone era – a simpler and more wholesome life, as it would seem.

The food displays and cake stands are as empty as the chest freezer for ice cream, now nothing but a sad reminder of the carefree summers belonging to a distant past.

Although ... here, some forlorn-looking quarter slices of pancake are left underneath a glass dome – still looking quite fresh. In fact, upon closer inspection, the counter top, worn out as it is, is spotlessly clean, without any accumulation of dust.

Also, with the benefit of these clues, the faint trace of an enticing smell of food becomes noticeable, emerging from the kitchen. We are halfway between meals, that is all. This is not the silence of an abandoned community. It is simply the relaxed quiet of the early afternoon hours gradually coming to an end.

Not the best time for getting involved in casual conversations with the locals ... nor would it be polite to hang around here, during the ongoing preparations for tea. Better would it be to while away the next hour or so by enquiring for vacancies at the guesthouse; or to take a little nap in the car, and then return later, when business resumes in the café.

‘Don’t be shy, love. There’s no need to leave. I just did not hear you come in – my ears, you know, not what they used to be.’ The elderly proprietor

smiles across the counter as she enters from the kitchen, carrying a steaming teapot. ‘I’m afraid you are a wee bit early for food. I am still ...’

She hesitates, struck by a sudden realisation. ‘But you did not mean to come here at all, did you, love? You got lost, took the wrong turn up by the main road.’

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

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

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

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

‘No. Tea would be grand – cheers.’

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

‘I am, yes. I know the Eastern Highlands quite well. The university has a field station out in Moray Firth, where I do part of my research. But so far, I didn’t get the chance to see the west of Scotland. And since I have some time off from work, I thought I should make the whole Highlands tour at last. I came via Inverness today, and I thought I might continue north to Thurso and back down along the East Coast from there. I just hope the weather holds up. I suppose it would be easy to get snowed in up here, with the mountains and the few narrow roads.’

‘Tell me about it, love. But it was pleasant enough today.’ She pours out two cups of tea and places them onto a tray, together with the scones. ‘We can sit there by the windows. After all these many years, I still enjoy the view

across the bay. Don't the mountains look lovely with the fresh layer of snow and the afternoon sun shining down onto them?'

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

'Hmm ... *Beinn na h-Iolair-bhàin* – or Ben Erne, as you would call it.'

'Is it nice for hiking up there?'

'No, love, you should stay away from that mountain. It's not a good place. And the scenery is much nicer down here by the bay.' She seems genuinely shocked by the question.

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

'Yes, when people still went up regularly to the old manor. You can't see it from below. It stands a little way back from the beginning of the valley, near the edge of a lake – Loch Cuirinnein. Now, it's all quite desolate up there, and the house has been empty for many years. It was built by an English family more than a century ago – rich folk, you know, who had made their fortune from the factories down South, and then realised that they did not like to live near them very much, and rather fancied a quiet place in unspoilt nature instead. They stayed up there until the Great War, but then everything changed. Society was very different afterwards. It was difficult for them to find household staff for this remote place, and they did not want to do all the hard work themselves, obviously. Therefore, they left and went back to England.

'Then, one of the sons and his wife, still a young couple at the time, they returned here early on during the Second War – 1940 it must have been – in summer, definitely, I remember that. You see, during the warm months, we still had the sheep wandering about in those days, and occasionally we children had to go out and get them down again from the mountain. We knew the valley quite well, and we'd got used to the house being all boarded up. So, we were quite surprised when we saw that someone had moved back in. But the couple did not stay for long. Less than a year later, after investing all this money into renovating and refurnishing the old house, they left and returned to London, as we were told.'

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

'Well, that was the question that everyone around here was asking, wasn't it? And more importantly, why had they come back to the old family home in the first place, having been away for a whole generation? Normally, one

might have thought that they had been afeared of the bombings along the South Coast, perhaps worrying that there was going to be an invasion. But then they discovered how lonely it was up here, and they did not have enough people to help them out, so they preferred life in the big city after all, even if it was more dangerous.

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

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

‘So, people were wondering what kind of secret the couple might be having that they were more concerned about protecting than their work for the war effort, if they had ever truly been involved in that. Not surprisingly then, very quickly, fresh rumours came up. Among those, it was said that now the couple had a child staying with them, when before, tradespeople who had gone up to the manor had never seen any children there, nor had they ever heard the couple talk about children. It was all based on a number of little things, you know: them needing a pint of milk more each day, or buying boiled sweets and cod liver oil, when they had never done that before.

And so, everyone began to wonder why they kept it a secret, if there really was a child staying with them?

‘Truth be told, I never saw any children that did not belong to the village, nor did anyone else. And, quite frankly, some of the speculations were a bit wild. It was said, for example, that maybe the child wasn’t quite right in the head, you know, or deformed somehow. So, the couple were afraid of people making fun of it, or that someone might take it away from them and put it into an asylum. That was still being done in those days, you know, and terrible places they were. Others said that maybe it was one of those poor transport children who had to leave Germany, and who were coming over to Britain before the War started. Maybe, as they could not have children of their own, the couple had taken one of them in and had become too attached to it. Then, as they did not want to give it back, they brought it up here, to hide it.’

She pulls a kitchen timer out of her apron pocket and puts it on the table. ‘I don’t know. It’s all so long ago – half a century now. In the end, I doubt we’ll ever find out what really happened up there. But it was quite obvious that some tragedy must have befallen the couple. During their last few weeks staying in the manor, we could tell that the woman especially was very much distraught. And then, towards the end of that winter, they left without a single word to us.

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

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

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

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

‘You’re doing research then – as you said, of course. I’m sorry, love, I forgot. Aberdeen, was it? My son, you know, he went to university as well, down in Glasgow – the first academic in our family. I was very proud. Then, afterwards, he got himself married to a well-spoken girl from the South, just like yourself. So, he’s staying down there now. But you like Scotland, don’t you, love? And I can see you’re not married.’

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

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

‘Which just goes to show how long people haven’t been up to that place, because I do not remember that little outbuilding by the lake as being a chapel – more like a pavilion. But it is true, there *is* a flower symbol engraved on one of the stones that are set into the wall. Only it’s not a memorial stone at all; nor is it the engraving of a rose. Instead, it is that of a water lily – as one might expect at a lake by that name. You could say – as people always do, when you point that out to them – that perhaps the little girl’s name was Lily. But look at the age of the stone. I know for certain that it’s been up there since before the War.

‘Still, you know what people say about every myth containing a grain of truth ... Well, I suspect that particular story got started because of a real little chapel, not far from here, out west by the coast, in Clachtoll Bay. In that

chapel, there really is a memorial stone with a rose engraving, and that *was* put there during the War, when the chapel was being renovated. So, you see how stories go. Some grow long legs and travel well between places.

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

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

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

‘Now, I need to say in all honesty, that this story came about because of the original inhabitants of the manor, long before my time. The couple I mentioned, whom I met myself, I do not remember as being anything but kind to us. But as you can imagine, the more fanciful say that it was the phantom who killed the little girl during the War; that this one time, the fae was unable to protect her. And so they say that, in moonlit nights, the poor

wee lass can be seen stepping out onto the patio of the manor house, walking down the lawn to the edge of the lake and out onto the jetty. There she stands, looking across the water, still waiting for the fae to come and rescue her, and to take her spirit away from that dismal place.

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

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

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

‘The poor lass ... she was from the South as well, you know – from Cambridge they said – a university girl too, I should think. They kidnapped her and brought her all the way up here, if you can believe that. Who knows what disgusting rituals they did with her; and when she died, they just left her there. Days later, it was, when the police finally found her lying on the floor, all alone, in the great hall of the manor. Eventually, they caught the people who were responsible for that. The trial is still going on, so I daresay we have not heard the end of it; but for now, at least, it’s gone quiet again. You’re the first visitor we’ve had up here for a month or so. Usually, we don’t get any during the cold months. Only this winter, all through the holidays and well into the new year, there were any type of folk running around – journalists, you know, and television people, blocking the roads with their funny vans – in addition to the ordinary onlookers, of course. We were all glad when we were rid of them again. But people are attracted to this kind of things, aren’t they?’

She takes her kitchen timer and gets up, straightening her back gingerly. ‘Well, I should go and check on the pie again. In a few minutes, the first

customers will be coming in for their tea. I hope you can join us. You would get to know half the village in one evening.’

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

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

‘And I’m Siobhán, Siobhán Dannreuther.’

‘Siobhán, how lovely. That’s a very noble name – and Gaelic, of course.’ She collects our two cups and picks up the tray. ‘So, here we are then, two famous virgins. Only, now I’m afraid I’ll have to leave you alone with the café for a moment – but don’t worry, love. If someone comes wandering in, just leave them be. They’ll know what to do.’

So, this is one question answered, at least: there can be no doubt that it would be impossible for any outsider to come into the village unnoticed. Even a brief visit to the shop or here to the café would instantly attract attention. And any excuse would have to withstand a substantial pressure of friendly but persistent interrogation.

Meanwhile, up in the mountains, that would be a different story. As local farming has clearly come to an end, and younger generations have moved away, the remaining residents of the village are not likely to get about much anymore. Then, from down here, with the main windows of the row of houses all facing the bay, and with the line of trees standing immediately behind them, the chance of accidentally spotting an individual vehicle heading up to the manor house would be rather small. Even from the foot of the mountain, any normal-sized passenger car would be hidden from sight for much of the time within the rocky terrain. Given the light traffic on the main road in winter, it would not be too difficult for someone to come and go unseen for several weeks, as indeed the cult members did.

And so could I. But what would be the point of that exercise? To see an old abandoned building by a lonely lake, surrounded by snow-covered mountains. A scenery that, without the association to horror stories and real crime, might be quite idyllic.

Only this is not a sightseeing tour – at least it was not meant to be. This journey was intended to provide, if not certainty, at least reassurance that everything is all right with Alison. But now, upon more sober reflection – the initial shock over finding the library book having somewhat subsided – how could that possibly be?

The building is still securely locked, the police verified that. And as there cannot be any question of breaking in, that only leaves the outside of the building to be investigated, which was presumably done by the police as well, and was never going to provide much information anyway.

That aside, the question is not how much sense going up to the manor house is making now. The question is, how much sense will it seem to have made when I am back at Gran's place in Norwich, nursing my injuries and waiting for Alison to phone – or better still, for her to return from Dublin; while I am waiting for a decision to be made about my future involvement in Antarctic research, or the termination of it; while I am lying on the old sofa, half a mind on the telly, the other half simultaneously bored and nervous; while I am being spoiled with a constant supply of tea and *Fliederbeer* soup or *Plettenpudding*, poor Gran fussing over me, trying to cheer me up, not knowing what the real problem is ... in that situation, looking back, how unforgivable will it be that, having driven all the way out here, I gave up just before the end, because I got lethargic, because I gave in to physical and mental exhaustion – or worse, because I allowed myself to be intimidated by a bunch of old myths and ghost stories?

The door opens with the entrance of an elderly lady. Carefully holding a tote bag in front of her, she heads straight for the counter, apparently without seeing me sitting by the window.

Upon hearing the radio and other noise emerging from the kitchen, she places two clean plates on top of the food display case and begins to unpack some homemade pastries – caramel shortbread, it seems, and cream buns.

Suddenly, she looks up. 'Oh, hello, hen. Didn't see you there at first.'

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

'What, at this time of the year?'

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

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

Mary glances over from the coffee machine. 'Hannah, what are you talking about? Please don't frighten the poor lass. She needs to rest.'

Explosion on Antarctica – honestly. This is Siobhán, Hannah. She’s from down South, originally, but she’s staying in Aberdeen now, aren’t you, love?’

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

‘Dannreuther, Hannah, she just told me.’

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

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

‘All this talk of witchcraft and Satanic rituals ... They knew full well that, whatever malice was at work up on that mountain, it came from the South, as usual, and certainly not from the village or out of the lake, as they tried to tell everyone. You remember what they said about evil fogs rising up from the water – misusing our old legends like that, only to make their own stories more interesting. No, I’ve really had enough of that. Now they’re saying we should stop wrapping our fish and chips in newspapers. Did you hear that, Hannah? It’s not hygienic, apparently. After telling us all our lives about saving and reusing paper ... just goes to show, doesn’t it? No use for anything anymore – newspapers. So, why should we pay attention to what they have to say. There are much better things to do.

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

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

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

Am I?

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

‘Heaven forfend. I almost slipped twice already over the few yards from my place. That’s all the evil that fogs ever seem to be doing around here –

icing up our pavements. And it's not a good time for driving in the Highlands, hen, not if there's snow coming.'

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

'That nice new car parked outside is yours then, is it? I was wondering about that. Surely you wouldn't want to damage it in an accident. Imagine if you slid off the road, out there in the middle of nowhere, without any phone to call for help for miles and miles. No, hen, better to come back here during the summer months. It's much more pleasant, with some lovely walks in the area.'

