

# The Signs of a Mystery

by

Nikolai Nawri

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**To SOPHIE SCHOLL,**  
WHOSE LIFE AND EARLY DEATH  
MOTIVATED THE WRITING OF THIS  
NOVEL — ON BEHALF OF ALL THOSE,  
WHOSE LIVES HAVE BEEN DESTROYED  
BY OPPRESSIVE IDEOLOGIES.



PART ONE

# THE WRONG DIMENSION

Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer  
The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,  
Or to take arms against a sea of troubles  
And, by opposing, end them.

William Shakespeare in *Hamlet*, Act 3 Scene 1



# PROLOGUE

And still there was no sign of the *Atlantis*. There was nothing but the grey fog closing in on them from all directions. The craggy silhouettes of the nearby islands had disappeared, and Fareøya, the small island at the southern tip of the Lofoten archipelago, had become isolated from the rest of the world.

The northern lights that had occasionally illuminated the sky during the night had faded away. Only the moon provided a diffuse glow – almost full, but beginning to wane. And the sun would not rise again for another two weeks.

Of course, this winter darkness was their main ally, possibly the only ally they had left. Yet time was running short. Nine days already into their mission ... At this point, they should be approaching Scotland. But despite their meticulous preparations, things had not gone as planned. Now, instead of nearing their destination, they were back, almost where they had started. And all he could do was wait and hope and keep the faith in his men.

Most importantly, however, he had to keep his nerves. He owed that to the crew. This was not the moment to allow himself to fall apart. He had to focus on the difficult task that still lay ahead – delayed, but not abandoned. He knew that, should also their second attempt fail, they would not be given another chance.

In the meantime, they were stuck on this godforsaken island, all their plans suspended. Only the sea remained in motion, as wave after wave came running up the bleak shoreline, or eddied around the submerged rocks with relentless determination and persistence – taunting him in his helpless inaction.

Already, with the fog ascending from the dark water, it felt as if the sea stretched out cold clammy hands, bent on smothering him, or trying to pull him down into the rising tide. As if it knew that, without their boat, they had no chance of escaping; that without it, they were not going to leave the island alive; that they were going to die there, even before the enemy got to them.

The enemy ... who exactly was that? Or, more importantly, who were their friends? Friend or foe – these distinctions had seemed so obvious at the beginning of the war. But now, boundaries had started to blur.

Nationality was no longer a useful concept to determine who was on your side and who was not. In a situation of war, allies were won with the betrayal of old comrades. Friendship gained came at the cost of new animosity elsewhere. And as hostility spread around the globe, how far could friendship reach? How long could it be expected to last?

Nonetheless, despite the fighting, despite all the death and hardship, life went on. Time never stopped. As the tides, it kept going, endlessly. With a complete disregard for human indecision, it pulled everything along.

And so, as predictably as the water rising again, a new day had just begun – 17 December 1940 – only eight days until Christmas. Soon, another year would be over, another bad year – the worst so far, and nothing to look forward to in the next. With hatred and determination growing on both sides, it was clear that the war was going to get worse before it was over.

Even the thought of Elisabeth, waiting for him back home in Kiel – with Lena, their little daughter – had ceased to be comforting. Since the first English air raids in summer, the city with its major naval base was not a safe place anymore. And with German attacks on English cities getting ever more intense, the English were bound to retaliate in equal measures.

Then he thought he saw something. At first, it was only the slightest indication of a solid outline within the wavering opacity of the thick fog.

Was it an illusion? Or a dream? He could not be sure. Had he managed to fall asleep after all, still slumped against the rough wall of the cave, huddled together with the English soldiers? Had it not been for the damp cold biting through his thin uniform, he could well have believed that this was just a nightmare from which he could get himself to wake up, if he concentrated hard enough.

But a moment later, he was certain – it definitely was not a dream. The grey submarine that had slowly pushed itself out of the darkness was undoubtedly real. It was now getting to a halt at a safe distance from the rocky shore, faintly illuminated by the pale moonlight. The steady humming of the diesel engines carried across the waves. And on the side of the conning tower, their new emblem could be seen: the Pole Star shining down onto a lone island on the horizon. This really was their boat.

The others had managed to bring her back to life. They had not abandoned him. And, after two long days and two longer nights, emerging from the darkness and the grey fog, the *Atlantis* had finally arrived.





The night-sky was not dark anymore. Following hours of total blackout, the criss-crossing beams of bright searchlights were now wiping away the stars, occasionally catching a low cloud, or reflecting off the silver barrage balloons, which swayed ghostlike over the vague silhouette of the city.

Above the wailing of the air raid sirens, the unnerving steady drone could be heard of the first bombers, swarming like invisible birds of prey – more probably already crossing the Channel. Perhaps they would pass by high above, bringing terror, death, and destruction to cities farther north, and London would be spared. Or, perhaps, the bombing would return. Then, as on the terrible night of their arrival, the great city would bleed again, the orange and red blaze of burning homes gushing up into the sky.

Already, the devastation was horrific, with few buildings left undamaged and most roofs gone. Streams of greenish white dust, deposited by the explosives that had rained down onto them two nights ago were blowing along the streets like poisonous snow, swirling around street corners and through ruined walls.

Elisabeth knew it was risky staying up in the attic room again, directly underneath the rafters. But with so many buildings destroyed, living space had become limited in the East End, even with half the population either evacuated or dead. And so, the top floors in the remaining buildings, normally abandoned, provided the last places to stay for someone not only hiding from the Germans, but also from the English.

She looked over to the old bed where her daughter slept, still clasping her favourite doll – the one toy she had been able to take along on their desperate flight. What Lena needed now more than anything else was rest. During the afternoon, her cough from the previous nights had started again, and worse than ever before.

It had taken an hour until, out of sheer exhaustion from coughing and crying over the disappearance of her friend, the little girl had finally fallen asleep. Now, Elisabeth could not get herself to wake her up again – not until the first bombs fell within sight of this elevated vantage point. Then she would have no choice. They would have to go back to the nearest shelter – Bethnal Green. She remembered that name and, if necessary, she would find it again, even alone.

They would hurry along the deserted streets, forced to climb over piles of rubble from collapsed buildings in some places, carefully avoiding large craters in others. Where a bomb had opened up the pavement and broken through into the sewers, the stench steaming up into the crisp winter air would be sickening. They would make their way, as fast as they could, towards the beam of the searchlight near the entrance to the unfinished underground station; down the slippery steps of the staircase, dimly lit at the top by a single lightbulb; down the unmoving escalators, and eventually onto the overcrowded platform.

They would then have to find some space among the hundreds of people, sitting or lying on thin mattresses, blankets, or simply on coats; drinking tea from thermos flasks, or sharing a simple dinner of sandwiches and chocolate; chatting quietly, or playing a game of cards; then desperately trying to get some sleep, to recover the strength necessary to deal with the harsh reality above ground – all waiting for the relief of hearing the steady tone of the “all clear” signal at dawn.

But sunrise was still hours away. And she knew that the German bombers were not the sole danger for them in this big city. Far riskier perhaps was the exposure in these busy public shelters, where after months of persistent bombings, sharing not only the same confined space, but also the same plight and the same hatred towards a common enemy, a tightly knit watchful community had formed – a community in which, every evening, people queued for hours to get their usual spot on the platform. These new underground neighbours had come to know each other intimately, and the arrival of strangers would not go unnoticed for long – especially if they looked and sounded as German as she did.

During the many endless nights, with people closely assembled, information passed freely: news about fatalities among shared acquaintances, about homes that had recently been destroyed, about events in other parts of the country, or about the fortunes of war on the Continent. Enquiries were made about missing people. Rumours were circulated about secret ammunition factories and government offices, hidden away in the unused railway tunnels. In such an environment, how easily would news spread about the arrival of two German women with their young daughters? How long could they rely on people’s assumption that they had to be Jewish refugees?

