

PART THREE

THE GREAT DAWN

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

Adapted from a traditional Inuit song

PROLOGUE

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

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

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

How much did she really know? Had she been able to talk to the old woman before her death? And how much, if anything, had she been told before? What was her involvement in the old conspiracy?

There was the possibility that the girl was the only person left who knew where the *Atlantis* had been sunk, and what powerful secret the old submarine, with some luck, was still guarding against the restless waters of the North Atlantic.

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

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

So far, their quest had been a succession of unforeseen difficulties and bad luck. But despite these setbacks, they had already come a long way since the summer; since they had joined the Order in London and had first heard the story of the lost submarine; since they had found out about the crucial mission that its crew had been entrusted with; about the shameful betrayal of that trust by these men, and their attempted desertion; about the escape of the commander's wife, together with her young daughter, to the enemy. They had been told that, eventually, all involved in the conspiracy had been brought to justice – the submarine with its entire crew sunk, the wife and daughter apprehended and eliminated.

This had been the accepted version of events half a century after the facts, when many of the original founding members had already passed away. However, without a special motive, the desertion of a German submarine crew, barely one year into the War, was extremely unlikely. Not surprisingly, therefore, much more plausible rumours had sprung up in the immediate aftermath, rumours that had persisted until the very end of the War, only to gradually fade away over the intervening decades, as the knowledge of the mysterious wartime events threatened to slip out of living memory.

But then, just before the collapse of East Germany, something had happened that had stirred up the forgotten stories once more. At great risk to himself, anticipating the end to the separation of the fallen Empire, a former German submariner had contacted some of the founding members. He had joined the Order shortly after the War, having just been released from a prisoner of war camp; but had then returned to Germany, only to become trapped again behind the Iron Curtain. Many years later, with the Socialist regime crumbling around him, he had managed to bypass the strict state censorship and indicated, in carefully disguised words, that he hoped that the old union was still intact and continuing the early attempts to recover what had been lost during the War.

And so, in the summer when they had joined the Order, rumours were circulating once again that espionage had only been a cover for a far more important mission. What exactly that mission had been, no one seemed to know, although the consensus was that it had to have been the search for a valuable artefact or some powerful weapon that might have determined the outcome of the War, had it been possible to put it to use; an object that had been created by the ancestors of the noble race, but had then got lost beneath the ocean waves, together with their homeland.

The German plans to recover that object had been foiled by a collusion between the German submariners and a group of British soldiers – a conspiracy against both sides. Nonetheless, if the joint search by this Treacherous Alliance had been successful, the recovered artefact or weapon – the Secret – still had to be out there, most likely hidden away in the old submarine.

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

To discuss this Atlantean artefact during their elaborate ceremonies and dinner parties was one thing – as long as it was as elusive as the Holy Grail. It had lent these otherwise dull meetings a certain mystique, and had elevated the attendant's own sense of significance. But despite that, no one had been willing to set out on an actual quest to rescue this remnant of the great civilisation from the sea – a reluctance that stemmed either from privileged complacency, or from fear of drawing attention to the Order.

What was needed was proof, undeniable physical proof that the old stories were more than part of a founding myth. It would be necessary to get more detailed information about the nature of the Secret, and where it lay hidden. Then it could be brought back to life and carried into a new era, just as the old generation was dying out.

It had taken months of delicate conversations during Order meetings, carefully attempting to find out more about the disappearance of the submarine, and about its aftermath, but their persistence had paid off. After sufficient trust had been established, an old couple, two of the founding members, had finally confided in them.

Evidently driven by some misguided feeling of guilt, they had admitted that a mistake had been made: the wrong woman and child had been killed, and the commander's wife and her daughter had remained undetected throughout the War.

Fifty years later, however, it had been a simple exercise to find them through the official records. The daughter had died in the meantime, but there was a granddaughter now – the perfect target for them.

Or so it had seemed, because that was when the difficulties had started. To gain access to the widow's home had been easy enough. But she had obviously made a mistake when writing down her granddaughter's new address in Cambridge, after her move there from Aberdeen. The resulting attack on the wrong girl had wasted far too much time. To make matters worse, after the media attention around the old manor house had calmed down, and they had begun searching for the Dannreuther girl again, she had somehow vanished – just like her grandmother had done during the War.

Fortunately, there had been that other girl, the pretty one – Alison. Given her frequent visits over the holidays, she had to be very close to the old woman. And she had shown a great interest in the carefully staged murder in the manor house, had recognised the significance of that old building, and had clearly been aware of the role it had played in the past. She had to have some kind of involvement in the conspiracy, or at least some knowledge about it.

Alison's plans to travel abroad had presented them with an excellent opportunity to execute the abduction with such efficiency and secrecy that even now her absence had not yet found its way into as much as the local news. At last, they had come so close to the truth, and had never considered the possibility that she would put up resistance for so long, even after days of limited food and intense interrogation. It had been most unnerving.

But then, quite suddenly, coincidence had played in their favour once more. Initially, it had started as just another afternoon news report on the television, about a fire on some British Antarctic research base, and about the evacuation of the team. But then, a photograph had been shown of the members of that team, standing on what appeared to be the access tower of the base, with a Union Jack flying in the back – fifteen men and one woman – and they had recognised that woman instantly. There she was, the Dannreuther girl, doing research on Antarctica, initially for more than a year, but now she would be back in England very soon.

This had been the ideal moment to dispose of Alison. After four days, she had been kept in the manor house for too long already; and it had become apparent that she was prepared to die, rather than divulge any information about Ultima Thule and the Secret. It had become too risky to drive out there twice a day from Ullapool, once very early in the morning, and then again late at night. Eventually, someone had been bound to see them. No, it

definitely had seemed to be the right time for Alison to go. Afterwards, they would be free to go after their original target again.

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

During the subsequent four anxious days, their activities had been reduced to following the repetitive and sensationalised news reports about the ongoing rescue attempt of a German team, until finally it had been confirmed that the evacuation by land had been successful. The girl would leave Antarctica on a German icebreaker and was going to return to England within the next six weeks.

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

For five days they had watched the two addresses, waiting in parked cars, day and night, in the cold and stormy weather – but again, the wretched girl had escaped. Then, their patience had run out. Although, initially, they had been reluctant to contact the old woman directly, now it was time to act. But how could they have known that she had been so frail? The truth about what had happened to Alison, and the implied threat that a similar fate was going to befall her granddaughter, had evidently been too much for her. According to the obituary in the newspaper, she had died of heart failure later that same day.

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

If only ... Somehow, the memory of Alison on that last evening – her defiance and, admittedly, bravery – was hard to shake off. Particularly troubling was the sudden change that had come over her at the very end, as if the certainty of imminent death had given her an exceptional strength. There had been something disconcerting about her calm demeanour. Even when they had taken her away, down to the lake, she had remained perfectly calm. She had not pleaded with them anymore, had not

tried to pretend any longer that she had no knowledge about the conspiracy. Had that only been the numbing effect of shock?

But she had seemed completely lucid. Her last words had been spoken with such cold precision and confidence. Of course, most likely, there was nothing behind them at all – just empty threats. Nonetheless ...

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

These last words still echoed in their minds and had left them with a strange feeling of unease.

Yes, Alison had proven to be a far more formidable opponent than anticipated. Not only had she recognised the right motive behind her friend's murder, had seen through the guise of a Satanic ritual, long before anyone else had; not only had she kept her secrets, even under immense pressure; she had also had the confidence of being avenged – but by whom? If she really was supported by some powerful organisation, why had it been so easy to get at her? And why had there been no retribution yet? Who else was still out there involved in protecting the old Secret?

The funeral had meant to provide the answer to this question, but it had been frustrating. Judging by the assembly that had gathered around the grave – elderly acquaintances, for the most part, perhaps former colleagues – no one of any significance was left of the original conspirators.

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

No, that much was certain: her spirit would not ascend again from the watery depths and haunt them; nor would there be any avenging angels descending from the heavens. In the end, it had been they who had prevailed. It was they who were the anonymous, faceless spectres, who managed to operate in plain sight, yet always unseen, eluding police forces across the country – unstoppable and invincible.

Still, there was the Dannreuther girl, dropping a bunch of flowers onto the coffin, as swirls of dead leaves rustled around the gravestones. Against all odds, she *had* returned from the dead. She had thankfully not managed to

get herself killed on Antarctica after all. And so, the time taken to observe the funeral had not been entirely wasted. She had finally come within their reach. Although, having invested all that effort into tracking her down, seeing her now in person came as a terrible disappointment.

The girl looked pathetic. She cried silently, as she limped away from the grave – accompanied by another young woman, who supported her by her left arm. Whether she was involved in all this, they would have to find out. Also walking with her was the old postman they had seen passing in the street where her grandmother had lived, while the other attendants followed slowly behind.

But the Dannreuther girl ... she seemed lost and completely clueless. She certainly gave no indication that she realised how narrowly she had escaped capture so far. Was it really possible that she was the only one left who knew about the conspiracy? Or worse, was it already too late? Could it be that none of the conspirators had had the confidence to entrust her with the carefully guarded Secret? Had the line been broken now? Had the Secret already been lost with the death of the old woman?

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

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

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

At the entrance to the cemetery, the two girls said good-bye to the postman and went on together. There was no urgency to follow them too closely. They would undoubtedly go back to the old woman's house. There

was time enough to catch up with them later. And when the girl had played her role, she too could be eliminated. Even if she was not involved in the conspiracy, her life had been forfeited by her grandparent's betrayal.

One way or the other, Siobhán Dannreuther would die.

CHAPTER ONE

THE LOST SUBMARINE

This must be it ... although the building has more the appearance of a traditional North German family home, than that of a historical archive. Well-preserved as it is, the walls look genuinely old, made of dark red bricks and covered in ivy, with a tall thatched roof sloping down to just above the row of white-framed windows on the ground floor.

The flower beds are empty, but the immaculate lawn has survived well throughout the winter season. A narrow drive leads up to the entrance, on which the pebbles are still raked into a neat wave pattern – crunching indignantly, and seemingly reluctant to yield their meticulously maintained order to the tread of invading feet. Clearly, not many visitors have been here today, to this quiet neighbourhood, situated well outside the busy port town.

The shiny brass plate next to the green front door confirms that this is indeed the “U-Boot Archiv,” with the curator’s name engraved beneath it – Günter Karsten – together with a bell button. A pleasant tinkle sounds inside the building.

Everything about this building suggests that time has moved on sufficiently such that dark events of the past can now be viewed as a part of history, and studied with a sense of objective detachment.

How comfortable was it to have that perceived certainty about the past – until, in one instant, everything changed: the certainty was taken away, and all that remains are conspiracy theories and confusion.

Steps approach from inside the house, and the door opens. ‘Mrs Dannreuther – welcome. Did you have a good journey? It was not difficult with the bus from Kiel?’

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

‘But I beg you, that is really no problem. I live here, you know.’ Mr Karsten beckons me into the hall and takes my jacket. ‘The archive is sadly quite small compared with what you have in London, and it is privately funded. Therefore, I am very honoured that you decided to come here in

person, all the way out to Laboe. As I mentioned on the telephone, I could have sent you the information that I found with the post.'

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

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

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

He seems pleased. 'Yes, I am glad to have very good contacts in England. It is not possible to study the German submarines during the War without getting involved with the Royal Navy. So, I contact the War Museum myself occasionally. In fact, I did for your enquiry, as you will see.'

Mr Karsten leads the way into a cosy living room with dark wood panelling and matching leather furniture. Only a limited amount of late afternoon sunlight manages to slant through the windows underneath the overhanging roof.

'Take a seat here, please.' He indicates three armchairs grouped around a little table. 'There is tea and cake, if you like. I will get the documents that I collected for you.'

The enticing smell of fresh tea – exactly what is needed right now. Although neither the elegant white-and-blue porcelain cups, nor the matching milk jug invite indulgence, the lumps of brown rock sugar are certainly generous enough.

And then the cake: the same kind of sponge cake topped with caramelised almond flakes that Gran used to make as a simple after-school snack for two developing girls in desperate need of a quick supply of energy ... and tasting just the same.

Despite all that has happened since then, after all the life-changing events of the recent months, and with a dark part of history threatening to take over the present, it is good to know that not all bridges to a happier past have been broken down, if all it takes is a little piece of cake to bring back memories from many years ago.

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

Mr Karsten returns from the library with a thin folder under his arm, which he carefully places on the table. ‘I hope the tea is still warm enough? Yes, very good.’

He opens the folder, somewhat reluctantly. ‘Now, before I begin, I think I should warn you. I am sorry that this is not good news. Of course, it is the War we are talking about. So, if you look through these documents, you see it again and again: all these young men, the submarine commanders, they get their first boat, they are very brave and motivated to serve their country, and then they start to go out on war patrol. If they are lucky, they survive for a while. They become famous, they receive medals – national heroes, you know – and then, suddenly, in one short moment, it all ends. Their boat is sunk, and the entire crew dies – so many. This is a list of losses in 1940. It starts with *U-55* sunk in January, then *U-41* and four others in February, at least one boat every month, as you can see ... *U-13* sunk in May ... *U-122* went missing in June ... until here: *U-112* lost with all hands on 11 December 1940.’

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

‘I ... it’s possible, yes.’

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

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

It takes but a thumb to cover up the uniform at the bottom of the picture. What remains is a self-confident young man, who wants to do what he thinks is right for the people who matter most to him. He has alert eyes, handsome features, and dark hair, just like Mum – a disastrous haircut, though.

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

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

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

And yet, I did. And now the search is over before it really began. But Gran was right about one thing: her husband did not betray her or his country. This rumour about a defection must have been created in the chaos of war. It may have been an error during the hurried transmission of coded messages. Something got lost in translation, and a sinking became a defection – a simple misunderstanding, nothing more.

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

‘There’s more information about what happened?’

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

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

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

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

Mr Karsten puts the document to one side and pulls a few more sheets of paper out of the folder. ‘In the records about the *U-112*, we find a bit more

information. She was a Type VIIB Atlantic boat, attached to the 7th Submarine Flotilla and, unlike many others, managed to survive the first year of the War. So, by the time of her loss, as bigger and more advanced submarine types were introduced, she was a little outdated. On the day of her sinking, she was patrolling the Norwegian Sea about 160 nautical miles west-southwest of the Lofoten, when she was detected and attacked by a British destroyer. A radio message about the enemy contact, giving the approximate coordinates of her final position, was picked up by several German stations in Norway and passed on to the Navy High Command in Berlin. No further transmissions from the submarine were received, and as far as we know, she never reached any port. A few more details about what happened may have been recorded in the last war diary, but obviously that went missing with the boat. So, based on what we know, we have to assume that *U-112* was sunk.’

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

Mr Karsten reveals a thin volume, bound in black leather, and opens it at the title page. It contains a few typewritten lines, together with several annotations and signatures, and one prominent stamp, in old German lettering, at the top of the page: “Geheim!”

Mr Karsten slowly leafs through the diary – page after page of identical tables, with neatly handwritten entries in each field. ‘I would be very happy to translate this for you, but I am afraid it is very boring.’ He glances up.

‘Suspiciously boring, perhaps. It only records the routes of routine patrols, with a few enemy contacts, regular comments on the weather and sea state, the general performance of the boat, some technical problems, but nothing significant – nothing that would give us any clue about what might have happened afterwards. I also found nothing in all the other documents that have survived the War. So, what was going on up there? What kind of activity was so secret that it was not recorded anywhere?’

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

‘I did not have to wait long. Here is one of the documents that he faxed me this morning: a report about the sinking of a German submarine by HMS *Laplander*. And you can see here: date and location are consistent with the attack on *U-112*. The report confirms that incident as recorded by the Germans. But ...’, he puts on his glasses, ‘... here we find more information. This is what it says: The *Laplander* was travelling towards the Lofoten for a raid on the German fish oil factories and glycerine stores on the islands. The first attempt, five days earlier, had failed because of bad weather and the strong tidal currents. In the darkness of the Arctic winter, another troop transport had got off course. According to their last radio message, they had hit the skerries west of Fareøya and were sinking. Then the contact broke off.

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

‘They know that all submarines of the time have a very limited range underwater and can only spend about two days submerged, at the most,

before they run out of electrical power and breathable air. So, the *Laplander* continues to patrol the area, waiting for the German boat to surface, but after more than two days of silence, they are convinced that it was sunk. As the weather is getting worse – with another blizzard approaching – the raid is postponed. Instead, they continue patrolling over a wider area, looking out for other German ship movements, but without any success. Only once, they intercept a distant radio signal in encrypted Morse code on the German submarine-to-shore high-frequency band, but from well outside the diving range of the attacked submarine. They conclude that this has to be another boat, and again widen their search area, moving closer to the Norwegian coast – without sighting any vessels whatsoever. And that is as far as this report goes.’

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

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

‘Torpedo failure was a big problem during the Norwegian Campaign. The magnetic detonators used by the submarines had never been tested at high latitudes before, so close to the Magnetic North Pole. And within the narrow Norwegian fjords, they were also affected by the iron ore deposits in the surrounding mountains which, ironically, was exactly the natural resource that Germany wanted to exploit in northern Scandinavia, and one of the main reasons for invading Norway. These deposits distort the Earth’s magnetic field and can hide even a big steel ship from the torpedoes – although, of course, you can still see it very clearly with your own eyes.

‘A failed attack like this is always dangerous for a submarine, because a submarine is only as safe as it is undetected. If you fire a torpedo and it explodes, you have given your position away. If you do not sink the enemy ship, you are in trouble. In direct engagement, you have no chance against

a destroyer. They are much faster and much better armed than submarines. Your only option then is to dive as deep as you can, stay there for as long as you can, and pretend that you are dead. In that first incident, the torpedoes did not explode at all, and the visibility was poor. Therefore, *U-112* was not detected and managed to get away. Sadly, the second time, they were not so lucky.

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

With reverence, he pulls another fax from the bottom of the thin stack of papers. ‘Here have I a report by the commander of HMS *Winslow* from 19 December 1940 – so, eight days after the sinking of *U-112*. Since then, the weather has improved, and the *Winslow*, an old escort destroyer, is heading north to join HMS *Laplander* for another attempt to destroy the oil factories. At around noon, just after sighting the *Laplander*, the *Winslow* also spots a submarine, fully surfaced and at a complete standstill, about ten nautical miles north-northeast of their position. By radio, they immediately warn the *Laplander*, which is cruising at about the same distance to the west of the submarine. Through their binoculars, they recognise it as a German boat. They are able to see people on the bridge, as well as on deck. The German submariners seem to be having a problem. They are getting the life rafts out of the bow compartments and start to inflate them, as if they were planning to abandon the boat – although, at least at this point, there is no indication that they are sinking. Then, one of the English lookouts notices several other low silhouettes, less than a mile southeast of the submarine – possibly a group of submarines. But before others can verify the sighting, the silhouettes disappear. Suddenly, the men on the surfaced submarine make preparations to dive. They stop inflating the life rafts, let them glide into the water, with no one inside, and hurriedly go under deck. Shortly afterwards, the submarine picks up speed and submerges. At the same moment, there are two explosions in quick succession. In the dark, the *Winslow* lookouts see an orange flash of light above the surface, where the submarine went down.

On the hydrophone, they pick up the faint groaning of a small steel vessel breaking up and sinking. Then there is silence. Now, of course, both British ships are on high alert – but nothing happens. The other submarines, if they were really there, simply vanish without attacking. Because of the unexpected strong presence of German submarines, and the possibility of warships hidden within the many fjords of the islands, the raid is postponed again – until the following spring, as we now know, when it was conducted successfully.’

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

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

‘Naturally, the English lookout could have been mistaken about the other submarines. The sun was very low above the horizon, and the reflections on the water must have been confusing. So, let us say that the other submarines were an illusion. But unless she was a ghost ship – some kind of a Flying Dutchman – that one surfaced submarine definitely *did* exist. And something *did* explode just beneath the surface.’

Mr Karsten places the two British records side by side. ‘You see, here have we two events: first, a German submarine goes missing; then, we have one too many.’ With a glance over his glasses he pushes the two sheets of paper together, one on top of the other. ‘What do you think?’

‘Well, I don’t know; is it possible that *U-112* could have survived the attack after all?’

‘Under normal circumstances, I would have said no. You see, it is not only a question of electric power, but also of lack of oxygen, together with a

build-up of carbon-dioxide and other poisonous gases. Two, and at most three days underwater would have taken *U-112* to her absolute limits. As I mentioned, during that time, they could not have got very far, less than hundred miles underwater – and the English knew that. So, with the destroyer patrolling over an area with that radius, constantly watching and listening, *U-112* really had no chance – normally.

‘But this is clearly a strange situation. And if we assume that *U-112* somehow managed to survive the attack by HMS *Laplender*, we can connect the two events. So, let us say that, after two days, *U-112* surfaces again, near the location where she went down. During the attack, the submarine has somehow been damaged and is not manoeuvrable anymore. Over the next six days, the crew gets very lucky, and somehow the destroyer does not see them, while they try to repair their boat – but they fail. Maybe the pressure hull is too badly damaged. They expect that the boat will sink and get the life rafts ready. Precisely at that moment, the *Winslow* arrives. The German submariners notice the arrival of the second British destroyers, which is heading straight for them. They attempt to dive, but hydrogen gas from some burst lead battery cells ignites, and the fuel tanks explode. I would say that that is a possible scenario, even if it is not very probable. But we still do not know what *U-112* was doing, all by herself, all the way up there in the Norwegian Sea.’

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

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

No ... but although the documents are written in German, the two names are unmistakable. Then their relationship as mother and daughter – that could not possibly be a coincidence. It would explain Gran’s reluctance to talk about the events leading up to her escape from Germany, and about her husband. But why would someone take on another person’s identity – the identity of a German Christian? A Jewish person might have done so, to be able to survive in Germany, but not for the purpose of fleeing to Britain – that would have been insane. And anyway, how could I ever consider anything like that, even for one second?

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

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

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

‘But that’s just it: they *were* arrested and interned until the final year of the War.’ – Only how much of this is it wise to divulge? – ‘The thing is ... I have a theory. It’s based on something my grandmother told me. Basically, what happened was, she fled the Nazis because she was told that her husband had gone over to the British, with his boat and the entire crew, and that she would have been arrested had she stayed in Germany.’

With a resigned smile, Mr Karsten sinks back into his armchair and takes off his glasses. ‘This is not making things more understandable, Mrs Dannreuther.’

‘No, but perhaps it does. In fact, if we accept that possibility, everything makes perfect sense.