'Still, after the long drive, I was thinking that I might go for a quick stroll along the bay, before the sun disappears entirely.'

Mary nods in agreement. 'You do that, love. The fresh air will do you good. But don't stay away for too long. You'll be late for tea.'

'Yes, you wouldn't want to miss that – Mary's legendary pies. And in the evening, you come by the guesthouse, and I'll set you up with a nice room looking out over our *Loch a' Chàirn Bhàin*. There'll be a bright moon again tonight, and the light on the water is going to be very romantic.'

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



The peaceful atmosphere of an early evening ... Apart from a few high clouds, the sky is still clear. But the wind has picked up a little since the afternoon, streaming down from the snowy mountains, channelling along the bay and out towards the open sea.

There is a distinct chill in the air now – only the temperatures going down in the evening, of course ... or is there something else about to happen?

Impossibly to ignore, the jagged outline of Ben Erne, with its two prominent buttresses, rises up behind the trees like the horned head of a demon, glaring down to the little village with its one fiery eye, as the sun sets behind it, and darkness settles over the world.

CHAPTER SIX

THE BLACK MIRROR

With a harsh revving of the engine, the front wheels slip on the icy and overgrown rocks. Then, after a quick tug backwards, the tyres find their grip again and pull the car further up the steep slope ... slowly and carefully along the meandering route over the uneven terrain.

Finally, rounding yet another bend, the rough track suddenly levels out, and the mouth of the deep valley opens up. The imposing front of the manor house comes into view, sternly facing any intruder who dares to venture into its lofty domain. Behind it, a wide lawn slopes gently down towards Loch Cuirinnein. Near the far end of the lake, a little island with a few Scots pines can be seen through a thin layer of mist that rises from the lake, lingering in the cold air and resisting the piercing rays of the early afternoon sun.

At the time of the initial habitation, this would have been a wonderful place, a genuine sanctuary, floating above a troubled world, with the curving crest shielding the select few who dwelled here from the dark Satanic Mills they themselves helped to create in the lands below.

The slamming of the car door echoes within the narrow valley – unexpectedly loud. In the hushed silence that follows, the crunching sound even of cautious footsteps on the gravel covering the forecourt seems too conspicuous, too intrusive.

Without a single natural sound, the valley appears to be abandoned by life. Even the air is completely calm, as the wind is blocked by the surrounding mountains. And yet, this silence holds in it a premonition of some unseen presence that hovers over the building – waiting and listening.

These superstitious feelings aside, the evidence of real activity up here in recent times is plainly provided by the chaotic pattern of tracks left in the gravel surface. One track in particular stands out, leading somewhat closer to the main entrance and cutting deeper at the very end. It must have been left by a vehicle that was neither wider nor heavier than the others, but rather by one arriving at a higher pace and breaking harder at the last second. As

it overlies some of the other tracks, it must be a more recent one – although it would be impossible to tell how long ago it was left.

Even from close up, despite its weathered exterior, the old manor still looks formidable, without any indication of actual decay. For its two storeys, it is unusually high, an impression that is helped further by the turrets in each of the corners of the parapet running along the edges of the roof. And with the somewhat darkened stones, what it lost of its former grandeur, it has since gained in ominous gloom.

The elegant shape of the tall bay windows, with their regular rows of slender columns and pointed arches, also is deceptive. They were clearly designed to be impenetrable for anything more solid than light; and they show no sign of ageing. Similarly, the elaborate nature of the porch in front of the main entrance hides a very practical purpose. Over the decades, it has served well to protect the two wings of the massive wooden door against the inclement weather conditions.

Turning away from the commanding façade, in the exposed northwestern flank around the corner of the building, there are no windows at all. Instead, ivy has been allowed to grow freely and to cover the front of solid stone.

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

A French window leading out onto the patio presents itself as the first potential weak spot of the old building. By breaking one of the large glass panes, it would be easy to open the latch on the inside of the door. But without an external lock, there is no way to enter through here in any clandestine fashion.

Stretched out at the bottom of the untended lawn is the dark expanse of Loch Cuirinnein, lying perfectly smooth in the still air, with the undistorted reflection of the crescent of snow-covered mountains visible through the pale haze that hangs over the water – together with the little island, seemingly floating on top of its own reflection.

The wooden jetty leading out onto the lake would be the obvious means in the immediate vicinity, if someone wanted to dispose of something big in a hurry. It still stands apparently undamaged, although the old planks creak and groan with every step, and the poles sway ever more strongly farther away from the shore.

At the end of the jetty, the water is no more than six feet deep. Through it, the rocky bottom of the lake shimmers in the refracted sunlight – rocks overgrown by a thin layer of algae – rocks and nothing else. With the standing water, in the absence of any currents ... even the wind would only push away from the shore something that was sufficiently light to float on the surface.

Nonetheless, given the steep slopes surrounding the lake, the water must be getting significantly deeper towards the centre. Anything sinking to the bottom there would be swallowed up between the rocks and vanish forever. Without a boat being available locally, it would then be necessary to bring something like an inflatable dinghy. This would require, once again, a high level of planning and determination. But to what end? Having murdered and carefully displayed Kathleen inside the building, what motive could someone have to secretly continue with the abduction and killing of innocent victims? Even now, standing here at the very site of at least one murder, surrounded by peaceful nature, this question remains as unanswerable as it was from a distance.

However, no doubt conjured up by the old myths, there is a vague foreboding of a latent threat lurking in the dark depths of the lake, as if at any moment an ominous pattern of ripples might disturb its calm surface, foretelling the approach of the ancient wraith, having been awoken from its slumbers once more, and getting ready to strike again.

Yet even without the interference from supernatural entities, what dark secrets have become hidden beneath the surface since the end of the last century? How many tragedies and crimes have unfolded here? If it is not the ghost of a little girl walking out onto the jetty now, maybe it was a very real little girl – fifty years ago – who, being left alone for just a short while too long, became interested in something on the lake, some ducks or other birds perhaps, came out here for a closer look and, wanting to pet or feed them, leaned over a bit too far, fell into the water and drowned.

How devastating would that be to those responsible for her wellbeing, be they her parents or not? Enough to move away from here and never come

back, even though the manor house must still hold some significance for them? Why else would they put all this effort into maintaining it, for decades, instead of selling it on, or having it renovated as a hotel? The building alone must be worth a fortune. It cannot be the sentimental value of an old family home, if they leave it abandoned like that. Then what is it? Are they keeping the house and the grounds as a hiding place for some incriminating evidence of dark deeds in the past? Are they themselves afraid of something that lies hidden somewhere around here? Or are the stories told down in the village true, at least to some extent, and this secluded area contains a secret memorial of sorts? In that case, a clue to this mystery might well be hidden in the little pavilion, standing not far from the jetty.

It is consistent in style with the architecture of the main building, including the little turrets in the corners of the roof, and the tall pointed window frames – only the windows here are glassless, and the entrance is just an archway. With its open structure, exposed to the elements and romantically located near the edge of the lake, it was clearly never intended to serve any religious function. The stone benches are arranged along the sides of the walls, and the interior is devoid of any Christian symbolism. As expected, the only engraving on one of the stones facing the entrance is that of a flower – as weathered and as old as the rest of the wall and, judging by the slender, pointed petals, indeed belonging to the family of water lilies, and certainly not to that of roses.

Nothing new then. If any secrets *are* hidden around here, they are hidden well and have been hidden for a long time. Following the scrutiny that the building and grounds must have received during the police investigation, it was foolish to think that one could simply walk in here and suddenly discover something new.

By now, with the sun gliding away behind it, the manor house is already casting a dark shadow over the car standing alone on the forecourt. But it is still early enough to make it back to Edinburgh, in time to catch the night train and to return to an ordinary world in which rationality reigns.

After all, there is nothing more to see up here, just a forlorn building, enwrapped in an invisible veil spun from the dark events it witnessed over the past hundred years.

Nothing more to see ... is that really true? If Alison was right about the manor house being at the centre of Kathleen's abduction and murder, rather

than an incidental crime scene, there must be something here, possibly invisible to anyone who searches for the wrong connection – such as a connection with Satanic rituals, for example.

As solid as the door at the main entrance looks, it does appear to be the only way into the building without leaving an obvious trace. While neither the wood nor the iron fittings show any sign of weakness, the lock is ancient, potentially as old as the walls, and easy to pick for someone capable of dealing with modern security locks.

Then what about all those who legally come and go, at least once or twice a year: the caretaker, different workmen, the cleaners ... were they all given keys? And the police from Ullapool – how did they get in on such short notice, only a few days ago? Did they collect the key somewhere nearby? Since it was not from Eyrie, it would have been from some other village farther away.

Unless all these people enter in the simplest conceivable way, without any detours at all, using the same spare key that is deposited somewhere around here, near the porch most likely ... inside these empty flower pots, for example – no, that would have been too easy.

But these two statues of griffins ... the one on the right shows a narrow gap between the bottom rim of the pedestal and the surrounding ring of moss. It has evidently been moved recently and carelessly put back by someone who thought his time had already been thoroughly wasted by a pointless inspection of the premises.

Tilted onto its edge, the statue rolls away quite easily, revealing a tile in the floor of the porch whose edges are cleaner than those of the others. It is a little loose ... easy to lift, concealing a small space underneath – and there it is, a large old-fashioned key wrapped in a leather pouch.

Regardless of the legal issues involved, this is an invitation that is too good to refuse.

The heavy door turns smoothly on its well-maintained hinges, opening up to an even deeper silence than resides outside. The entrance hall is dimly lit by the remaining daylight that manages to penetrate the dirty windows in the shady façade of the old building.

The wide staircase leading up onto the first floor, flanked by two columns, is familiar from the photographs in the newspapers; but with the additional smell of abandonment, it feels more desolate in reality than the black-and-

white image suggested. Although, with the dark wood panelling all around, and properly lit by the warm glow of the paraffin lamps, this would once have been an impressive introduction to the manor house.

The door on the left stands open, leading into the library. A large part of the walls is taken up by tall shelves, filled entirely with antique leather-bound books ... mostly nonfiction, and apparently all written in English: several extensive series of specialised encyclopaedias about history and geography, different editions of outdated world atlases, some books about the colonies and international trade – all quite boring and probably meant for decoration more than for actual usage. Also, the group of armchairs and sofas takes up an excessive amount of space in the centre of the room, and further suggests that the library was used mainly as a smoking room. As in the entrance hall, the only artificial source of lighting would have come from the oil lamps on the walls, and from the candlesticks on the coffee tables.

In this austere pre-electric environment, the large radio, standing next to a writing desk in a corner by the curtained bay window, is strangely out of place. It must have been brought here during the Second World War, when the manor house was temporarily inhabited again. However, without electricity laid on in the building, some modifications would have been required to be able to run it on batteries ... unless it is a portable radio set intended for field use, disguised inside this stylish cabinet. Whatever the truth is, the apparatus is definitely dead now.

In the compartment underneath the dial is a headset – a headset in addition to the speakers, used either to avoid disturbances for others, or for one's own privacy. And farther back, a microphone. This radio was capable of transmitting as well as receiving.

Without a telephone connection, this is of course something one might have expected to find up here. With a slow and occasionally interrupted postal service in winter, the radio would have been the only reliable connection to the outside world.

Even so, it is curious that such a sophisticated communication device was installed by people whose goal for returning here ostensibly was to get away from modern society and to retreat back to nature. Then, perhaps there *is* something about the old rumours. Perhaps some clandestine activities were conducted from up here – “for the war effort,” as it was said ... but for whose, one wonders. Would it be possible that this was a nest of traitors – of spies or

saboteurs – relying on the gossip among the people down in the village about secret activities for our cause, to justify the comings and goings to and from this remote place?

Could the expansive mural above the large open fireplace hold an answer to these questions? If so, it would not be hidden particularly well. Nor, it seems, was there ever an attempt made to hide anything in here. The sheer size and its prominent location, the fact that it is painted directly onto the wallpaper, rather than being hung up in a frame, would make it difficult to remove or to cover up. The family were obviously committed to the culture to which this image belongs. And at least prior to the two World Wars, when this interior decoration would have been completed, they were not in any way embarrassed by it.

The mural shows a group of young women, about ten of them, huddled closely together and dressed in flowing white gowns, with long crimson cloaks draped around their shoulders – clearly characters from Nordic or Germanic mythology. They wear winged helmets, and their torsos are protected by intricately worked light armours. As weapons, they carry spears and long shields. The focus is on two of them, standing in the foreground. The hair of the one on the left is fair, whereas that of the other dark. But their faces are very similar, to the point where they must be sisters. It is a scene of an unfolding drama. For some reason, the blonde girl has put away or lost her spear and shield. Instead, she supports another girl, who is without helmet or any kind of armour, and who is evidently swooning, hanging limply in her arms, with eyes closed. The blonde girl looks intently at her sister, pleading for help and somehow apologetic – as if blaming herself for what must just have happened. Her sister, meanwhile, projects a more confident attitude and appears to be better in control of the situation than the others, who stand around them, startled and worried. Overall, the image expresses fear and tension, a glimpse at a moment of crisis, when one tragedy has already occurred, but worse is yet to come.