And Lena ... the child worried her more than anything. In the already weakened state she was in, the danger of falling seriously ill in the poorly ventilated shelter was too great. There were too many sick people assembled in too little space, with too little clean air between them. What if Lena caught pneumonia or tuberculosis? What if she had already been infected? What options would they have then, in their present situation, to get proper medical treatment? On their first night in the shelter, Lena had already attracted far too much attention with her coughing, and not only compassion, but also indignation and angry remarks from people who were equally afraid of the spread of infectious diseases.

The coughing had begun in the rowing boat, during the final stage of crossing the Channel, just as they had been approaching the dark Essex coast, and complete silence was essential. Then already, Lena's distress had provoked nervous complaints from some of the other refugees. They had remonstrated with her, telling her to be quiet. And it was impossible for the poor girl to understand why everyone was always angry with her, when she felt so miserable.

Threatened from above as well as below, Elisabeth knew that, no matter what she did, hiding from one danger would unavoidably expose her to another. Their survival would therefore depend on balancing the two risks. And with Lena's health deteriorating rapidly, she was determined not to expose her daughter to the discomfort and resentment in the underground tunnels, until bombs started to fall close to their neighbourhood.

Ingrid had disagreed, the previous evening. She had insisted that the public shelter was still the safest place for them; that going there, once the bombing had begun, would be too late and far too dangerous in itself. But Ingrid did not have to worry about her daughter. Rosemarie was much stronger than Lena. They had argued vehemently about whether to go or not, until the sirens had started, and Ingrid had decided to leave, together with their English friends. The two girls had desperately clung to each other, as if they had feared they might never see each other again; until in the end, they had to be separated by force.

At that moment, Ingrid's had seemed to be the sensible decision. But then, the following morning, she and Rosemarie had not returned. In the large crowd down on the platform, they had become separated from the others, and no one had seen them since. No bombings had occurred over London that night, and there had been no reported fatalities. Then what had

happened? Had the two been arrested? Or had the suspicion among the underground crowd already turned to violence? In either case, Elisabeth had no way of finding out. Getting the police involved was only going to get her arrested and interned as well – or worse, deported back to Germany.

All day she had waited for Ingrid to return, increasingly desperate towards the evening. Finally, she could wait no longer. Their friends had left for Euston Station as planned, and Elisabeth had had no choice but to go with them. This was their chance to get out of London, possibly the only one they would get. It had been difficult enough for their supporters to obtain for them these precious tickets – for the night train to Manchester. And now their resources were almost exhausted.

With both their luggage, in the blacked-out and smoke-filled hall of the station, Elisabeth had waited in vain for her friend, still hoping against hope, that Ingrid would turn up at the last moment. The large clock had counted out the minutes at a faster and faster rate, as the time for their departure came closer. The ominous N°13 on the platform sign had been illuminated by dim blue light, while underneath, on the crowded platform, people moved about in near darkness.

More and more passengers had boarded the train in an orderly fashion and vanished behind the covered-up windows, visibly relieved to be able to get away from the war-torn capital. Among them, eventually, also her devoted friends, who had helped her so much. Reluctantly, they had agreed to depart without her, leaving her behind on her own, alone in the largest city in Europe, in a country, whose language she barely spoke.

For standing in the busy station, surrounded by uncertainties and risks, Elisabeth had come to a decision. Somewhere out there, among the millions of strangers, had to be two people she knew and loved. And she was not going to abandon them.

Shortly before midnight, the platform had emptied. The last goods and newspapers had been loaded, the doors had been closed, and the guard had given the signal for departure. Briefly, his green lantern had flashed in the dark, accompanied by a shrill whistle. Then, with only a few minutes delay, the long train had pulled out of the station, away from the vulnerable south coast and the crumbling metropolis.

Now, Elisabeth was back in their small attic room, and still Ingrid had not returned – another mysterious disappearance. She knew then that something had gone terribly wrong. Starting tomorrow, regardless of the dangers, she

would have to go looking for her friend – and she did not have a lot of time. The winter had just begun, and they were already low on heating material. When the last lump of coal and the last piece of wood had been used up, the cold and lack of proper food and medicine would make matters even worse for Lena. Her only option was to find Ingrid quickly, so that they could leave London together and re-join their friends in Prestwich.

Elisabeth glanced at her watch, one of her few remaining valuables, faithfully ticking away the seconds, those fleeting markers of a restless time. Nineteen minutes past two, on 22 December 1940 – only three days until Christmas. The second Christmas since the beginning of the war, and the fighting went on, relentlessly. Would she have the strength and skills necessary to survive in this world?

Looking out over the ruined buildings, she wondered what would be left of the world when the fighting ultimately ceased. If the devastation that could be seen from her window was not enough to defeat this people, they would never surrender. Surrounded by their dead, the spirit of the survivors appeared unbroken, and the traumatic events only increased their determination to carry on. How much more death and destruction would it take on both sides to bring this manmade catastrophe to an end?

And Lena – if they made it through – how old would she be when the war was finally over? How much of all this would she remember?

Fifty years from now – Elisabeth wondered – who will be left alive? Will life continue to be dominated by chaos and violence? What kind of place will this world be then? Just a barren wasteland, left behind by human strife? Or will a new generation emerge from the ashes, with more foresight and fewer prejudices?

Fifty years from now – if we make it through – Lena may have grown-up children of her own. What kind of problems will they be facing?

Fifty years from now ...



CHAPTER ONE

# A PERFECTLY NORMAL ADVENTURE

All is white ... our planet hidden underneath a bright blanket of clouds, resting peaceful and quiet.

Diffuse light breaks through the intricate pattern of frost that has formed outside the window.

The aircraft still glides smoothly through the thin air, with a reassuring steady drone. Everything appears to be normal. It does not seem to have been anything in the real world that brought the desperately needed sleep to an abrupt end – a sudden noise or turbulence.

No concrete memory remains, only a lingering shadow of confusion and fear that reaches out from the other side of sleep, leaving the heart rate elevated and the breathing faster and more shallow than usual – a vague feeling of falling into empty space.

It must have been the same wretched dream again: being immersed in water – immersed, but not suspended; betrayed by the formerly familiar element; unsupported by seemingly natural circumstances. Unsettling, of course, but in the end just another nightmare, nothing to be bothered about in the real world.

Since our departure, the sun has circled around to the other side of the aircraft, now moving along its southern arc, heading towards evening and a night without sunset. But the endless daylight in the far South is only borrowed from the dark world left behind on the other side of the globe. Much too soon, we will have to give it back.

A few minutes to five ... after almost eight hours in the air, we should be at Aurora soon. Eight hours, and most of it spent asleep – uneasily perhaps, but at least uninterrupted for the first time in days, for the first time since the murder.

As if the year had not been exciting enough already, with several momentous occurrences – and positive for the most part. A year in which injustices were defeated and borders broken down. A year in which we began

talking to the Argentinians again; when apartheid was abolished, and Mandela released from prison, at last; when the Iron Curtain opened, with the mighty Soviet Union gradually falling apart, and Germany reunited – bloody Germany, booting us out of the semi-finals. Then, just as the Cold War comes to an end, the fighting starts again in the Middle East. And so, history continues to be written by the big events of global significance.

Despite that, it is the little things, which happen close to us, that affect us most of all; those very personal incidents that never make it into the news or into the history books – an unexpected phone call and a belated job offer. And before we know it, we find ourselves suspended in mid-air, moving inexorably towards a destination that only three months ago had seemed completely out of reach. And with the realisation of that certainty come the doubts. It was easy to apply for the position on Antarctica, when there appeared to be no chance of ever being accepted, when it was unnecessary to consider the consequences of being separated from ordinary life for such a lengthy period.