‘Here’s how I see it: *U-112* was involved in some secret activity, outside the normal scheme of naval operations. Let’s say, they were testing some new technology, nicely secluded in this remote part of northern Norway. Then, something happens and, for some reason, they decide to collaborate with the British. The British records are deliberately incorrect to cover that up. I mean, what if there are German spies on their side? If they ever saw those records, the Germans would be warned. If that is right, HMS *Laplander* wasn’t near the Lofoten for a sabotage operation at all. They were there to meet *U-112*. But the first attempt fails. As you said, the weather was bad. They might have missed each other in poor visibility. Or they needed to go alongside the submarine, to exchange people or some cargo. So, they try again, when the sea is calm. On that second attempt, they and that other ship are approaching the meeting point. But in the meantime, the Germans have somehow found out about the conspiracy and have sent a group of submarines to intercept and sink *U-112*, before they can make contact with the enemy. When *U-112* dives, they’re not trying to escape the English destroyers at all. They’ve seen the other submarines – but it’s too late. The Germans have already launched their torpedoes, and *U-112* is hit just beneath the surface – twice. That’s what these explosions were. Then, the Germans would have wanted to cover that up as well. Obviously, submarine crews who go over to the enemy, and having to sink your own vessels is not exactly great propaganda, is it? And so, officially, *U-112* was sunk – during faithful service – by HMS *Laplander*.’

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

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

‘Well, I don’t know, Mrs Dannreuther, but a defection does not seem very plausible, especially at this stage of the War. A much more likely scenario would be that, instead of sinking *U-112*, the English had managed to capture her, with all the important material on board, the codebooks and everything. Then I agree that the English would definitely have tried to cover that up, because that is exactly what they did when they caught *U-110*. But now, all

the records from the War have been declassified, and there is nothing about *U-112* being captured. Especially for the scenario that you describe, if that really happened, the cover-up was done very well on both sides. And people alive today, for some reason, would still be silent about it.’

‘Only ... I’m sorry, Mr Karsten, I don’t mean to be bothersome, but isn’t it a bit of a contradictory argument to say that a conspiracy cannot exist just because we don’t know about it – when that is exactly what one would expect from an effective conspiracy?’

He nods slowly. ‘Yes, okay, you are right. I can see that you have an argument. Then we can try to think about it in a different way. Let us look at the motive for why someone would do something like that. We can say: a big conspiracy needs a big motive, yes? So, let us think about the political situation at that time. Things were going very well for the Germans in 1940, when *U-112* disappeared. Everyone thought that they were going to win the War. Almost all of Western Europe was occupied or allied. Only very few countries were allowed to remain neutral. And even Britain was in very serious danger. They had failed to defend Norway. They had been driven out of France, their last position on the Continent. The Channel Islands had been occupied without any resistance whatsoever – these were desperate days for your country, Mrs Dannreuther. Meanwhile, here in Germany, the opposition to the Nazis was at the lowest point ever. We were still allied with the Soviet Union. The worst bombings, the disastrous Eastern Campaign – and the Holocaust, of course – none of these things had happened yet. The submarine force especially was doing very well, and the Royal Navy was only slowly catching up with effective countermeasures. So, in that situation, why would a German submarine commander have decided to go over to the English? Even if you forget the rest of the crew and only think about your grandfather, did he have a good reason to betray his country? Did he hate the Nazis so much – enough to abandon his wife and young daughter? Think about them. As you said, they would have been arrested immediately, and your grandfather would have known that. The secret police would have interrogated your grandmother, to find out exactly who else was involved. That would have been extremely brutal. Then, if she refused to talk, or when they had found out all they could, they would have put her in prison or a concentration camp, or ...’

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

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

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

The steady ticking of the tall clock by the wall emerges from the silence that settles over the room, as the pendulum, with indifferent precision, swings to and fro.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Mr Karsten becomes mildly excited. ‘You are right, they did.’

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

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

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

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

Possibly ... and what if someone else has suddenly become interested in the old *U-112* for an entirely different reason?

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

Why was Gran so insistent about that? Why was she so convinced that Alison’s disappearance is somehow connected to the disappearance of her husband and his submarine half a century ago?

If the submarine itself is not important anymore, this would have to be about the secret activities the crew were involved in. Unless ... it is about another object, something that has not yet lost its significance; something of financial value, for example – such as gold or some other precious articles that were stolen from Jewish families. If that treasure was hidden inside the submarine and deliberately sunk in shallow water, by a group of people who wanted to fake their own deaths and go into hiding in South America, wait there until the fighting was over, and then return to recover their loot ... all they had to do was to take advantage of a failed attack by a British destroyer.

Mr Karsten is watching me closely now. ‘Mrs Dannreuther, I don’t want to be curious, but I am wondering why you came to enquire about your grandfather now, after such a long time.’

‘That was because ... my grandmother died a few days ago. It was her last wish that I should find out about what had happened to her husband. I’d grown up thinking that she must have hated him for deserting her and their little daughter, forcing them to flee Germany. I’d always thought that that was the reason why she didn’t like to talk about him. I realise now that, whatever the truth about her husband’s disappearance is, she didn’t blame him for what happened. She did try and find him after the War, but with the chaos that existed at the time, eventually had to give up. Nonetheless, apparently, she hoped that I might somehow be more successful now, after so many years. I just don’t see how.’

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

‘Oh, no, please, I’m very glad I came; and I really appreciate the effort you put into collecting all this information. If anything, I should have come much sooner – years ago, and together with Gran. After all, this is where she was born and where she lived for many years.’

‘I am glad to hear that. Then you will be staying in Kiel tonight?’

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

CHAPTER TWO

FOREIGNER

The distant ringing sounds faint against the background noise of the busy pub ... going unanswered for a third time. The relaxed chatter of the professionally-dressed patrons, ending their day's work with a quick drink after a boring business dinner ... while a forth ring dissipates into an empty flat miles away. This is bound to end in yet another answerphone greeting, another thread that is about to break ...

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

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

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

'Yes, this is she.'

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

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

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

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

‘Incidentally, yesterday, we went to Bremerhaven, to the return party for the *Polaris* at the harbour. We had been waiting with our holidays just for that. I finally had the chance to meet Stefan’s colleagues from Helios, which was nice, and literally everyone asked him about you. They were all very impressed with how you managed to pull through, after everyone had expected you to be ... well, they didn’t necessarily expect you to be alive, when they got to your base. In fact, I had the feeling that they never seriously expected to find you at all.

‘Sorry, Siobhán, where did you say are you right now?’

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

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

‘Oh, no, not at all. They just put me on sick leave for a month or so, to get me out of harm’s way, presumably – only until they worked out what to do about the biology programme at Aurora. With luck, I could be back in action for the next Antarctic summer season.’

‘Oh, that’s good to know. Stefan told me about broken ribs and squashed legs – sounded pretty nasty.’

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

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

‘Yes, I tried to phone her earlier on, but she’s not at home either.’

‘She only got back yesterday, with the *Polaris*. Maybe she has gone to see friends or family. After more than a year away ...’

‘Yes, that must be it. Now ... Korina, I hope you don’t mind my asking, but you don’t sound very German.’

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

‘Sure, will do. Although, I’m still in the process of settling in after the early return from Antarctica – moving about, you know ...’

* * *

‘U-Boot Archiv, Laboe – Günter Karsten.’

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

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

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

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

‘But I did not give up, and I thought about the other submarines that had operated out of Kiel. At the beginning of the War, this was the largest submarine base in Germany. It had tens of boats in several flotillas. At least some of the officers on the other boats must have known your grandfather

and the other officers serving on *U-112*. They would have had regular contact with each other, professionally at least, but probably also socially. So, I looked for information about any officers who, in 1940, had been stationed in Kiel. Most of the German submariners did not survive the War, or they have died since then. But then I found Ralf Behring, the former commander of *U-115*. He commissioned his boat in April 1941, when it became attached to the 1st Flotilla in Kiel, but he had been stationed there already since before the War – and this is where it gets a little confusing. It says here in his personal record that he had been First Watch Officer on *U-46*, which was a sister boat of *U-112* in the 7th Flotilla. The problem is that another person is also listed as First Watch Officer on that submarine for the same period. Without more information, it is impossible to say which of the two personal records is right. Behring became very famous during the War, one of the most successful submarine commanders. Because of that, we could think that his record is correct, unless ...’

‘Unless he served on *U-112* before the sub was reported as being lost, when in reality it was never sunk at all, but rather hidden away somewhere, for some reason, and the Germans had to find a way to cover that up and make the crew disappear as well – without killing them.’

Mr Karsten hesitates for a moment. ‘I don’t know, Mrs Dannreuther. I am getting very confused with all this unorder in the documents. But I am starting to think that maybe you are right. There are so many open questions, and the story of *U-112* is definitely becoming a little bit ... strange, I would say.

‘So, I got interested in Mr Behring and I ... Do you want me to tell you now? Do you still have enough money for the telephone? Or is your train leaving? I could send you all this information with the post.’

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

‘Very good, but I will try to keep it short. So, Mr Behring and his *U-115* ... after only two months in Kiel, in June 1941, they were transferred to Brest, in the north of France, together with the rest of the 1st Flotilla. They were stationed there until August 1944, when they were transferred again, this time to Norway, and attached to the 13th Flotilla stationed in Trondheim. In December that year, they were moved even further north, to become part of the new 14th Flotilla in Narvik. There they were until the end of the War, in May 1945, when the German forces surrendered, and they

were captured by the Royal Navy. They were interned in a prisoner of war camp near Watten, in the very north of Scotland, until March 1946. This is as far as Ralf Behring's wartime record goes. But I found here a handwritten note by my father, from a few years after the War, when he began to collect documents, before they got lost. As I said, Behring was an important submarine commander, and my father must have tried to contact him for information about his service in the submarine force. My father notes here – in German, of course: "From marriage register Stralsund: Ralf Behring and Emma Lohmann, 7 December 1948." Stralsund is the city where Behring was born. So, he must have returned there after his release from captivity. By the way, this is very close to the Army Research Centre in Peenemünde that I mentioned yesterday, where they tested new military technology, such as rockets – but okay. Then my father notes: "Oliver Behring, born 15 November 1949." A few years later, the separation into East and West happened, and they ended up on the other side. Now the border is open again, and I thought that maybe they are still living there. I hoped that we could clarify the uncertainty about Behring's wartime career before taking over *U-115*. And really, I found the son's telephone number in Stralsund. I called it this morning and spoke with his wife, Ulrike. She knows that her father-in-law was a famous submariner on *U-115*. But she never heard of *U-112* or your grandfather. Ralf Behring's wife died young after a heart attack. He left Germany not long ago, after the opening of the border, and moved to Fareøya, a small island in the Lofoten, not very far from Narvik. Mrs Behring said that he had liked the region, when he was stationed there, and went back for his retirement. So, he is a bit difficult to reach now. But Mrs Behring said that her husband could know more. He is more interested in this part of history.'

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

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

'No, I understand ... although this is curious indeed. Do you know, by any chance, when he was born, Ralf Behring?'

'That was ... I remember it was 1913.'

The same year as Gran ... 'Then he would have been about the same age as my grandfather.'

‘Yes, that is right ... oh, I see ... but Behring looks very different. I have a photograph here, and he is definitely not your grandfather, Mrs Dannreuther. I am very sorry.’

Or is he ... two different photographs attached to two different personal files, with two different names for people neither of us know personally. That does not mean that there are necessarily two different individuals belonging to these names.

‘Mr Karsten, I’m beginning to think that it might be a bit premature for me to return to England at this point already. Somehow, I have a feeling ... I don’t know ... I have a feeling that there is something about Mr Behring that is not quite right – even if he isn’t my grandfather, as you were saying. But the uncertainties about his wartime record, his retirement in the Lofoten ... I think it might be interesting to talk to his son at least.’

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

‘But as I said, Oliver Behring is still in a special hospital in Stralsund – the *Ostseeklinik*, as it is called. If you want to talk to him, to find out more about his father’s activities during the War, it would probably be good to visit him there. But it will not be easy. The situation in the East is still quite chaotic.

The train service, as I experienced it, is catastrophic, and I would definitely recommend to rent a car. Also, for you a problem would be that most people who grew up in the East do not speak English.'

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

'Very good. If you want to continue the investigation into what happened to *U-112* and her crew, you should not be shy to telephone Mrs Behring. She is very friendly. After I spoke with her this morning, she will know what it is about. And I am sure that somehow you will find a way to understand each other. Maybe she can get you in touch with her father-in-law. She said that he lived in England for more than a year after he was released from the prisoner of war camp. He worked on farms for a while, and then at a shipyard in London. After that, he must speak quite good English. I cannot find the phone number here in the office at the moment. It is possible that I left it with my notes in the library. But you will find it easily yourself in the phone book for Stralsund. And if you decide to visit, to talk to Oliver Behring in person, you should definitely take some time to see the Baltic coast. You could stay in a guesthouse on the island of Rügen, for example. It is very easy to reach over a bridge from Stralsund. There is a national park, white cliffs, and nice beaches. It would be a shame if you would come here, to the country where one half of your family is from, and only think about the War and terrible things like that.'

* * *

The chill wind from the sea is getting stronger, while the sun gradually descends behind the island. But for my lonely figure, the exposed pier lies deserted now, as the few other visitors have retreated into the shelter of the cafés and hotels along the promenade.

Almost a day has gone by ... and a potentially pleasant sojourn in this quiet resort, surrounded by unspoilt nature, continues to be plagued by the same indecision and doubts, turning over the same old thoughts that have nowhere to go without any fresh information. Yet, as evening settles, the

chance of doing something productive today, and perhaps learning something new, has been squandered at last. Now it is too late to make a difficult phone call, and certainly much too late for a hospital visit.

However, the main resistance towards taking the first step does not stem from a desire to avoid a confrontation with certain potentially ugly truths – nor is it the language barrier. More importantly, if there *is* something dodgy behind the loss of *U-112*, contacting Ralf Behring, or even his son, might set in motion a chain of events that is unpredictable and potentially catastrophic. This is not something that should be done carelessly.

Nonetheless, tomorrow will have to bring a decision about how to proceed. While the uncertainty about the criminal proceedings back home is ever present, hanging like a dark cloud over the western horizon, simply waiting around here becomes more difficult to justify with every passing day. As comfortable as it would be to finally do what everyone has been recommending since the return from Antarctica, to take the opportunity to relax and recover, it would require a solid reason to extend the stay on the island.

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

What if Gran was right about Alison? What if something happened recently that somehow stirred up the old wartime events – something that took place, at least in part, right here in northern Germany? What if the police enquiry into Kathleen’s murder and Alison’s disappearance has so far failed to turn up any results because they are searching in the wrong place?

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

Hidden things ... If there is one lesson that can be learned from the tour of the Highlands, it is that hidden things can occasionally be plainly visible. Sometimes, all that is required to recognise them is to abandon a direct approach, and to take a step sideways for an oblique view of the situation.

A former military radio station ... in a scenario in which not all is what it seems concerning *U-112*, what role might that play? The workplace of the son of one of few surviving submariners from the Second World War – a

submariner, moreover, with a questionable wartime record, who, following the end of the War, spent more than a year longer in Britain than was necessary; who then returned home and, soon afterwards, was caught behind the Iron Curtain. And the moment the border opens again, he gets out of Germany, leaving his son and daughter-in-law behind, and retires to some remote place in northern Norway, most likely with the financial support from someone else – near the same place, in fact, where *U-112* was once stationed under mysterious circumstances.

No, something is not right here; and with that amount of uncertainty, any approach that is too direct could easily have unpleasant consequences. Therefore, as tangential as it may seem, the investigation of an abandoned military compound might just be the right first step to take.

Would people have gone through the trouble of constructing a nuclear bunker only to protect a radio station? Or was there also something else going on – continuing perhaps a project that had already been begun during the Second World War? When they officially acknowledged the existence of that radio station and apparently closed it down, was that really what happened? Or are these other more important activities still secretly continuing underground?

Either way, visiting the site of the abandoned bunker is the only thing that can still be accomplished this evening. And a logical investigation without a certain degree of serendipity is just as likely to go unrewarded as frenetic action without any kind of planning. There is nothing to be lost, and it might well be the safest way forwards.



The white hatchback glows golden in the low sun, despite the thin layer of dust it has collected over the past twenty-four hours, being parked right next to the beach.

Wrong side, Shivy – the steering wheel is still on the left in this country, as it would do well to remember by now.

So, to consult the roadmap ... although it is not likely to indicate the location of an installation that, until recently, was strictly classified. But here is that village in its vicinity – Lindenthal – probably less than an hour's drive from here: down the B96, over the bridge, back to Stralsund, and then following the L192 – always keeping to the right side of the road.

And when we get there without causing any accidents, we shall not do anything rash. We shall not climb over any fences, and we shall not step on any landmines. We shall simply take a quick look around. How bad can that be? Just a quick look.

CHAPTER THREE

GOING UNDER

The few detached homes, surrounded by modest gardens, are lined up along the left side of the single road that leads through the small community.

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

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

Past the last house, the quiet residential street comes to an end in a roundabout, while a narrow paved road leads off towards the trees. Its coarse unmarked tarmac surface was evidently intended for heavy vehicles travelling at low speeds, rather than for ordinary traffic.

Among the trees, the sunlight is briefly scattered into individual bundles of rays. Then, a clearing opens up only a short distance ahead. Just before, however, the road is blocked by an olive-green gate, with a prominent warning sign on the right, looking very prohibitive.

So, this is as far as it goes in this direction – not particularly far from the outer edge of the group of trees, such that the white shape of the car might still be visible from the houses. To leave it parked along the residential street would have been less conspicuous, but that cannot be helped now. Going back and forth would only attract more attention.

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

Total silence hangs all around, whereas normally there should be birds singing in the evening. Has something disturbed them recently? Or have they long sensed the presence of a darkness here that is unrelated to the setting of the sun?

In any case, darkness *is* coming. So, now might be a good time to get that torch out of the boot of the responsibly-equipped rental car.

On either side of the gate, the enclosure of the compound is formed by a double fence, which must have carried high voltage at some point, and is topped with several strands of barbed wire. Immediately behind the gate, on the right side of the road, stands a guard-house, painted in a camouflage pattern – a dog kennel next to it, but thankfully unoccupied. Beyond it, the road leads farther onto the compound, until it is lost from sight within the trees on the opposite side of the clearing.

The main gate for vehicle traffic is closed off with a thick chain, in addition to the normal locks – its impregnability reinforced by the regular pattern of bars that is projected by the light from the torch onto the road ahead.

A regular pattern, except ... there is something wrong with the smaller gate for pedestrians. The frame at the side of the lock is slightly bent. It is hardly noticeable even when standing directly in front of it, but the relatively small deformation is magnified by its shadow. The lock must have been forced open, probably with something like a crowbar – and not too recently. The scratches have already begun to rust slightly.

Now, why would someone want to break into an abandoned military complex? Out of curiosity, quite possibly – especially, if it is made that easy. It would be understandable if, after living next to it for years, the neighbours would finally want to find out what had been going on here.

Despite being slightly stuck, the bent gate opens without much resistance and with only a slight squeaking – provoking no response of any kind, no alarm, no challenge from a hidden sentry. There does not seem to be anyone about now. At least above ground, the compound really does give the impression of being abandoned.

A few camouflaged single-storey barracks stand alongside the road, their windows boarded up. Already, even after only a few months of being left uninhabited, they look rundown and depressing, made redundant at the end of a war that never came. In fact, without any sign of recent activity, it is hard to imagine that anyone ever lived here.

Past the barracks follows a succession of garages, all their doors closed; some fuel drums lined up outside them; an army lorry with a flat tyre left standing by the side of the road.

All buildings here are regular brick constructions, which were obviously not meant to withstand a nuclear attack, or even the impact from regular

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

At the edge of the clearing, the paved road comes to an end. From here, two paths continue into the gathering darkness among the trees. A narrow trail leads off towards the left, where various smaller structures can be seen hidden beneath the canopy – too small for access tunnels, but vents possibly. A wider gravel path continues straight ahead, towards the dark outline of a metal tower, topped by a two-tiered platform, about fifty feet high, and loaded with antennae of different types.

Shortly before reaching the tower, the path widens into an open space of compacted earth, bounded on the right by an artificial, wooded hill that covers an imposing block of concrete, with five massive gates leading into it – more garages, most likely, for vehicles considerably larger than ordinary lorries.

Straight ahead is a lower mound, also overgrown, and with an opening that used to be closed by a solid steel door, at least two inches thick – a door that now has a hole cut into it, just big enough for one person at a time to climb through. This would have required considerably more effort than forcing open that gate at the entrance to the compound. Someone must have worked here with a flame cutter for many hours, and likely motivated by more than simple curiosity.

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

Several cardboard boxes are stacked along the side of the tunnel, filled with various components of some dismantled electronic equipment, and still waiting to be taken away. Although the old bunker has lost its strategic significance, it must nonetheless contain something that is of value to someone.

Or it really has become the base for some other subversive activities. In that case, the answers to many open questions might well be hidden down there.

So, here we go ... carefully squeezing past the sharp metal edges along the crude opening.

Installed along the ceiling of the rough concrete tunnel is a line of lightbulbs, with a bulky switch near the entrance – not surprisingly, though, the electricity has been cut off. Now, it all depends on the batteries of the torch not dying down there.

Away from the entrance, as the tunnel continues downwards in a straight line, a growing number of echoing footsteps assemble in the narrow space, taking on a life of their own, moving up and down the passage, wave after wave, as the faint glow of the setting sun recedes into the distance. How far away the shrinking opening is, is difficult to gauge already, perhaps a hundred yards – as the tunnel makes a sharp turn to the left.

Beyond the bend, the passage levels out and leads on towards another steel door, this one potentially locked with two giant hydraulic bolts, but now conveniently standing open – revealing behind it a succession of three similar doors, all opened as well, which must be forming part of an airlock system, and the actual entrance to the bunker.

The first chamber houses the pumps that control the pressure within the airlock. Then follows a tiled room with showers – the decontamination area. This, finally, leads into what used to be the control room, now stripped of its electronic equipment.

Past the airlock system, an empty corridor ends at a staircase leading farther down, leaving no other option but to follow it.

Suddenly, there is a soft touch against the tip of the right foot – then a clanging erupts in the silence, metal on metal, as a small object, a screw possibly, tumbles down the steps and vanishes out of sight.

For a few endless seconds, its descent continues to echo along the unseen passages on the lower level. Then, silence settles again, more oppressive than before, as the feeling builds of newly-awoken senses reaching out from the darkness below.

And not for the first time – remember? – we have been here before.

Last time, when imagination was allowed to run away, the feet were quick to follow. That was inexcusable and must not happen again. This is just another sad abandoned building, accommodating no more ghosts than the basement of the manor house. And as long as the torch provides no indication that it is about to relinquish its light, there is no excuse to abandon this exploration.

At the bottom of the staircase, several passages lead away into different directions.

From the one immediately to the left originates an unpleasant smell of mould and fungi, together with the distant regular dripping of water; the first indication of the presence of organic life down here, but not particularly appealing – no doubt the remains of the internal water supply.