Despite the archaic style of the painting, there is something strangely moving about the scene. It must be part of a larger story, neither the beginning nor the end. And so, its prologue or continuation might well be found elsewhere in the building.

Across the entrance hall, on the other side of the porch, a door opens into the parlour. The room still has a formal atmosphere about it, having

probably been used for receptions, but the dark red and purple colour scheme here is friendlier than the drab browns in the library, and the furniture is more elegant.

The bay window towards the forecourt is half closed by two layers of thick curtains. In the resulting faint light, the details are hard to make out – but, as in the library, the wall above the fireplace is covered by a large mural.

In the background of the image, two male figures are engaged in a sword fight. Notwithstanding the drama of their situation, they are portrayed as dark outlines only. More prominently in the foreground stands the blonde girl, again wearing her helmet and armour, but this time also holding a spear and a shield. She must have been about to get involved in the fight, but was distracted by the arrival of the old man off on the right, who comes slowly walking towards her out of the early morning fog. He too carries a long spear, but neither a shield nor any armour; and even his spear seems to serve more the function of a walking stick. Nonetheless, he is an imposing presence, radiating an air of invincibility. For the moment, he is indifferent towards the fighting men, his whole attention focussed on the girl. She is tense, facing him with some trepidation, uncertain about his intentions, whether he might be hostile towards her. She holds her shield up defensively, anticipating an attack, but the tip of her spear points just a little too low to be aggressive. If possible, she is intent on avoiding a confrontation with the old man. After all, what chance would she have against his superhuman powers. Still, she is defiant, demonstrating that she is prepared to defend herself if necessary, that she is willing to stand her ground and fight, futile as that may be.

On the opposite wall, the scene changes. There the two sisters are together again, but this time alone in a featureless landscape. Unlike her sister, the blonde girl is not wearing her helmet and armour anymore, nor her crimson cloak. She is dressed only in her long white gown that blows freely in the strong wind. And it is her sister now who entreats her, with loving concern, but also with a sense of frustration, trying to convince her of something, perhaps warning her of some danger. But the blonde girl is half turned away from her, clutching her hands to her chest, determinately holding on to something, something her sister begs her to give away, but she is unwilling to let go. What could have happened to plunge these two characters in such a desperate situation?

With the long curtains completely drawn, the next room too lies in a murky gloom. Even so, the absence of any murals is instantly noticeable. Instead, the walls are decorated with framed paintings – family portraits, most likely.

Generally, this room has a different character compared with the other two. Judging by the dark outlines of the various pieces of furniture, it is more cluttered and casual, giving the impression of an actual living space, rather than serving a ceremonial function.

It is bound to be the drawing room then. In fact, hidden behind the curtains is the French window that leads out onto the patio, providing a nice view across the lake, over to the little island, and to the mountains rising behind it.

Back in the day, it must have been cosy in here, a perfect place to while away a dreary winter's day like this, when it is too cold and too stormy to sit outside. Even now, with the curtains opened again, and the afternoon sun allowed to stream through the tall windows once more, the room still feels pleasant.

However, even here, the weight of history and of the recent tragic events hangs heavier in the air than the multitude of tiny dust particles dancing in the beam of light, stirred up by the sudden return of life into their forsaken world.

Because, right there, this must be the fireplace that, after many years, was lit once more for a macabre purpose – although the grate has no ash in it now, and would have been thoroughly cleaned out since the murder.

But if this really is the drawing room, then through that double door, there must be the dining hall.

The flames shoot up in a flickering inferno, engulfing the female figure on the horse – it is the blonde girl again – alone this time, and apparently resigned to her fate, looking up into the dark sky, her arms raised, reaching out for ... not for help, no, for salvation. But already, around the ring of fire, there is water flowing in from a river nearby, with steam rising up where the two powerful elements clash.

At a distance, seen across the length of the great hall, and illuminated by the warm light of the sun that enters through the long row of windows on the right, the vast mural on the facing wall is almost lifelike.

Only from closer up, the pattern of individual strokes of the brush becomes discernible ... and the inscription in the lower left corner:

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

It must be a later addition. The paint used here is of a thicker texture and of a deeper black than in the artist's signature or indeed anywhere else. And so, years and possibly decades after the original image was completed, this stanza, obviously part of a longer verse, must have attained a special significance for the inhabitants at the time, to include it in this particular scene; a few lines, referring to the receiving of some important understanding – connected, it seems, to a tragedy, or having itself tragic consequences – a revelation of sorts, some kind of enlightenment that is accompanied by the end of days, when the world as we know it collapses, and everything is being consumed by fire and water.

On the wall opposite the windows, another mural, a wide vista of a lonely mountaintop is revealed, lost in a sea of clouds. Fire and water have been left behind, far below, down on the ground of our normal lives. It is all quiet now. The drama is over. There is no more strife. And the girl is dead. She is laid out on a flat rock, dressed only in her humble white gown; while standing at her feet and gazing mournfully at her, is the same old bearded man as in the scene of the sword fight earlier on, wearing the same grey travelling cloak, but somehow diminished now in his appearance, and remorseful, leaning heavily on his long spear, his powers seemingly broken.

This then is how the story ends. Whatever tragedy led up to this situation, and however the girl got drawn into it, she was unprepared, unable to cope with the challenge, and was ultimately defeated by it.

But she looks peaceful now, lying there, as if she did find salvation in the end. Only salvation for what? What was her role in this conflict? She is present in every scene depicted here. And yet, she never appears to be the key player in this drama, always reacting to changing circumstances that are outside her control. If that is true, then how could she have become culpable of anything so heinous as to require salvation? Was it for something that happened to the swooning girl? Should she have heeded her sister's advice

or warning, who had clearly tried to help her? How did the two get separated? And what was her sister's fate?

In any case, she does look peaceful lying there ... yes, peaceful *and* unblemished. How is that possible? If she is truly dead in this scene, she must have managed to escape the raging fire and the violent water of the overflowing river, only to find death in a different manner later on. Just how likely is that, given her gesture of complete resignation, or even self-sacrifice, as the flames encircle her?

On the other hand, this cannot be some ordinary sleep into which she has fallen, up there on that mountaintop – not lying on a bare rock, nor with the old man standing by her in that dejected manner. Of course, in a mythical world full of magic, this might well be some kind of sleep enchantment, from which she was woken up again at an opportune moment, giving her a second chance to continue some appointed task, until she succumbed to her difficulties and perished in a turbulent confluence of fire and water.

Is she truly dead then, or in a state of suspended animation, lying there on that mountaintop? If different stories can be told by rearranging the sequence of the same images, the outcome is uncertain, until a particular order is fixed.

Still, one thing is certain: this is where Kathleen's story ended – there, on that old wooden floor. The long dining table has been moved back to the centre of the room. But underneath it, despite the thin layer of dust, a lighter patch is still visible, where the floorboards have been thoroughly cleaned recently. No chalk marks or candle wax remain now. Understandably, the owners of the manor house were keen to remove all traces of the murder.

But was it only the murder that troubled them? Or was it particularly the ritual activity that took place here? Was it fear of evil spirits that may have been conjured up? The same spirits perhaps that had driven them away from here, half a century ago – far more ancient and far more evil than the ghost of a little girl.

Through the row of tall windows, the same view across the lake opens up as from the drawing room, with the snowy mountains in the back now beginning to light up like a ring of fire, as the sun continues to recede, sinking ever lower above them. And so, as another day in the Highlands comes to an end, the tantalising questions are the same as they were before. What lies hidden underneath the dark water of the lake? And whom are the mountains protecting – the inside, or the outside world?

From the dining hall, a dark and narrow corridor leads back towards the main entrance, with one door on either side.

The right one leads into the kitchen and scullery. In contrast with the other rooms, instead of a fireplace, it has a massive range cooker, with a collection of pots still standing on it. Next to it is a side entrance for servants. But the door is securely bolted, and judging by the rust on its latches, it has not been opened for many years.

Water had to be brought into the house manually, using two hand pumps; one with a spout opening into the wash basin; the other attached to a pipe, apparently bringing water to the upper floors. The surface of the sink is bone dry. On the floor is a worn-out patch created by water that leaked out of the pipe over a long period of time. But now, the tiles too are dry and covered in dust.

The many utensils left behind in the kitchen reinforce the impression given by the rest of the house, that once this used to be a grand family estate, much loved, and infused by the original owners with all their idiosyncratic interests and tastes. Also by a later generation it was liked well enough for them to return to this lonely spot – only to abandon it again, shortly afterwards. Even after completing the round on the ground floor, there are still no perceptible clues as to why that might have been.

Which leaves one obvious place that still needs to be investigated – the most obvious one – and it cannot be put off any longer. It must be through the door on the other side of the corridor, the last unexplored passage left on this level.

It will be completely dark down there, and a pointless attempt to enter that domain without being armed with some artificial light source. An electric torch would be too much to hope for, especially one with working batteries. But standing by the stove is a cardboard box with several candles, together with an equally old box of safety matches, commemorating the Silver Jubilee of 1935 ... almost full. If they are still useable, this will have to do.

No traces of footprints show in the layer of dust on the trodden-down stone steps, although without any draft, all tracks would persist for some time – several days at least. So, the most recent search by the police was evidently not conducted as thoroughly as it should have been.

An unhealthy atmosphere stagnates down in the basement. The scent of coal is most readily identifiable, lying on top of a blend of other smells – all lifeless, without any indication of death and decay.

Still, the vague hint of some consciousness reaches up from the darkness below – just imagined, of course, just nerves, that is all.

A low room with a domed ceiling is reached at the bottom of the stairs. Its formerly whitewashed walls have long turned a dark grey. Several barrels of different sizes are neatly stacked along the walls ... only barrels, nothing else.

But worryingly, three passages lead away from here. This underground network of cellars is much more complicated than one might have hoped, spreading out underneath the whole building. Best to carry on straight ahead, and take no turns for the time being.

The next room is as cavernous as the first and perhaps even larger, its ceiling supported by wooden pillars. A number of objects lie about in great disarray – more barrels, some boxes, probably having contained food at some point – all decades old. A pile of empty sacks in one corner; judging by the black dust, they must have been used for coals ... with nothing hidden underneath them.

A rapid movement around the room – dark shapes – shadows on the walls ... just shadows dancing in the unsteady light of the candle.

Although, inside the next room, surely there was something, just outside the range of the light, a furtive motion, briefly seen through the doorway, before something ducked out of sight. Something has become aware of this intrusion into its silent realm, something watching ...

There – a pair of eyes, the eyes of a giant monster, gleaming in the darkness, looking straight at me.

But no ... only the reflecting heads of two nails in a wooden beam supporting the ceiling, similar to the pillars in this room. And I need to be more careful. That sudden movement almost blew out the flame.

Otherwise, what will happen when the candle is extinguished – during the few seconds of darkness, before I manage to light it again? Will more pairs of eyes appear, glinting by themselves, bloodshot and hungry, having waited a long time, now leering from the opening of each passage and blocking the exit? Or will some other apparitions materialise in this very room, when the fine dust suspended in the still air condenses into vague figures, their arms outstretched, their hands groping?

Again, the candle flickers almost to extinction in another nervous reaction, passing through a moment of near darkness. And the instant the feeble flame steadies itself, a dark shape looms up behind me.

The car, still parked on the forecourt ... a familiar outline in the dusk.

The key, where is the key? In one of the coat pockets, it must be ... there, some paper wrapped around it, the receipt from the little village shop ... but the door is unlocked anyway.

As soon as it opens, a comforting bubble of light springs up in the gathering darkness; a little piece of reliable modernity, a reminder of a world without ghosts and evil spirits ... a world in which the gathering darkness is really just a quiet evening.

Just a quiet evening ... in summer, there might even birds be singing now. As it is, only a soft breeze has begun to whistle around the bulky silhouette of the abandoned manor house.

A dull pain in both knees becomes noticeable, most likely from a fall while running up the old stairs. Both palms are scratched, and some wax has got stuck underneath the fingernails of the right hand – the sad remains of the candle, which got crumbled and dropped in the desperate flight. And the previously dull pain in the chest has become more piercing again, as the fractured ribs must have absorbed part of the impact.

Brilliant ... another major accomplishment on this heroic quest, one to cherish for the rest of the life. If there actually *are* ghosts down in that cellar, they will be laughing themselves silly now.

But ghosts aside, there can be no doubt that bad things have happened here during the Second World War. Whether it was a legitimate British intelligence operation that got taken over by traitors, or whether from the outset it were the clandestine workings of a group of spies ... in such a nebulous world of espionage, something else must have occurred that time did not allow to become history, something deeply personal, an inciting event that still lingers inside this valley.