Separated from Alison – her letter still clutched in my hand, the envelope involuntarily crumpled during sleep. The card inside it ... crumpled too. Thin, irregular lines now run across the picture, across the two emperor penguins standing in an empty snowscape, touching flippers, and looking towards the sunset – a bit twee perhaps, but still very cute; together with the inscription: “Lots of love in a cold world.” There was nothing else she had to add, except her name. That lifelong, unwavering friendship she has given – all contained in her signature. Six handwritten characters conveying more than any number of platitudes and conventional greetings ever could.

But while friendship remains implicit within the empty spaces of the card, its spirit has changed during the short week since it was written. When, normally, it would have radiated cheerful optimism, it now projects apprehension and the fear of tragically losing another friend – not to human violence this time, but to the harsh forces of nature.

In return for this faithful dedication, right at the very moment when Alison needed me more than ever before, I abandoned her. I walked away from her, through the entrance gates of the RAF station, to board the plane for Antarctica; leaving her behind, standing alone by her car, lost amidst the aftermath of a ruthless crime. And neither her encouragement for me to go through with the journey as planned, nor her insistence on driving me the



hundred miles to Brize Norton herself, to make sure that I got off all right, does anything to alleviate the guilty conscience.

Gran, meanwhile ... although she is still doing well, a lot can happen even in a few months. So quickly ...

Paul's voice faintly penetrates the sound of the engines, but the words are unintelligible. He has half turned in his co-pilot seat, peering through the opening from the cockpit, flashing the fingers of his left hand – only five more minutes to Aurora.

Sure enough, we are already descending. The low clouds over the ocean are left behind, and directly underneath us, the sharp white line of the leading edge of the ice shelf can be seen, dropping off steeply into the blue-green water of the Weddell Sea. A few icebergs have broken off from the sheer cliff, drifting among the scattered floes of broken-up sea ice. And stretched out in front of us, the plateau of permanent snow extends all the way to the distant horizon in the east.

So, this is it then. As the long journey comes to an end, it is time to take a mental leap as well: to leave Britain behind, and to focus on what lies ahead; to move away from the dreary grey winter skies and the customary last-minute Christmas bustle of the civilised world; far away from Satanic rituals, abductions, and murders – into the cold sanity of Antarctica and a perfectly normal adventure.

Somewhere underneath us should now be the compound of the research base. The few structures above the snow should show up as a collection of dark dots. But from the air, they are all lost in a limitless sea of white.

Then the aircraft banks left, curving around towards the north, while continuing its steady descent. The irregular surface of the ice shelf becomes clearer. And there, up ahead, the landing site comes into view – the first token of any human presence on this frozen continent.

Circling ever lower over the ice shelf, the skiway is shown to be a patch of relatively smooth snow – marked by red flags straining in the wind, and surrounded by a rough pattern of pressure ridges and crevasses. A large sledge with several fuel drums is parked on one side, together with an old shipping container that has been converted into a basic shelter. Nearby, a lone figure, clad in one of the Institute's red and blue survival suits, is sitting sideways on a snowmobile, with a smaller, empty sledge in tow.

The twin engine plane is being buffeted about, as it turns into the wind again, rapidly descending towards the improvised airfield now.

Engines roaring at full throttle, the skis make their first contact with the snow, skidding over the remaining ripples on the groomed surface. As the marker flags rush past, the engine noise decreases. The seesaw over the soft ground gradually weakens and eventually runs out. The propellers judder to a stop. The snow that has been stirred up during our landing settles again into its natural swirling motion.

We are there – no, *here*. This is it. At the end of a long journey, the distant “there” is no more. We have arrived.

Paul extricates himself from his seat, stretches, and steps into the sparse cabin. ‘Everything all right back there?’

‘So far, so good.’

He nods, smiling. ‘I’ll open the cargo doors.’

Brandon follows from the cockpit, also a little drowsy from the long flight.

‘Thanks for the lift, Captain.’

‘Pleasure. And ... well, good luck out there.’ He glances through the frosted windows, looking concerned. ‘It’ll be fine. Now in summer, you’re only a few flying hours away from Halo. So, if there’s anything, any kind of trouble, we’ll get you out.’

But his words are more reassuring than his expression. We all know that the main base is a long way away, especially if the weather turns bad.

Paul swings the cargo doors open. A blast of ice crystals enters the cabin. ‘This is you, Siobhán – last stop. I could attach the stepladder, but it almost isn’t worth it. It’s not far down.’

‘That’s all right. I believe I can manage.’

‘Just take your rucksack for now. We’ll hand down your kit bag with the rest of the cargo.’

And there it is – Antarctica, empty and white. Even the atmosphere seems to consist of ice, pressing in on us hard and cold. A trace of exhaust fumes still hangs around the aircraft, but it dissipates quickly into the turbulent air. Beyond that is the pristine, dry smell of permanent snow, the frozen surface now only a few feet below.

So, here we go: just one small step for a woman – or jump, rather.

With a reassuring crunch, the boots leave a distinct mark in the dry snow, but only temporarily. Already, the footprints are being eroded away. Our human presence on this continent is still young and insecure. We are still

desperately trying to cling to its edges, while the ceaseless wind and the motion of the ice pushes us back out to sea, telling us in no uncertain terms that we are not meant to be here. And yet, against all odds, I am – I really am.

After dreaming without hope of ever being given a chance, after the seemingly pointless effort of applying for a position for which, by default, I had been disqualified even before I was born, after the inevitable initial rejection – this is it.

The man from the base comes walking towards us. He does not slow down as he approaches and, in passing, only places his hand on my shoulder. Together with a brief nod, this is his sole recognition of my presence. My own excitement notwithstanding, in the larger scheme of things, my arrival here is clearly not the main priority at the moment.

The man climbs up into the cabin. He greets Paul by name and enquires about the flight. Together they disappear into the cockpit, leaving me alone to take in the scenery – to the extent that it is visible.

A steady stream of snow emerges from the distant interior of the vast continent, having travelled perhaps for days through a world that is still largely unknown to us. Through this veil of suspended crystals, the low sunlight scatters as if emanating from it.

What a place. Who would have thought that a wind-blown desolation could be so beautiful – independent and pure, unpolluted by human civilisation and strife, without any historical or social baggage, without anything to keep us apart, to separate us into different camps. We are all newcomers here, all strangers.

And it is definitely going to be a white Christmas this year.

‘Siobhán!’

The man from the base has appeared again in the open cargo door and jumps down. He smiles as he approaches. *‘Is mise Iain. Ceud mìle fàilte.’*

‘Uhh ... *tapadh leat*. But beyond that, I’m sorry to say my Gaelic is rather limited.’

Iain laughs. ‘That’s all right. It’s just that with your first name, and since you live in Scotland, I thought I’d give it a go. But you’re very welcome anyway.’

He motions towards the aircraft. ‘Sorry about the wait, by the way. We had to clarify first whether they’d be able to fly back today. Brandon’s been

on the radio with the control tower at Halo, and they're saying that in a few hours the airport will be down. The weather at their end has already turned pretty nasty, and it's heading our way. I guess you saw the clouds from the air. So, they have no choice but to stay here for the night, and quite possibly longer. The good news is that there is no need for refuelling now, which is just as well. Avtur fumes have a nasty habit of getting into your gloves and sucking the last bit of heat out of your hands.'

Paul calls over from the cargo door, holding a stack of sealed plastic containers.

With a quick gesture of an excuse, Iain walks back to the aircraft, to receive them. He checks the labels and nods. 'Medical supplies ... I need to get them inside, before they freeze. They were the main reason for sending the plane over today – and the airmail, of course.'

He passes the containers on to me and takes hold of the large postbag that Paul lowers down from the cabin.

With obvious excitement, he carries it back towards his snowmobile. 'This is the most precious cargo we get down here, especially now after the long winter months, when we had nothing coming in from the outside world at all. And with the weather closing in once more, it looks like it got here just in time for the holidays.'