Then, a sudden movement on the right – surely, something just moved at the periphery of vision, only for a second, a dark shape flitting silently out of sight – there, in the narrow opening of that door, now standing ajar ... or was it open like that before?

Dark shapes moving without a sound – or shadows, as they are commonly known among sensible people.

Only shadows, just like last time – remember? – simply shadows and nerves.

Still, there is no need to stray too far away from the central staircase, and into odd directions. Who knows how extensive this underground network really is.

Also, that passage straight ahead, past yet another solid steel door, looks most likely to contain offices or some other rooms that might give an indication as to what activities have taken, or continue to take place here.

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

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

However, the second door does indeed lead into an office – or an archive, even. Except for an empty desk near the entrance, the room is filled with several rows of shelving units, a few empty, but most still lined with folders ... all labelled by date, and neatly arranged in chronological order.

Row after row of the same type of folders, with the same type of labels, and the same type of content: endless lists of dates and frequencies and output power, all annotations written in Russian, interspersed with lines of number and letter codes – apparently, nothing more interesting than a record of routine transmissions, with standard call signs and abbreviations.

All the effort that went into compiling and archiving this information ... and now, everything here is redundant, with the dust of time settling over it.

The dust of time ... of course, if somewhere in this uniformity something unusual should be hidden – there, on this one shelf at the very back of the room, the dust along its edge has clearly been disturbed not long ago, when three folders were pulled out and then carefully put back again in the correct order.

Now, what was so special about these few weeks of September 1986, that they have become important again? These particular folders are identical to all the others, containing the same type of transmission logs. Nothing out of the ordinary – nothing obvious, anyhow – and no indication that any pages were torn out.

Also, there is nothing hidden on the shelf behind the folders – not anymore, at least ...

A soft grating sound enters from the corridor, as a heavy steel door slowly swings on its hinges ... gently closing against its frame ... then the faint creaking of a hand wheel, as the bolts slide shut.

That must have been the door leading back to the staircase; but was it closed from this or from the other side? So far, no approaching footsteps can be heard out in the corridor. Everything has become completely quiet again. Whoever is out there, are they lying in wait now? After all, they must know I am here. Anyone closing that door would have seen the light emerging from the archive. Even before that, they must have heard me coming down the stairs. And if they arrived later, they would have seen the car parked right outside the entrance to the compound.

Suddenly, a harsh metallic banging erupts, distant and echoing through the underground passages. Its origin is hard to locate, but it seems to be coming from this level. It must be someone who has returned to continue the dismantling of the electronic equipment, perhaps breaking in another door somewhere. Or is there something more sinister happening down here?

The corridor lies as deserted as before, but the steel door is closed now. It has no ordinary lock, and it appears as if the bolts can be operated by a hand wheel from either side. It should be possible to unlock the door from here, but then what? Who will be on the other side? Why would they close the door in the first place, if they cannot lock me in? What are they playing at? Trying to intimidate me, forcing me to hide? Not knowing who I am, are they keen to avoid a confrontation?

One thing is clear: regardless of what activity is going on over there, it would be advantageous to find an alternative way out.

The last room of the corridor contains several bunk beds, but has no other door. Past that room, another airlock system leads to what must once have been an emergency exit. The stairs have since been removed, and the vertical shaft has been filled in from the top with sand and gravel. Any attempt to try and dig a way out from down here would only result in a crushing landslide. This is very much a dead end.

Now, the only exit from this corridor leads through the locked steel door. The banging on the other side has stopped. But whoever was responsible for that is most likely still there, engaged in more subtle tasks.

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

Given the advanced firefighting equipment in the next room, people were clearly concerned about flammable materials in this bunker. Then, could there be a fire? The door is still cold. But by the time the heat from the blaze managed to penetrate this solid slab of metal, it would already be too late. Whatever awaits me on the other side, it is pointless to tarry any longer.

There are Russian and German inscriptions painted around the hand wheel, no doubt indicating the right way to open or close – *auf* or *zu* – in whichever direction the wheel allows itself to be turned ... *auf*, then.

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

A fall backwards, while a piercing pain explodes across the chest ... then the hard contact with the floor, and the paralysing impact of a liquid cold, as a wall of water comes crashing down.

Briefly, the light from the torch continues to flicker sickly brown in the murky flood, then there is nothing but darkness and disorientation ... head spinning ... all muscles cramped, unable to swim against the torrent that is funnelling into the narrow space ... being swung around by the whirlpool forming at the entrance to the first room, as part of the tidal wave is deflected

inside ... a rough collision with the door frame – something to hold on to, at least, as the suffocating dense mass continues to stream past.

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

Then the door frame slips out of reach, as frozen fingers lose their grip ... carried farther away from the exit by the relentless current – until a return wave reflects off the blocked-up entrance at the other end, colliding with the last amount of accumulated water pressing into the corridor ... smaller waves sloshing back and forth for a few seconds, gradually getting weaker, as the water's surface settles.

The light from the top of the steps is gone. The lower level of the bunker lies in complete darkness again; and aside from the occasional gurgling, the deathly silence that reigned previously has returned.

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

The cold is the main problem now, far more dangerous than anything or anyone else down here. Whether the others have left or are still waiting in the dark, I need to get moving, before the muscles in arms and legs are too numb and too cramped to keep myself afloat at the surface.

With a few gentle shakes, the torch flickers back to life, as a stream of water drains out of the casing – although, after the time spent submerged, the light is already much weaker than it used to be, just barely bright enough to illuminate the staircase.

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



With a soft breeze, the air outside feels even colder than down in the bunker, while the wet clothes only serve to drain the remaining body heat quicker.

The sun has set now; not even the moon is up; and the torch has become almost useless – its light, unsteady and dim, struggling to pick out the gravel path that leads away from the bunker.

The dark shapes of the trees on either side, that tangle of branches ... like arms, ready to reach out, at any moment, to grip and ensnare. And all these

uncertain spaces between them ... who knows what may be lurking there. Tonight, fleetingly, the shadows detached themselves from the surrounding darkness – but now they have merged back again and vanished out of sight.

Over the clearing, the last residual light from the early night-time sky faintly illuminates the dark band of the paved road that leads past the garages and barracks back to the gate at the entrance – but no sign of anyone else on the compound.

Outside the gate, the car still stands by the side of the road, without any obvious indication that it was interfered with in any way: the windows are unbroken, the locks intact, the tyres fully inflated – although that was probably to be expected. If things had gone differently down there, if the trap had been effective ... sometime later, to anyone wondering about that car parked outside the abandoned military complex, then going to investigate the bunker and eventually finding the dead body floating in the lowest level, this would less plausibly be the result of an accident, if the car had been vandalised.

The door opens to the welcoming crisp smell of the brand-new interior, against which the putrid stench of rotting water stands out even more starkly than down in the bunker.

But unless someone stole the steering wheel, it's probably on the other side, Shivy ... if you'd care to check there.

Naturally, all the clothes are back at the guesthouse, everything that would be useful now ... except for the beach towel, which is still conveniently lying on the back seat.

It would be futile to try and clean up properly now. It will require more than just a towel to get rid of the sickening feeling of a slimy residue all over. The best that can be done at this point is to dry the hair and then cover the driver's seat. Beyond that, the only hope is to be able to sneak into the guesthouse unnoticed. Otherwise, my appearance will require some difficult explanations.

There is a last view of the compound, as the engine starts up and the headlights come on – the whole area deceptively quiet and deserted once more, but still hiding a dark underbelly.

Now it is time to turn the car around and to get away from here, before anyone gets alarmed by these nightly activities. Theft of military equipment and vandalism is not something to get entangled in – never mind whatever else might be going on here.

The windows of the houses along the residential street are illuminated now, projecting a civilised domesticity in the sleepy atmosphere that covers the rural landscape.

And the silver-grey sedan is gone – of course. In retrospect, it was suspiciously out of place.

Whoever these people are, and whatever their agenda is, one thing is certain: they are completely ruthless – the way they stood there, up on the stairs, looking down and making no attempt to help, when they saw me get hit by the tidal wave. They did not even wait to find out if I would come out of the bunker alive. They simply got back into their car, and drove off.

For a moment, when I showed up, clanging down the stairs, that must have come as a surprise to them – but in the end, I was no more than a temporary nuisance. Afterwards, they coolly carried on with their secret pursuits, entirely unconcerned about any collateral damage, as long as I did not get in their way.

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

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

As they could not have known how much water would be left inside the tanks, they had to wait and see how high it would rise. And, in the meantime, having no doubt seen me go into the archive, where they themselves may have been only a minute earlier, they had no interest in dealing with me, unless it became absolutely necessary. So, they cordoned off the corridor,

knowing that I must have heard the door closing, knowing that I would work out that I was not properly locked in.

Then they stood there, outside by the staircase, as the water level rose, gradually retreating up the steps, and wondering whether I would have the courage to come out, wondering when desperation would outweigh cowardice – almost as if they were curious about how I would react, as if to test me. And as the water rose higher and higher, still I waited, like a cornered animal, cowering and trembling inside its den, while the predator lies in ambush outside.

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

Yes, clueless and ineffectual ... that just about sums it up. All I want to do right now is to lock myself into the cosy room at the guesthouse, with the quaint old furniture and the little balcony, the nice view over the sea during the day, and the soothing sound of the waves at night; take a steaming hot bath and scrub off the filth left behind by the oily water; then crawl into the freshly made bed, pull the duvet over my head, and cry.

But now is not the time for that. Now, I am driving – on the right side of the road.

CHAPTER FOUR

BURNT OUT

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

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

In this serene environment, how easy would it be, as for the rest of nature, to ignore the nearby military complex and the nefarious activities that are carried out there secretly underground. How lovely would it be to be able to lead a normal, carefree life again, to have nothing more stressful to do than to spend the morning hours by taking the soiled clothes to the laundrette, to hang out in one of the cafés on the promenade until the washing and drying has finished, and then to return to the room at the guesthouse to iron shirts, standing by the open door to the balcony, with a fresh sea breeze playing in the curtains, listening to music or watching a German soap on the telly.

Instead, it is perfectly clear that I cannot languish here on the beach forever, that I cannot pretend that the world outside this idyllic island does not exist.

Eventually, I shall have to admit that this is just a temporary sanctuary. I shall have to drive over that bridge again and back onto the mainland, to face reality and to try and answer at least some of the questions that brought me here.

Now, in addition to the confusing stories about *U-112*, there are these other shady goings-on to worry about. The dismantling and theft of electronic equipment, in which no official agency appears to have any continued interest, is the least troublesome aspect of all this. It only mirrors what is happening on a larger scale, to people whose country – the whole

culture in which they grew up, and everything they worked for – from one day to the other is declared outdated and redundant. People in a situation like that may get desperate enough to break into an abandoned bunker and salvage from the past whatever they can. However, it was a very different group of people who were down there yesterday evening.

Who operates like that, with that cold calculated efficiency? Secret agents would, undoubtedly ... but they should have had more than enough time by now to clean up after themselves.

What was it then that got left behind in that bunker, unbeknownst to first the East German government, and then the West? Or *did* they know about it but considered it irrelevant? East and West ... how many more sides can there be? What other key players are out there? And what is their agenda? Are they able to read something out of these routine transmission logs that was invisible to everyone else?

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

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

That would suggest that it was something unforeseen, such as an accident, a manoeuvre that went wrong, and the person was killed. Or it may have been a medical emergency ... a heart attack, for example, as a result of which Oliver Behring ended up in hospital. Then, while he was being treated in long-term care, the whole political system broke down, and his former base was abandoned.

If that is true, whatever secretive activities he is involved in, and whoever these people are who continue to work with him, his father may well be involved too. Then, somehow, these recent events may in fact link all the way back to the disappearance of *U-112*.

There is only one way to find out. And this is a meeting that cannot be put off any longer.



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

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

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

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

‘Do you have a date?’

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

‘Are you a family member?’

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

‘But you know, Mr Behring is very weak. He had three visitors yesterday morning already that had not been here before. Only his wife comes normally to visit. Mr Behring was very exhausted afterwards and nervous.’

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

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

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

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

All doors on either side are closed, without the sound of conversations or of music to be heard in any of the rooms. The patients do appear to be resting

right now. If necessary, I shall simply wait in the garden for an hour or so, and then try again.

First, though, here it is – Room 147. No point worrying about the language barrier now, there is nothing left to lose.

Only two careful and polite knocks ... without an audible answer. But there *is* some kind of noise within the room ... a strange noise again coming from behind a closed door ... this time sounding as if strong gusts of wind were entering through a window – but on a calm day like this? No, there is something wrong in there.

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

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

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

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

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

He seems to be well into his sixties – certainly much older than Oliver Behring would be now. He coughs incessantly between desperate gasps for air. Time is running out for him.

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

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

He tilts his head back to look at me with shocked incomprehension, as we move past his dead roommate and out into the corridor – now, gradually,

also beginning to fill with smoke. Still, the fire alarm is several yards away, and something inside this room might blow up any second.

Through the garden door – that would be the shortest way out of the building. However, as sunny as it is, it will be cold out there, and the old man is only wearing his thin pyjamas. On top of that, he is undernourished and in poor health. Judging by his pale skin, his circulation is weak. The duvet from his bed ... that would have been useful now.

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

Clearly, he does not understand a single word of this.

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

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

Finally, the alarm goes off, when already half the corridor is filled with thick smoke. Approaching from the other end, the two reception nurses are barely visible, trying to determine where the fire has broken out. The elder of the two resolutely takes a fire extinguisher from the wall. She at least appears to know what she is doing. And as there are still no flames emerging from the room, it may not be too late to get the fire under control.

But first, the poor invalid needs to get out into the fresh air, before he suffocates.

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

This being the repose period, there is currently no one outside – except for a group of people down by the beach, assembled for a photograph, who evidently have not heard the fire alarm from inside the hospital. Although, just now, the person taking the picture lowers his camera and gestures up towards us, having perhaps noticed the cloud of smoke following us out of the corridor.

It is high time to get away from here. Very soon, there will be too many questions I shall not be able to understand, and certainly shall not be able to answer: Who am I? Why did I want to talk to Mr Behring, moments before

he was burned to death? Why did I lie about my connection to him? Who are these other people who were here yesterday? Why was Mr Behring so affected by their visit?

I would never be able to explain the situation here, never mind what happened down in the bunker. Under these awkward circumstances, I cannot afford to be arrested and interrogated – possibly by the same people who, until very recently, worked for the notorious East German secret police.

Going back into the smoke-filled corridor and out through the foyer is out of the question. From here, the safest way back to the parking lot at the front of the building is through the garden – and quickly, before any more staff assemble, and before the police get here. Already, at a distance, a siren can be heard, heading this way ... ideally that of a fire engine.

The old man continues to stare at me with wide unblinking eyes, but his breathing is beginning to recover.

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

He clings to the jacket covering him with the strength of desperation – and hands that are ice cold. There is no choice but to leave it behind. For the next stage of the journey, I shall have to invest in a proper down parka anyway.

Just the car key then ... otherwise, there is nothing left in any of the pockets, no clue that might link the garment back to me.

The man remains speechless. Hopefully, in his shock, he will not remember much of this, including me.

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

CHAPTER FIVE

THE ANGEL OF STRALSUND

So, here we are again – surrounded by the same picturesque scenery at the beach. Only now, the hopeful golden glow of the morning has faded away, the front of the white cliffs beginning to turn grey, casting longer and longer shadows out to sea, as the sun recedes behind them.

And once again, the tide is gently coming in, with waves smoothly running up the pebbled beach in regular succession.

That's right, Baltic Sea – go on, why don't you – taunt me with your pretty waves.

While I sit here all by myself, trapped in helpless indecision, pathetically coughing my lungs out, each time tearing apart my fractured ribcage just a little more.

Even worse than the smoke, that smell – simultaneously cloying and acrid – still appears to linger in the air, clinging to the inside of nose and throat, and no amount of coughing will purge that for a while.

Bruised legs and broken ribs – or even a burnt corpse – these things do not register in this sheltered realm. Nature steadfastly refuses to be troubled by the petty and transient human dramas playing out in its midst. And so, life here on the island continues as if the horrific death nearby had never happened, as if that bridge to the mainland was a gateway to some other reality.

But the fire ... that was definitely real and not the result of an accident. The speed at which it must have flared up, the intensity of the flames, the way they shot up from the bed, giving the sleeping man no chance of survival at all – the bedding and the mattress alone could not have been combustible enough for that. This could not have been the result of someone falling asleep while smoking in bed. There had to be some type of accelerant involved.

Judging by the evening news report on the television, with the significant police presence at the scene, hours after the fire had been extinguished, the officials seem to have formed a similar suspicion. What then will they make of it? Will they discover the motive behind the murder and the other criminal activities that are connected to it? Will they apprehend those who are responsible?

Perhaps the next morning edition of the local newspaper will contain more information about what happened. And with the help of a dictionary, the printed account should be more comprehensible than the fast-talking news presenter.

However, there is bound to be a larger scheme at work around here. With the fire coming less than a day after the flooding of the bunker, this cannot be a coincidence. At least before his heart attack, Oliver Behring had to be involved in some kind of dodgy activity that, ultimately, had deadly consequences for him – some form of espionage, most likely, as a result of which something got left behind in that bunker that should not have been there; something that has not lost its significance with the end of the separation into East and West.

Now, someone is cleaning up, with total efficiency and ruthlessness; and whoever this is, they continue to be only a few seconds ahead of me. They must be very close, yet always out of sight ... or plainly visible, but unnoticed.

Either way, this situation is becoming too dangerous to continue to blindly blunder about in the dark, to get drawn into a conflict that either originated during the Cold War, or may even be the fallout of events that happened fifty years ago.

On the other hand, these dangers aside, while the possibility exists that the recent activities here indeed link back to the disappearance of *U-112*, it would be inexcusable to abandon the quest that Gran entrusted me with, and not to honour her last wish.

Without any news about Alison, a return to England would be pointless anyway, an admission of defeat in a moment of weakness. Then, I would be sitting there in an empty flat, unable to find rest – day after day, and one sleepless night after the other – lonely and with nothing to do but to wait for some news to come in – news that is only becoming more likely to be tragic the more time passes – until I am finally allowed to resume work somewhere.

Work ... the research with the dolphins, out in the water, and even the signal analyses in the lab, these were happy days. It used to mean so much; while now, by comparison with all the other open questions, everything else has lost its significance. Wherever this journey leads from here, there will be no easy way back.

* * *

Expectantly, the pigeons come pecking closer to the table, no doubt attracted by the smell of the fresh buns and the coffee – and not yet spoiled for choice. After all, no one else seems willing to take their breakfast at this early hour, outside in the chilly morning air. The promenade still maintains a sleepy mood, while the deserted pier leading out towards the rising sun is shrouded in fog.

But the early start to the day might turn out to be essential. With shadowy figures roaming the mainland, and surrounded by uncertainty about when and how they might strike again – in situations like this, every minute counts. Every piece of information becomes crucial, and the morning paper might provide some much-needed answers.

The *Strelasunder Morgenpost* – with its broadsheet format, it certainly looks respectable enough. Correspondingly, on its opening pages, it appears to be concerned with matters of international significance ... one matter in particular: the *Zwei-plus-Vier-Vertrag*, somehow involving Germany and the wartime Allies.

But here it is, the leading article of the local news section. The top of the page is taken up by a large photograph of a fire engine on the parking lot of the hospital. The window in one of the corners on the ground floor has been broken, with a blackened wall above.

Somewhat smaller, farther down the page, is a grainy black-and-white photograph, clearly taken from a distance, but perfectly lit by the early afternoon sun – the two of us, instantly recognisable, emerging from the smoke-filled corridor out onto the patio, the poor old fellow limply slumped into the wheelchair, wrapped in my jacket, and looking absolutely terrified and confused.

Now, that has the potential to seriously complicate things. With that photograph out there, the situation could get very nasty.

At least, Oliver Behring's name is the only one mentioned in the article, suggesting that there were no further fatalities, and they managed to bring the fire under control, before it could spread into the neighbouring room or onto the floor above.

Even without the dictionary, several keywords readily jump out: repeated references to “England” and “Englisch,” somehow standing in connection with “junge Frau” and “mysteriöse Verschwinden,” also referring to a “Jacke.” It does not require much imagination to connect the dots: a young woman from England, or at least speaking English, came to visit Oliver

Behring shortly before the fire broke out, and then vanished mysteriously, leaving her jacket behind.

Given that, it definitely was a mistake to run away – a rash decision that could still have unpleasant consequences. Instead of panicking like this, I should have phoned Mr Karsten, asked him to explain the situation to the police, and to act as a translator.

But that cannot be helped now. The damage is done. That suspicious behaviour is irreversible. If I was arrested under these circumstances, chances are that I would be charged, at least initially, with arson and murder. And then, if put on trial here, even without an ultimate conviction, I would not go back to Britain for a very long time.

No, this must not happen. Fortunately, neither the news agent nor the waitress appear to have had the opportunity yet to make it that far through the newspaper. They showed no sign of recognition, at any rate.

There is no telling how big this story is going to get; but a murder enquiry involving a foreign national can quickly escalate from a curiosity published in a local newspaper to a nationwide police search. When that happens, airports will become too dangerous; which only leaves the ferry for the journey north.

This quest needs to be brought to a conclusion soon, and not only to finally clear up this mess. Living as I did for the past weeks, without proper sleep, and with exhaustion gradually building up – how long will it take until my judgement is seriously impaired? During barely three days here, I already stumbled into two dangerous situations; and with the island surrounded by these unseen dark forces, another careless decision is not likely to be forgiven.

Should Ralf Behring decide to visit his daughter-in-law, once he has been notified of his son's death – so be it. It is still better to wait for his return on some remote island, than it would be to remain here, with the constant threat of being recognised and arrested hanging over everything. Who knows, it might even be advantageous to talk to the other villagers first, without having him around.

It will still require one more day to make all the necessary phone calls to organise the journey – maybe even to take care of the laundry that is now seriously overdue. This leaves one more night of peace in the idyll of this little safe haven. But then, sadly, the moment will have come to say good-bye to the white cliffs, the peaceful beaches, the gentle waves, and the

carefree birds; to leave all this behind and return to reality – whatever that may reveal itself to be.

* * *

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

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

‘It was my pleasure, Mrs Dannreuther. I am glad that you directed my attention to the *U-112*. And I am sorry that there are still so many open questions. Since you were here, I have thought about this. I am quite sure that the documents that we have are mostly correct, especially the English ones. But they are surely incomplete. There is something essential that is missing. On the basis of what we know, we can read different stories out of the documents. But no matter how we look at the events involving your grandfather’s boat, something does not make sense at all. So, between the lines, there must be another story hidden – the true story. It is just that, unless we can find some new information, we will never see it. So, I was wondering, Mrs Dannreuther: will you be interested to continue the investigation?’