It may well have been the death of a child; perhaps a little refugee from Germany, or an evacuee from Southern England, whom the couple agreed to take in and to care for, whom they decided to hide away for some reason, and who then died from an illness or in an accident. This would have been concurrent with but unrelated to their espionage activities, although it would suggest that they were on our side.

Alternatively, the opposite was true, and a child may have been kidnapped from an influential family, for the purpose of extorting information from them, or forcing certain political or military decisions. If so, the death would undoubtedly have been murder. The murder of a child ... yes, that could easily reverberate down the generations; even if, in a larger context and in the chaos of war – with all those other deaths, and all those missing and displaced persons – the crime might have gone unnoticed.

Either way, there clearly is an unresolved conflict here that may be claiming victims to this day. As long as that is the case, the growing number of incidental peculiarities cannot be ignored, no matter how vague they are: the magnificent but abandoned building itself, the unusual murals that are part of the original interior decoration, the apocalyptic inscription added at a later stage, the troubled behaviour of the owners during the weeks leading up to their hasty departure, the various rumours still circulating about them down in the village.

But any continuation of this investigation will have to wait until tomorrow. Until then, it is best to get the travel bag and the food out of the car before the sunlight has gone completely; to get everything into the house and then lock the door securely. For if the old myths are true, this is no place to be outside after sunset.

Who knows what night-time evil might rise up from the dark depths of the lake and reach out from the other side of the looking-glass.

CHAPTER SEVEN

THE PHANTOM AND THE FAE

This appears to be the grandest of all the bedrooms. It is still completely furnished, and was probably used by the couple upon their return. Being also noticeably less dusty than the other rooms on the upper floor, it must have been cleaned after the conclusion of the police investigation.

The long curtains are opened, such that the narrow columns of the bay window stand out as a dark silhouette against the fiery red of the evening sky above the curving crest of the mountains.

A comfortable-looking armchair stands by the window, but dominated is the room by an over-sized four-poster bed. The mattress, protected by a threadbare velvet cover, is far too soft to be comfortable and a little uneven, the worn-out springs groaning under the sudden weight. Still, with the sleeping bag spread out on top, it should be able to serve its purpose for one more night.

Above the fireplace is yet another mural of the blonde girl. This time, she is sitting alone on the parapet of a fortress wall, or of a tower, built at the top of a mountain – high up, and surrounded by a few scattered clouds. She is still wearing an armour here, with her weapons placed by her side. This, then, must be before her fall from grace and her exile to the lonely wasteland, while she was still living at home. It is night-time now – a sleepless night, as she gazes thoughtfully over the landscape far below, where the calm surface of a lake glistens underneath the full moon.

Not unlike the view from this room, in fact. Even better than from the drawing room directly beneath, Loch Cuirinnein can be seen resting at the foot of the mountains, outwardly peaceful but impenetrable, reflecting the world above – always reflecting, never revealing its own secrets.

The bathroom too has been thoroughly cleaned not long ago. The brass fittings of the large roll top bath in front of the fireplace glow in the last evening light.

Only a thin layer of dust has accumulated on the elaborate wash basin, while the taps show no sign of any fingerprints at all – a reminder that it is

advisable to keep it that way. Any amount of water that may be left in the pipes, by now, should be of a questionable quality anyway. For brushing teeth and drinking, the bottled water from the shop will have to do.

Above the wash basin, the large mirror, though slightly dulled, still reflects the image of the dark-haired girl above the fireplace, alone now too. She stands by the bank of a river, apparently preparing to take a bath. Her helmet lies on the ground beside her. Her shield and spear lean against an ancient oak tree. Her head is bowed, but not in shame or dishonour – out of sheer exhaustion, it seems; possibly suffering the effects of battle, but no wounds are visible on her body. Her gown and cloak are intact, her weapons unbroken. Unlike her sister, she is unburdened by guilt. Whatever struggle or hardship she was involved in, she prevailed – still undefeated and pure.



Loch Cuirinnein lies quietly under a shimmering blanket of moonlight, itself as black as the jagged outline of the mountains that surround it. A succession of gentle waves runs smoothly up and down on the narrow beach.

Away from the shore, the ground slopes upwards towards the top of a low hill, where some Scots pines stand together in a desolate group, their branches deformed by age-long exposure to the harsh winds.

Beyond them, glinting faintly in the moonlight, water again – there is water all around. This is an island, right in the middle of the lake – the Isle of the Phantom.

The moon is full, floating almost directly above in the dark sea of the night-time sky. It must be close to midnight. Any moment now, the phantom will appear, out on the hunt for a new victim. Over there, among the dark group of trees it will stand, until it emerges from them, gliding silently down towards the water.

No ... there must be a way off this island, the same way that led here – a boat, somewhere along the shore must be a boat.

A mass of dark boulders is strewn across the beach, making it difficult to walk in the dim light. But this is the only solution – always following the water's edge; that way is bound to lead to the boat.

And keep an eye on the trees. Seen from a changing direction, their branches seem to move – not irregularly as if shaking in the wind, but rather systematically, deliberately, each tree in its own fashion. Although ... is that truly an illusion? Or are they moving for real, all by themselves?

A dense fog is beginning to form above the lake, carried towards the island on a soft breeze, while the moon continues to rise higher above the horizon. There is not much time left.

Suddenly, the rocky slope comes to an end, as the shoreline makes a sharp turn to the right. Beyond the bend, the ground levels out, and the rocks are replaced by a wide sandy beach, stretched out between the water and the trees.

Some fifty yards ahead, a pattern in the sand shows up, looking regular and deliberate, like symbols or letters – a message, perhaps. This could be important. Only the pattern is still too far ahead to be decipherable.

The surface of the beach is soft, yielding instantly, like quicksand, getting softer with every further step. And as the feet sink in deeper and deeper, it takes an increasing effort to carry on.

Now, there is nowhere else to go, with the water on the left, and the trees on the right – already much too close and far more threatening than before, the irregular spaces between them filled with shadows that are about to come alive.

There is no choice but to stay on the sand – and keep moving, one laboured step after the other. Never stand still, no matter how tiring it gets, or the phantom will have won.

The pattern in the sand is getting closer now – ordinary letters, it appears – definitely a message then.

Simultaneously, though, the atmosphere is beginning to change, something is about to happen. The trees start to rustle ominously, as the wind is getting stronger. The waves too come in more rapidly now, each running higher up the beach than the ones before. Soon, they will wipe out the writing in the sand. Then it will be too late, and the message will be lost forever.

The sand relentlessly strengthens its grip, as the water continues to rise. The tide is coming in, as the full moon reaches its zenith.

I need more time. Time and tide ... and both wait for no one. This is my last chance.

But the tide ... in a small lake? That is impossible. The water cannot be rising – and yet, it is.

Unless it is the island that is sinking. Then this is not the phantom's lookout after all. This must be the hidden abode of the fae, which has temporarily surfaced, responding to some imminent threat, but is now about to submerge again.

And there she is, the fae, up on the hill: a pale figure among the trees, clad in a long white dress, standing utterly still, as the wind continues to get stronger, and the branches around her wave ever more violently.

And as the water washes higher and higher over the beach, the letters in the sand become legible. They form a single word ...

‘Alison!’

The room is almost dark, illuminated only by the ghostly glow of the moon outside the window. No one else is in here. The old building is completely quiet – except for the silent echo that seems to linger in the still air, as if someone spoke just a moment ago.

The old mattress continues to undulate, like water, no doubt disturbed by a violent movement during the impulsive awakening. It must have been an uneasy, troubled sleep, during which the sleeping bag got hopelessly twisted in a tight spiral around the legs – not the best starting point, if a sudden need should arise to run from ghosts or other nightly intruders.

Although it was a dream, of course ... only a dream. But in it, there *was* water, dark water, and it was rising. So, nothing new then, just the once loved element turning hostile again inside my own head, this time inspired by a wobbly mattress.

And with all that, it is true what everyone says: I really need to rest, to finally shed the constant physical and mental exhaustion. But as it is, a few minutes before midnight, it would be futile to try and go back to sleep. At best, that would only result in yet another descent into some nightmare.

Outside the sleeping bag, the air streaming down the chimney and out of the fireplace is refreshingly cold – while the old windows give no indication of allowing any draft to enter.

The moon now hovers directly above the valley, only a day or two away from being full. And judging by the scattered clouds drifting across the sky, the weather is beginning to turn. The previously smooth surface of the lake is now broken up into small ripples by the strengthening wind ... unless the disturbance originates from below. Now that the rigid boundary has been dissolved, and the shimmering light from the waxing moon percolates ever further down into the hidden depths, what ancient entity may be awoken? What danger may rise up and emerge from the surface?

Just uneasy meditation of a weary and lonely mind? Perhaps. But even the jetty ... from up here, it almost looks like an arrow, drawing attention towards the centre of the lake, or to the island – inviting, even demanding investigation. A hint at the presence of secrets that remain to be uncovered.



There is someone inside the room after all, speaking in a soft voice – the voice of a little girl, saying my name.

She stands by the open door of the bedroom, framed by the darkness of the landing behind her.

Now that she has attracted my attention, she falls silent. But she knows me. And she evidently expected me to come here.

She turns around and slowly descends the wide staircase leading down to the ground floor. She wants to show me something. She has been waiting for this all these many years. And now she can share her secret at last.

The entrance hall at the foot of the stairs lies deserted in pale moonlight. All is quiet. It is only the two of us moving.

Through the empty parlour she walks, and into the drawing room.

The French window now stands open, the curtains moving gently in an unfelt breeze. She passes through them, as if they were air.

Out onto the patio she steps, and down the lawn towards the lake.

But some power is holding me back, tying me to the old building. No matter how fast I walk, the little girl gains on me. As the ground stretches between us, I am left behind, powerless, forced to watch her approach the edge of the lake.

No, don't go. You are going to fall in. You are going to die. I understand that now. I know what is going to happen. Don't go.

She must have heard my desperate thoughts and halts at the beginning of the jetty. She turns back and holds out her hand to me. She does not want to take these last few steps alone, steps she already took a long time ago, and is bound to take again.

She grips my hand tightly and with a comforting smile – yes, comforting and compassionate, towards me. She is the one consoling and pitying me, as if this was my last journey.

And so, down the rickety pathway we walk together, suspended precariously above the darkness that opens up beneath us.

At the end of the jetty, the lake stretches out far ahead into the distance, completely unperturbed. And reflected in it am I, looking up from beneath the surface ... I alone, because the little girl is no more.

I am left standing on my own, lost at a dead end, as my reflection falls away from the calm surface, to be swallowed up by the impenetrable depth and vanish forever.

A beam of icy moonlight floods in through the window. The formerly refreshing chill of the night-time air has now turned to a freezing cold.

Despite that, I somehow managed to fall asleep, still sitting in the old armchair, my aimless thoughts carried away into another nightmare. But this one feels real and intensely personal, like the distorted memory of something that actually happened, even if it was many years ago.

The jetty ... that unstable walkway leading out onto the lake ... and the growing sense that it has an important role to play – but in what? In solving the mystery surrounding this building? Or as a reminder of something else entirely.

Alison and I ... we are out on a jetty, feeding the ducks – I am feeding the ducks, and the swans. Alison is engaged in some pretend ballet dance, imagining the rough planks to be her grand stage. We are very young, maybe four years old. And Gran is there with us. She is preoccupied with Alison, worried, telling her to be careful, not to dance so close to the edge.

Where was that? A jetty by a lake ... better maintained than the one here and a little wider, but similarly surrounded by mountains.

The image is so clear now, it must be real. It definitely was not by the seaside. And young as we were, we could not have gone hiking in the Peak District yet. It had to be Ullswater then – and if was, of course, the first summer we were there.

It was Alison's idea to go out onto the jetty, although Gran had told us to stay on that nice patch of sand with our shovels and the pail, and not to go away while she went to chat with some other grown-ups nearby.

But there are the swans, near the end of the jetty. Alison loves swans, and she is the brave one.

'It's all right, Shivy. Don't be scared. You can take my hand. Gran is still over there. She can still see us if she wants, even if we go and say hello to the swans.'

Obviously, Gran spotted us as soon as we began walking towards the jetty. She immediately came after us, telling us to wait for her, as she collected a few leftover slices of bread from our lunch.

There are some ducks with their young. They never seem to get any of the bread, as the big swans with their long necks snatch up everything first. I need to lean over and reach down to the ducklings to put the crumbs right into their little beaks.

Suddenly, a whirl of flapping wings ... excited quacking ... the impact of a paralysing cold ... the indistinct humming of water against the ears ... wavering green light from above ... long strands of algae closing around the legs like slimy fingers, pulling me down ... an attempted scream ... the stinging pain of water inside the lungs ... and darkness.