He begins securing the bag on the sledge. 'Brandon said he was going to contact Aurora. They'll probably send two of the lads to help secure the aircraft and then take the pilots back to the base. However, I would suggest you come with me now.'

'Sounds good. But, where is it?'

'Aurora?' Iain squints into the icy haze, glistening underneath the retreating sun. 'You can't see it from here today. The blowing snow is too intense. But it's only about two miles from here – down this way.' He points towards the south. 'The old skiway was a little closer to the base, until it was destroyed during the winter when a crevasse opened up right across it. These ice shelves are in constant motion, you know, not only pushing out to sea, but also heaving up and down with the tides. Cracks and pressure ridges appear and disappear all the time. So, we must constantly be on the lookout for a sufficiently smooth surface that is long enough for the *Twin Otter* to land on. At the moment, this here is the closest we can find.'

‘Anyhow ...’ He takes back the plastic containers, to fasten them next to the postbag. ‘I really need to get these drugs out of the cold. Just let me strap your rucksack here onto the sledge, and then we can get the rest of your stuff.’

By now, the kit bag has also been unloaded. Sitting there in the snow, underneath the aircraft, it looks rather more intimidating than it did back in Cambridge. Tired as I am, it feels to have got a lot heavier too. It will not be easy to get it off the ground and over to the snowmobile. But I cannot afford to show any weakness now, to arrive here as the girl who is unable to carry even her own luggage.

Iain’s crunching steps approach from behind. He stops discretely off to one side, hovering about uncertainly. But he cannot get himself to ignore my second failed attempt at shouldering the unwieldy bag. ‘Not meaning to be patronising or anything, but if you need help with that ...’

‘Actually, I do – cheers. It didn’t seem quite so heavy when I packed it. But I’m absolutely knackered from the trip.’

‘Sure, no worries. I know exactly what you mean.’ He picks up the bag with a polite exaggeration of the effort required. ‘Last year, I did not get much sleep either on the various flights here.’

‘It would have been nice to go on the supply ship, but it left Hull only the day after I got formally accepted for the wintering position.’

‘Yes, the *Steadfast* got here twelve days ago. It’s still moored down in Creek 9. That’s the big crack in the ice shelf edge, which allows us to get down to the ocean. You’ll see it, once you start your research – although, given the weather conditions, that may not be for a while. Anyway, at least you managed to get here now.’

‘As a last-minute replacement, judging by the way they rushed me through the basic training courses. It was quite a surprise when, one evening, I suddenly received a phone call from the Institute – especially after they’d completely ignored my application the first time around. They didn’t give me much in terms of an explanation either.’

Iain occupies himself with loading the kit bag onto the sledge, looking uncomfortable, and chooses not to respond.

‘So, my predecessor had to go back to England then?’

‘Kevin? Yes.’ Iain shoots a sideways glance. ‘But he’s better now, last time I heard.’

‘Better? Did he become sick? Or did something go wrong during diving?’

‘Oh, no, nothing of the sort.’ Iain looks even more uncomfortable. ‘No, diving went surprisingly well, considering it was the first year we had the marine science programme down here at Aurora.’

The same evasiveness on the subject of the previous biologist as at headquarters. There is definitely something dodgy about this, something to enquire about at a later point; but it will have to wait. With my bag secured, apparently, we are ready to leave.

Iain takes two pairs of goggles, which had been hanging from the handlebar of the snowmobile, and shakes off the accumulated snow. ‘I brought you one of these. You’ll need them, once we get going.’

He puts on his own goggles and mounts the snowmobile. ‘You should have enough space on the seat behind me. Just hold on to these grips in the back. The ride is going to be a bit bumpy, I’m afraid. With the wind we’ve had recently, the snow surface has become quite uneven. It’s hard to tell in the glare of the sunlight, but over there you can see some of the sastrugi: this regular pattern of waves, which look like they froze in the moment of breaking. We try to maintain a groomed track between the base and here, but it’s mostly a hopeless endeavour.’

Iain turns his attention towards the front. ‘Right, here we go then. Pad my shoulder, if you need to catch my attention. I won’t hear you against the head wind, and over the racket this thing is making.’

The instant he pulls the starter rope, the natural soundscape of the wind is pushed away by the engine noise. He gives a final wave to the two pilots, and we are off. The driving belt cuts into the slippery surface. The heavily laden sledge lurches into motion, swerving after us. Then, gradually, it straightens itself out, as the snowmobile gathers speed, its runners gliding more smoothly over the rippled snow, plunging us into the uncertainty that lies ahead.

The route to the base is only vaguely made visible by a pattern of tracks, which cannot survive for long on a surface that is in constant flux. Along the right side, the occasional red marker flag still stands, having survived the persistent onslaught of the harsh elements. But most of them seem to have vanished, either blown away or buried.

Without a warning, two snowmobiles burst out of the agitated whiteness in front of us, trailing eddies of snow, as they race past us towards the skiway. There is only a brief greeting from the drivers, both leaning low behind their

windscreens, straining to make out the waiting aircraft. Then, as quickly as they appeared, they are lost from sight again.

A localised yellow shine has developed directly ahead of us. It is strongest immediately above the surface, before it blends into the diffuse glow above the horizon.

Responding to my leaning over to one side, Iain half turns back with a confirming nod. ‘Aurora.’

Gradually, two indistinct structures solidify inside the haze – raised platforms, one with a simple container building at the top, the other with a giant satellite dish.

From closer up, some smaller objects come into view: what looks like a fuel tank, and there – the two red igloo-shaped plastic domes with the round windows, each sitting on its own sledge – these must be the mobile shelters for field operations.

Closer still, the first indications of the buildings buried beneath the snow become distinguishable, with various access towers, ventilation shafts, and antennas protruding from the surface. Above the main tower, a Union Jack rattles in the wind. A weathered sign, half buried in a snowbank, announces:

Aurora IV  
British Institute for Polar Research  
75°16’45”S, 24°56’39”W

The artificial light is now revealed to emanate from a ramp leading down into the main part of the base, with a London Underground sign next to the entrance. Dim light also emerges from the few windows of the raised container building. But without any visible human presence, and with the lifeless structures being swept over by a ghostly current of snow, the first impression of the compound is one of abandonment.

Iain slows down as we approach the opening of the ramp. Then he lets the snowmobile run down the steep slope, just fast enough to prevent the sledge from swinging around.

Down at the bottom, the tunnel widens into a long garage. The ground is hard-packed snow, but the walls and ceiling are formed by arches of corrugated steel, with rows of fluorescent lights installed along both sides.

Iain brings the snowmobile to a stop and turns off the engine. A welcome silence settles, as even the natural sounds are left behind at the surface above.

Iain waits for me to dismount, before getting off the snowmobile himself. He takes off his goggles with a sigh of relief. 'Home again.'

'Yes ... Sorry, just to make sure I got that right earlier on, with the wind and all: did you say your name was Iain?'

He smiles and takes off his gloves. 'That's me: Iain McDonnell, weatherman.'

'Siobhán Dannreuther, marine biologist.'

He nods and takes my outstretched hand. 'Welcome to Aurora, Siobhán. I guess they told you about this place, back home in Cambridge?'

'To some extent. At least they did mention that, on Antarctica, I'd be living underground.'

'Yes, that's right. We're now under almost forty feet of snow. Each year, about four feet accumulate at the top. Simultaneously, with the heat we're producing down here, the base melts itself down into the ice. So, there's a fair amount of pressure building up from above. In addition, there's the strain inside the ice shelf, as it flows out to sea. With all that, Aurora IV has pretty much reached the end of its lifecycle. Therefore, next summer, when the new team arrive, they'll begin with the construction of the fifth generation of the base. Otherwise ...' He gestures back up the ramp. 'You saw the Met Tower, which is where I spend my working hours – doing routine observations, launching the daily weather balloon, preparing forecasts, and such things. I hope you also admired our latest acquisition: the brand-new satellite antenna. It was installed last summer, and it worked all right throughout the winter – with regular de-icing, of course. It's available for personal communication in the evening, when the channel is linked to the public network. But it's extremely expensive, as you can imagine, and only suitable for very special occasions.'