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

‘I agree, and I am very glad to hear that. It will be a long journey, but it must be very nice up there. And if you are able to speak with Mr Behring, you could find out about many interesting things that happened during the War. Also, I am now thinking ... maybe you want to write an article in the magazine I publish for the society that supports the archive. It is called *Echolot* – depth sounder, you know, and it comes out quarterly. Normally,

there is not much to write about, only biographies of commanders, or the description of some sea battle. But it would be interesting to have a special edition about *U-112*, maybe in summer. For example, we could have a ... what we call a *Gedenkschrift* – some publication to remember the lost men. We just missed the fiftieth anniversary of the sinking, but that is not so important. And who knows, it could be that someone who reads the article remembers something. Also, if you wanted to write about your grandmother's story, that would be very interesting for the members of our society, to find out what the consequences were for the families of the submariners. You see, here in the archive, in all these documents, there are only men. That is all we ever talk and write about. And so, it is very easy to forget that, during the War, there were also women and children involved. You would naturally write in English, but I could translate for you, if you want.'

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

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

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

* * *

The leafy suburbs of Kiel slip past, as the ferry steams through the gradually widening firth on its way north. Among the trees on either side, clusters of residential buildings can be seen, where the Sunday afternoon unfolds in a relaxed quiet – not a bad place to live, really. If the mysterious events that drove Gran away from Germany had not happened, I might well have grown up here, under a different name, and speaking a different language; together with siblings, perhaps, and the product of a loving relationship.

But there is also another possibility: that my fate is connected to the other line. In that case, I might still have been born to a victim of hateful violence, the result of a total disregard for a fellow human being. Although, even in this scenario – as it actually happened – there was compassion too, because

Mum and Gran *did* exist; and it was their commitments and unconditional love that got me where I am now.

Dark thoughts on such a bright day – a little chilly, though, out on the water, and with the headwind. The other few passengers occupying loungers outside on the upper deck are all wrapped up in woollen blankets, engaged in relaxed conversation, or allowing their thoughts to wander casually – heading off into their Easter holidays, most likely. Reassuring normality ... good to know that, somewhere out there, ordinary life is still going on.

Then again, judging by the front page of this tabloid at least, normal life too might neither be ordinary nor reassuring. *The Daily Ray* ... although not generally known as the most reliable source of information, being the only English-language newspaper available on board, it will have to do. And certainly the main headline even they could not make up: “The Birmingham Six Release – More Shocking Revelations of Police Conspiracies.” And in the text underneath it: “fabrication and suppression of evidence” ... “perjury” ... “perversion of the course of justice.” So, the six men were innocent after all – well, that should keep the nation occupied for a while. And look how quickly the conservative publication switched sides. After years of advocating the death penalty for Irish terrorists, now they are calling for the resignation of the chief police officer.

But here, within the blue bar at the very bottom of the page, a single line in white print: “The Angel of Stralsund – A Miracle! ... See Page 3.”

The Angel of *Stralsund*? What is that peaceful East German seaside town doing on the front page of a British tabloid?

Surely, they could not ... page three ... and there I am again, in full colour this time and almost as big as the topless girl – complete with painted wings, added as an artistic touch. Short as the accompanying text is, at least it is readily comprehensible, revealing that the police were indeed able to confirm that the fire in the hospital was not an accident and is now being treated as a case of arson and murder. While as yet no arrests have been made, police are searching for three individuals who had visited the deceased patient the previous day, leaving him in a state of distress. This is rounded off with a fanciful account of this “angelic being” appearing out of nowhere to rescue an old man from the flames, and then vanishing again without a trace – emphasising the fact that this personification of grace spoke English with a British accent – apparently, now also the official language in Heaven.

But colourful and incomplete as the account is, at least it gives no indication that I might be a suspect in the ongoing police investigation, in addition to these “three individuals” ... although, whether this is true, is another matter entirely.

Even so, regardless of how potentially problematic the German reports may be, this is infinitely worse. The photograph here is easily clear enough for anyone who knows me to recognise me instantly. And, right now, this is all over Britain, in every kiosk, in every station.

Claire ... if she sees this, she will never forgive me; not after the media storm she had to endure about the fire on Antarctica; not after I promised her that this would never happen again.

I should have told her that I was going to go to Germany, when we got back from the funeral – if only I could have foreseen then how long this journey would last, and where it would lead. But, at the time, what was there to say, when it seemed to be an entirely hopeless quest, not really knowing where to begin, or even what there might be to find?

Now, of course, if she found out through this tabloid about what I am currently up to, she would fly over straightaway – faithful soul that she is.

CHAPTER SIX

ON THE EDGE

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

On the steep terrain, space to settle is evidently hard to find, as some of the houses are half built on stilts, standing out over the water, with several small boats tied up beneath them, while another row of houses clings to a ledge further up the slope, clearly determined to avoid the exposed plateau at the southern end of the headland that wraps around the bay.

Illuminated by the pale light of the morning sun, as it struggles to break through the clouds hanging low over the rugged mountains, the community rests in a tranquil atmosphere.

It would not necessarily require an ulterior motive to come here for a peaceful retirement, to get away from the memories of an oppressive regime that immured and intimidated its own people for decades, or from the more distant memories of a horrific war.

And still the violence continues ... whether, by now, Ralf Behring has found out about his son's death? If so, does he know who these mysterious figures are that are responsible for it, and what their goal is?

'Good morning! Did you sleep good?' Mrs Olsen bustles into the room.

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

She is flushed and slightly out of breath from work. 'You look better than when you came – a little bit, not so tired.' She laughs candidly and slumps into a chair by the windows.

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

‘You will visit the other islands as well?’

‘I’m not sure yet. I was planning to walk around here today, and then decide in the evening whether to stay or to take the ferry back to Bodø and carry on from there.’

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

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

She nods encouragingly, but is clearly too polite to ask what else I might be doing here all by myself.

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

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

‘True ... but I’m afraid my grandfather was German. He was in the navy, a submarine commander.’

‘But did you not say ...’

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

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

‘No doubt ... The sea battles must have been quite fierce around the archipelago and inside these narrow fjords. I imagine there must be many wrecks around here.’

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

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

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

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

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

‘Avalanches?’

‘I can show you. You see the highest mountain over there, above the cliff at the end of the island that goes down into the ocean – that is Brannberg, where the fires used to be for the ships at night, before they built the lighthouse on Værøy, that little island there in the south. With a lot of snow, don’t go near the mountain, especially to the steepest slope on the other side; it can be very dangerous there.’

* * *

Despite the sun rising higher in the sky, a fine layer of fog still lingers on the headland. Even so, the exposed vantage point provides a nice view over the village that is nestled into the little bay below.

A narrow path continues towards to the cliff – presumably leading down to the shore and over to the other side of the island that faces the open sea.

So, where to go from here – carry on, or turn back? Go sightseeing inside a cave? Or walk back along the row of houses and gather enough courage to knock on the door of the first one? Only, what is there to say? How do you begin such a conversation?

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

The man has quietly materialised out of the fog and remains standing at a distance of several yards. He looks to be well into his seventies.

‘Unnskyld meg, snakker du engelsk?’

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

His English has a slight foreign accent, but he must have lived in England for many years. He is wearing an old sand-coloured duffle coat – typically English, and possibly Navy surplus.

He has noticed my scrutiny and is surprised by my suspicious attitude. ‘You’re a bit early for the tourist season. Are you on holidays?’

‘I ...’ This is it. From now on, every step counts. But playing hide and seek will not lead anywhere. ‘I’m trying to meet someone – a German. His name is Hans Dannreuther. Do you know where he lives?’

In an instant, his benign expression vanishes. While he struggles to regain composure, it is he now who scrutinises me with suspicion. ‘I know every

person on this island, and I assure you that no one by this name has been living here since I arrived more than ten years ago.'

He is bothered himself by his obviously evasive answer and is unsure about how to continue. His hair is pure white, and the original colour impossible to tell. But even in the pale light, his eyes are of a deep blue.

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

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

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

His suspicion turns to disbelief. 'Siobhán? But that is not a German name.'

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

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

He points towards the last of the row of houses, then turns and walks ahead without a further word. Aside from a noticeable limp in his right leg, his movements are still fluid. He remains an imposing figure, with a strength and toughness that comes from years of physical work. And although his shoulders are slightly hunched, he is easily a head taller than I am. There would not be much of a contest between us, even if I was currently at the top of my fitness.

Another rash decision – careless and potentially dangerous. However he is connected to *U-112*, he clearly knows what happened; and there had to be a strong motive for maintaining this secrecy for decades. Perhaps the rumours in the village are right, and he has killed in the past to protect his secret. If that is true, he might well do it again.

But the small house looks friendly enough, its wooden walls painted in the usual rusty red, and with white window panes. No television aerials are installed on the grey slate roof, and no telephone cables lead into it.

The door is unlocked. The man steps inside the short corridor, then turns back. 'Come in, please.' His expression is still grave, but he makes an effort to be more hospitable. 'Let me help you with ... yes, you can put your rucksack here.'

After hanging up my parka next to his own coat, he walks ahead into the spacious living room. From the floorboards to the beams supporting the ceiling, it is dominated by wood – a plain yet comfortable interior, with a bookshelf along one wall, a seating area in one corner, a few paintings of coastal landscapes ... but no images of people, no photographs at all.

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

He watches me carefully, waiting until I have taken my seat. 'The events you mentioned happened a long time ago. Why have you come now?'

The tone of his voice is friendly and relaxed. But if this is going to be an interrogation, I must have hit a nerve – and he makes no secret of that. He wants me to know that he is aware of whatever lies behind these strange wartime events. He is obviously trying to draw me out, to discover how much I know myself.

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

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

'Then ...'

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

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

He swallows hard. 'Then it must have been your grandmother who told you about her husband. You must have met her. You must know her maiden name.'

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

His fingers tighten around the armrests of his chair. 'Elisabeth? Elisabeth von Derschau?'

'Yes.'

He leans forwards. By now, he should be able to see the tears in my eyes.

I never imagined it to be like this, these past days, looking for him. As finding him was such a remote possibility, not once did I stop to think about how it would be to come face to face with him; how he would take the news

of his wife's death, and the much earlier death of his daughter, whom he never saw growing up.

The Pilgrim ... is that what Gran was trying to tell me? That he and I were more alike than I would care to admit? Always the restless wanderer; always searching for something elusive that is hard even to put into words, and always just below the horizon.

He gets up again with some difficulty, walks heavily across the room, and back to the entrance. Without a comment, he puts on his coat ... then holds my parka out towards me.

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

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



He follows the path towards the cliff, without saying another word, but then stops several paces short of the edge. He glances back over his shoulder and nods towards the open sea. 'Take a look.'

At the cliff, the land comes to an abrupt end, dropping off to a bleak shoreline about hundred feet below. It would be hard to scale, if it were not for the narrow ledge that time and repeated usage have worked into its sheer face. The waves are still strong, although the water must now be at its lowest point, revealing several sharp rocks that would normally be submerged. An impressive scene, but without anything unusual to see.

Faintly from behind, the careful steps of the man can be heard as he slowly approaches. He really is determined to protect his secret – and now I shall never find out why. Down in the village, life will go on as if nothing has happened. Even when I plunge down into the abyss, any involuntary scream will merge with the noise of the waves breaking against the cliff, and with the cries of the seabirds sailing above them. In the evening, the high tide will come in and take my broken body away. No traces of my short presence here will be left on the headland either. No one will ever know.

'Siobhán, you better step back. The edge isn't very stable.' His voice sounds genuinely concerned.

He reaches out to grab my elbow, but he is still too far away. 'Come on, step back. You're making me nervous.'

He anxiously watches me turn around. But standing with my back close to the edge, I appear to be strangely out of his reach – as if some force repelled him, preventing him from coming any closer.

‘Why did you want to show me this?’

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

‘Then it isn’t you?’

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

‘I didn’t know what to think.’

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

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

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

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

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

As soon as I step within his reach, he pulls me farther away from the edge, his arm tightly around my shoulders.

‘The sad truth is that your grandfather did die fifty years ago, somewhere out there in the North Atlantic. They set out on their last voyage from that shore down there. Only few crew members were not aboard at the time. I was among those who stayed behind, and one of only two who survived the War. Somehow, I was never able to forget and to let go. Instead, I felt compelled to return here – hoping, I suppose, just like you, to find meaning in the tragic events someday.’

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

‘And you’re afraid of heights?’

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

Briefly, there is an undisguised pride in his voice – then he returns to his brooding attitude. ‘But that’s not it. I just don’t like this particular cliff.’

He releases me and slowly walks away from the edge. After some paces, he turns back and waits for me to catch up. ‘I’m sorry to hear about all these deaths in your family. Elisabeth ...?’

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

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

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

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

‘No. I’ve seen those German death certificates, but they are wrong – they must be, I’m sure of it. Gran was who she said she was. As I said, she died only recently, and Mum in ‘63, shortly after I was born. But Gran told me once that Mum got very sick during the War. She caught influenza during the escape from Germany. Then, during the long nights they had to spend in underground shelters, crammed into some unused tube station, with hundreds of other people, it got worse and eventually developed into a pneumonia. It wasn’t dealt with until they were put into an internment camp, and Mum apparently had problems with her lungs ever since. When she got pregnant with me ... during that cold and long winter, she got sick again with a pneumonia. On top of that, there were complications during birth. She lost a lot of blood. And in the end, it was just too much for her.’

‘Lena, lovely girl ... Did Elisabeth speak much about the time during the War?’

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

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

‘No, not that I know of – definitely no close friends. There were only a few casual acquaintances. When we were out shopping, it would occasionally happen that Gran met other German ladies of about her age. I remember hanging about the trolley bag for a few minutes, while they chatted in a language I didn’t understand. Gran never tried to teach me German, when

I was very young. I think she wanted me to grow up as English as possible, to make it easier for me to integrate. I only began to learn the language later in school, for a few years, at least.’

He remains silent, his face expressionless, as he gazes out to sea, his thoughts far away.

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

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

‘And what was your role? I mean, what did you do as chief engineer? Did you design the submarine, or did you develop any special equipment or weapons?’

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

Nonetheless, there is something he is omitting, as he gives me a gauging look. ‘Siobhán, I don’t know what you’ve heard about what happened back then, but the events that caused your grandmother to flee from Germany,

ultimately, have a fairly ordinary explanation – although, I’m afraid it’s a sad story.’

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

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

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

He leans back against the boulder and closes his eyes. ‘So, my role in this tragedy ... I think, for you to really understand what happened, I need to tell you how it all started.’

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

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

‘We started patrolling between the Shetland and Faroe Islands, waiting for news about the outbreak of war. When the first reports eventually came in, we were in quite a unique position, out there on the ocean, being able to

receive the radio broadcasts from both Berlin and London. So we couldn't possibly fail to notice the obvious contradictions regarding who had begun the hostilities. But, in those days, we still believed our own people. We didn't consider for one moment that our leaders would lie to us.

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

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

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

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

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

'And the crews?'

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

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

'Well, fortunately, she never had to witness any of the fighting. And I doubt that Hans would have told her much about it. In wartime, there is always the unspoken understanding hanging over everything that only one of two parties can survive. So, if we managed to get back alive, the obvious implication was that, most likely, someone else didn't. In a situation like that, you celebrate the return of your loved ones, and don't complain too loudly about the deaths of others whom you've never met, and the killing of whom you didn't witness. You limit your attention to a small circle of family and friends, and you become short-sighted to the tragic things that happen elsewhere.'

'Elsbeth definitely knew what being in the navy was all about. Her father was an admiral who had served in the Imperial Navy. And the prospect of marrying a naval officer evidently didn't trouble her very much – even under

a Fascist government. Moreover, she would have known that submariners were part of an elite force, with twice the pay of a comparable rank in the regular navy. Also, Hans was a handsome fellow, and I'm sure he was very nice to her. But in any case, they clearly fell in love with each other, and so they got married the same year as I did, in '34. Your mother was born the following year.

'By then, the political and social situation in Germany was already extremely unpleasant, with open discrimination and violence directed especially against Jews, but really against anyone who opposed the government in any way. The year leading up to the War was particularly bad, with the worst attacks on Jews yet: thousands of people arrested and deported, or murdered on the spot; homes, shops, and even hospitals raided and destroyed, while synagogues burned all over Germany, including Kiel. Hans and I were out on training patrol in the Baltic Sea when that happened, but Elsbeth was at home. Did she never tell you about that?'

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

He relaxes visibly, as he continues to look at me, studying my features more intently now, perhaps trying to discover a family resemblance.

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

'Is that what Elisabeth told you?'

'Didn't you?'

'It wasn't that simple, Siobhán.'

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

He nods. 'But first, I'd like to know: when your gran told you about what she thought had happened, about her reason for leaving Germany ... how did she ... when she spoke about Hans ...'

'She didn't hate him. And she never truly believed that he'd meant to abandon her. When she was forced to flee, she must have assumed that he had planned to include her and their child in his plans, but that something

had gone wrong. Ultimately, I think she was proud of him. I was with her when she died, and her last words were about him. That's why I've come, to find out what really happened.'

Peter fights back his tears, rigidly looking out to sea. He does not turn, even when he feels my hand on his.

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

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

He takes a deep breath to steady his emotions. 'So, how did I end up here? Well, as I said, for the first few months of the War, we were on routine patrol duty. But then one day, in early April 1940, without any explanation, we received orders to abort our current patrol and to return to our home base immediately. Hans was given a sealed envelope that he was only allowed to open upon receiving a specific code word via radio. It was all very mysterious, and we knew that something big was about to happen.

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

'The Norwegians had never planned to be involved in the War, and we were able to capture their garrison with little resistance. But we were quite sure that the British would eventually react. Norway was too strategically important for them to let us take it without some form of resistance. So, we and two other boats were ordered to guard the entrance to the fjord in which Narvik is situated. Since the disembarkation, the weather had got steadily worse. By evening, we were engulfed in a proper blizzard, with dense swirls of snow streaming through the narrow gaps between the steep mountains and racing across the water. We were convinced that the British would not risk an attack under these conditions, and therefore thought it would be safe to rest most of the crew.

'I woke up very early in the morning, with the boat bouncing on the waves, and couldn't get back to sleep. So, I went up onto the bridge, to take a bit of fresh air. I was chatting with the lookouts, when suddenly the dark silhouette of a destroyer appeared out of the blowing snow and the fog – right in front of us and frighteningly close, its superstructure towering above us.

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

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

'So, we roused the crew and radioed a warning to the other vessels. Then, we went down to periscope depth. We were in an ideal position for an attack. With several big targets straight ahead, there was no way of missing. From then on, it was just going to be the same old routine of a regular patrol: the forward tubes are loaded and flooded as quietly as possible; bearing and range are determined through the periscope; then, the torpedoes are launched in rapid succession. As they race towards their targets, usually there's a period of nervous waiting, as the seconds on the stopwatch slowly tick away, counting down to the estimated time of impact. During that period, nobody talks. The boat itself seems to be holding its breath in anticipation. But in that instance, it all turned out differently. We could hear two detonations almost immediately, well before the torpedoes reached their targets, while the other two failed to arm at all.

'It was a complete disaster; none of our torpedoes worked. We'd had some difficulties with the magnetic detonators before, but not a total failure like this. And in those days, we had no idea why this was happening. It looked to us as if some unseen protective shield had been cast around the British warships – as if Nature herself had turned against us. Of course, from that point onwards, we didn't stand a chance. We were unable to prevent the destroyers from entering the fjord, where most of our ships were still waiting to be refuelled. And the British were able to make two unopposed runs at the

harbour, before at least some of our ships were ready to fight back. As the other submarines had the same problems that we had, there was nothing we could do. We had to stand by and observe as one by one our ships went down into the sea. We could see and hear the men in the water, drowning or freezing to death. When finally the British withdrew, half of our fleet had been sunk or severely damaged.

‘Still, more and more British reinforcements arrived, hemming us in, and the second battle three days later was even more devastating than the first. Our remaining warships were hopelessly outnumbered by then, low on fuel and ammunition. We were stuck inside these narrow fjords without any air support. That’s when we realised that we had to get *U-112* out of there. We couldn’t risk being captured. We had on board not only our encoding machine and various codebooks, but also crucial information about the movements of the entire submarine fleet. And so, that night, together with one other boat, we managed to slip through the British blockade, the only two vessels that managed to escape the annihilation inside the fjord.

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

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

‘You can probably imagine how relieved we were, then, when we were told that, beginning in autumn, our flotilla would be operating out of Saint-Nazaire. But that relief was short-lived, because soon afterwards, we received special orders to return to Narvik – the only submarine to be stationed there. At first, we were convinced that there had to be a mistake, some kind of misunderstanding. As the Arctic convoys hadn’t begun yet, we would be too far removed from all Allied shipping routes to be deployed effectively.

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

‘But it was obvious that we would not receive any further information at this point. And so, we left Kiel again – for the last time together, as it turned out – and returned to the site of our humiliation. After weeks of heavy fighting, much of Narvik had been razed to the ground. Most of the civilians had left the town, and the fjord had become a graveyard, with wrecks sticking out of the water everywhere, while more sunken ships and aircraft could be seen, ghostly distorted, down in the clear cold water.

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

‘By that time, the atmosphere on board had changed dramatically, and had become subdued and ominous. Before Norway, we had come to believe that we were essentially invincible. But after the two battles up here, we had to be glad just to be alive. The War had only started; and right away, the Royal Navy had shown itself to be exactly as powerful as we should have expected it to be. We also couldn’t help noticing that many of our mates from the navy training school weren’t with us anymore, suggesting that we too were approaching the end of our life expectancy.

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

‘After a while, however, we began to get suspicious. We noticed that nobody was particularly interested in what we were doing. We kept sending in reports with our results and recommendations, but as far as we could tell, they were being completely ignored. So, we started to ask ourselves again what really was behind our remote posting, and how long we would have to

stay there. By then, autumn was approaching, and it began to get colder. We wanted to wrap the tests up as soon as possible and return home for Christmas.

‘But then, we received new orders that changed everything: we were to prepare the boat for a medium-range operation into enemy waters. No further explanations were given at that time, but it could only refer to the British coastal zone. Over the next days, several detailed maps and photographs from aerial reconnaissance arrived, covering the coastline of a sparsely populated part of northern Scotland. But as there did not appear to be anything of any strategic significance in that region, just a multitude of bays and inlets, the situation only became more mysterious.

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

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

‘From the outset, it was clear that this mission was essentially impossible. Until then, no one in the armed forces, or the secret service, had ever succeeded with an undetected landing on the British mainland. And so, after our initial indignation about effectively having been taken out of action and shunted aside, this special mission was a rather dubious honour. We realised now that we’d been posted to that remote place under the cover of a torpedo testing programme *because* it was out of the way. With British attention

focussed mainly on our new bases in France, we would be able to sneak in through the backdoor from the north – at least, that was the idea.