Then there is Gran, dripping wet, holding me tightly in her arms. Alison crouches alone on the grass some distance away, crying and being ignored by everyone. Why does no one care for her? Why does everyone fuss about me?

Because it was *I* who fell into the water. That is what this is all about, these vague fears when walking out onto the jetty down there by that lake. It was not the premonition of some ancient evil lurking beneath the surface, nor was it the psychic perception of the tragic death of a little girl half a century ago. It was not, in fact, about anything that happened here. It was simply the distant memory of a traumatic childhood event, which was stirred up once again and disguised under the influence of all these ghost stories. Just echoes of the early fear of water in the aftermath of that near-drowning, being afraid for months of even getting into the bathtub; then, one day, this fear turning into an obsession, the desire to learn to swim; starting with the frightening first lessons, gradually becoming better at it, the training getting ever more serious; finally leading up to the school competitions, the interest in the oceans, marine zoology, diving – all the way to Antarctica.

But while this might explain the nervous reaction to the surroundings here, it answers none of the questions about the old rumours – about how much of them is true. Was there ever a child being hidden up here? If so, why and from whom? And what tragedy befell it? The need for secrecy during the last days of the child's life would certainly suggest that some form of criminal activity was involved, even if the death in the end was not the result of murder.

The death of a secret child – a secret death, in other words ... that would require a secret grave. Moreover, considering how strongly that death appears to have affected the couple who looked after the child, they may even have established a secret memorial at some other place that is neither linked to them, nor to the manor house, but still not far away.

And so, as a new morning approaches, one final clue remains to be followed up – a clue the police with their professionally conducted enquiry could never have found, as it lies hidden in local myths and unsubstantiated rumours. Nonetheless, if these stories are to be believed, this obscure clue might lead to a solid piece of evidence that is literally written in stone.

CHAPTER EIGHT

THE LAST DRUID

From the vantage point of the dunes, the blend of farming and fishing cultures of the small community becomes apparent: the patchwork of crofts on either side of the country road, dotted with simple farm houses; and closer to the coast, a few fishing bothies and ice houses, with nets draped over drying poles; all of it held together by scattered groups of sheep wandering aimlessly about.

Towards the west opens Clachtoll Bay, its white sandy beach framed between two rocky headlands. Up on the one in the south, somewhat removed from the other buildings, stands a little chapel. Despite its prominent location, it has a simple dignity about it, humbly blending into the surrounding rocks.

The afternoon sunlight twinkles over the sea, with only a few clouds high up in the sky. But away from the shore, the waves seem agitated, their crests already suspiciously white, indicating the approach of a major storm, itself still out of sight.

Anne walks out to the very edge of the dry sand and lets the waves run up to her feet. She deeply inhales the fresh wind from the sea, then she glances over. 'For me, this place will do. I may not have seen as much of the world as others have, and I'm rarely even leaving Scotland these days, but I don't need to see any more of the world before I'm happy to settle down here.'

'It's lovely, yes; easy to see why people would choose to stay out here.'

She nods. 'But many do leave, those who can't manage to support themselves. My family has been living in this region for generations, but it's getting more and more difficult. The old way of life is dying out, both the farming and the salmon netting. Me too ... after I left school, I moved down to the city, hoping to make some money – that was about twenty years ago now. I wasn't terribly successful with the job search myself; but, eventually, I found a husband with work. Everything went all right for a while, until it began to go bad for the steel industry. When the marriage didn't survive the years of unemployment, I got divorced, reclaimed my family name, left

Glasgow, and moved back up here. Tourism was picking up a bit at that time. So, with some support from my father, I bought what was then an old farm house and turned it into the B&B. It's been going well so far. Recently, I was able to pay back my dad, and now it's mine. But usually it's quiet during the winter months.'

'As I mentioned, I'm only moving through at the moment. But seeing this, it would be grand if I could stay for a few days and relax.'

'I imagine you could do with a break, after everything that happened – although you still got away lightly, considering.' She smiles and lays her hand on my shoulder. 'I did not want to bring it up before, but I immediately recognised you from the news reports on the telly.'

'About what happened on Antarctica? Yes, I suppose I did have a little luck down there.'

'I noticed you're still limping.'

'It's not so bad. I just need to get a bit more exercise, to walk it off, you know. In fact, I wouldn't mind strolling up onto the headland over there and taking a look at that little chapel. It's sitting in such a beautiful spot.'

'It does; and from the outside, it is quite nice. But the interior, at least in my opinion, has been spoiled by renovations. I can show you, if you want. I've got the key here. I was put in charge by the community as our local tourist guide of sorts. Especially now, when the campsite is closed, the few visitors we get end up staying at my place anyway.'

'There have been recent renovations inside the chapel?'

'Not particularly recent, no. It happened during the early Forties. The chapel had been in a steady decline for many years – since the Reformation, really, and then throughout the Highland Clearances. So, by the beginning of the Century, it had fallen quite badly into disrepair. There was no money for restoration or even maintenance in the community until, during the War, a generous donation was made by a rich couple – from London, apparently, but no records seem to survive anywhere about who these people were. As I understand it, the agreement was that they would renovate the chapel, it would still belong to the community, but they would be allowed to put up a memorial stone for their daughter, who had died recently.'

'All the way up here, despite them living in London?'

'Yes. They had probably seen the chapel on one of their travels, and liked it. Then, when their little girl died, they remembered it and wanted to have her memorial here, in a peaceful location, away from all the fighting and

destruction. London, of course, was horribly destroyed at the time, under constant attack from the air, with bombs dropping all over the place, including the cemeteries. Nothing was safe down there, not even the dead.’

She leads the way up an overgrown path and onto the headland. Although not much higher than the beach, the wind is noticeably stronger here, as it whistles over the steep outcrop that suddenly rises from the waves, and around the little chapel.

With its weathered exterior, and constructed from local material, it gives the impression of having grown naturally. The only exception is the arched iron gate at the entrance. Anne selects an old key from her bunch and inserts it into the lock. After some jiggling, it turns, and the gate reluctantly allows itself to be opened on its rusted hinges.

Two shallow steps lead down into the small room with a low vaulted ceiling. A narrow glassless window is set into each of the two side walls. Through the one on the left, a slanting beam of sunlight falls onto the centre of the floor.

Old stone benches are located underneath the two windows, while set into an alcove in the wall facing the entrance is a memorial stone. Clearly visible near its top, above an inscription of bronze letters, is the elaborate engraving of a flower. And this time, there can be no doubt about what kind of flower it is.

‘Is that a rose on the memorial stone?’

‘Yes – and very well crafted, isn’t it, with all that intricate detail. Someone put a lot of effort into this. There is also another matching one on a flagstone in that corner over there.’ She points to the right of the entrance, where an identical engraving is set into the floor.

‘That’s a bit unusual, isn’t it, up here in Scotland.’

‘Well, the couple who renovated the chapel were English. But I suspect the real reason is that the girl’s name was Rose. Otherwise, the epitaph is incomplete, somehow.’

She nods towards the memorial stone.

HER SOUL, O LORD,
WHOSE BLOOD WAS SHED
ON THE CROSS,
WE PLACE IN YOUR HANDS

‘You see, it appears as if the rose engraving at the top is a substitute for the name.’

‘Yes ... although that is a bit strange as well. I mean, why would they choose to keep the memorial anonymous?’

‘I don’t think they would have seen it that way. Perhaps it was too painful for them to spell out their daughter’s name, now that she was dead. But you’re right, Siobhán, I have often thought that there was something strange about this inscription. For example, consider the combination of an engraving in stone with this bronze lettering – a weird artistic choice. Surely, to be consistent with that sophisticated rose symbol, you would expect the words to be engraved as well. And then, there is the inscription itself. Normally, this type of epitaph, with this type of lettering, is found on memorials to famous people. In here, inside this plain chapel, it looks far too extravagant and out of place.’

Yes, these words are definitely intended to be noticed. And whether this is a deliberate choice or not, the memorial *is* anonymous – no question about that.

Then there is the significance of the roles played by two London couples: one, the owners of the manor house, their wartime actions shrouded in mystery, with rumours concerning the death of a child; the other establishing a memorial to their daughter less than twenty miles away from that building. That cannot be a coincidence. They have got to be the same people. And that means that there really was a tragedy that befell them, involving a little girl – a tragedy they had to keep secret.

Nonetheless, albeit anonymously, they felt compelled to leave such a conspicuous memorial – almost as a challenge for someone else to uncover the secret they themselves could not reveal. Then there must be something else hidden in here, something that solves that mystery, or at least indicates the right direction to follow during an investigation. And if that is so, in an empty room like this, the clue must be hidden underneath the flagstones, and underneath one flagstone in particular. A buried secret ... possibly the actual grave, even. Could it be that a rose marks the spot?

‘Anne, that other engraving back there in the corner ... it’s curious, isn’t it? It too is somehow out of place – quite literally. After all, it is rather strange to put so much effort into decorating one of the flagstones, only to put it into such an unremarkable location – seems a bit random, doesn’t it. So, I’m wondering, is there any chance that, since the renovation, the stone has been

moved there from a more prominent location? Or could it be that it already existed at the time of the renovation, and that it was moved into the corner then?’

‘I don’t know. But as you said, you would not usually expect to find a rose engraving in a late medieval chapel in Scotland. I’d therefore suspect it was put there during the renovation, exactly matching the engraving on the memorial stone and representing the name of the little girl. Why they chose to put one engraving into that corner, I honestly don’t know. But these stones are very solid. And with their irregular shapes, the floor is like a jigsaw puzzle. You would have to rearrange many of the pieces to make them fit again as closely as this. I can’t imagine that any of them have been moved since the floor was laid down initially. But I agree, it is a little weird. Almost as if the person who made these engravings wanted to practice on a similar type of material, before tackling the memorial stone. I suppose the explanation could be as simple as that. But here, take a look at this.’ She points along the top of the sidewalls. ‘They are somewhat eroded now, but you can still make out the original engravings, dating from the period when the chapel was built – Thirteenth Century, as far as we know – and still very much in the Celtic tradition. You can see the beautiful knot pattern running all along the ceiling on both sides; and woven into it, the crosses and harps, and those rampant lions over there.’

She steps closer to the memorial stone. ‘Now look up there, above the alcove. There is another more recent inscription. It is a bit hard to read in the dim light, but it says: “And at the Great Dawn, the Truth shall be revealed by the Flames of Heaven”.’

‘Blimey ... what do you believe does that mean?’

‘I asked myself that question many times – myself and others. No one around here knows the answer, but everyone is convinced that the inscription was put there during the renovation, together with the memorial stone.’

‘I don’t know ... I have to say, I find that rather disturbing.’

‘Agreed. Of course, it is touching, in a way. The couple were obviously devastated by the loss of their young daughter – understandably. And if it hadn’t been for their support, the chapel would now be in ruins, like so many other religious sites in the Highlands. But as much as I sympathise with their grief, there is something about all this, that gives me the creeps.’

‘Although both inscriptions are clearly religious.’

‘Oh, yes, no doubt about that. The epitaph on the memorial stone is quite standard, and in a different context, I doubt it would attract much attention. But the other inscription above it ... that is a different story. It’s not a direct quote from the bible, at least not from the King James Version. The closest match I can think of is in the Book of Revelation – you know, on the Day of Judgement, when all hidden truths are revealed, all injustices uncovered, and all wrongs righted; the ultimate battle between good and evil, during which the Saviour will return with his flaming sword, vanquish and cast down all wrongdoers, and bring back from death all those who are worthy of resurrection – the dawn of God’s kingdom on Earth.’

‘I find that rather ominous and gloomy for a nice little chapel like this.’

‘Well, I guess it’s an allegory for our own daily struggles, small as they may be by comparison, to find the right path through life. But you’re right: in here, it does come across as being just a little too grandiose. We probably must remember the conditions that existed when these inscriptions were put up, at the height of the Second World War, with horrific air raids happening nightly all across Britain.

‘In the context of that time, apocalyptic writings like these would have been interpreted as being much less allegorical and far more realistic than now, when fighting is happening a long way away from home. Think specifically about the book with the seven seals that is mentioned in Revelation. Evidently, the first four of the seals had already been opened, with the four horsemen of conquest, war, famine, and death galloping all over Europe. Then, as the violence and oppression spread, and the cries of the innocent victims of persecution and extermination rang out more and more loudly, it would have felt as if the fifth seal too had been opened. And with no end to the fighting in sight, it was natural to assume that all this would ultimately lead to the opening of the sixth seal, to the total destruction of all cities, and to the blocking out of the sun by smoke and ash.’

Anne walks to the sunlit window and squints up into the sky. As her voice trails away, the room is filled with the soft noise of the wind streaming by, bringing with it, more distantly, the rushing of the waves.

‘And the seventh seal?’