He begins unloading the sledge. 'So, Aurora is definitely getting old. Still, I would say it is reasonably comfortable down here, considering where we are. I mean, you get used to it, after a while. At least it's warm, and you're out of the wind. Outside, on the other hand, it's a very different story. You'll see, there are hand-lines leading from here to each of the outlying parts of



the compound. When you're moving about out there, you should never stray away from these ropes. Even on an apparently calm day, the wind can pick up at any moment, when a wave of cold air comes sliding down from the elevated interior. And before you know it, you can find yourself in complete whiteout conditions for hours on end, or even days. When that happens, without any visual references, and with the snow spinning all around you, your orientation may be gone within seconds, and so are your footprints. Then, since you won't be able to retrace your steps, chances are that you walk off into the wrong direction. In this way, people have frozen to death within only a few yards of their base.'

Iain falls silent and dedicates himself, with loving attention, to wiping the snowmobile dry.

The garage houses an assortment of tracked vehicles, all obviously well-respected and kept meticulously clean. Additionally, two football goals and two sets of rugby posts occupy one corner in the back, together with an old dog sledge and several pairs of wooden skies. Rather more optimistically, there is also a large parasol for the beach and several deck chairs.

And somewhat hidden among all the other vehicles, propped up on its sledge – still waiting for the long winter break to come to an end – stands the dive boat, the real thing, only yards away.

The rubber tube now bears the Institute's logo, but the orange-and-grey colouring clearly betrays its venerable past as a lifeboat. Despite the dramatic action it must have seen before its retirement from the previous service, it looks well up to the new duty. The two powerful outboard engines are brand-new. And arching over them, the roll-bar glints even in the low artificial light, with the radio antennas mounted at the top. A windlass has been installed at the bow, to be able to lower the rack with the scientific instruments into the water.

Iain notices my excitement about the boat. 'Yes, that's the one. But as I mentioned earlier, I suspect you'll have to wait until after the holidays, when the weather has settled a bit, and summer has fully started.

'Now, if you could take your rucksack and those boxes with the medical supplies – cheers. I'll take your kit bag, and then I'll come back for the post later.'

He points towards one side of the garage, where a steel door and a large sliding gate seem to be leading to the main part of the base. 'Basically, Aurora consists of two parallel tunnels, connected on this side by the garage, and in

the middle by a crossway. In the North Tube, here on the right, are the workshops, the back-up power generator, the laundry, the main storage, the surgery, a little gym, and your biology lab at the very end. The lab is a bit rudimentary and probably not what you're used to at university back home. But you've got a decent microscope, as far as I can tell, a freezer, and what appears to be a refrigerated incubator – all emptied and cleaned. The previous results are stored in the computer, together with the copy of a draft report. Kevin didn't get around to finishing it.

'So, that's work over there. But most life underground takes place here in the South Tube.' Iain walks towards the door on the left and opens it. 'This is the so-called Boot Room. It has the lockers for outdoor clothing. Yours is this one here – cleaned out as well, I hope.'

He sinks onto a wooden bench along one side of the room and begins taking his boots off. 'Just put those boxes down somewhere. I'll take them over to the surgery, after I showed you to your room. And while your indoor shoes are still packed up – somewhere deep inside your bag, I imagine – you can leave your boots on for now.'

The state of the changing room stands in stark contrast to the meticulous order and cleanliness in the garage. In here, instead of the crisp outside air, the strong locker room smell is only partially obscured by the volatile scent of some kind of fuel.

'Diesel ... we use it in the power generators and for heating. Although the main storage is outside, the fumes are everywhere. But you'll get used to it.'

Iain must have seen my involuntary reaction to the dense atmosphere in the poorly ventilated room and misinterpreted it.

'My checklist says that I should report to the Base Commander upon arrival.'

'John, yes – John Rowlands. He's our BC and also the station doc. But he's away at the moment, with one half of the lads. They're down by the ship, getting the last load of cargo, and having their dental check-up on board. We're not equipped for that here. So, you can get yourself a good night's rest, and then I'll introduce you to the guv'nor tomorrow, when they've all come back; or when things have calmed down a bit, and everyone is on a regular schedule again. You know, the first relief after the winter is always a busy time, when we have to travel back and forth between the base and the ice shelf edge, unload the supplies for an entire year, and then somehow find the space in here to store it all away – ideally before Christmas.'

But we got lucky this year. The ice wasn't particularly thick, and so the *Steadfast* managed to get through to us about a week earlier than usual. Now we've got a full supply of new books, magazines, films, plenty of fresh fruits and vegetables – real crunchy lettuce. Not that you would appreciate that yet, but you will, soon enough.'

Iain has finished changing his shoes and gets up. 'In any case, now you're here, you can safely forget about your checklist. Cambridge HQ are a long way away.'

He opens the door leading out of the Boot Room and flips a heavy-duty light switch.

As a row of pale fluorescent lights flickers to life, another tunnel is gradually revealed, this one made of arched plywood panels. On the left, a row of prefab building units, two storeys tall, is joint together into one structure, about half the length of a football field. A corridor with a bare wooden floor runs alongside it. About halfway down, a dim column of evening sunlight descends from a shaft in the ceiling, adding a little warmth to the austere environment.

There is no sign of life anywhere, and the only noise to be heard is the steady chugging of a large engine inside the first of the building units.

'It's quiet in here.'

Iain nods. 'Those, who aren't down by the ship, are recovering from their last shift during the relief. So, they should still be sleeping – except, of course, the two we met on the way here – and Nigel, the other meteorologist. He's on duty right now.'

'Then I'm keeping you from your well-deserved rest?'

'Oh, no, not at all. All I had to do was to get up a little earlier for my night shift, which starts in about an hour. Nigel and I were exempt from unloading the ship. We're working twelve-hour shifts anyway throughout the year. Especially now in summer, with aircraft coming in again, we need to keep on top of the weather. Our skiway may not look like much, but it's quite important for refuelling and emergency landings. Normally, there isn't too much traffic from other bases, but you never know. About a week ago, the new German team passed through on their way to Helios. That's the nearest base from here, about five hundred miles to the northeast.'

Iain glances at his watch. 'Right, then, let me show you your new home for the next year or so. To begin with, as you can hear, this is the main generator room and the snow melt. All our water is produced here – that is,

as long as enough snow is being shovelled down the funnel from above, which is the main part of our daily duties, as you'll find out very soon. Needless to say, this is the heart of the whole operation. Without at least one of the generators running, the base is dead.'

At the next door, Iain contemplates for a moment whether to open it or not, but then decides against it. Instead, he vaguely gestures at it. 'This is our washroom and, you know, other facilities. It's unisex, I'm afraid. But if we work out a system ...'

'Iain, I was briefed about this, and I'm sure it'll be fine – don't worry. They already told me everything about water rationing and the half-a-minute showers. So, I'm confident I'll manage, just like the rest of you.'

He seems relieved. 'Good, I'm glad you've been forewarned. Then we can move on to more pleasant territory. Here, for example, we have the kitchen and pantry – very important, but pretty much out of bounds, except when you're on meal duty. And next to it ...' He opens the door and switches on the lights. '... is our dining room and lounge.'

The left half of the room is taken up by two tables. It is spotlessly clean, but furnished plainly – reminiscent of a ship's mess. An open side door leads directly into the dark kitchen. Neat rows of framed sepia or black-and-white photographs from the heroic era decorate the walls on both sides of the tables, all commemorating groups of men with haggard faces, mostly hidden behind bushy beards, and with a wild energy in their eyes, born of hardship and desperation.