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

‘At this early stage of the War, the strategy of operating primarily on the surface had worked quite well for us. Anti-submarine defences aboard British warships were still quite poor, and there was a lot of confidence on our side that it would stay that way. But now, of course, our objective was different. The new priority was to remain secret and not to engage in combat. For our special mission to succeed, we had to travel most of the way submerged. By spending longer periods underwater, we could also avoid the strong wintertime wind and waves of the North Atlantic. The rough seas would then work in our favour by eliminating our wake and making us invisible from above; because we knew that, the closer to the mainland we would get, the more aircraft specifically hunting for submarines we had to expect.

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

‘First, we had to streamline the hull, to conserve energy while travelling underwater. We did this by removing the deck guns, spray deflectors, net cutters, and railings. Without the deck guns, there was no need for ammunition, which freed up the magazine. The torpedoes we could dispense

with as well, which also made the compensating tanks redundant. These modifications saved us enough weight and gave us enough space to install additional batteries – if we were able to find them.

‘This was where we could benefit from the wrecks all around us, which also included one of our submarines. It had been waiting to be refuelled, when the first British attack had happened. Although it hadn’t received a direct hit, the hull had been cracked by bombs exploding nearby. The boat was still moored to the quay, held up only by the ropes. It clearly wasn’t seaworthy anymore, but still accessible through the bridge. Before abandoning it, the crew had removed all sensitive material, and had destroyed the instruments. However, despite some water having accumulated down in the battery compartments, most of the cells were still intact.

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

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

‘Gradually, more details arrived about our British collaborators. They were working for Military Intelligence and were officially involved in an operation that had been set up to break a special German code supposedly used for planning and ultimately conducting an invasion of Britain. The coded messages, of course, were fake, broadcast from a station in Germany, specifically for the purpose of leaking false information to the enemy. Meanwhile, these British double agents were collecting vital information for our side. An English couple – both fervent Nazi sympathisers – owned a

building near the bay where we were supposed to land. Therefore, all secret documents were to be collected there, until we were able to pick them up.'

Indeed ... 'Sorry, Peter, I was just wondering – do you remember the name of that bay?'

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

'Cairnbawn.'

'Yes, that's right. You know it?'

'I've been there.'

But what is the connection ...

'Is it nice?'

'Lovely.'

... because how many coincidences can there be?

Peter looks at me with a curious glint in his eyes. 'Right ... Anyway, eventually, we got green light to commence our mission. We removed all insignias from our uniforms, anything that would enable the enemy to identify us, in case we were captured. We installed scuttling charges so that we could sink the boat, rather than have her fall into the wrong hands. As a final touch, we painted our own unique emblem on the sides of the tower and, henceforth, always referred to her as *Atlantis*, our new elusive home beneath the waves.

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

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

more than a good drill. So, we calmly went down into the control room; Hans gave the order to dive – and then, it all went terribly wrong.

‘Within seconds, the alarm was raised. Water was entering the engine room through the ventilation tube, and the boat was being flooded at an alarming rate. There could only be one explanation for that. During the night, while we had been running at the surface, it had got very cold, and big chunks of frozen sea spray had built up all around the conning tower. We had been working routinely on removing it, but the smaller of the two air intake valves on the side of the tower had nonetheless got stuck and wasn’t closing properly anymore. We had no other option but to abort the dive.

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

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

‘Finally, we got down to a safe depth of about one hundred metres. For a while, depth charges could still be heard at a distance, until, eventually, they stopped. Then, with everyone holding their breath, the groaning of the steel hull, and the ominous gurgling of the water against it, were the only sounds that could be heard. It seemed as if, for the moment at least, the British had lost us. But we knew that the warship was still prowling at the surface, in ever increasing circles, watching and listening out for us. We knew they would never miss out on a chance of capturing a German submarine. At least they would make sure that we were really dead. No doubt they were intending to suffocate us, knowing that in two or at most three days, we would have no choice but to resurface, no more than a hundred miles from where we had

gone down. After that, it would have been easy for them to force us to surrender.

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

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

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

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

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

‘But we still didn’t know on which island we had landed, and whether there was a settlement nearby. So, we decided to send out a small party to investigate. As I felt a bit better by then and hadn’t been injured during the attack, I volunteered for it, together with three others. We realised that it would be too dangerous to clamber along the exposed western coast of the island, while the wind threw ever bigger waves against the rocky shoreline. It would also have been a futile attempt, as any village was likely to be located on the calmer side facing the mainland.

‘Therefore, we began climbing up into the mountains, hoping that from the higher vantage point we might get a better idea of where we were. But it was hard going, exhausted as we were. And even as we slowly ascended, the view did not improve very much. The fog that had piled up against the seaward slopes of the mountains simply merged into low clouds hanging above them. This wasn’t helped, of course, by the constant darkness of the Arctic winter; and when we managed to get up onto a small plateau, we still weren’t able to see very far. There were hints within the clouds of some mountaintops to the north and south, but no lights from villages, or any other clue that might have helped us identify our location. So, we decided that, rather than turning back, we had to at least try and get up onto higher ground.

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

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

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

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

It wasn't difficult to work out that the English didn't intend to be there any more than we did. The only explanation for their presence on the island was that they, as we, had got stranded there during some kind of special operation. Unlike us, however, they weren't on hostile territory. And so, the fact that they had not managed to get help suggested that we had landed on one of the unoccupied islands. As we knew that there hadn't been any fighting since our recapture of Narvik, and since the capitulation of Norway, the English must have got shipwrecked during bad weather. The last major storm affecting the Lofoten had been a few days before we had left Narvik, which meant that they would have been on the island for a week at least, most likely surviving on meagre rations, if they had any food left at all.

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

We only had seconds to think about all this, but one thing was clear: we couldn't simply walk away from each other and pretend that nothing had happened. As Christmas was approaching, we were united by an unspoken agreement that a truce would be the most dignified way of dealing with the situation. A far more formidable opponent than anyone of us was on its way, and it was going to affect both sides with equal force. We were all stuck on

the same remote island; and now that coincidence or fate had thrown us together, we had to postpone our hostilities and find a way to work together.

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

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

‘When we got back to the others, we found out that our own situation had become equally desperate. The makeshift tents made of tarpaulin, which our crew had tried to erect, were torn down or blown away instantly by the wind. We really weren’t equipped for survival on land in the middle of a blizzard. Due to the restricted space on board, we only had enough warm and waterproof clothing for our lookouts and the few officers who occasionally had to spend some time outside on the bridge. To weather the storm inside *Atlantis* also was not an option anymore. Already, the boat got thrown about on the waves; and even with the pumps working constantly, it was uncertain whether in its damaged state it would survive.

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

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

‘So, we packed up as much as we could carry of the food that didn’t require cooking, all the blankets that were still reasonably dry, and our medical supplies. From the bunk beds, we fashioned stretchers for our injured, and walked back to where we had left the English. It was evening by then, and we followed them, scrambling along the rocky shore in the light of our torches, until we reached the entrance to a large cave. Its main tunnel was flooded during high tide, but there was a passage branching off towards one of the sides, which always remained above water. In that passage, the English had established themselves a camp.

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

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

‘Given the circumstances, we passed the night quite comfortably – far more comfortably in fact than a typical night on board. But we had to wait another whole day before the worst part of the storm had passed. Then, the following morning, Hans took us a little way away from the others to reveal how the situation was to be resolved. We were to take the English off the

island, heading southwest into the open ocean, were the destroyer was probably still patrolling – either searching for us, or waiting for an opportunity to rescue the stranded commandos. We would be counting on seeing the large ship sooner than they would be able to spot us in the near darkness and among the waves. This should give us enough time to get the English into our life rafts, with a sufficient supply of distress flares so that they could attract the attention of the destroyer. And by the time the lookouts on the ship had seen the flares, and the decision had been made to approach the position, we had long vanished.

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

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

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

a German officer had volunteered to stay with them ensured that they would honour the agreement as well.

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

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

‘After two days, *Atlantis* was ready to go out to sea again. Standing on that bleak rocky shore, we watched her disappear into the fog – and then, we waited.

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

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

‘Over the next three days, we were all kept in separate rooms, and under constant supervision. One after the other, we were taken to several long interviews. They wanted to know what we’d been doing on that island, where the rest of our crew were, and what had happened to our boat. That was a

tricky situation. We simply had not considered the possibility of being picked up by someone before the return of the others. And afterwards, we were not given any opportunity to talk with one another and come up with a consistent story.

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

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

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

‘Clearly, against the strict instructions from our commanding officer, someone had broken the radio silence and sent out another message, after our meeting with the English had taken place, but before the others had left the island. I was convinced that this could only have happened while most of us had been distracted by making the repairs on *Atlantis*, after the blizzard had passed. And it had to have been in response to that second radio message

that the paratroopers had been deployed, to root out the remaining English commandos.

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

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

‘But then I started to think about the strange behaviour of our own people. Why were they only marginally interested in the whereabouts of *U-112*? Exactly what information had our command centres in the South received through that second radio message? Had they been told not only about our meeting with the English soldiers, but also about the plan to take them off the island? What would the reaction have been to that? Would the Navy High Command have believed in a defection? In that case, they would have taken this very seriously. So much so, that they would most likely have sent an entire group of submarines to intercept *U-112*. At the time, the harbours of southern Norway were occasionally used by individual submarines as temporary bases during longer patrols, but the nearest full flotilla was stationed in Germany. From there, I estimated that it would have taken two to three days to reach the spot where we had encountered the destroyer. If the British ship was still patrolling that general area, our crew would have attempted to cast the English adrift somewhere nearby. And as I added up the days from the moment that the other submarines could have left Germany, until their arrival at the potential meeting point with *U-112*, and as I considered the approximate time of arrival of *U-112* at that location, it occurred to me ...’

‘You’re right, Peter.’

‘Sorry?’

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

‘How do you ...?’

‘Before I came here, I went to a submarine archive in a small town just north of Kiel. Well, you know the place – Laboe. There are no details about the sinking in the German records. But the incident was observed from another British warship that had been sent up there to rendezvous with the destroyer that you encountered, to attempt another raid on the oil factories. It wasn’t mentioned in the British records which submarine had been sunk, and how exactly it happened – or why. But based on what you told me ...’

Peter has become pale and agitated, his breathing heavy.

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

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

‘They did. They were in the process of inflating the life rafts and getting the English soldiers off the boat, when they saw the other submarines. It is easy to imagine how the situation would have looked to the Germans: their renowned *U-112* – on a top-secret spy mission – surfaced and at rest within visual range of two enemy warships, with several men out on deck, some of them part of a British special unit ... they could only assume that *U-112* had either been captured or defected. To preserve the secrets on board, they would have seen no other option but to sink her. Anticipating this, my grandfather must have given the order to dive. But with all those men out on deck, it took too long to get everyone back inside. The Germans had enough time to launch their torpedoes, and two of them hit almost simultaneously. According to the British records, there was a massive explosion just below the surface. So, it must have been very quick for the men on board, mustn’t it?’

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

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

‘The following day is like static in my memory – just random noise, without any meaning. Then, on Christmas Day, I was home alone, when there was a knock on the door. At first, I wanted to ignore it. I was sure there would be someone who either wanted to wish me the compliments of the season, or to express their condolences, if they had heard about the deaths. But they persisted. They obviously knew I was home. Finally, by the voice, I recognised the person as our neighbour, and managed to drag myself out of bed to talk to her.

‘She told me that, in the immediate aftermath of the loss of *U-112*, rumours had somehow spread inside the High Command, saying that a part of the crew had taken the boat over to the British, and the distress message had been false, to cover up the disappearance. In response to that, orders had been issued to arrest Elisabeth that same night, as she was the wife of the commanding officer, and to bring her in for interrogation. Our neighbour had found out about that from a friend who worked as a secretary at the local police station. We’d all met once, at our neighbour’s flat, for the christening of their child – just the previous summer, in fact, after Hans and I had returned from the Norwegian Campaign. Therefore, the secretary recognised Elisabeth’s name on the arrest warrant and was sure that this had to be a mistake. As there was nothing she could do to prevent it, during her

lunch break, she quickly ran to tell our neighbour. And so, through that lucky chain of connections, Ingrid found out about the planned arrest and was able to warn Elisabeth, just in time. The official story about the fire was wrong, designed to cover up their escape. No doubt, the police had laid the fire themselves, after they'd searched the house for any evidence.'

Peter sighs. 'When I think of how the women must have felt during that night, and what they might have thought about us ... You see, the problem was that Hans and I never managed to tell our wives about that secret mission to Scotland. We were allowed to send personal letters back from Narvik, after we'd received our new orders; but all our communication was being monitored, and there was no chance that the censors would have let that kind of information through.'

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

'Gran certainly did. She told me about it just before she died. Of course, she couldn't guess any more than you did what kind of operation it was going to be. But in the light of these rumours, without the luxury of being able to think about it, she must have assumed that something had gone wrong, that you had vanished under circumstances that looked suspicious to your navy people, and that you would not be able anymore to prove our innocence. Somehow, it all added up, and the risk of staying in Germany, with the two little girls, seemed greater than trying to find refuge with the enemy.'

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

The truth ... but so many other parts of that story are just as mysterious as they were before. What exactly happened to Ingrid and her daughter? How did she and Gran become separated? How was it that Gran survived the War, and she, apparently, did not?

And then the manor house ... On the one hand, a building with such a long history is bound to have a succession of shady events and rumours associated with it, without any reason to suspect that these events are related

by more than geography. There is no more need to connect Kathleen's murder to a spy operation that occurred at the same location fifty years earlier, than there is for connecting Alison's disappearance with that murder. Nonetheless ... why was Gran so insistent that Alison was "taken" by the same people who, in some way, took Ingrid from her? What information was she given during that phone call that brought on such a shock – and by whom?

With a rapid flapping of wings, a large glaucous gull comes sailing up the steep cliff in the strengthening wind, and rushes past overhead.

Peter has been watching me. 'Everything all right?'

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

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

'Left alone.'

'Yes.' He looks at me even more closely. 'And then you showed up, with all your grandmother's little mannerisms – such as her way of squinting into empty space with a furrowed brow, when something was working hard inside her head.'

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

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

'It was abandoned. All that subversive activity in Britain, it never came to anything. And without these documents that would have exposed the locations of radar sites and military airfields, effective bombing raids were basically impossible. So, despite the horrendous destruction of urban centres, we never got the air superiority that would have been necessary for an invasion. Moreover, as I found out after the War, these collaborators had also obtained information about the development of brand-new radar

systems that were small enough to be installed inside reconnaissance aircraft and bombers – ideal for hunting submarines that were forced to operate primarily at the surface.

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

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

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

But in that state of conflict, caught between contradictory opinions, and surrounded by moral ambiguity, deciding on the right thing to do was a subjective assessment, from which further conflicts arose, with unforeseen consequences. And in this unpredictable chain of causes and effects, a

specific event had to occur that dramatically altered a few lives, so that the world at large could remain the same. And the ripples in the fabric of causality that were created by this distant event have now reached us.

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

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

‘During all that, we were never exposed to the bombing raids in the big cities, or to the atrocities along the eastern front. About the holocaust, we only found out afterwards. For the most part, we were trapped inside the submarine, adrift somewhere out there in the North Atlantic Ocean, while the War escalated and turned against us. As more and more of our boats were sunk, younger and more poorly trained crews were recruited into service – many of whom were killed within days. But while others died, somehow we always managed to get through. We were doomed to continue the fight against the very country that, with some luck, now gave shelter to my own family. Then, when it was all over at last, we were ordered to surrender to the Royal Navy. Our *U-115* was scuttled north of Ireland, and we became prisoners of war.

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

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

‘I immediately tried to find Ingrid and Elisabeth, but I had nothing to go on. Even if they had managed to enter the country, they had done so illegally, and it was highly unlikely that they were registered somehow. To make matters worse, the whole system was still in a state of chaos at the time, the administration unable to keep up with the many dead and missing people. Not surprisingly, neither the police nor the Home Office had any records on either of the women. I then used the first Christmas holidays that I got off from work to return to Germany and meet my and Ingrid’s families, but no one had seen her. After more than two years since the end of the War, they still had not returned, or at least got in touch somehow. At that point, I had to admit to myself that there was only one plausible reason for that.

‘So, after the holidays, I went back to my job in Liverpool. Gradually, I began to enjoy it there, building rather than destroying ships. And Germany, whenever I returned ... well, the country didn’t feel like home anymore. I did keep in touch with my relatives there and visited them as often as I could, but one by one, the older generation died, and I haven’t been back for more than ten years now.

‘Towards the end of my working life, I had a well-paying job as an engineer for a large shipbuilding company in Liverpool, and I could have comfortably retired anywhere in Britain. But without the work, there wasn’t really much for me there, except far too much time to think. The War suddenly kept coming back to me, and then I remembered the Lofoten. The memories of what happened here never really left me alone. So, when I found out that the little village had been established in the meantime, I sold my house in Merseyside and moved here. It always felt like a futile attempt to retrace my steps to the start of the tragic succession of events, and to try and find meaning in them. Until today, I never understood what drew me back to this place. I just had the feeling that there was something I still had to do. I’ve always wondered why. Now, I finally know the answer.’

Peter smiles at me, but then becomes concerned. ‘Sorry, Siobhán, I didn’t notice you’re getting cold – you’re shivering.’

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

‘Come on, then. Let’s go back inside.’

He gets up from the rock and carefully stretches his legs. ‘Just briefly ... I wanted to show you something. Here, directly underneath us, is that cave I told you about, in which we survived the blizzard together with the English. I heard there is a narrow crack at the end of the cave that leads up onto this plateau, and exits among these rocks over there; but I never tried to find it. The main entrance is down by the shore.’

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

‘Sure, that would be great.’

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

‘I was, yes, but ... well, I was hoping you’d let me sleep on your sofa tonight. I’m not difficult to accommodate, with simple tastes, you know, and I’ve got my own sleeping bag.’

He seems surprised.

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

‘None whatsoever, Siobhán.’

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

His expression has become dark again, the same combination of anger and grief as before. Clearly, he has lived here on his own for far too long.

‘Peter, why don’t you come to England with me? At least for a couple of weeks – this summer, perhaps. I could show you Norwich, if you haven’t been there, where I grew up with Gran. Cambridge, as you know, is nearby. That’s where I began to go to university. I’ll also show you St Andrews, where I finished my studies. We can then go up to Aberdeen, where I live now, doing postdoctoral studies – on the rare occasions that I’m at home. From there, we can visit the Moray Firth, where I do part of my research. You know how beautiful the north of Scotland is, and you’d be coming as a friend now, a welcome guest, and you could finally close the book on history. In fact, if you moved there permanently, you could keep an eye on me.’

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

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

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

CHAPTER SEVEN

PARA BELLUM

Peter hangs up my parka next to his own coat again. ‘I shouldn’t have kept you outside for so long. That was silly of me. But I completely lost track of the time, and now you can’t stop shivering. Let’s go into the kitchen. It’s the warmest room in the cabin, and I’ll make us some tea.’

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

‘How?’

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

‘Hey, I showered this morning – I even washed my hair.’

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

Yes, I know exactly what you mean.

He studies me a critically. ‘What happened to your legs?’

‘It’s nothing, just some old bruises. As I walked up from the village, they began hurting again, that’s all.’

He seems unconvinced and starts rummaging in one of the kitchen cupboards. With a sceptical look, he pulls out a package of tablets and checks the expiration date. After some deliberation, he removes one of the blister packs. ‘Here, take one of these now, and keep the rest for later.’

He fills a glass with water from the tap and hands it over with an encouraging nod.

‘And this works?’

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

‘You know, Peter, that would be really great.’

He lights the gas stove with a match. Then he puts on a water kettle and a frying pan. But even as he goes through the motions of preparing dinner, his mind is preoccupied with other matters, his thoughts still far away, out there in the past.

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

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

As the strips of bacon begin to sizzle, an appetising smell spreads through the kitchen.

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

‘Well, at Cambridge ... those were the undergraduate years, reading general courses in Natural Sciences. Then, at St Andrews, I got a doctoral degree in marine biology, specifically on the subject of “Spectral Analysis of Echolocation Signals and Sound Communication in Bottlenose Dolphins,” which I continue to work on at Aberdeen. Basically, what I’m doing is analysing underwater recordings of wild dolphins, to find out how they use sound to navigate and to communicate, especially in murky water or in the dark – a concept we call “sonar;” but it’s a bit technical, you know, so I won’t bore you with that.’

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

He tries not to show it, but he is proud of me – he really is.

Once again, I set out on this journey much too late. This meeting, this conversation should have taken place years ago, discovering rather than ignoring the past. Now, looking back, there are so many lost opportunities to be reminded of.

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

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

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

Peter falls silent again, following his own thoughts – then he looks up, when he hears me chuckle. ‘What’s so funny? Why are you laughing, Siobhán?’

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

‘Did I? Why does that amuse you?’

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

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

* * *

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

Finally, he removes a small cardboard box and places it on the floor. Then follows an irregular object wrapped in a white linen cloth, which he carefully removes, as he gingerly straightens up. ‘This is Hans’ old service pistol. We only had a few firearms on board. Except on the occasion of being captured and boarded by the enemy, they were of limited use to us. But Hans always kept this one in his locker. He gave it to me after we had landed here, and I was about to leave with the other three to try and find out where we were – when we didn’t know if there would be people living on the island. As we climbed up into the mountains, I put the pistol into my pocket; and in the confusion afterwards, I forgot to return it.’

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

He holds out the pistol with the grip turned towards me. 'You can have it, if you want.'

'What would *I* do with it?'

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

'Has it been used?'

He hesitates. 'Probably ... most likely, yes.'

'By him?'

'No ... not for shooting.'

'What else for, Peter?'

'As backup.'

The metal is still cold from its stay in the unheated attic. It is of a dull dark grey hue, with a multitude of fine scratches, and an engraving that reads "Erfurt, 1911." It has seen two major wars, and survived. It is always the weapons that emerge from wars being the stronger for them. Those are the big impulses that keep their species evolving, while we fall by the wayside and are left behind.

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

To be fair, it is well balanced and not difficult to hold steady with both hands, even with arms outstretched, the sight fixed at the centre of the window – and my own reflection inside it. If Alison indeed was abducted, is

this how she was last seen alive, down the barrel of a gun, trained on her dear face – looking into her frightened eyes, now beyond hope but still pleading?

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

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

Yes, it would be so easy. But no bullet can make another's work undone.

And that is what you'd want me to do, isn't it: to pull the trigger and become one of you – become a shadow myself, and blend into the dark.

But there, in the window, my vague reflection still hovers at the thin boundary between light and darkness – the weapon lowered again, a picture of dejection. True, for the moment, the great avenger is gone, and all that remains is a lost little girl – far from home, and even farther from the truth. Yet, after everything that happened, I *am* still here, my reflection only getting clearer as the light outside slowly fades away.

And, eventually, I will get onto your track, you can count on that.