Anne hesitates for a moment, then she turns away from the window. ‘Silence ... the calm before the inevitable storm, when something bad has happened, and everything has gone quiet, with a foreboding of something even worse to come; when the whole world appears to be holding its breath,

the birds stop singing, and time stands still. But you know that, very soon, the clock will begin ticking again, and your grace period will be over. That is when the seven trumpets sound, the sea turns to blood, and the bottomless pit opens.’

Silence ... yes, there is silence in this place – and fear. But not about things to come; about terrible events in the past. Everything in here, these old stones themselves, seem desperate to scream out the truth, echoing perhaps the cries of at least one innocent victim. Only, there is no one here to listen. And until someone is prepared to do that, the secret will remain hidden, encoded in this fearful silence.

But at the right instant, when the sun rises, what might there materialise in this empty space? What may become visible?

‘Anne, those letters on the memorial stone ... I suppose they would glow, wouldn’t they, if the sun shone directly onto them.’

‘Most likely, yes.’ She looks a little confused. ‘Oh, I see: you’re thinking about a truth that might be revealed by the flames of heaven. But that could only be ... let’s see.’ She glances out through the entrance to get her bearings. ‘Well, it would have to be very early in the morning, immediately after sunrise. Later during the day, the sun is too high in the sky and too far south – coming in through this window here, in fact, as it does now.’

Exactly ... ‘The Great Dawn.’

‘You’re right.’ She gets more excited and walks up to the memorial stone. ‘But you can read the words anyway, at any time of day. What difference would it make if the sun shone directly onto them?’

She crouches down in front of the inscription and wipes over it with her jacket sleeve. ‘See here, they’re really just ordinary bronze letters.’

As the thin layer of dirt is being removed, the metal surfaces obtain a faint golden glow in the diffuse light from the window. It would certainly be more intense in direct sunlight, but that would be all. The letters could not rearrange themselves; no new words could form, that would reveal the truth about the death of a little girl all these many years ago. On the other hand, the inscription above the memorial stone, together with the orientation and the layout of the chapel – again, that cannot be a coincidence. But rather than bringing with it new information, the rays of morning sunlight entering the chapel are intended to point out and illuminate something that is already there, information that simply needs proper interpretation. And so, instead of the deliberately obtrusive inscription, the real clue may lie in the

inconspicuous engraving of a rose at the top of the memorial stone, in turn pointing to an otherwise unremarkable flagstone in a corner.

Clearly, this investigation is not over yet. There is more to be done here, more to be discovered ... with possibly a gruesome outcome. Therefore, it will have to be done alone – and at night.

‘Sorry, Anne. It was only a silly idea that popped into my head. Somehow, there is something about this place that makes supernatural occurrences seem more likely than would normally be the case.’

She ends her close-up inspection of the memorial stone and straightens up again. ‘Yes, I know exactly what you mean. I have often thought that the chapel should be restored to its original state. I could try and find out who exactly is in charge of it. Maybe we can get it scheduled and properly protected.’

She shivers. ‘Let’s go back to the house. I can make us some tea, if you like.’

‘That would be nice, thank you.’

She leads the way back outside. ‘Just pull the gate shut. It will lock by itself.’

A small pebble lies near the entrance. With a soft kick, it rolls into the corner of the door frame. The iron gate jams against it without locking.

Anne does not notice. She has turned away, gazing north across the bay. ‘By the way, these inscriptions inside the chapel are not the only mystery around here. If you look over there, to the other headland, behind the netting station, on top of the natural rocks, you can just about make out a mound of regular stones. These are the remnants of Clachtoll Broch, an Iron Age roundhouse. It is almost entirely collapsed now; but when it was built, more than two thousand years ago, it would have been an impressive defensive structure, forty feet tall, or so. No one knows exactly what it was used for – as a storage tower perhaps, to protect vital supplies from raiders, or even as a residence for the rulers of this region.

‘But whatever its role was, according to a local legend, it became the final resting place of the Last Druid.’ She winks conspiratorially. ‘Now, if you remember from your school days, it is generally accepted that, in Britain at least, the druids were systematically wiped out by the Romans, as they retreated farther and farther west into Wales and eventually onto Anglesey. Sadly, they left no written records. Theirs was a purely oral tradition.

Therefore, when all the druids were taken out in one single blow, with them vanished their whole culture – all their knowledge and beliefs.

‘And this leaves us with that perennial, tantalising question what it was about the druids and their society that worried the Romans sufficiently to devote so much effort to their destruction. Especially because that was not the Romans’ usual attitude towards other peoples’ religions, and towards the Celtic deities in particular. *Aquae Sulis* is an excellent example for that. The Romans came across the hot spring on their way to Wales. And just as they built a magnificent temple and bath complex dedicated to the same goddess that the Celts had worshipped there for centuries, not far away, they ruthlessly slaughtered the last remaining druids.

‘So, if it wasn’t Celtic spiritual practices that bothered the Romans about the druids, then what was it? Why did they deploy their victorious Fourteenth Legion against them – in Nero’s own words, his finest? The same legion that, prior to the conquest of Britain, had been involved in avenging the catastrophic defeat of Varus in the Teutoburg Forest. The same legion that would later go on to defeat Boudicca’s overwhelming army after the sacking of Colchester and London. And speaking of which: why did the Romans allow this to happen in the first place? At a time when trouble brewed with the Celtic tribes in the East, why did they move this legendary fighting force away from their main settlements and into difficult and unknown terrain on the other side of the island, to go after the druids with such determination and brutality? Not only to kill the men, but also to lay waste to all their shrines and sacred groves?’

‘What was it about the druids specifically that the Romans hated or feared so much? What exceptional powers did they believe that small group of select people might possess that threatened them? And to what extent were their fears justified? Sadly, we will never find the answers to any of these questions, because the Romans were very successful in eradicating all meaningful traces of that culture.

‘However, our story goes that, during the final slaughter, one single druid did manage to escape. Alone, in a small boat or a canoe, he travelled north along the coast, until he reached unoccupied territory. From there, he continued his journey on land, gradually moving northwards, always trying to stay ahead of the advancing Roman forces, bringing with him the ancient wisdom of his people, all the while searching for someone with whom he

might share it, someone worthy of becoming a fellow initiate – but without any success.

‘And so he became a restless wanderer, roaming the land like a ghost, moving from place to place without ever settling down, holding on to an understanding of the world that only he remembered, and hoping that one day he might find someone after all whom he would be willing to entrust with his secrets, before he could allow himself to die. Then, after many years, he arrived here, where he found shelter in the broch, very old and very weak by that point, and unable to travel any further.

‘Now, there are two different versions of that story. According to one, the Last Druid, even at death’s door, was unwilling to confide in anyone, deeming the local population of farmers and fishermen unable to truly comprehend the old wisdom. And so, as he died, lonely and with a broken heart, the sacred knowledge of our Celtic ancestors was lost forever.

‘According to the other version, he was cared for by one of the local girls. And as he felt the end approaching, and as he had to accept that he would not be able to continue the search for his rightful successor, he suddenly understood that, all this time, he had been looking for the wrong person anyway. You see, Siobhán, the druids had formed a fraternity. Therefore, throughout all his journeys, he had exclusively been looking for another man – a man, moreover, who was already learned and in a position of influence in his community. But, in the end, he had always been disappointed by the leaders that he had met, realising that they were only going to use his powerful knowledge for their own benefit, to gain control over others, rather than for the good of the community. Now it became clear to him that the person most worthy of the old secrets was indeed the young, uneducated woman who so selflessly cared for him. So, he told her who he was. And as he passed all his knowledge on to her, his spirit was released at last. His soul slipped away, and he died peacefully. But through the young woman and her descendants, the wisdom and the power of the Celts was preserved for many generations.

‘And there you have it: the two versions of *The Legend of the Last Druid*.’

‘Interesting ... but I think I prefer the second one.’

Anne laughs. ‘Me too. Then let us assume that this is how the story ends. Admittedly, it’s not entirely original. For example, there are some obvious similarities to the story of the Fisher King, who, wounded and old, becomes the last guardian of the Holy Grail. On the basis of that, some like to take

our story further and say that the Last Druid not only brought his sacred knowledge with him, but also some powerful physical object, a secret weapon of sorts; and that, before his death, he gave that weapon to the young woman to hide it away, to keep it safe until she or her descendants could use it to defeat the invading enemy.

‘But then the Romans left, defeated by ordinary forces on the Continent, only to leave the door wide open for another wave of invaders of the British Isles – the Saxons. According to the Celtic sources and the later Medieval romances, the Britons were then united by a new leader, King Arthur, who led them to many victories until, finally, he was killed in the Battle of Camlann by the traitor Mordred. Through all this, Arthur was served by his mighty sword Excalibur which, as you may remember, had been given to him by the Lady of the Lake.

‘Now, according to our legend, that sword was actually the magical weapon of the old Celts, guarded by the druids for many years, rescued by their last survivor from the Romans, and eventually brought here. The Lady of the Lake, of course, was none other than the humble country girl, whose contact with the sword had given her supernatural powers and eternal life. Some like to believe that, having saved Excalibur from Camlann after Arthur’s death, she went into hiding again, waiting for the right moment to return, or to pass the sword on to a new leader, to continue the battle begun by Arthur and, this time, perhaps to finish it; to accomplish what earlier generations had failed to achieve, and to defeat the old enemy.’

Anne sighs. ‘The problem is, there are no epic battles anymore, are there. The grief we get from the Saxons these days comes in the form of poll taxes and pit closures. A magic sword is not much use in mundane struggles like these. And in any case, it would be hard to find with all the many lochs we have up here in Scotland.’

‘I don’t know, Anne. Maybe it isn’t in a lake at all – and, moreover, very close to home.’

‘In the old broch, you mean? Yes, people have suggested that.’

‘Has it never been excavated?’

‘Some archaeological work was done by a university group a few years ago. They found several chambers in the remaining structure above ground. There is also the possibility that the tower is positioned over some underground passages or natural caves. But it would require some major effort to move all those massive blocks of stone that came down from the

collapsing walls. And you know, generally speaking, I think that legends are best left undisturbed. They tend to be more exciting than the factual truth. So, perhaps, we should let the Last Druid and his secrets rest in peace.'

CHAPTER NINE

TWO ROSES

The wind has become stronger than during the day, as the distant storm has moved a little closer. Yet the dark sky is still mostly clear. Only occasionally, scattered clouds move across the moon, perfectly round now, with the stars fading behind its bright glow.

While the reflected light glints on the agitated water of the small bay, the sun itself is hidden on the other side of the planet. There are more than six hours to go until sunrise.

At night, the sea becomes a scary, heaving mass of hidden powers, rushing up against the land, wave after wave, crashing against the exposed headland, groping, and pulling away with it all within its reach.

Everything changes in the dark. When the light fades away, so does our rationality. As our eyes become useless, and as other senses take over, we enter a new unseen reality – a world of phantoms and ghosts.

Meanwhile, the lonely outline of the little chapel is the same as it was in the daylight; the same low, arched entrance, with the iron gate still wedged against the pebble.

The same screeching sound erupts as the gate turns, uncomfortably loud, and seemingly carrying farther on the wind than during the day – more intimidating too, perhaps hiding the wailing of an escaping host of spectres, as they rush past, out of the gloomy opening.

After that onslaught, all that remains inside the chapel is deadly silence. The inscription on the wall just below the ceiling is now hidden in darkness. But the words on the memorial stone are still discernible in the pale moonlight that enters through the windows – the same words, the same anonymous cry for salvation ... but salvation for whom? An innocent little girl? Or, more likely, for those who set up the memorial.

Two roses ... intricately worked into solid stone with such loving care and attention – once in a prominent spot, facing the entrance and instantly noticeable; and then again, barely noticeable at all in that corner by the gate. There must be something hidden underneath it.



Earth ... only earth ... a thin layer of soil above the natural rocks of the headland – nothing else, no concealed passage or burial site, no funereal secret, no clues at all to the tragic circumstances of the death that is being commemorated here.

It would be pointless to search any further. If the secret is not hidden here, it is not hidden anywhere underneath this floor.

Having been disturbed from its long slumbers, the rose-engraved flagstone readily slumps back into its old bed with a definite thud. And with the crumbs of dirt brushed back into the gap around it, everything looks as it did before. Only upon close inspection, the small dents left by the tools along the stone's edges are still visible, but they will weather away in the months and years to come, as time continues to wash over the chapel, removing whatever last traces of the past there may be left in here.

Even Anne's trowel and cultivator, though slightly worse for wear after the digging, are not scratched badly enough for the damage to be noticeable when spring gardening commences in the Highlands.

Everything will be back to normal, and nothing will have been gained. Once again, this artificial cavern will be occupied by nothing but ghosts, which were left behind in the wake of the traumatic loss of a loved one – memories that may already be extinct among the living. And we are left with a physical reality that is stripped of its original meaning; a physical reality that does not communicate to us anymore and will guard its secrets forever.