The other half of the room is more disorganised and homely, with a worn-out but comfortable looking set of dark leather sofas and armchairs, facing a television set that, for a complete lack of reception, must be connected to a video recorder. A row of book shelves stands along one of the windowless walls, while a plastic Christmas tree, still unadorned, leans against another. In contrast with the dining room area, the lounge is decorated with a set of more recent photographs, showing a succession of wintering teams in increasingly less washed-out colours. The men here are generally younger than the early pioneers, and considerably better fed. The occasional beard or moustache is more a fashion statement of the past two decades, than an inevitability of life on the edge. In the far corner of the room, a winding metal staircase ascends to the upper floor, a shiny brass plate with a baroque inscription on one side:

'Le Cercle 75?'

‘That’s our club, as we like to call it. It’s not much, but it’s got a fairly decent bar – keeping in mind that alcohol is strictly rationed down here. Then there are darts, a pool table, things like that. The name, by the way, has to do with our position here on the ...’

‘75<sup>th</sup> Parallel – yes, very clever. Are women allowed in there at all?’

Iain smirks. ‘I think we may be able to make an exception for you.’

He leads the way back out into the corridor and switches off the lights. Closing the door, he nods down the remaining line of buildings. ‘Past the common rooms are the sleeping quarters. This is where the whole crew live, door to door. Now, with you, we’re going to be sixteen again – the full contingent. Here, the first one, that’s the unit I’m sharing with Nigel. But, as I said, he’s out at the moment.’

A few paces on, Iain stops at a solid door on the right side of the corridor. ‘Behind this is the crossway that leads over to the North Tube. In the middle of it is the main access tower, which takes you up to the surface. I can show you all that tomorrow.

‘Meanwhile, this is where Chris lives – Christopher Heywood. He’s the marine assistant and your diving partner. He’s down by the ship tonight. But you’ll meet him latest at the Christmas party. He’s sharing a room with Darren Walsh, our field assistant and boatman. He’s the one who’ll get you safely out to the diving site and back.

‘Then this here is John’s compartment. He’s got one floor to himself – the benefits of responsibility. The one above is used by occasional guests, such as the two pilots, who will arrive later. But mostly, he’s alone.’

Iain continues to the next door. ‘In here, we have the administration office on the ground floor, and the Comms Room above. That’s where you find the shortwave radio and the satellite phone. For about half the year – when it’s too cold and too dark for flying, and the sea ice gets too thick for the ship to break – this is our only connection to the rest of the world.’

He points to the very end of the tunnel. ‘There, through that steel door is the emergency exit tower – not that you’re likely to need it. Things must get pretty bad down here, before it’s safer to be outside.

‘And so, finally ...’ He opens the door to the last unit and switches on the lights. ‘... this is your home.’

The ground floor is filled almost entirely with boxes, stacked up to just below the ceiling.

Iain leads the way along a maze of narrow paths that winds between them. ‘All this stuff ... It’s a bit of a nuisance down here, to be honest. Originally, the storage room was meant to be at the top. But over the years, the base accumulated more and more material that no one really needed anymore, but no one was willing to throw out either – as in the attic of an ordinary family home, I suppose – until it got too heavy to be kept on the upper floor, and they had to bring it back down. Since then, people kept chucking things in here, without thinking about how to arrange them systematically. It only got worse when, a year ago, we had to empty out one of the storage rooms, over in the other tunnel, to make space for the biology lab. So, you just have to try not to get lost and ... here we are.’

We have arrived in the corner farthest from the door, where, as in the lounge, a winding staircase leads to the floor above.

Iain shoulders the kit bag and begins climbing. ‘You’ll be staying in what we used to call the Con Room – as in convalescence. It was reserved for crew members who are not injured or ill enough to be cared for in the hospital, but are still better off being away from the cramped lifestyle of the rest of the base for a little while. If it got very crowded during the summer months, it was also used by guests, but we’ll find enough space in the other quarters. So, it’s all yours now.’

The landing at the top of the staircase opens into a room that, despite the lack of windows, turns out to be far more comfortable than one might have expected. About twice as wide as it is deep, it was evidently intended to house two people, each half furnished with a single bed, a wardrobe, a desk, and a small bookshelf. A larger shelving unit that, judging by the indentations in the carpet, had been dividing the two halves of the room, is now pushed against the wall.

The bed on the right is covered by a coarse rug. On the other lies a fluffy duvet and pillow, together with a separate pile of folded covers, from which originates the inviting smell of freshly laundered linen. But the air inside the low room is over-heated and dry.

Iain indicates a grid in the ceiling. ‘Normally, the heating is done through the ventilation system. So, there is more or less the same temperature throughout the whole base, which is kept quite low to reduce the melting. Since I wasn’t sure how warm you wanted it, I set up this space heater here, to give you time to acclimatise. But I realise now that it’s a bit on the warm side. So, if you ...’

‘It’s perfect, Iain. Cheers.’

He nods and deposits the bag next to the wardrobe. ‘Right then, I’ll let you settle in. Have a good first night on Antarctica and ... well, I’ll see you again after my shift tomorrow morning.’

Iain’s footsteps recede on the floor below. As the door closes behind him – with the space heater turned off, and the chugging of the power generator lost at the other end of the tunnel – silence settles in.

But only for a moment. Then the breathy sound of the ventilation system becomes noticeable. And beyond it, faintly, the creaking of the outer cylindrical shell that protects the frail manmade structure against the restless motion of the massive ice shelf that surrounds it – the exiled part of an ancient ocean that, having been condemned to spend millennia on land, is now coming towards the end of its long journey back home, unaware of the insignificant foreign object that has embedded itself in its skin.





## CHAPTER TWO

# AURORA IV

‘I’m bored, Ally – bored out of my mind. I’ve been here for almost three weeks, and I still haven’t had the opportunity to get going with my research. Ever since I came, the weather has been absolutely awful. I’ve never experienced anything like it. The sky is completely clear, the sun is shining around the clock, and yet, there is this never ending strong wind, which picks up the dry snow from the surface and creates an impenetrable cloud over everything. When you’re inside that, you can’t see anything, you can’t breathe, you can’t walk, and the constant howling drives you utterly insane within minutes. Meanwhile, the sea ice is breaking up into smaller and smaller fragments that get thrown about by the waves – not a healthy environment to go diving in, or to drive a boat through, for that matter. So, I’ve been mostly cooped up inside. The first week was quite exciting, right through the holidays. There was always something new to discover, and generally lots to do: getting to know everyone, becoming familiar with the different parts of the base, the daily routine, but now ...’

‘Sorry to hear that, Shivy – to the extent that I *can* hear you. I’m afraid the connection is rather poor at this end. Then again, considering how far away you are ... You should be happy now. After all, that’s exactly what you always wanted, isn’t it: to travel to the end of the world, to live life at the extremes – *nil satis nisi optimum*. But don’t get me wrong, I’m happy for you. To be able to get away and leave everything behind for a while – I wish I could, with everything going on at the moment. And I do appreciate you responding to my telex. They told me how horrendously expensive this is, and I’ll pay you back. I just needed someone to talk to, and there isn’t anyone else who’s particularly close – except Gran, of course, but it’s different with her. She’s been very supportive, but I can’t continue to burden her with things like that. I know that, ultimately, I’ll have to find a way to cope with it myself. The problem is, I haven’t been myself since the murder. I’ve never fallen to pieces like that before. And to make matters worse, now with you down there in this dangerous place ...’

‘Ally, honestly, you don’t need to trouble yourself over me. What I said about the weather, it isn’t so bad, really, just a little annoying. If you follow some basic rules, Antarctica is perfectly safe these days. And without any violent crimes, life here may well be safer than in the UK these days.’