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

Eying me closely, he takes back the pistol – just a little too quickly, perhaps. He seems glad not to have to part with it after all. He hastily wraps it up again in the linen cloth, and carefully places it on top of the other contents in the trunk, together with the cartridges.

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

‘I think it must have been with the Jewish couple you mentioned – with some Jewish refugees from Hamburg, at any rate. They travelled together to the Hook of Holland. From there, they were taken across the Channel by Dutch fishermen, who were involved with the resistance. At the shore near Harwich, they were met by friends or relatives of some of the refugees, who brought them to London, where they had arranged accommodation for

them in the East End. Then, two days before New Year's Eve, that terrible air raid happened, as you know – “The Second Great Fire of London,” and all that. Gran and Mum spent the night in an underground shelter. Although there had been some damage done to the house they stayed in, the next morning, they had no choice but to return there. That's when they were discovered by air raid wardens, who came to check on the building, to see if it was still safe, or if there had been any fatalities inside it. Gran spoke next to no English at the time, and it was perfectly obvious that she was German. So, she and Mum were arrested and taken to the nearest police station, where they were held for several days and interrogated. Rather than pretending to be Jewish, or inventing some other explanation for why she had decided to enter Britain, Gran gave her actual name and told the police that her husband was the commander of a German submarine. She hoped that, if there really was something about these rumours concerning a defection, or if her husband had arrived in Britain for any reason, they might then be reunited. The police and the Home Office did make enquiries, but no one had heard of him or his submarine, and no one was willing to believe Gran's story. So, at a time when many internees were being released again, she was classified as high-risk enemy alien, and she and Mum were sent to the internment camp in Port Erin on the Isle of Man.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Peter reacts surprised. ‘Elsbeth and Lena lived in Liverpool during all this time?’

‘They did, yes, in Everton.’

He leans back with a groan. ‘And all it would have taken was a random meeting in the street, or in a shop somewhere.’

‘I know, and I am so sorry. But here we are, Peter – you see, we did meet in the end.’

‘We did indeed. So, you were born in Liverpool then? How ... you said that Lena never got married?’

‘No, she didn’t. After leaving school, Mum became a nurse too. And then – in the August of ’62, it must have been – returning late from her shift at the hospital ... Gran and she had relocated that year, moved into a newly built council estate. I only saw the blocks many years later, but even when they were new, they must have been scary places. Anyhow, that night, Mum was attacked by three men, right inside her tenement. Gran didn’t tell me about that until I was sixteen, or so. Back then, of course, it was impossible to get a legal abortion. Therefore, I don’t know whether Mum truly wanted me. I couldn’t blame her, if she didn’t. And in the end, she never got the chance to find out whether she would have liked me anyway. As I said earlier, she died soon after I was born. So, in addition to losing her daughter, Gran

had to look after a little bundle called Siobhán – named after her long-lost husband, as I realise now. She stayed with me in Liverpool for two years. Then, she was transferred to the main hospital in Norwich, where she worked until her retirement.’

Peter processes the new information quietly and without any outward signs of emotions. But hearing about the missing half of history has clearly set a train of thought in motion ... or, perhaps, has put things that previously appeared to be understood into a new perspective.

‘Peter, I still don’t see why you were so suspicious of me, when I told you who I was. It couldn’t have been because you’d heard that my mother had been killed in that fire, when she was just a child. You said it yourself, even before we met you had doubts about that, and you suspected that they might have escaped to Britain.’

He gazes thoughtfully at me for a moment, and then nods slowly. ‘You’re right. There was more to it than that; and I’m afraid that this is where the story gets really dark. As I mentioned earlier, after my release from the prisoner of war camp, I immediately began to enquire about Ingrid and Elisabeth, but initially without success. Then, I got in touch with a particular group of people, in the hope that somehow they had heard of them. That is how I found out about something that made me believe that your grandmother and mother had not survived the War.’

He hesitates again. ‘You may know that during the first few post-war years, in a tragic twist of history, there was a violent upsurge of Fascism in Britain. Just as the Nazis had done after the end of the First World War, British Fascists preyed on soldiers returning from the battlefields, often seriously wounded, only to find their homes destroyed and their loved ones maimed or dead or missing. But not only lay the country in ruins, there was also the perceived loss of status and identity that came with the collapse of the old Empire, mirroring again what had happened in Germany. This grief and desperation was carefully exploited by the Fascists, who told the returning soldiers that the British Government was to blame for all the death and destruction, by fighting an unnecessary and unjust war; that the Germans had purely acted in defence of their homeland; that, after all, war had been declared by Britain on Germany, and not the other way around.

‘To make matters worse, a wave of antisemitism was stirred up by news of a Zionist insurgency and acts of terrorism against the British Administration in Palestine. And so, by the time I was released from the

prisoner of war camp, there it was again: Fascists marching in the streets, waving their flags, singing their songs, attacking Jewish homes, and getting engaged in street fights with Socialist groups. It was the Twenties in Germany all over again, as if we had never fought the War; as if, like a dark cloud, the old evil had simply wafted across the Channel.

‘But even more dangerous than that were the right-wing underground organisations. They included some of the richest families in the country, leading industrialists who, more than anything else, feared a Socialist uprising in Britain, and the overthrow of the monarchy, as had happened in Russia. To them, it was the empowerment of the uncivilised working classes that was to blame for the decline of traditional values and social order. In their minds, the Continental Fascists had been the only ones brave enough to stand up against the real enemy – who, of course, was the Soviet Union. For years during the War, these people had entrenched themselves in their country estates, at a safe distance away from the embattled urban centres. They had weathered the storm; but now, with the Nazis defeated, their worldview was called into question – and they were not going to give up without a fight.

‘I heard about one of these groups from my former commander on *U-115*, who, in turn, had found out about them from some other prisoners in the camp. As a high-ranking former Nazi officer, he had managed to get an introduction to that group and had been invited to their regular meetings in London. As we’d kept in touch since our release, he told me that I would be welcome to come along too. I’m not sure what exactly his motives were; whether, even after the War, he still supported this kind of ideology; but these were desperate times, and you had to be grateful for any support you could get. For me ... I think I genuinely believed that there was a realistic possibility that Ingrid and Elisabeth, to avoid being arrested and interned after their arrival in Britain, had somehow found shelter with one of these influential families that had been sympathetic to the German cause throughout the War. After everything else had failed, I thought that, through that group, I had one more chance of finding my family again, or at least discovering what had happened to them.

‘So, on weekends, I began to travel from Liverpool down to London, where the group met in an old private club. The first meetings I attended were fairly innocuous dinner parties, where politics was completely off the table as a subject for conversation. Despite the open demonstrations in the

streets, being a Fascist continued to be very dangerous. Even years after the War, collaborators with the Germans were still being executed. After a while, though, I had established sufficient confidence to be invited to the more secretive meetings. I suppose, from their point of view, I had the wartime record of a true German hero – one of very few survivors who had served in the submarine force right from the beginning. And having listened to Nazi propaganda for the past several years, I was abundantly familiar with the right kind of rhetoric for those occasions.

‘As I got to know the group better, it became clear that they had in fact been part of the underground network that had supported our espionage operation. It was then that I realised that this was becoming a risky game. With the uncertainty and rumours that, also among our former collaborators in Britain, had to be hanging over the disappearance of *U-112*, it was impossible to anticipate the reaction that I would have received, had I revealed to anyone inside the secret society that I had been one of the officers who had served on the lost submarine. As the truth about what had happened had been covered up by the Germans, it would have depended on which of the two false stories had been accepted. In the minds of the members of this secret society, this could have meant that either *U-112* had been sunk by the British, or that the crew had betrayed their special mission and gone over to the enemy. Then, how would the former collaborators react to the news that not all crew members had been aboard *U-112* on that fateful day? In the case of a sinking, would they suspect that we, who had stayed behind, were the traitors and had somehow managed to alert the British, so that they had been able to intercept *U-112*? Or, in the case of a defection, had we perhaps refused to be part of this betrayal to our country, and had therefore stayed behind? Initially, I had no way of knowing what the accepted truth had become. But over the next two or three months, as I continued to get closer to the inner circle of that secret society, I found out more about what had happened during the War in Britain.

‘The original network of Nazi supporters had been formed back in the spring of 1940, partly from former members of the British Union of Fascists, who had been forced into the underground after the arrest of their leader, and partly from the old established elite. Faced with their perceived common enemy of Socialism, this unlikely alliance of revolutionaries and conservatives had managed to build up a formidable organisation that had managed to infiltrate several branches of the armed forces, as well as Military

Intelligence. But then, in the wake of the mysterious disappearance of *U-112*, something else happened that split the organisation into two camps – another tragedy – the murder of a little girl.’

He falls silent, his head bowed, and his eyes closed. Then he looks up again. ‘You remember that couple I mentioned earlier, who owned the building in the Scottish Highlands, where we had planned to collect all this secret material? Well ... a few days before Christmas, they were urgently called to London, and a girl – about five years old – was given into their care by members of the underground network. The couple weren’t told much about her, only that she had recently arrived from Germany, and that they had to take her to their home in Scotland and hide her there. But then, the following day, they were informed that the situation had changed, and that the girl was the child of a traitor. They were told that her father was the German submarine commander whose crew had been selected for the espionage operation. But rather than helping to get strategically vital information out of Britain, they had planned to desert and to take the submarine, with all its secret equipment and codebooks, over to the enemy. Fortunately, the Germans had been warned just in time, and had been able to prevent the desertion. A few days later, the commander’s wife, who had fled Germany together with her daughter, had been apprehended by some of the double agents in a London Underground shelter, after they had attracted some attention there the previous night. During the interrogation of the mother, the daughter had to be cared for by someone else. But after the extent of the mother’s involvement in the conspiracy had been established, she had been eliminated; and now, the daughter had to die as well.

‘However, as dedicated to the German cause and the Nazi ideology as the couple were, they could not get themselves to become complicit in such a crime. They themselves were childless and had taken to the little girl immediately. They refused to hold her responsible for her parents’ treachery, as they saw it. So they only claimed to have carried out the murder, intending to hide the girl in their remote home until the excitement had died down, hoping to be able to obtain a false birth certificate for her, and to raise her as their own or an adopted child under a different name. They were convinced that she was no danger to the underground network; that she was still young enough to eventually forget her parents; that, at least, any lingering recollection of them could be dealt with by telling her about an

accident in which they had died; that she would ultimately accept her new guardians, if they only gave her a safe and loving home.

‘But the double agents involved in the underground network were suspicious. With the certainty of the death penalty hanging over them, if they were ever found out and convicted of spying, they could not allow anything that would threaten their secret mission. To them, the unexplained presence of a German child in Britain was too much of a risk. Therefore, one night, they showed up at the lonely building. The couple tried to resist, but the agents took the girl from them, and they ... they killed her. That is what the couple told me, in the strictest confidence. They only opened up to me after I subtly suggested that I knew more about the story of *U-112* than was officially acknowledged. I had the impression they were relieved to be able to talk to someone about that at last, despite clearly still being scared of the consequences, if these events ever became publicly known. I think they felt genuine remorse about what happened during the War, and I have no doubt that they told me the truth – except for one thing. Because of that, until today, I believed that this poor child really had been Lena.’

Unable to continue, he gets up from the sofa and slowly walks to window. ‘I cannot even begin to imagine how Ingrid would have felt in that situation, when they took Rosemarie away from her; and what else she and my little girl had to go through before the end.’

The tone of his voice is as hollow as the eyes of his ghostly reflection looking back at me.

‘Peter ... I’m so sorry, I don’t know what to say.’

He turns away from the window. ‘You’re here, Siobhán. That means more to me than words could ever express.’

He struggles to fight back his tears and remains standing, his back to the window, too agitated to sit down again. Then he takes a deep breath. ‘As I mentioned earlier, after the sinking of *U-112*, the espionage operation was abandoned. In response to that traumatic failure to save Rosemarie, the couple distanced themselves from the more politically minded Fascists and, with several other members of the former underground network, founded a new secret society, which they called The Order of the New Atlanteans, and for which they continued to hold monthly meetings up in their place in Scotland – although otherwise they had moved away from there and back to London. To escape the horrors of war, they retreated into a romantic dream world, in which, during some prehistoric era, an advanced alien species had

arrived on our planet and settled on the lost island of Atlantis. There, drawing on their superhuman cosmic powers, they had developed a society far more advanced than anything that humans have managed to accomplish in all the millennia since then. But even this utopia was destined to fail, as their island and their civilisation sank beneath the sea after a massive earthquake. And so, they left Earth again for another world. The Order members believed that these Atlanteans were the true ancestors of the Aryan race, and they saw themselves as their rightful heirs.

‘While the War escalated around them and turned against their ideology, it seems that they developed a founding myth for their Order that may have given them hope. They were left with incomplete and conflicting rumours about either a defection of the crew of *U-112* to the British, or a sinking of the submarine by the British. Out of this uncertainty, and having lost the trust in their former allies, a new conspiracy theory grew. They asked themselves what *U-112* had really been up to, all alone out there in the Northern Sea? The answer they came up with was that the espionage operation had only been a minor task compared with the submarine crew’s true mission.

‘In keeping with their ideology, they became convinced that, in addition to the well-publicised expedition to Tibet, which had been conducted just before the War, the Nazis had launched another, a secret mission to uncover the origin of the Aryan race. For that, they had sent out *U-112* in the hope of finding Atlantis and the remains of that ancient civilisation. But, according to the Order, the crew then betrayed their government and, together with some of the British collaborators, formed a “Treacherous Alliance,” as they called it, to find and recover the Atlantean treasures for themselves. The story even went so far as to say that the crew of *U-112* had indeed found the lost island, and had been able to recover some valuable or powerful artefact. The encounter with a British destroyer was then used as a convenient opportunity to disappear. After escaping the attack, the crew stored the artefact inside of *U-112*, and then deliberately sank the submarine by flooding the diving tanks in shallow water, somewhere near the Lofoten. Then they escaped to South America, planning to raise *U-112* again after the War was over, and to continue the search for more of the Atlantean treasures.

‘Precisely that was it the Order wanted to prevent. Their hope was that *they* might be able to recover some superior weapon that would help to win

the War for the Nazi regime, and to replace the violent and corrupt human cultures with a racially and morally pure society that would be modelled on the lost utopia of the Atlanteans.

‘To this end, the Order began to collect money to organise an expedition to find *U-112* – but no one knew where the submarine had been sunk. There are far too many islands in the Lofoten to launch underwater searches around all of them. They needed more specific information. But as the cover-up in Germany had been quite effective, any attempts to track down former crew members failed.

‘So, when I met them, a few years after the War, following the decisive defeat of the Nazis, the Order had abandon all hope of finding *U-112* and, through it, at least a small part of that great Atlantean civilisation. Nonetheless, they were determined to preserve their secret Order. With the threat of war gone, and life in the capital normalising, they stopped driving all the way up to the Highlands, and their meetings shifted to London.

‘Now, looking back, I find it curious that, with all their openness, the couple never told me that the girl that had been put into their care had not been the daughter of the commander of *U-112*. They spoke fluent German. They must have talked to Rosemarie. As much as she loved Lena, she must have corrected them vehemently when they called her by the wrong name. And as she was far too young to be coached into telling convincing lies, consistently and over a period of weeks, they must have understood then that the wrong child – and therefore the wrong mother – had been apprehended. I can only guess that they kept quiet to prevent any further murders.

‘For the British double agents, this mistake could only have happened because, initially, they had not known that a second mother and daughter had fled from Germany. This, in turn, could only have been the case if, at that point, no attempts had been made to arrest Ingrid. I don’t know how long it took before her disappearance was noticed. But, evidently, by the time this information had been communicated to the British collaborators, it was already too late.

‘Even before Ingrid got caught, the two women must have got separated somehow, in the crowded bomb shelter most likely. Then, when Ingrid and Rosemarie had vanished, Elisabeth must have realised that she had to be very careful, and probably stayed away from the public shelters as much as possible. Soon, of course, as you just told me, and for several years afterwards, they were then safe on the Isle of Man.

‘But you can imagine, Siobhán, when I found out about all this during the secret meetings of the Order, I had no desire to get drawn into this madness. These people were clearly disturbed and willing to use any amount of force to achieve their goal. Had they ever found out who I was, that I had been part of the infamous *U-112* crew, my situation would have turned very dangerous. And as I had been unable to find out anything from them about my wife and daughter, I stopped attending the meetings.’

His breathing having returned to normal, he settles down at the table again and pours fresh tea from the thermos jug. ‘Are you going to tell me now how you managed to track me down in this remote place?’

‘Sure ... as I mentioned earlier, after Gran’s funeral, I went to visit the submarine archive in Laboe, and it turned out that there is very little information about *U-112* in the German records. That, and your mysterious posting back to Narvik, when the rest of your flotilla was transferred south to France, seemed a bit dodgy, and it made the curator of the archive suspicious enough to dig a little deeper than to simply accept the official version of the reason behind the loss of *U-112* – that it had been sunk by a British destroyer. He then began to look up any surviving officers who had served on other submarines in Kiel, at the same time as my grandfather, hoping that perhaps they might be able to tell me something about him. That is how he found Ralf Behring – your commander on *U-115*. There were some discrepancies about his service record prior to taking over that submarine. And when the curator found out that Mr Behring had moved up here, soon after the opening of the border between East and West Germany, the strangeness started to pile up. To be honest, I don’t know what I expected. I just ... I had nowhere else to go. This was the last lead I had left, and I didn’t want to let Gran down. I arrived here yesterday evening on the ferry. Then, this morning, I was told that Behring’s house was up here on the headland. But before I had the chance to talk to him, I ran into you. So, you see, our meeting was only a fortunate coincidence, as I’d actually been searching for someone else.’

‘Hmm ...’ Peter is visibly dissatisfied with this explanation. ‘Siobhán ... forgive me, but there is something you’re not telling me. Earlier on, when I told you about that bay in Scotland, where we had been supposed to land – this clearly meant something to you, and not in a trivial way.’

‘No, you’re right, not in a trivial way at all – and it is complicated. At this point, I’m not sure myself if there really is an underlying connection, or if it’s

simply a strange set of coincidences. The thing is: while I was away on Antarctica, Alison, a good friend of mine, somehow disappeared from her flat in Cambridge. At first, everyone thought that she'd gone away to Dublin on a sabbatical, as indeed she had planned to do; but I couldn't believe that. I was quite sure that she'd never left without telling me, never mind how complicated communications are with Antarctica. So I was afraid that the same may have happened to her, as had happened to a friend of hers, just over a month earlier. That friend had been abducted from her flat and found murdered a few days later in an abandoned manor house – a grand place in its day – located up in the mountains south of Loch Cairnbawn. The building has a somewhat shady history – as I discovered, when I became worried about Alison and went to check it out – with several rumours hanging over it, especially concerning Military Intelligence activities during the Second World War. There is plenty of evidence inside the building that the owners were heavily invested in Germanic mythology. But aside from that, I didn't find anything suspicious.'

Peter leans forwards, looking startled. 'You broke into someone's house looking for your friend? And into the Order's old headquarters, of all places?'

'Now, Peter, don't you get started on me as well. I was already reprimanded about that by the police, when I told them ... well, I just thought it would help them in their investigation if they knew about these rumours and about the potential connection to a little chapel not far from the manor house. But I didn't *break* in, technically. I simply entered through the front door, because I found the key. And anyway, I didn't know anything about this Order at the time. All I knew then was that, leading up to the murder, the building had been used occasionally for some Satanic rituals – but I still have no idea how that fits into the overall picture, if it has any significance at all.'

Despite Peter's obvious concern and bewilderment, the corners of his mouth twitch in the flicker of a smile, as he leans back again.

'The thing is, I was worried sick. I didn't think straight. I didn't know what was going on. But the official explanation for Alison's absence just didn't ... it wasn't good enough. That's the only reason why I'm behaving like this. Normally, I don't travel all over the place, willy-nilly, and I don't usually walk into other people's homes uninvited. But ever since I got back from Antarctica, I've been confronted with this endless string of tantalising clues, nothing but the vaguest suggestions of connections. I follow up on the

possibility that Alison's disappearance might be connected to her friend's murder, and it leads me to an old manor house. I follow up on Gran's last request to find out about her husband's disappearance, and it leads me to the same manor house. Two disappearances potentially linked to the same building, although the two issues are completely unrelated – or at least they should be. But now that I heard your story, I'm beginning to suspect that Gran may have been right. You see, just before she died, she became distressed about Alison's absence, when previously it hadn't bothered her at all. Suddenly, she seemed to think that Alison had been abducted, as had happened to Ingrid during the War. She mentioned Ingrid's name, but didn't explain who she was, and I never got the chance to ask. Afterwards, when I slowly began to process what had happened – Gran having been taken away from me so suddenly – I thought that she had simply been confused, you know, after the fall and having fainted. But there may at least be an indirect connection through the old manor house. After all, it's a creepy place, and creepy places attract creepy people.'

'But Elsbeth couldn't have known that. She didn't know about the manor house, or indeed any aspect of our secret mission.'

'No, you're right, Peter. She must have had another reason for making that connection, regardless whether she was right or not.'

The connection ... it must be here, somewhere within the confusing cloud of words and phrases and names that float through an overcrowded mind space – tantalisingly close, but never concrete. All these disappearances of people and things ... a sunken submarine, and a sunken island ... Atlantis ... the Order of the New Atlanteans ... their search for a lost civilisation, for lost treasures.

'Peter, there's something I wanted to ask you. When I checked Alison's flat to see if there was anything that would give me an indication as to what had happened to her, I found a note she had written, apparently shortly before she disappeared. It said something about a guarded Secret, with a capital S, and there were two words that I can't really put into any relevant context. Perhaps they mean something to you.'

Peter leans forwards again, with a tense expression on his face. 'What were these two words, Siobhán?'

'It's how the note started. There were no proper sentences. It simply said: Ultima Thule.'

‘Ultima Thule ...’ He barely whispers the words. ‘Why didn’t you tell me this earlier?’

‘Why should I have? What does it mean?’

He wordlessly stares at me for a moment. Then he gets up and quickly walks around the table to pull me up from the chair with a firm grip above the elbow. ‘Who knows you’re here?’

‘No one. I told no one where I was going.’

‘Good, that’s something, at least.’

‘Peter, what’s wrong?’

He checks his watch. ‘You must leave the island – tonight. You have just enough time to catch the ferry. No, Siobhán, listen: you must take this very seriously now. You are in great danger. You need to return to England immediately. You need to go to the police, as soon as you arrive there – this is very important. They are the only ones who can help you. They have to protect you, you understand?’

‘Yes, but what is all this about?’

‘That secret Order – it seems they’re still active, or active again, after all these years. How Elsbeth could have found out about this, I don’t know. But I want you to be absolutely clear about this: the people you’re dealing with are ruthless. They will not rest until they have found this elusive Secret. To this end, they are prepared to do anything – just as they were fifty years ago. You cannot run around like this anymore, digging up the past. You don’t know what and whom you’re dealing with, but I do. I encountered these people before, and I’m telling you, you have no chance. You’re up against an enemy you cannot possibly defeat on your own.’