So, if that library book was intended to be a guide into some kind of magical realm that lies hidden behind a wardrobe, it certainly accomplished that. Following the obscure clues it seemed to contain has led into a world of dreams and myths, of vague rumours and ghost stories, where, by the intervention of supernatural forces, spirit messages from beyond the grave can materialise in thin air, carried along by a ray of sunlight.

If, on the other hand, the book itself was hidden behind the wardrobe, everything changes, and the world gets very dark. All the horror of a fantastical world of nightmares suddenly comes bursting into our ordinary reality, as demonic powers become an actual threat. The boundary between dreams and reality being eroded away ... Alison talked about that; about the premonition she had of shadows closing in around her; about some kind of evil returning from the past. What if she was right? What if her fears were justified? What if she was pulled back by her nightmares, away from our waking reality? And where was I when that happened? Far away and unable

to help – but worse than that, unwilling to take her fears seriously, and to see in them more than simple paranoia. If she did deliberately hide the library book behind the wardrobe, where in this surreal world of shadowy evil is the message meant to lead then? Into which direction do these words point, and what would it take to decipher them?

The same unanswerable questions circling through my mind, slowly driving me insane. If only I allowed myself to sleep properly for just a few nights in a row, instead of climbing out of bedroom windows in the middle of the night and rifling other people’s garden sheds. If, instead of going ghost hunting, I stopped behaving like a ghost myself, I would probably get my old sanity back, and these other apparitions would disappear all by themselves.



The small room is illuminated by unsteady light ... though not from within; nor is it the cold light of the moon.

Instead, the sky is aflame, turned red by billowing clouds of raging fire. And underneath it, stirred up by an infernal wind, the ocean seethes; the waves now regularly crashing over the headland and swirling around the ancient walls of the chapel – a little island stranded in a turbulent sea.

Even so, there must still be some way out of here – up the few steps to the entrance, where the screeching iron gate swings in the violent flood, and then ...

‘Where are you going, Siobhán?’

Alison is standing in front of the memorial stone, her dark hair and white gown streaming in the blasts from the burning sky.

‘Where are you going now? Are you leaving me again?’

‘Ally, I was looking for you. I came back from Antarctica, looking for you.’

She does not respond. She simply remains standing there, a lonely figure, illuminated by the blaze outside.

‘Ally, the fire and the water – it’s coming. We’ve got to get out of here.’

But she does not react to my outstretched hand. ‘Why do you always run away, Siobhán? What are you afraid of?’

‘Alison, please ...’

‘Why did you have to leave me, when I needed you most? And where is Kathleen? Where did she go, Siobhán? Where did she go?’

‘Ally, please, let us get away from here – together, as it always was.’

'Too late, Siobhán. It is too late.'

Flames erupt from the memorial stone; Alison vanishes, as they burst through her.

And a fiery inscription is revealed:

HER
BLOOD
ON
OUR HANDS

The words glow golden-red in the otherwise dim chapel, as the first rays of the sun come streaming in through the entrance, lighting up the bronze letters. The silent scream that has reverberated inside these walls for half a century, now finally reveals itself.

And so, a message was there all along, hidden in plain sight, just waiting to be found – encoded in a few small perturbations of our physical reality; nothing but imperceptible ripples, slight differences in the way the letters are angled on the rough surface of the stone; seemingly random irregularities that, in fact, mask a systematic pattern. Only if viewed from the right direction, and under the right light, all extraneous details are being filtered out, and the true meaning emerges.

The death that these desperate words proclaim could not have been an accident; while the anguish and intense feeling of remorse they express suggest that those who wrote them were not the perpetrators of the crime. They may have been mere witnesses, but nonetheless attached significant culpability to themselves. They saw themselves as being responsible for a child that, most likely, was not theirs. Possibly she was a refugee from the Continent, who, for some reason, continued to be persecuted by the enemy, even here in Britain. Or they took her in after the death of her parents, who may have been killed in a bombing raid, or may even have been murdered as well.

However the little girl came to be in their care, they immediately took her to their remote manor house, obviously trying to hide her, but in the end were unable to protect her. For this failure, they blamed themselves for the rest of their lives. And the dark shadow of the evil that overtook them all these many years ago still hangs over the old family home, as they are kept away from there by the recollection of these traumatic events that have not stop haunting them.

But why then leave this message in such an obscure fashion? For fear of prosecution from the legal system, if they were genuinely innocent of committing the crime themselves? More likely for fear of retaliation from the real culprits. It appears they got caught up in some dark network that had established itself around here during the War. It was that connection they had to keep secret; a connection that even now, much later, cannot be publicly admitted. Out there, somewhere, there is still the threat from an enemy that may return at any moment and strike again. And now, with the murder of Kathleen, perhaps it has.

Whatever happened here in the past, it is not over yet. This message, and the manner in which it was hidden, is more than an admission of guilt. It is a challenge. That is what this chapel is intended to do: to send out an eternal cry for justice, for anyone to hear who is willing not only to come all the way out here, but also capable of identifying and reading the signs correctly; someone who is willing to step off the beaten track and see things from a different angle; someone resourceful and courageous. That is the kind of person whom those who established this memorial must have had in mind – an ideal hero of their old mythology come to life again; the one person in the crowd capable of pulling the sword out of the stone; someone worthy of receiving their message. This is their call to battle against the same enemy who defeated them half a century ago, in the hope that someone might hear it who is more virtuous than they had been – not someone like me, who simply stumbles into the situation, blindly starts digging in the dirt, and then gets lucky, again.

But regardless of how the message was received, it comes with the same responsibility, the same burden of taking action against an invisible foe, who is hiding in the darkest recesses of our life. And I shall not run away again. Nefarious activities have been going on in the old manor house for far too long now. It is time they are uncovered.

Poor little Rose ... how did you get drawn into this tragedy? How does your short life fit in with the fate of millions of other people whose lives were destroyed as the world was at war? When there was hardship everywhere, violence and injustice, what horror was it that befell you? What evil powers were they that took you away from your home – and what happened to your parents? When you were gone, was there anyone left who loved you and who missed you? You know I cannot do that for you. But I will not forget this, and I will find out what happened to you – I promise.

CHAPTER TEN

A SUDDEN PAST

The humming and beeping of the printer fills Alison's abandoned flat as, gradually, line by line, the account of the last six days emerges. Well-organised and spelled out in the regular computer font, black on white, the bizarre sequence of events seems to be taken out of the realm of myths and into our ordinary world, lessening the uneasy sense of impending doom that hang over it only yesterday – as if looking back with a waking consciousness to a dream that becomes difficult to pin down, a nightmare that loses its threat as it fades away in the daylight.

But this is just an illusion, of course. It was the morning sun, after all, that brought the startling confirmation of a violent crime that occurred in a distant past, and the possibility that the same dark forces may still be at work today. Since the return from Antarctica, it is the mundane reality itself that has become surreal, containing all the frightening supernatural elements of a nightmare, but none of the magic tools of a fantastical world to deal with them – and without any chance of waking up. In what should be ordinary life, none of the mysterious circumstances have changed by laying them all out on paper – the hidden messages, the disappearances, and the murders. Nor have any of the open questions been answered. If anything, this journey through the Highlands has thrown up even more and more difficult questions, only leaving me with yet another mystery to worry about.

Nonetheless, although it does not convey the true nature of events, the printed word cannot lose its nerves and throw a tantrum, precisely when it knows it should not do so. It always remains calm and rational. And if that makes it easier for the police to take the narrative seriously, and to probe more deeply beyond the rational surface layer into the strange reality that lies hidden beneath it, then the written account will have served its purpose.

Otherwise, there is nothing else to do. Without any sign of life from Alison, without any important letters among her most recent post, or any revealing messages on her answer phone, there are no more leads to follow. There is not even a convincing reason to suspect that her absence may not be exactly what it appears to be; nothing definitive to suggest that it may be

related to Kathleen's murder, and even less to the tragic death of a little girl fifty years ago.

On the other hand, no new information has emerged to diminish the fear that Alison may have been overtaken by the same dark forces, nor anything to diminish the guilty feeling of having abandoned her in a situation where not only did she need mental support, but may even have been in physical danger.

Moreover, the fear persists that, right now, I may be failing her again. If the library book really was intended as a clue, it would have been so easy for me to overlook or to removed it. And if that is true, how many more clues could there be hidden in here that I simply fail to see? How many more signs are there, clearly visible to anyone? Signs I do not recognise, and therefore cannot interpret correctly.

The library book ... Without anything else to go on, it all comes down to this one ordinary object and the few handwritten words inside it, which are just as mysterious as they were before the visit to Scotland. It is as if the book were taunting me, refusing to let the letters fade away, and to remove the mystery in that fashion; while simultaneously refusing to give away any more secrets, to be able to solve the mystery. It provides just enough information to raise questions, and not enough to answer them. But as long as there is no definitive explanation, these words cannot be ignored. And so the same uncertainty remains: are they inconsequential ideas noted down in a state of intoxication, or do they form an important message?

Page after page of printed text, with a few unremarkable annotations in the margins made by others ... No further note tucked away inside the book, or folded up and hidden behind the spine ...

The telephone – ringing like an alarm bell over the monotonous noise from the printer.

A phone call on a Saturday – that must be personal; finally, someone else wondering about Alison, trying to get in touch with her.

'Hello?'

'Miss Conway?'

'This is Siobhán Dannreuther. Alison ... I'm afraid she isn't here at the moment.'

'Miss Dannreuther, what a fortunate coincidence. It is you, in fact, I was trying to reach. My name is William Brenton. I'm phoning from your

grandmother's home and ... I'm very sorry to tell you, Miss Dannreuther, but your grandmother fainted and fell. She was taken to hospital, just a few minutes ago.'

'Gran? Why? What's happened?'

'Regrettably, I can't tell you that. It all came about so suddenly, while she was on the phone. It was such a shock – I was here at the time. I'm delivering the post for her, you see, and have been doing so for a number of years now, since I was assigned the new district and Wingfield Road fell onto my route. But I had known her before. She cared for Evelyn – my late wife – when she was taken ill. Therefore, I recognised your grandmother when she answered the door one day. She had to sign for a registered letter, you see. That's why I'd rung. And so, since then she has occasionally asked me in for a quick cup of tea. It's always nice when people do that, especially now with the rain and the snow, just to get a little warmth back into your body ...

'But I must tell you about today, of course. I didn't have any letters for her, but she saw me passing. So, she came out and asked would I like to come in for a little chat. I had read about you in the papers, and had meant to ask her if you had got back all right, and she said you had, and she told me everything about your adventures. I have to tell you, Miss Dannreuther, I was very impressed. She was going to show me some new photographs you had brought back from Antarctica, but then the telephone rang out in the corridor – we were sitting in the kitchen, you see. She excused herself and left the room, and then ... Obviously, I didn't pay attention to what she was saying, nor would I have been able to understand anything, had I tried. But after perhaps a minute or so, I heard the telephone dropping to the floor. Naturally, I got worried. So, I went to enquire, and she had fallen – fainted, as I said.

'When I took the receiver to dial 999, I thought the person on the other end might still be holding the line, but they weren't. I assumed they must have realised what had occurred and had rung off to phone for an ambulance. But, all the same, I phoned the emergency services myself, just to be on the safe side, and they came as fast as they could, I'm sure. It took no more than ten minutes, but it felt like ages, I can tell you. Your grandmother was still breathing, thank God for that, so I didn't try to interfere. I simply put a pillow under her feet and covered her with a blanket. The ambulance men said it was good I had done that. They took her to the casualty department at the N&N.

‘Afterwards, I allowed myself to check her address book, to see if I could find any contact information for you. I found the old number in Aberdeen, and I knew you weren’t living there anymore. Underneath it was another address and phone number in Cambridge. Your grandmother had told me you had been temporarily staying there during the training programme, prior to leaving for Antarctica – so I knew I wouldn’t be able to reach you there either. But then I found this number, and I remembered your grandmother telling me about Miss Conway, how the two of you have been close friends since childhood – and I’ve seen all the nice photographs of the two of you here in the flat, at different ages ... I’m glad I caught you on the phone, Miss Dannreuther.’

‘Yes, thank you very much for all your help. I’ll go to the train station straight away and come out to Norwich as soon as possible.’

‘All right. You know, of course, where the hospital is, where your grandmother worked for all these years. And I would like to say, Miss Dannreuther, she is very proud of you – all the interesting research you are doing, first in Scotland and then on Antarctica. She showed me the letter you had sent back from there after the holidays, and she read parts of it to me. She was so excited. She appeared to be decades younger. You know that, after the tragic loss of your mother, she very much thinks of you as her daughter, and it gives her the greatest pleasure to see you realise your dreams, even if they take you to the ends of the world. Also today, she was so happy. I would like you to know all this, just in case ...’

His voice trails off, leaving nothing but a suffocating emptiness. What is going on? Only a few days ago, Gran was doing so well. And now, within an instance, the whole world is falling apart ...