‘But you’ll be prepared, won’t you, when you finally get the chance to go diving, after all this sitting around and waiting. I mean, you know what you’re doing?’

‘Sure, Ally. No one here is willing to take any chances with unnecessary risks – which is exactly why we continue to be stuck inside. Admittedly, the environment around here is pretty intimidating. But now in summer, the air and water temperatures aren’t a lot colder than during the winter in northern Scotland, where I’ve been diving for years. And the work isn’t particularly difficult either – taking water and ice samples at different depths down to about a hundred feet. The main work happens afterwards, when I have to analyse all that stuff in the lab. The only thing that is likely to kill me then is boredom.’

‘And I guess there aren’t any dangerous animals down there – no sharks or anything?’

‘There are ... no, no sharks or polar bears. But, Ally, why are you so concerned about me all of a sudden? We’ve chatted about what I was going to do on Antarctica before.’

‘I know, and I’m not seriously worried. I’m probably just trying to distract myself from my own problems by worrying about you.’

‘So, Kathleen ...’

‘Yes, I can’t get over it. It’s been three weeks – as you said – and every time more details are being released by the police about the manner in which she was killed, it gets worse. And I can’t stop thinking how easily it could have been you coming home to her flat that evening. If Kathy had been away for only a few days longer, you would still have been living in her flat, and it *would* have been you, who got attacked and eventually murdered in that terrible fashion. It’s silly to pretend otherwise. Kathy wasn’t a specific target, that much is certain now. Nobody who knew her considers for one moment that she was involved with this Satanic cult, not even the police. But they couldn’t find any other motive either that would explain her murder, least of all under those extreme circumstances.’

‘Her work placement in the Cabinet Office – didn’t that turn up anything?’

‘There was nothing about that in the news, but I doubt it. She was there for less than two months. During that short period, she wouldn’t have got anywhere near any sensitive information. Even if she had wanted to, she wouldn’t have had the opportunity to get mixed up in some kind of important affair. And, as a general rule, if you want to extract information from someone working in the government or for the diplomatic service, there are any number of things you can do: you can break into their office, you can bug their phone, you can steal their briefcase, you can attempt to bribe them, you threaten their family – but you don’t stage a ritualistic killing, which is bound to attract everyone’s attention for weeks. So, I don’t think that Kathy’s brief affiliation with the Cabinet Office is relevant for anything that happened to her, and we probably have to accept that we’ll never find out exactly why she was abducted. Chances are, it genuinely was just bad luck – the wrong place, at the wrong time. I suspect the perpetrators were lurking about outside her apartment building one evening, when they saw her come home. They liked the look of her, but couldn’t assault her out in the open. So, they went in after her. That way, they found out which flat was hers. From the name plate, they would then have known that she was living there on her own. And the simple fact is that if you had still been staying there, instead with me, it would have been you they had seen coming home that evening.’

‘But judging by the photographs in Kathleen’s flat, I don’t look like her at all.’

‘You’re young and female, that’s all that matters to these bastards. Also, perhaps they didn’t see her at all and simply concluded from the name tag and the decorations in the windows that a young woman was living there alone. I don’t know. Maybe they saw her photograph in the department newsletter, when she graduated from King’s last June. From that, they would also have known her name. Then all they had to do was to get her address from the phonebook. And when they decided it was time ...’ Alison breaks off with a quivering sigh.

She is right, there is no point denying it: that was a narrow escape, no two ways about it; and that realisation affected her more than even myself.

Alison sighs again. ‘At least, the coroner released her body now, so that she could be buried. And you know, Shivy, I was driving back from Kathy’s funeral ... that was last Saturday, down in Bournemouth, where she grew up. The occasion was depressing enough – meeting her family and other

friends. But it was made worse by the fact that I appear to be the last person who saw Kathy before she was abducted. So, I had to tell everyone how happy she had been, and to reassure them that there was no chance whatsoever that she might have got involved with any kind of shady activity, such as strange rituals or illegal drugs. On top of that, throughout the whole weekend, there was another bad storm down by the coast, as if we hadn't had enough of them already this winter – no snow this time, but the wind was as bad as on the day we moved your stuff from Kathy's flat into mine, remember?

'So, anyway, I was driving back to Cambridge late that evening. The traffic was slow because of the storm, and I had far too much leisure to think, when suddenly it hit me: the reason why I'm so devastated about Kathy isn't the fact that we'd been particularly close friends at all. It's the fact that we *hadn't* been. The truth is, I didn't know her all that well. I'd only met her last summer during the weekly aerobics classes. We got on fine on a casual level, and we chatted occasionally over a cup of coffee somewhere, since she had just completed the same programme in International Relations as I had. So, she was interested in the internship at the embassy in Dublin that I had done after graduating. And when you were selected for the wintering position on Antarctica, I told her you'd be temporarily coming back to Cambridge for your training, and that you'd be bringing back all your stuff from Aberdeen, partly store it in my flat, and partly at your gran's. I mentioned how I was looking forward to having you back for a while, hoping my little flat wouldn't get too crowded with two people living in it and all the extra stuff, and ... I never told you this, but I was concerned that under those cramped conditions and without having the opportunity to spend quality time together – given my regular work hours and your busy training schedule – we would notice each other mainly by getting into each other's way. So, I was afraid that that might create tensions between us, shortly before you left for such a long period, during which we wouldn't see each other at all, and wouldn't get the chance to reconcile. It seems rather silly now, but at the time ... that was a few days before Kathy went to London. And right away, she offered to let you use her flat while she was away, without knowing you at all. She was a lovely girl, whom I should have known better, but I didn't. And now she's gone, and I can never talk to her again, to ask her about all those things I should have asked her about months ago: her family, her friends, her plans for the future ...

‘So, it’s a combination of things that is bothering me: the shock of realising how close to being killed you came; the relief that it wasn’t you on the one hand, and the bad conscience about Kathy on the other. I understand that, rationally, but that doesn’t make it any easier. And the problem is, there isn’t anything else going on at the moment that would distract me. I thought that, once the holidays were over, I might find it easier to focus on other things, my job for example, but ...’

‘Yes, how *was* Christmas? Did you go to see Gran?’

‘On the 24<sup>th</sup>, yes – straight after work, as usual. I stayed with her until Boxing Day. Apart from the murder case hanging over everything, it was lovely, really, just like always. We had tea together and listened to the *Christmas Oratory* on the old turntable. Only it wasn’t as always, because you weren’t there. But we chatted about you. She’s very proud of you.’

‘I feel as if I didn’t spend enough time with her, before I left. I mean, what if ...’

‘No, Shivy, don’t worry about her. She’s doing well. She asked me to put on the LP for her, but that was just ... well, you know how much she values her old records. She was afraid of scratching it, but I could see that her hands were quite steady. And she’s as bright and as alert as ever.

‘Given that, it didn’t take her long to work out that Kathy had lived in the same building in which you had stayed for what ... three weeks before going to Antarctica? We were watching the news together on the evening of Christmas Day. I had tried to distract her, but it was hopeless. She had heard of the murder, of course, like everyone else in the country, and she wanted to see if there were any new developments. And sure enough, as soon as we turned on the telly, they were talking about Kathy having been abducted from her home in Cambridge. That was new information at the time, which the police had just released. Until then, the reports had focussed exclusively on the uninhabited manor house in the Highlands, where her body had been found, and on the ritualistic nature of the murder. Now they were standing right outside the apartment block, explicitly mentioning the address. I could tell that Gran recognised the street name, and she tried to remember from where. Finally, she got up and went out into the corridor. I couldn’t see her, but it was easy enough to guess that she checked her address book by the phone. I know she’d written down your temporary address at Kathy’s. She didn’t say anything when she got back. We simply looked at one another,

and she knew that I knew that she knew ... So, I told her that it had not only been the same building, but in fact the same flat that you'd been staying in.'