‘All right, Peter, I get it. But I still don’t understand. What is going on?’

He relaxes his grip around my arm. ‘Ultima Thule was the codename for the secret operation that we were involved in – or, more precisely, it was the name given to the larger plan of an invasion of Britain from the north, of which our reconnaissance and espionage mission to Scotland would only have been the first step. In the conspiracy theories that developed afterwards, it became the name of this fictitious quest to find Atlantis. “The Secret” is how the Order referred to the unknown Atlantean artefact that they thought we had found. As I said, shortly after the War, they had abandoned the search for *U-112* and the lost land of the Atlanteans. But something must have happened recently. Somehow, these old stories have been brought back to life. Perhaps a new generation came along, found out about them, and

believed in them to such an extent that they are prepared to try and make another attempt at finding this elusive Secret. Perhaps the old couple broke their silence and revealed to them what they had not dared to tell me many years ago, that the wrong girl had been killed during the War, and that, therefore, the wife and daughter of the commander of *U-112* may still be alive. As did their previous generations, they would have asked themselves why Elsbeth would have fled Germany, if not because she knew of her husband's plans. They would have assumed that she also knew of the location where *U-112* had been sunk. Finding her now would have been easy, I imagine; and through her, they found you. How your friends got involved in this, I don't know. This is something you have to find out. For that, you must return home and talk to the police.'

'Home? Which home, Peter? Where do you want me to go, if everyone is dead?'

'You don't know that, Siobhán. Alison may still be alive. That's why you have to get back to England, as quickly as possible.'

No, I can see it all now. Suddenly, everything has become so transparent. All those seeming coincidences, all that comforting implausibility – it has all vanished, all turned into crushing certainty.

That fatal phone call to Gran – that was the confirmation that Alison was no more, and the warning that I was going to be next, unless Gran revealed a conspiracy that never was.

And so, it was I who was at the centre of it all, right from the beginning. When Alison found out about that, when they interrogated her, when she got the confirmation about what had happened to Kathleen, when she understood what was going to happen to her – how long did love last? Did it really last forever? Or did she curse me before the end?

All these romantic notions of our lives being connected ... and I never even noticed when she passed away. When her heart beat for the last time, when she took her final breath, the world as I knew it simply went on. After that, how could you go back to ordinary life, when everything has become so utterly meaningless.

How much easier is it to let go, to give in to the pull of gravity ... just to stay here forever, right here on the floor, slumped against the armchair ... rather than continuing a desperate fight we are bound to lose anyway, sooner or later.

But Peter is kneeling next to me, talking with an urgent tone in his voice, although his words are unclear.

‘Why, Peter? Why do I keep killing people? Everyone I get close to: Mum first, then Kathleen, then Alison, and finally Gran. I’m only here because of the sacrifices they made, in some form or other.’

And while I am here, it will never end. While I am in this world, the shadows of the past will always surround me. But I have no right to burden Peter with this, after the realisation today of his own losses.

‘It’s all right, Peter. I’ll get up again. It was only a momentary weakness, but I’m better now. And you’re right, of course, I have to ... move on.’

He steers me out into the corridor and hands me the parka. ‘I won’t accompany you down to the harbour. I’m too slow, and you have to hurry to catch the ferry. Let me know when you have returned to England. I don’t have a telephone up here. But if you contact the guesthouse where you stayed last night, they will pass your message on to me.’

He hands me the rucksack. ‘As you suggested earlier, I’ll see you in summer, when all this is sorted out.’

‘Yes, Peter, in summer.’

He steps out of the door and glances down the narrow path that leads back to the village, past the row of houses that cling to the steep mountainside. In most of them, the lights are on now, but there does not seem to be anyone else outside. In the other direction, on the plateau leading to the cliff, only the irregular dark shapes of the scattered boulders stand out against the low sun, motionless and quiet.

Seeing this, Peter relaxes somewhat. ‘All right, go now, Siobhán – run. Look out for yourself. And get in touch as soon as you can.’

CHAPTER EIGHT

INTO DARKNESS

The houses of the little fishing village are still nestled into the curving headland, just as they were this morning, as if nothing in the meantime had changed at all. The collection of boats quietly bobs on the rising tide; and somewhat off to one side lies the bigger motor yacht that arrived this afternoon. Notwithstanding the storm clouds approaching from the open sea, a peaceful atmosphere still prevails over the sheltered bay, with the lights of the ferry shimmering on the dark water, as the last link to a troubled world finally slips away.

There never really was a way back to my former life, the sense of disconnect after the return from Antarctica never an illusion. This former life, it had already ended. From then on, I was left to chase a set of increasingly distant memories. While there was still the great mystery to pursue, following one clue after the other, trying to detect and interpret correctly all the relevant signs along the way – even in the darkest hours, there always appeared to be a small glimmer of hope. But now that the truth about the past has been revealed, there is nothing left to return to.

Outside this island lies a world of painful and dispiriting formalities, of futile police investigations, with nothing specific to go on, and still the same vague threat hanging over everything – vague, yet ready to strike at any moment, all pervasive and ruthless.

Without any concrete evidence to give to the police about the manor house and its owners ... without any detailed information about this Order of the New Atlanteans, who appear to remain in existence after half a century, still as secret as ever, and no doubt protected by some powerful people ... without even the slightest indication that would link that Order to Kathleen's murder and Alison's disappearance – what would be the point in going back?

With Alison and Gran gone, what difference does any of this make? Meanwhile, Peter is still here, and that last thread cannot be broken. There is still too much to talk about, too much lost time to make up for.

If only it was possible to withdraw from everything – forever. If only this little island could simply drift away, or sink beneath the waves, and go over into a better world.

For it *is* a good world that lies beneath the waves. With graceful regularity, they wash up against our shores, inviting us back into their realm. Even now, as the world grows dark, their soothing sound still carries upwards on the wind.

As Peter understands, down there at the bottom of the cliff, lies the origin of all the losses and all the sorrow – although, in itself, this origin was defined by a rejection of violence, the amicable coming together of two enemies, and the multiple false narratives that were spun around this encounter, created for lack of knowledge, for strategic reasons, or driven by ideological beliefs.

So, if this is where it all began, let it be the end of the journey, and perhaps the turning point for the way home.

But the rucksack can stay here, leaning against one of the boulders.

The boulders ... standing about like a group of silent watchers, their shadows creeping ever longer over the plateau, as the sun sinks lower over the western horizon.

Already, the narrow path down to the shore is barely visible in the fading light.

The ground is loose, the rumbling of dislodged rocks tumbling down the steep slope uncomfortably loud in the quiet evening.

The tide is noticeably higher now than it was during the afternoon, with the larger waves almost reaching the foot of the cliff. But there is still a little time left.

A short distance above the rocky shore, the path continues along the base of the cliff towards the other side of the island.

Just around the headland, the entrance of the cave suddenly opens up in the sheer wall of rock – an imposing jagged crack, not particularly wide, but at least fifty feet tall, and glowing warm in the last rays from the sun, which shine straight into the long passage.

Inside the cave, the ground gradually descends away from the shore, scattered with rocks that have fallen from the ceiling over the past ages, still slippery from the high tide this morning, and covered with algae.

From the end of the main part of the cave, a narrower passage branches off towards the right, continuing downwards. After only a short distance, the remaining daylight fades away; but echoing out from the darkness comes the

churning of water that must be pressing through the cracks in the ground, up from the submerged tunnel below.

A narrow crack in the sidewall to the left leads into a spacious cavern that is somewhat elevated above the main passage. It is quite cosy in there, with only a few rocks strewn across the floor – as if someone had cleared out the space not long ago.

When he stayed here, with his own crew and the English soldiers, could he have guessed that his granddaughter would be following in his footsteps – and why she would be compelled to do so? Had he known what the consequences of his simple act of humanity would be – not only for himself and his immediate family and friends, but for generations to come – had he acted differently, considering that, under the circumstances, the only alternative would have been an act of violence? Balancing violence during a state of war against violence during peacetime ... sanctioned killings against murder. To make a moral decision like this, how wide a circle do you have to draw around those who are directly affected by your actions, and how far into the future do you have to be able to see?

The harsh sound of shifting rocks erupts outside on the shore. The silhouette of a man appears in the entrance of the cave, outlined against the setting sun.

‘I was wondering where you would go next.’ His voice is that of an elderly person, but still energetic, and with a distinct German accent. ‘After you talked to Janssen, I was wondering where he would send you.’

Ralf Behring remains standing at the opening, evidently unwilling to step inside the darkening passage. ‘What’s wrong? They told me you speak English, down in the village. They told me your name, asking me if I knew your grandfather.’

He gives a dry laugh. ‘Yes, I knew your grandfather – or at least the man you say was your grandfather. But that is not why you are here. So, what are you looking for?’

Given his suspicious and aggressive behaviour, he seems to be caught up as well in the renewed search for this elusive Secret – and if he is, so might be his son. In that case, the flooding of the underground bunker, and the fire in the hospital the following day, all this was part of the same desperate quest for a myth.

Ralf pulls a torch out of his coat pocket and briefly shines it around the cave. ‘What was it that Janssen told you, that you had to come down here

immediately, although the sun is setting, and the water is coming in? What is so important down here, that you couldn't wait until tomorrow?'

To get past him, standing up there by the entrance, will require an element of surprise; and running on this uneven ground is going to be difficult. A slow approach then ... one casual step after the other.

He switches the torch to his left hand and makes a furtive motion with his right – hard to see against the light. Otherwise, he remains standing motionless. 'Who are you really? And why have you come?'

His voice now has a patronising tone. Perhaps he begins to think that I may not know about the Secret after all. Perhaps he thinks that I am lost and confused.

But I am not, not anymore, not ever about this one thing: 'I'm here because of Alison.'

He aims his torch directly at me. 'Because of what?'

This moment of surprise has somewhat unsettled his self-confidence.

Just a few more steps ...

'Don't be silly, girl.'

At the edge of the blinding circle of light from his torch, the barrel of a gun is now pointing straight at me.

'Don't underestimate me. I know why you have come. So, tell me what is hidden down here.'

'There is nothing down here but the past – a past that you know much more about than I.'

'Come on, stop wasting time. The water will be here soon.'

'Ralf, this Secret you're looking for – it does not exist. It never existed. It's simply a wish-fulfilment fantasy that came about when ...'

'Don't talk to me like this!' With a sudden outburst, he steps into the cave. 'What do you know about the Secret? What did Janssen tell you? What does he know? I always thought that he was not involved in the conspiracy, because he was left behind as well. I really believed that he was an honourable man.'

'Ralf, there wasn't a single traitor in your crew, and there was no conspiracy.'

'No conspiracy? Then why did Janssen tell *you* about the Secret, and not me, if he knew about it? No conspiracy – don't treat me like a fool. As soon as we met the English, I immediately got suspicious. I wondered what they were doing on this island. And then the commander talking to them all night,

coming up with this ridiculous plan to take them off the island – it wasn't up to us, to make truces like that. Dannreuther should have taken the risk and radioed for help. He should have described our situation and requested new orders and reinforcements. So what if that had alerted the enemy? Maybe there would have been enough time for reinforcements to arrive, before we were attacked; and if not, we would have died with honour. Anything would have been better than fraternising with the enemy. And when I finally got the chance to make the radio call, it was already too late. Then, when Dannreuther went off with the English ... I admit, I did not know for sure, but I was worried that they would defect – and I was right. They left, they left us behind, and they never came back. They deserted us on this island. They betrayed us. And if I had not radioed for help, we would have died here. Dannreuther never found out that I had done that. He also did not notice, before they left, that I had taken the codebooks and many other important documents from board. I was not going to let them fall into the hands of the enemy. I even took our last war diary, and I kept it for myself. I wanted at least one souvenir of our *U-112*. It was a good boat, and we were a good crew – one of the very best. That is why they had given us that secret mission. Yes, of course, we had a bit of bad luck, but we would have succeeded the second time – if our commander had not betrayed us. And for what? Why did he do it? He was not always like that. It must have been something very special for him to turn against us. So, what was it that the English offered him? What had they discovered?'

'Nothing, Ralf. They found nothing.'

Standing just a few paces away now, he aims his gun directly between my eyes – the same type of pistol that Peter offered to give me. He takes another step closer. 'Don't waste any more time. The water is almost here. And if you're waiting for your friends to come and rescue you ... even if they come, I warn you: whatever happens, you will die first.'

'Ralf, what are you talking about? Which friends?'

'I said don't treat me like a fool! I know what this is about. I know about your partners. I saw them arrive in their motorboat, three days ago for the first time, cruising around the islands, pretending to be tourists, but constantly watching the village, trying to find out who lives here and who comes to visit. My son had contacted me only a few days before they arrived and told me about three people who had visited him in the hospital. They said they were acting on behalf of the Order, but I know they lied. The Order

would have told me, if they had sent someone over from England. Then, last night, you arrived here on the ferry. And this evening, I saw their boat in the harbour again. So, don't pretend you are not together.'

'Ralf, I assure you, these people are not my friends. Whether they are somehow connected to this Order, I don't know. But one thing is certain: they are extremely dangerous. If you calm yourself down and put that gun away, we can go back up to your house and talk it all over – together with Peter. Because, you see ... there's something important I need to tell you.'

'You want to lure me to your friends? How stupid do you think am I?'

'For the last time, Ralf: these others are not my friends.'

'Then which side are you on? If you're not working with them, or for the Order?' He is gripped by a sudden comprehension. 'Of course ... *Du bist von der Stasi, nicht wahr, oder wie auch immer ihr euch jetzt nennt.*'

'What? What do you mean – Stasi?'

'*Tu' nicht so, ich weiß doch genau ...*'

'Ralf, you cannot seriously believe that I'm from the former State Security of East Germany?'

'You people have been after me ever since I tried to contact the old members of the Order. I knew it would be dangerous to communicate with the West, especially while the last war diary of *U-112* was still in my home. I knew exactly what you thought about this kind of "fascist" material, and how incriminating that would have looked to you. I know that you put me under surveillance, and that you searched my flat, when I was away. But you never found anything, did you, because I was cleverer than you. I gave the war diary to my son, and he hid it right under your nose, buried deep within your own bureaucracy. And now your regime is collapsed, your Socialist ideology is finished – and so are you.'

'How can you possibly think that I have anything to do with that? For goodness' sake, Ralf, look at me!'

'You failed. Just like the Nazis, you failed ...' Clearly impervious to any logical arguments, he keeps ranting on. '... but the future lies in a new race of people. I know that, one day, the descendants of the ancient Atlanteans will rule the Earth. Then, all unworthy life will perish and die out. There will be no more crime and no more diseases. Everyone will have a decent job and a decent life. No one will be poor anymore, and no one too rich.'

This is completely hopeless. ‘Ralf, listen, I know you’ve been through a lot – these traumatic years during the War and, afterwards, the time in East Germany – I understand.’

‘No more talk. Show me where it is.’

‘Ralf, please, I really want to help you, but not like this. I can’t tell you anything about this Secret, because there is nothing to tell.’

‘Of course you have something to tell. It was your grandfather who put you up to this, wasn’t it? He told you where they sank the boat, probably not far away, in some sheltered fjord.’

‘My grandfather died when *U-112* was sunk by your own people, out there, in the open ocean, at a depth of more than thousand metres. There is nothing more to say. There never was a conspiracy. It was only a tragic succession of coincidences and misunderstandings.’

‘Is that what they told you, these traitors?’

‘Exactly which traitors are you talking about now, Ralf? Your former comrades on *U-112*, or those who killed them?’

He impatiently waves with the barrel of his gun. ‘Enough with talking – now walk. Back there, that’s where you wanted to go, before I interrupted you, wasn’t it? Maybe the old boat was sunk, as you said. But you are still searching for the Secret, because they never put whatever the English had found on board. Instead, they hid it in here, and you know where it is. So, walk!’

He shines his torch down the passage and lets me stumble ahead, following my own unsteady shadow. As the wind and waves outside become more distant, the noise of the churning water in the darkness ahead is getting louder again.

Ralf has no problems keeping up over the uneven ground. He is still fit and alert for his age, and never lets the beam of light stray far from me.

All the while, he keeps muttering, almost as if speaking to himself. ‘Forty years ... forty long years was I trapped behind the Iron Curtain. When, at last, it seemed possible that the separation was coming to an end, and I contacted the Order again, I wanted to motivate them to try to find the location where *U-112* had been sunk, and to organise a salvage operation. But they said they were not interested anymore. They had given up, and they had stopped believing. I finally wanted to tell them the truth, that I had been part of the crew. But I could not prove it. If only I could have got the war diary back, I would have been able to convince them. It would have shown

that the official story about the submarine being sunk by the British could not have been true. Then, after the border opened, I wanted to see this island and the cave again. I heard that a village had been established here, in the meantime. So I came for a visit, and what do I find out? Janssen had moved to the island. I recognised him immediately – although he was many years older – and he recognised me. Of course, I wanted to find out why he had returned. I suspected that the Secret was still hidden somewhere nearby. The Order gave me enough money so that I could retire up here, to keep an eye on things. For almost a year, nothing happened. I began to think that maybe Janssen had told the truth, that he had moved here for his retirement too. Then, suddenly, you show up. I saw you talking to Janssen up there on the cliff for hours. So, what did he tell you? What are you trying to find? Just quickly show me where it is, and then we can get out of here.’

At the end of the main passage of the cave, the sound of the underground waves has become even more threatening than before, as the water continues to rise.

‘Tell me, Ralf – now that we’ve come all this way – what exactly did you expect to find? Take a look around – there’s nothing here but rocks.’

‘Then why did you come down to the cave, when the tide is coming in?’

‘You wouldn’t understand.’

‘Come on, girl, don’t be silly. Maybe the boat was sunk, but the Secret is still here – and you know where it is.’

‘Listen, Ralf, we need to talk about these people you saw arrive here, because ... I don’t know if you heard already about your son ...’

‘My son? What do you know about my son? What do you know about the fire?’ He is screaming uncontrollably now.

‘Ralf, I had no involvement in this.’

‘Don’t lie to me. It was you – of course, you killed him! I can see it all now: you are that woman who came to the hospital and then vanished. Ulrike told me about that. The police were looking for you, and for your three friends. Because of you, my son is dead, and there is nothing left for me to bury. I planned to go to the memorial service, leaving with the ferry tonight, but then you arrived, and I wanted to see what you would do here. So, tell me, what do you want?’

‘Ralf, I swear, I had nothing to do with the fire. These other three ... when they came to the hospital for the first time, your son must have told them where the war diary was hidden, and they found it. After that, they

thought they had all the information they needed, either to convince the Order to organise a search for *U-112*, or to do it by themselves. Either way, they didn't know who else was trying to find the submarine, and they wanted to eliminate their own tracks. So they flooded the bunker, to cover up the fact that the war diary had been taken. And then, the next day, they went back to the hospital and ... Ralf, you have to believe me, the fire was already burning when I arrived. Your daughter-in-law must have told you that I rescued your son's roommate. I would have rescued your son too, but it was already too late. At that point, there was nothing that anyone could have done for him. The other three got there only minutes before me – and I assure you, they are not my friends. I am really sorry for your loss, Ralf. I know exactly how you feel. I just lost ...'

The barrel twitches, as he gradually pulls the trigger, fighting back his tears. 'You ... murdered ... my ... son!'

So, this is it. After travelling so far, it all comes to an end here, in this cave. It is a cold world I leave behind, as the last daylight is about to fade away. Already, shadows fill the end of the passage. And there, a dark figure appears in front of the fiery sky by the entrance of the cave – the first of the three phantoms. Having pursued me for months, they have finally caught up with me.

But the man seems to be alone. He is tall and wearing a long coat that billows behind him in the wind. He carefully steps into the passage now, visibly exhausted – and he limps. Yes, it is not just the rocky ground, he definitely limps.

'*Ralf, du Hund! Lass' sie gehen!*' Peter's voice mixes with the roaring of the sea and the howling of the wind, and is amplified by the echoes within the high cavern.

Ralf turns around in surprise and flashes his torch back up the passage.

Peter is standing steady now, aiming his pistol at him. '*Du wirst dem Mädchen nichts antun so lange ich am Leben bin!*'

He takes aim – but Ralf reacts swiftly. The two shots go off simultaneously.

One bullet grazes Ralf's left arm, tearing through his coat sleeve, before hitting the rocks behind him with a splintering crash. His torch drops, the light still on, but partly blocked by the rocks on the ground.

Peter's dark outline staggers towards the right and blends into the blackness of the cave wall. Through the ringing in the ears percolates the clinking of rocks being shifted by the impact of his body.

'Peter!'

Ralf, hunched up with pain, continues firing blindly towards the entrance of the cave ... twice ... three times ... before he gives up. With his injured arm, he begins groping for the torch between the rocks, struggling to gain hold of it, his fingers reluctant to follow the nervous impulses. Then, shaking intensely, he straightens up. The artificial light beam finds me once again – once again, the same gun is aimed at me, as twitching fingers flex around the grip.

A single shot rings out.

With a howl of pain and rage, Ralf drops his right hand, holding the gun. He quickly extinguishes the torch, before Peter gets another chance of firing at him.

Darkness falls like a thick curtain, pressing hard against desperate eyes. After the echoing gunshot, silence sets in – but only temporarily. Then, slowly emerges again the background of natural noises: the steady dripping of water from the cave ceiling, the crashing of the waves underground and in the passage behind – much closer already.

But no sound from Peter; no sign of movement.

'Peter, are you badly hurt?'

Another deafening explosion from Ralf's pistol. Splinters of rock are blasted from the cave wall, no more than a foot away.

'Siobhán, get out of there! The water is coming.'

'Peter, are you alright?'

One more flash of light out of the darkness, aimed into the direction of my yell – another impact, this one even closer – much too close.

'Siobhán, you must get out immediately. Remember what I told you about this cave. And for heaven's sake, keep quiet. It was bloody stupid of me to believe you would simply walk away from here. Incidentally, Ralf, I hope you realise who she is.'

'She's a liar. I never told you this, Peter, because I knew you were a good friend of the family; but I found out from the Order that Dannreuther's wife and daughter were killed during the War – and it was not in the house fire, as you were told.'

‘No, Ralf, they weren’t killed at all, not in the fire and not otherwise.’ Peter’s voice is steady and calm now. ‘Your friends made a mistake. Elisabeth and Lena survived the War. That’s why Siobhán has come here today. You know, all this time since you arrived here, I was wondering why you had decided to return to this island. I thought you were just as haunted by the old memories as I was, compelled to retrace your steps to the very place where our lives fell apart, and possibly find another way – until today, when I found out that someone is still looking for this imaginary Secret. I immediately suspected that you were somehow involved in this. I wanted to talk to you about it – peacefully, I hoped. But as soon as I stepped outside my cabin, thinking that by now Siobhán would be safely off the island, I saw you heading towards the cliff. I called out to you, but you didn’t hear me against the wind. At first, I was confused. I couldn’t work out why you would climb down that cliff, with the water coming in. So I waited, convinced that very soon you would come up again. Then, I saw the rucksack leaning against one of the rocks – and that’s when I knew.’