‘Miss Dannreuther?’

‘Yes, I’m still here. Thank you so much again for notifying me. With luck, I shall be at the hospital in about three hours.’

‘I’ll go on with my round then. I shall shut the door and put the key underneath the doormat, unless you’ve got a key yourself?’

‘I do.’

‘All right ... But I shall leave my number here by the telephone. Please, feel free to ring me up whenever you need local assistance, if there is anything I can do.’

‘I shall. Thank you very much again, and good-bye.’

‘Good-bye, Miss Dannreuther. And my best wishes for your grandmother.’



With calm determination, the matron leads the way through the deadened silence that fills the sparse corridor of the coronary care unit.

‘They brought her in from Casualty about an hour ago. Initially, her condition was quite unstable, with an irregular heartbeat. But she is doing better now, and she has been sleeping since she arrived here. So, you must be extra-quiet in her room. Don’t touch her, and don’t sit on her bed. What she needs now more than anything else is rest. Should she wake up while you are there, under no circumstances is she to excite herself. Just talk to her calmly and cheerfully, all right? And most definitely, do not ask her about that phone call. We don’t know if it had anything to do with her collapsing. It may only have been a coincidence. Perhaps she got up a little too quickly, took a few hurried steps ... At her age, a latent cardiomyopathy is not uncommon, and even harmless things like that can be enough to bring on a temporary heart failure. On the other hand, if the conversation itself excited her for whatever reason, there is no point in reminding her. Meanwhile, you probably should try and find out who it was who phoned her, and what that was about. Maybe there was an emergency in your family – you can never know, can you. There is a public phone in the waiting room by the reception. If you need a phone card, you can get one in the shop on the ground floor.’

She slows down in front of one of the rooms, where grey curtains are drawn across the large windows to the corridor.

‘So, this is it. Very quiet now.’ She carefully opens the door.

Gran looks ancient, her skin completely pale, almost transparent. Her breathing is shallow, the movement of her chest barely noticeable underneath the blanket – but fairly regular. Despite her weak appearance, she seems to be sleeping peacefully.

The white cotton bedclothes are still smooth, as if they had not registered yet the presence of the frail human being they are meant to shelter.

Without any windows to the outside world, the room is only dimly illuminated by the displays of several instruments mounted on a rack on one side of the bed, including an electrocardiograph.

‘She’s being monitored then?’

‘But of course she is, dear. This is a CCU. All our patients are being monitored around the clock. If there are any significant changes in your grandmother’s heart activity, we will be alarmed immediately.’

She points to the single chair by the side of the bed. ‘You can wait here if you want. Although, I’m afraid you’ll have to sit in the dark, while she is asleep.’

‘Anyway, I’ll leave you two alone now. But I shall be on the ward until the evening. You can get in touch with me through the reception desk, if need be – ask for Elaine Foley.’



That phone call ... that was no coincidence. Even if, understandably, her heart was getting weaker as she got older, Gran still appeared to be too healthy to simply collapse after getting up from a chair and taking a few steps. The last time walking to the corner shop with her, she gave no indication at all of slowing down, or of breathing more heavily. Obviously, these things can happen without any warning, but there is still the possibility that, physical exertion aside, there was something about that conversation that disturbed her sufficiently to bring on such a shock that she lost consciousness.

There is currently only one kind of bad news that has the potential to do that. This had to be about Alison – the one phone call I have been dreading myself for more than a week. And once again, at the critical moment, I was away on my own, determined to follow my own private investigation, rather than staying at home, allowing myself to recover, and to trust the police to do their job.

Whether it was an accident or something more sinister, it had to be the police who phoned, following up on the missing person report. And even if it was someone else, the police would at least be in a position to trace the call. Either way, this is not something to speculate about. While Gran is still asleep, now would be an opportunity to go and find out.

‘Siobhán ...’

‘Omi, I didn’t mean to wake you. I just ... How are you feeling?’

‘Siobhán, sit down here and listen. You are in great danger.’

‘Don’t worry, Omi. Everything will be fine.’

‘Siobhán, listen, this is very serious.’

‘Omi, it’s all right. I’m here now. And I won’t go back to Antarctica, I promise. I’m not leaving you again.’

‘Siobhán, what are you talking about?’

‘You don’t need to worry about me anymore. I am safe now, and I’m sorry if the news reports upset you. I didn’t even know that the fire and the evacuation had been reported back here in England. It was all exaggerated, you see. In reality, it wasn’t nearly as dangerous as they made it out to be.’

‘Siobhán, I’m not talking about that silly accident on Antarctica. I always knew you would get through that. But you are in real danger now.’

‘Don’t excite yourself, Omi ...’

‘Siobhán, you must find him. That is the only thing that can save you.’

She is clearly becoming delusional. There is genuine panic in her eyes. Her hands are shaking uncontrollably. Her heart is not going to stand this. Why is there no alarm?

But I must not get agitated myself, if there is to be a chance of calming her down.

‘Please don’t excite yourself, Omi. Here, lie back down. You have to rest now. Then you’ll be feeling better tomorrow.’

‘Siobhán, listen, this is about Alison – they took her. They ...’ She breaks off with a sob. ‘I don’t know. It’s the War all over again. People vanish. People get killed. And I still don’t know who does it and why.’

‘Don’t worry about Alison, Omi. She’s just gone away to Dublin for a while, on that sabbatical, you remember? She’ll be ...’

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

‘Please, Omi, you should be resting. I’ll get the nurse. She will give you something so that you can sleep.’

‘Siobhán, listen to me! I don’t have long now; can’t you see that?’

‘No, please, don’t talk like that. Everything is going to be all right. You just have to rest a little.’

She tries to raise herself from the pillow, but fails, and falls back again with a sigh, her breathing getting more agitated.

‘He was so young – still so young and inexperienced – but very honest and very loyal, always loyal. I should have known, I should never have believed the rumours. But when we were warned, it was too risky, you see. The Navy, the Government, they all believed it. So, we had no choice, we couldn’t stay.’

‘But that journey ... at night, across the Channel, in those little boats ... and then London ... seeing the total devastation – the shame over what we had done. And then the others got lost, exactly as I had feared. We should never have separated. I should never have let them go back down into that terrible tunnel. I told Ingrid it was too dangerous for us. I knew it, and I let them go.

‘And Hans, of course he did not desert. He did not abandon us. He never betrayed anyone, in his whole life. It was all because of that secret mission. That is when it all started, and it is still going on. Even before, he had never said where they went on patrol and what they did during those long months at sea. But that mission, when they left Kiel for the last time, they all knew it was special, I could feel it. And then something went wrong, and they disappeared.

‘But you must find him, Siobhán. I know you can. You’re just like him – a wanderer, restless, always searching. You’re named after him.’

‘Omi, don’t worry about the War anymore. It’s all over. Now, the only important thing for you is to rest and to get well again.’

She feebly shakes her head. ‘Siobhán ...’

She breaks off, but manages to sit up a little. The panic and uncontrolled agitation have left her eyes. Instead, they are now filled with a calm confidence, as she intently looks at me.

Suddenly, she is overcome with emotions. Her fingers around mine regain a convulsive strength. She tries to speak, to finish her sentence. She takes a deep breath. ‘Find him!’

All tension leaves her body, as she calmly exhales. She will be fine now. Everything will be all right. She will get up any moment and tell me not to fuss about her.

But her head drops back onto the pillow. The alarm goes off, as the instrument lights begin flashing.

People rush into the room – determined people with clear, well defined tasks. They all know what to do. Their lives have a purpose, are well organised, following a meaningful routine. They still have their families, with all the associated reassuring problems. They have their daily commutes, their fixed work hours, and their weekends.

And I am left standing alone, clueless, lost in a space without any point of reference, as Gran falls away into the whiteness of the linen, dissolving into the blinding light that now floods the room.



The rattling of the cables against the empty flagpoles ... the screeching of the seagulls sailing carefree in the breeze ... the rhythmic rushing of the waves. But underneath that blanket of natural sounds, Yarmouth Beach lies deserted in the evening light. The kiosk and tea room are boarded up. Britannia Pier rests dark and quiet – still hibernating, waiting for spring to arrive, while the cheerful music of summers past carries on the wind only as a distant memory.

The elaborate dream castles that Alison and I once built in the sand have long been washed away; and Gran will never again be sitting here in a deckchair, reading, trying hard to resist the pull of a comfortable afternoon nap – too anxious about the two of us to allow herself to fall asleep.

Now she *is* at rest, after a long and turbulent life – but even so, mercilessly torn away before her time, before I was given the chance to pay back all the years of loving care that I received from her.

And today ... I should have been with her, doing the one sensible thing there was to do – to wait by the phone for any information about Alison, and to intercept the painful message that became more and more likely with every passing day. Had I only answered that fateful phone call myself, everything would be different now. Gran would still be alive and, for better or worse, we might finally have a definite confirmation about Alison.

As it is, the agonising uncertainty continues. Once again, I am trapped in a situation that is impossible to evaluate, in which no conceivable scenario makes perfect sense.

If the phone call itself brought about the shock that caused Gran to lose consciousness, it had to have been some kind of bad news concerning Alison. But then why did that person never try to call back, when the conversation was so abruptly interrupted? And why do neither the emergency services nor the police know anything about Alison, when they should have been the first to be notified in the case of an accident, or of any crime having been committed?

Conversely, if it was not the phone call itself that provoked Gran's strong reaction, it would imply that she really was weaker than she appeared. It may have been that they had just finished a completely harmless conversation, and Gran was about to hang up. In fact, it could have been Alison herself,

calling from Dublin at last, telling her that everything was all right – only a cheerful chat that Gran insisted on cutting short for financial reasons, or because she began to feel dizzy.

But that would not explain her fear for Alison – and even for myself – in a complete change of mind from the last time we spoke, when she had not been worried at all. Could that be attributable entirely to confusion? When she regained consciousness, waking up only a few minutes before her death, not knowing where she was, perhaps not able to remember anything that happened since the phone call. Then, in her dying mind, Kathleen’s murder, my recent near-fatal adventure on Antarctica, and Alison’s absence during the last month might all have merged with the memories of the most significant events of her past: her husband’s mysterious disappearance; having to leave home, and the dangerous escape to the enemy; losing “the others,” for which she obviously blamed herself.

The others ... who were they? The wives of other crew members? The people who warned her of the imminent arrest? And then they got lost, “down in that terrible tunnel” ... that had to be a bomb shelter in one of the underground stations. Had these others survived the War, by now, they would have surfaced again somewhere. Therefore, they probably got killed during a bombing raid, when their shelter took a direct hit. As they were in the country illegally, they could never have been identified. They would never have been registered as deceased, and eventually they would have been buried in an unmarked grave.

All these disappearances ... how easy it is for us to vanish without a trace, and how quickly it can happen. Just this morning, Gran was still alive and happy, looking forward to many more years in this world. Now, she survives only in the minds of those of us left behind who remember her.

And without her, who is left to carry on the memory of her companions, who accompanied her on that perilous flight? Have they already faded away into history? And who is left to remember her husband? During the last moments of her life, her greatest regret seemed to be that she had never been able to find him again. Did she blame herself for that, thinking she had not exhausted every possibility? Was it the fear that he too might slip out of living memory that caused her to urge me to find him – together with her usual overconfidence in my abilities, her unrealistic belief that somehow I can do anything I put my mind to.

It would be far too easy to rationalise away her dying fears and to dismiss her last words. In a way, she may have been right. Despite the many years that have gone by, we may now be in a much better position to try and find out what took place during the War, as record keeping in Britain and Germany has had time to catch up with the multitude of tragic events, as electronic databases make it easier than ever to search and cross-reference.

Currently, there is nothing more for me to accomplish here. I have reached the limit of what I can do. The police are in possession of everything I can provide them with, every confusing clue, every tantalising hint, every outrageous speculation. And they must take this very seriously now. They must make any attempt to uncover whatever connection there might exist between the wartime death of a little girl, possibly by the name of Rose, and the abduction and murder of Kathleen. After all, it would be easy enough for them to confirm the existence of the secret message in that remote chapel by the coast. From then on, there can be no doubt that some tragedy occurred there that cannot be ignored, no matter how long ago it was.

Moreover, even if no evidence has survived the ages that connects the owners of the manor house to that memorial, the police can go back for a proper forensic examination of their old family home, to look for any evidence that Alison was there, if somehow she too got caught up in these dark affairs.

So, while I am still on sick leave, and until developments here reveal any new information, it would be inexcusable not at least to try and honour Gran's last wish; not to do anything in my power to turn back the clock and to retrace her steps. Far too many questions finally need to be asked, that should have been answered a long time ago.

In the fading light of the sinking sun, my lonely shadow is cast over the windblown ripples in the sand and out onto a stormy sea.

Over there in the east, hidden below the horizon, lies Germany – and a dark past.