Ralf does not respond. Only the furtive rustling of clothes emerges from his direction, gradually coming closer.

Peter continues to talk to him in German – taunting him, by the sound of it – distracting him, drawing his attention away from me, to give me the opportunity to escape. But I cannot leave him like this – injured and perhaps dying – while water already comes creeping out of the flooding passage.

Some larger rocks are being shifted in Ralf’s direction, as he makes a careless movement. ‘Peter, let’s work together – the two of us and the girl. Siobhán is her name? Perhaps you’re right about Elisabeth and her daughter. Perhaps the girl is telling the truth about who she is. Then we cannot hold her responsible for her grandparents’ betrayal.’

‘How dare you, Ralf, talk about Hans and Elisabeth like that!’

Peter lapses back into German, now audibly incensed, while Ralf – as slowly and as quietly as possible – scrambles closer to me in the dark. There is no way past him – and still the water in the passage behind rises ever higher.

Suddenly, Ralf stops. ‘No, Peter, that is unfair. Is that what you told the girl? I admit, it was a difficult situation, after we had met the English. No one could have foreseen that. But warning the High Command was the right thing to do. I had the law on my side, you know that. Order 154 made it

explicitly clear that we were prohibited from rescuing or in any way assisting enemy combatants.’

‘Don’t be ridiculous, Ralf, citing the old War Order again. This wasn’t about following the rules. This was about doing what was right – and that’s exactly what Hans decided to do. Can you still not see that?’

‘But, Peter, ask yourself: what was the point? They were our enemies, our direct opponents. If we helped them, for what? We didn’t fight the War to rescue enemy combatants, only to kill them during our next encounter. Come on, don’t be so naive. And, Siobhán, this fairy tale that Peter may have told you about your grandfather ... he didn’t save the English soldiers for any noble reason. They shared an important secret with him, something very valuable and powerful – that’s why he decided to collaborate with them.’

‘Siobhán, don’t listen to this.’

‘No, she needs to know the truth. She needs to understand who is responsible for all these tragic things that happened afterwards, to her family and yours. And Peter, I always liked you – really. I know you are an honest man. You were betrayed by Dannreuther as much as I was – and everyone else who was left behind on this island. And believe me, I always felt sorry that your wife and daughter got drawn into this. But it all begins with Dannreuther, when he betrayed our secret mission to the English, when he made a deal with them. And then his wife, when she found out about the conspiracy, rather than alerting our own government, she decided to go over to the enemy, somehow convincing Ingrid to come with her – who knows what she told your wife. Come on, Peter, we’ve been through so much together, first on *U-112*, then on my *U-115*. Remember how we managed to get through the many attacks that were made against us, time after time. We were a great crew, weren’t we – of course we were, you remember. Whatever they threw at us, we were unsinkable – undefeated and strong, until the very end. And then later, during the imprisonment in Scotland, we looked out for each other, didn’t we? When they locked us up together with all those SS bastards – when we found out what they had done in the concentration camps. That’s not how the Empire was meant to be. It is only ordinary humans who, in their weakness, always tend towards uncontrolled violence. A superior race does not behave like that; and that is why the Nazis failed. But there is still a chance. The solution to all our problems, the key to abolishing all evils in this world, lies hidden beneath the sea – the great

civilisation of the Atlanteans, safely protected from those who are unworthy of it. If we can find it, if we can use it – imagine, what we can accomplish. We will put an end to all suffering. We will make good all the damage we did during the War. It will be our redemption, Peter. I know exactly how you feel about what happened back then, why you moved back here. The past doesn't go away, does it – all the things that happened, all the things that went wrong. So, let's work together. We will contact the Order again. Together, I am sure we can convince them to support a systematic search for *U-112*. We will tell them the truth now, that we were part of the crew. We will tell them how we got stranded on this island, how our commander betrayed us, and how he abandoned us.'

'Abandoned – how can you believe that? They would have come back. They would have swum the whole way, if they could have – every single one of them.'

'Be honest with yourself, Peter. The simple fact of the matter is that we only had Dannreuther's word for what he had discussed with the English. He was our skipper, and we trusted him. How could you know that he really continued to be on our side, rather than forming an alliance with the enemy soldiers, when he found out about all that power and wealth that could be found down in the ocean? How could you know that they didn't find something, and kept it hidden somewhere? How could you know *any* of these things?'

'I know *all* these things, because I knew Hans. That's good enough for me.'

'Peter, please, don't be so sentimental – not now, when we have so little time. After all that happened, how can you still have faith in people?'

'Faith ... it's a curious thing, isn't it? You, Ralf, have faith in supernatural powers that might somehow be controlled by some ancient technology. I, on the other hand, had faith in my family and friends, while they were alive. And that faith did not die with them. As far as Hans is concerned, it is based, among many things, on the expression in his eyes, when we said our final good-bye, right here, outside this very cave. It is also based on the fact that I'm still alive, and he isn't. But you're right about one thing, Ralf: our time on this planet is running out, yours and mine.'

Ralf chooses not to respond, but the stealthy shifting of rocks is very close now. Then, there is a splash and a suppressed curse. In the darkness, he must have slipped on the overgrown rocks and fallen into the water that begins to

flood the back of the cave. There is the sound of frantic movements, as he scrambles a little farther away into the main passage.

‘Siobhán, are you still there?’

Peter has heard the commotion. But any response, any noise from me at all would provide Ralf with a target to aim at. Meanwhile, the escape route behind is getting more and more dangerous with every passing minute. Already, lacking any light source, it would be a blind stumble into the rising water, not knowing whether the crack that leads up to the top of the cliff is still open after all these years. At some point, surely, Ralf must realise that holding me hostage here will only get him into danger as well. He must come to his senses. Then we can all escape together through the main entrance of the cave.

‘Siobhán, you must get out of there before it’s too late.’

‘You’re crazy, Peter. It would be suicide. You’re sending the girl to her death. She can’t possibly get out of this passage. The water is already rising back here. Let’s be reasonable about this. Let’s work together.’

‘Siobhán, don’t listen to him. Get out and bring this to an end – once and for all. Forget what I said earlier on, about you not having what it takes to defeat your enemies. That was wrong. I was just trying to get you to go back to England and talk to the police. But I know you can finish this – in your own way. It’s all up to you now.’

Peter’s voice is becoming more and more constricted. Alone, he does not have much time left. And with Ralf persistently guarding the main passage, the only way to resolve the situation is to get out through this dark tunnel, up onto the headland, and back down the cliff, before the water reaches the entrance of the cave. There may still be enough time. We may still make it out of here together. Although I shall not be able to carry Peter, if I can keep him afloat, if I can manage to swim to the path that leads up the cliff, to get him above the high-water mark and out of the cold water, then I can go for help.

Ralf has retreated a little farther from the encroaching flood, still arguing with Peter, but afraid to get too close to him and risk another shoot-out.

This might be the last chance to get away unnoticed, while any splashing sound is masked by the roaring of the agitated water – already knee deep, after only a few careful wading steps into the passage.

Being pushed and pulled by the current, it is easy to lose the footing on the submerged rocks. More dangerous still are the unseen cracks in the

ground, through which the water presses upwards, before being sucked down again, as wave after wave washes into the cave. For anyone getting caught in this maelstrom, there would not be any way back.

But there, the touch of the rough cave wall on the left remains, with its many protruding rocks ... and nothing but empty blackness in front. How long can this passage possibly go on, consistently sloping downwards ... while the water continues to rise. Some of the stronger waves already reach waist level, and their pull into an unseen abyss becomes harder to resist.

Slowly, the ground seems to disappear, as the feet begin to get numb – although, in truth, it is as uneven and treacherous as before.

The cave wall now is increasingly covered with algae, suggesting that the water in this lower part of the passage will ultimately rise to well above shoulder level.

Then, what happens if I cannot find the crack that leads out of here? What if I simply continue to go farther and farther down into the rising tide, until the way back too is blocked by a violent mass of water?

Suddenly, a faint unsteady light springs up in the darkness. Ralf too has waded into the passage and, safely out of range from Peter, has switched his torch on again.

Peter, no doubt assuming that I am already well underway on my escape, must have refused to let him leave the cave through the entrance by the sea, to prevent him from climbing up the cliff and coming after me again.

Ralf has caught me now in his beam of light. He gives a panicked shout, distorted by the echoes in the narrow tunnel, but he makes no further attempts to shoot. Instead, he takes a few careful steps deeper into the water, but is almost instantly swept off his feet by a particularly strong wave and sucked into the chasm, now clearly visible near the right cave wall – a gaping hole in the ground, through which the water is pulled down in a powerful eddy. Just in time, Ralf manages to throw himself back into the main passage, and the light from his torch fades again to a distant glow.

But there is the end of the submerging tunnel, only a few steps ahead – and nothing but an impenetrable wall of rock.

So, now, I am finally trapped. Already, with the waves routinely reaching up to the chest, wading has become difficult enough. Very soon, it will be impossible even to swim, without being bashed against the sidewalls by the turbulent current sloshing back and forth. And latest at the beginning of the tunnel, there would be no way past the deadly whirlpool anymore.

Then again, the air back here is not completely stagnant. A distinct chill can be felt on the wet skin of the hands, emanating from the wall straight ahead, more so than from other directions. This can only come from a stream of air. That crack leading upwards really must be somewhere around here, and it cannot be entirely blocked.

But just then, the already dim light from behind vanishes all together. Panicked shouts erupt, increasingly more desperate, and increasingly more distant – until Ralf's hysterical screaming is cut off by a single shot.

Then there is only silence in the main passage of the cave.

One shot – surely, that was just one shot.

'Peter?'

No response, only continued silence ... and the crashing of the waves.

'Peter, hang on! I can't get back up this tunnel. The water is already too high down here. But I found the exit, and I'll be coming back for you – I promise.'

So, where *is* the exit? Even in total darkness, the soft breeze still serves as a guide, originating somewhere above. Although hidden from below, the crack may be opening up near the ceiling.

Steep though the wall is, with the many protruding rocks it is not too difficult to climb – helped, for once, by the rising water. Here, already, seems to be a ledge, with the ceiling less than two feet above. The breeze inside this confined space is definitely getting stronger – the beginning of the crack, it must be; but it is a tight squeeze, with just enough space to pull up onto it, lying completely flat.

A short distance ahead then, the gap widens, noticeably starting to slant upwards, away from the inundated tunnel. Now it is simply a question of nerves, and a little bit of luck. One hand groping ahead, the other used for support on the rough surface, while every push with aching legs brings the freedom of the open air a little closer. The most important thing is to avoid any wild movements that might dislodge rocks from above; and to keep breathing calmly and regularly.

Slowly, the thundering of the water in the caverns below recedes – push by push.

Then a larger boulder appears in front, and another – the narrow passage is blocked.

Claustrophobia is there in an instance – a wave of panic, a feeling as if the surrounding rocks suddenly pressed in more tightly, constricting and suffocating.

But the current of air is still streaming by. It can only be a sharp bend. The crack must extend in some other direction.

There, some free space, continuing upwards, but slanting back towards the seaward side of the headland. All it takes now is to roll over and squeeze past the tight corner.

Beyond it, the space is getting gradually wider again. The air is beginning to smell a little less musty. The gaps between the rocks become filled with earth. And there is light above – faint and of a dull grey – but undoubtedly the remains of daylight. The current of air is intensifying, the sound of the wind getting ever closer, increasing to the howling of a storm, as the passage opens up onto the boulder-strewn plateau.

In a dizzying instant, after the static darkness in the cave, the world is turned upside down – until straightening itself out again, with the clouds racing overhead, and the sheer drop down to the violent sea only a few feet away.

By now, the shore has vanished completely, as wave after wave is driven in by the gale to break against the cliff – except directly beneath, where the surging water is swallowed up by the cave's entrance with a hollow crashing sound that reverberates through the rock.

In this churning flood, swimming has become impossible. No one left down there could still be alive. With inexorable regularity, the sea has returned to exert its unrivalled power over the land.

While Peter sat there by the entrance of the cave, with the water rising around him, the cold taking hold of his body, his mind slowly fading away ... in that final moment, perhaps he did see the *Atlantis* again, returning out of the gathering darkness and the storm, to carry away the last faithful member of its old crew, on to a better place – not a utopia that has long vanished beneath the sea, but a world in which the memories of those who have gone before us are still alive.

Standing once more at the edge of the cliff, how easy would it be to follow down that same path – if we could just close our eyes and let death gently catch us in peaceful oblivion.

However, having chosen the easy way out, what if things turn out differently? What if, instead, we are being swallowed up by an eternal abyss,

where we never stop falling into our worst nightmares, filled with all our failures and regrets; where the memories of those who have gone before us only serve as a constant reminder that they had to die as a result of our indecision and our lack of foresight? But if the easy exit is barred, where do we turn to find the right path to carry on? And what do we do when no other path is open to us?

Even as the last daylight fades away, high above in the dark sky, the tallest peak of the mountains preserves a golden-red glow, still illuminated by the sun that, viewed from down below, has already vanished beneath the horizon. And emerging from the grey clouds, the first glittering snowflakes begin sailing down to Earth in a swirling curtain.

There *is* then one path left to walk. Its end is uncertain, and there may not be a way back; but at least its origin lies clear head.

So, you may rest now, Peter. I understand what remains to be done at last. Rest now, you troubled wanderer, while I take the final steps alone.

Alone but for the three elusive figures that are still hiding in the shadows – mere shadows themselves – nameless, faceless remnants of a dark past.

They were always there in the background, always unseen, always watching – waiting for their opportunity to strike. They followed me when they thought that I might lead them to a powerful secret. They overtook me and left me for dead when they thought that they did not need me anymore. They watched me when I was clueless and undecided. They watched me when I was weak and frightened. Well, they can watch me now, as we set out on our last journey together. For, now, the moment has come to lure these phantoms out from the shadows – and then we shall see how well they do in the light.

CHAPTER NINE

THE LAST ENEMY

The end of the road – on the highest point around, with nowhere else to go but down. The line of other peaks and ridges of the mountainous archipelago lies beneath now, stretching far towards the north; whereas the vast expanse of the open ocean towards the south and west vanishes without a visible horizon.

While the moon and the stars remain hidden above a thick layer of clouds, the only light that can be seen emerges from the yellow dome of the tent, left behind on a narrow ledge halfway down the steep slope – a lonely beacon in the dark.

Large snowflakes swirl around it, driven by the strengthening wind, accumulating on the ground in an ever-deeper layer, filling the many gullies that scar the mountainside, and gradually eliminating the single line of footprints that leads away from the tent and up onto the summit.

The trap is set. Now, there is nothing more to do but wait.



Sitting here, leaning back against the rucksack, with all activity suspended, it might seem as if time were on hold – as if the hours simply stretched ahead indefinitely, without life truly progressing.

But already, a change is underway in the dark sky, as the last clouds sail away with the passing of the storm, and the stars come out again.

Then, gradually, another type of light begins to appear, only a pale shimmer at first, high above, but getting ever more intense – until the whole sky is alight with glowing green waves, which fade to a deep purple along their upper edges.

And just as the gateway opens, with an ominous creaking and groaning, the mountain comes alive.

On the western slope, fractures have begun to form in the fresh layer of snow; while, inside the gullies, the even deeper snow has already turned into powerful streams.

Down on the narrow ledge, the tent now lies in tatters, having been cut open with a knife. Although the torch inside has burned itself out, nearby, in the unsteady shine of the northern lights, three figures can be seen struggling upwards against the glistening cascade.

They have seen me now, standing on what previously would have looked like a lonely summit to them – the very spot they try to reach; for they know that, very soon, this will be the only safe place left on the entire mountainside.

To them, I am but a dark silhouette against the flaming sky – but they know who I am. Perhaps they also understand now why I have come here – that it *was* for Alison, for her all along, for what they did to her. Perhaps in my outline they can see her as clearly as I see her standing next to me. Perhaps that is why they are scared now. Perhaps, in the rustling of the snow, they can hear the ghostly whisper of all those whose lives they ended, telling them that now it is their turn to leave this world.

Betrayed at last by their ideological fanaticism – their one fatal weakness – they came all the way up here, searching for some supernatural secret. And what they found instead is nature, plain and simple – yet possessing of powers that are beyond any of us.

The green flames flare up even more intensely now above the snowy landscape – fire and water again, but different this time; fire that does not consume, but still brightens the night; water that has evolved from a homogeneous mass into countless intricate ice crystals, each one made unique by its own little imperfections. And this time, the elements are on my side.

In an act of desperate anger, one of the figures unslings a rifle from his shoulder, trying to gain a stable stance for taking steady aim – but it is too late.

The avalanche begins in one fluid movement. Breaking off from just below the summit, its billowing front grows rapidly as it accelerates down the steep slope, impacting onto the ledge, rising up in a breaking wave that engulfs the three figures, drowning their shouts of terror, and carrying them away – as it plunges farther into the depth, still growing, until it washes over the plateau at the top of the cliff, skipping off it in a great jet, out over the sea, and vanishing into darkness.

For a while, the distant rumbling of dislodged boulders can still be heard. Then a hushed silence settles. The mountain is at peace again.

Fleetingly, the silhouette of a solitary bird can be seen sailing rapidly across the luminescent veil, as if emerging from it. Then, with a final wave, the northern lights fade away. Night has fallen once more.

CHAPTER TEN

THE GREAT DAWN

And so, the circle closes. I am left behind again, all by myself, as life slowly drains away into the cold that closes in on me from all directions. The second chance is used up. The borrowed time has run out. At the end of an arduous detour, after many losses, after many defeats and a brief victory, I am right back where I started.

A stony silence still hangs over the western slope. There is no sign of life ascending from the dark depth. The relentless pursuers are no more, and no one else is left to follow them.

Thus we keep fighting, until the last enemy to be defeated is dead. We get lost in the process, and we try to find our way back home; but we cannot see it anymore, because we have changed, and the right path has vanished from our sight.

Then, as the cold slowly fades into numbness, a heavy tiredness descends. Finally, for the first time in months, with no more need to struggle on, it will be such a relief to give in to the pull of the night, and to fall into a long dreamless sleep.

Already, a great calm settles. And with the last fears dissipating, Peter's image returns to mind. What would he think of me now? Would he still be proud of me? Would he recognise how tired I am, having come all the way to this lonely mountaintop? Will he be standing by my side, looking down to me with an understanding smile, until I have crossed the threshold? Or will he tell me to get up, to leave this place and to let go of the past? But the past is all I have gained in this quest, while everything else is lost.

The last things left in this world are memories – as Alison appears again, slowly emerging from the dark, with Gran walking next to her.

I know, there were so many things that went wrong, so many mistakes I made. But I never gave up, and I did it – what you told me to do, it is finished. So, please don't think too harshly of me. Let me join you now, for I am ready. I can feel it, I can let go now. I'm close to you already, so close. I am ready to move on.

The rustling of wings – some rapid motion on the right – as a dark shape materialises at the very edge of vision.

A raven perches on a nearby rock, perfectly quiet and still, with only its feathers stirring softly in the breeze. Even in the dim moonlight, it must have seen me lying in the snow, and now it has come to enquire if I am dead already.

Well, my friend, I'm afraid you'll have to take a number and wait. But don't worry, it won't be long. Then again, you know that already, don't you? After all, you're the expert in these things.

It calmly gazes at me with unblinking eyes, only slightly cocking its head, but otherwise sitting completely motionless.

Now don't just sit there, awkwardly on the side. What? You want me to turn around and look at you properly, to acknowledge the significance of your presence here?

No reaction.

'Come on, say something!'

Despite this outburst, the raven remains unmoved. No facial expressions betray its thoughts.

Silly bird!

'There, is that better? See, you have my full attention now – and believe me, I know exactly why you're here. But quite frankly, right now, I couldn't care less.'

And neither does it, of course. It is untroubled by the fragile feelings of human beings. There are no emotions built into the laws of nature. It is just about life and death, and that is all. Consequently, there can be no moral ambiguities in nature, only ideal states of right and wrong, simple and clear, black and white – just as a black bird on white snow.

Although ... strictly speaking, the raven is not entirely black. There is a warm glow on its shiny plumage, and it seems to be intensifying.

The cold wind from the continent is getting stronger. The raven should turn around to face it, but the bird refuses to do so. Instead, it continues to gaze at me intently.

'You shouldn't be sitting there like this, you know. You'll only get your feathers in a tousele.'

A few snowflakes are lifted off the ground around the rock the raven is perching on; and still it does not stir.

'Why have you come here?'

Suddenly, a strong gust throws up a swirl of snow. Without a warning, the raven takes to the air in one effortlessly fluid motion. It is going to fly away.

'No! Where are you going? You can't leave me here!'

The raven hovers some distance above the ground, watching me struggle to get to my numbed feet. Then, with one last enquiring look, it flies off towards the mainland.

There, in the east, a narrow band of purple is stretched out just above the horizon. The distant snow-covered mountains are slowly turning from grey to blue. Soon, it will be the dawn of a new day. And so, life does go on.

Or is it death? Is that what death is like? To be standing alone on top of a tall mountain, high above the clouds and petty worries of everyday life, above everyone else, without enemies and without friends, without hatred and without love. Is that what it all leads up to in the end, to be able to see things from the perspective of eternity? Removed from the merciless progression of time, perhaps a meaningful pattern begins to form from the apparent injustice and randomness of life; when the true secrets of life are finally revealed.

But we cannot exist in such a state. It is the progression of time that gives us life. It is therefore in the progression of time – in our lack of understanding of the past, in the fleetingness of the present moment, and in the uncertainty of the future – that we must try to find meaning.

No, it will not end like this. There is still too much pain, too much that is unresolved. There are too many things that are left undone.

We live our lives for those who came before us, for those who lived and died for us. The sacrifices they made become our responsibility. We carry on with the tasks that they began, so that their lives and deaths were not in vain.

All this is real and not a dream. This is life, and it is not over yet. This planet that is presently emerging from the darkness of space is where we belong. To a distant observer, it must appear to be completely unremarkable, easy to overlook in the outskirts of an ordinary galaxy, revolving around an ordinary star – one of many ordinary planets, and seemingly expendable. In the vastness of space, it may not be very special. But until death sends us back to beyond the great dawn of time and space from which our universe expanded, it is the only home we have got – and it sure is beautiful.

Any moment now the sun will rise. A few low clouds and some morning fog still linger along the coast – but it will be a fine sunny day.

The raven has vanished into the distant glow. I am alone again, and I cannot stay here forever.

It is time to move on.