Oh, dear ... 'And how did she take that?'

'As I said, she'd already been troubled by the case before then. And she was particularly sorry when she found out that the victim had been a friend of mine. But aside from that, regarding you staying in Kathy's flat up to a week before she was abducted – I was surprised, she took that rather lightly. Gran seems to have your ability to rationalise away these kinds of coincidences – or rather you inherited hers, I suppose. Also, she has this indestructible optimism and confidence in you. She is convinced that, whatever the situation or whatever the danger, you'll be able to cope with it. The embarrassing thing is that, right now, she's far more concerned about my mental state here in all the familiar surroundings than about your safety on Antarctica. And no matter how hard I try to downplay my depression and pretend that I got over everything, it's hopeless. She's known me for too long.

'She was so sweet, when I went to see her over the holidays – all excited and happy for you. Shivy, I love her so much, and I hope you appreciate what you have in her. Most of her life she's dedicated first to her daughter and then to you. She's gone through incredible hardships for many years. And now she sees you achieve your goals: first going to university and now to Antarctica, despite everyone saying that there was no point in applying, what with you being *a girl* and all.

'She had the old atlas open on the table, and she showed me where you'd marked the position of your base on the white, empty continent all the way at the bottom of the page. I could tell that she didn't have a clear understanding of how you could live down there – after all, she does know that there aren't any villages, with shops and such things. So, I explained it to her as best I could. But as far as she knows, you've pretty much walked off the charted territory on the map.'

'You're right. It all happened so quickly, and there was so much that needed to be done before leaving. Somehow, I never thought about how foreign all this must be for Gran. But she never asked me about any details, and I honestly had the impression she understood what I'd be doing.'

'Yes, Shivy, because she's content just to hear you talk about your work, starting with the excursions up in Scotland, your research with the dolphins, and then the preparations for Antarctica. Your happiness and enthusiasm is

what interests her most. And she doesn't want to spoil that for you by letting you know that, for the most part, she has but the vaguest notion of what exactly it is you're up to.'

'But then at least I could explain it to her properly.'

'I doubt it, Siobhán. The Old Lady is quite clever in her own ways, but she's really from a different world. When she was our age, her sole concern was to keep herself and her little daughter alive from one day to the next, under conditions that you and I couldn't even begin to imagine. After the War, she's known little apart from work, her colleagues at the hospital, the two of us ... Just think about the places she's seen in her life. All the locations we visited with her, you can count on the fingers of one hand: apart from Norwich and Cambridge, there were the occasional trips to the seaside at Yarmouth, either the Lake or Peak District for the summer hols, and combined with that, your mum's grave in Liverpool, while it still existed – that's all. Now she's old, and there is only so much you can explain to her. She knows that, and you'd notice it too, as soon as she began to ask any detailed questions.

'Then also, often you're so completely caught up in your own world – which, let's face it, is largely dominated by your science and by dreaming about some faraway places – that you don't see how incomprehensible most things you do are to the majority of people. At first, during our undergraduate years back here at King's, it was all right. Having worked as a nurse for decades, Gran does have a basic understanding of biology. But when you went off to St Andrews and started with your dissertation research, she simply couldn't keep up anymore. My own work, politics and journalism, those are concepts she can relate to. After all, they are part of ordinary life. But every time you'd been on the phone to her, when I went to see her afterwards, she had a whole list of questions – actual notes she had made during your conversation, Shivy, about some terms you had used – and asked me, if I could explain them to her in a manner she might be able to understand. She always made me promise not to tell you. But there you are, now you know.'

'Dear old Gran ... what was it she didn't understand?'

'I can't really remember. Often things that didn't mean a whole lot to me either, although I heard you talk about them endlessly for years – you know, "signal analysis," "bioacoustics," "spectrograms," things like that. To you, all of this may be blindingly obvious. But you must realise that for most

others, that's barely English. So, about your work in Scotland, I explained to her that you're studying the way dolphins communicate with each other; but that, instead of words, they're using different whistles and other sounds; that you record these sounds underwater and compile a sort of dictionary, to be able to see how they socialise and hunt and generally organise themselves.

'And with regards to what you're doing now on Antarctica, I told her you're studying different types of very small organisms, plants and animals, that live in the ocean and in the sea ice. I told her that you're trying to work out how they manage to survive at these very low temperatures, and how they may be the closest examples that we have here on Earth of life on other planets, like Mars, for example. Isn't that right?'

'Yes, it is. But Ally, after the holidays, I'd sent long letters for Gran and you to our main base down here, trying to explain a little bit about my work – together with the film rolls I'd completed during the first week. From there, they were supposed to go north on the first plane. Haven't they arrived yet?'

'Yes, they have – cheers, Shivy. Sorry, I forgot to mention that. There was so much else on my mind. But I picked them up yesterday at the Institute, when I sent you the telex. The films are currently being developed, and I'll collect them and take them to Gran tomorrow. I'm staying with her over the weekend.'

'Ally, that's brilliant – then give her my love. And once the research gets going, I'll send you a more detailed account of exactly what it is I'm doing down here, with photographs and all.'

'Sounds good. Then I'll be looking forward to that. Just promise to be careful.'

'I do. But otherwise, what's going on back home? Nothing positive to report?'

'I don't know. Do you get the Cup results down there?'

'Indeed we do, yes. That's an important part of our routine communication, and there are always up-to-date football fixtures and results on the notice board. So, I saw that Everton won.'

'Yes. Now they're through to Round Four. But look, Shivy, we've been chatting for far too long. It'll cost you a bloody fortune. Still, it was worth it. I feel a bit better now. Let's hope ...'

'No wait, before I forget, very briefly: yesterday, when I went to the Institute, one of the secretaries there mentioned that an editor of *Brigid* had



contacted them and asked about the rights to publish your “Antarctic Diary,” as she called it. I didn’t know you’re keeping a diary, Shivy.’

‘Neither did I – and I don’t, as a matter of fact. I suspect she believes I should. But at the moment, it’s deadly dull, as I said.’

‘Well, think about it. Something is bound to happen sometime. I know you never had much patience for this kind of magazine, but *Brigid* isn’t bad, considering the alternatives. Apparently, the editor read your interview with the *Alumni Magazine*. That’s come out now in the Lent edition, with a very nice write-up and some photographs. I’ll keep a copy for you. I didn’t appreciate that it was being read outside the university, or even outside the college. But I noticed that *Brigid* are currently publishing a series on new job opportunities for women. So, I suppose they have to keep informed about what comes out of our elite education system.’

‘Yes, probably ... All right, I’ll see what I can do. But first, I finally need to get the chance to prove to all these guys that I can do the job I was hired for – even if, momentarily, I seem to have misplaced my Y chromosome.’

\* \* \*

Suspended in a frozen flow of time ... trapped in a random instant, a state of insignificance, more inactive even than the ice that surrounds us – that rigid body of water that holds us in its grip, crackling ceaselessly, taunting us ... the only thing still moving.

Except – there are footsteps outside in the corridor. They come to a halt ... followed by the sound of a door opening.

Someone enters, turning right into the lounge, approaching tentatively. Then he chuckles quietly. ‘All right, I get the point.’

‘What?’

Chris sinks into one of the armchairs, smirking. ‘Siobhán, if someone lies on a sofa, eyes closed, but moving their foot in rhythm to the music playing softly in the background, it usually means they’re conscious. And if then, upon hearing someone enter the room, they stop moving their foot, they probably want to pretend to be asleep, for the purpose of being left alone.’

‘Or, alternatively, upon hearing someone enter the room, they casually wonder to themselves who that might be. But they are far too lazy to open their eyes. And so, to conserve energy for this unexpected mental task – in an entirely unconscious manner – they stop moving their foot.’

Chris nods, still smirking. ‘Yes, all right, point taken.’

He falls silent and begins studying the intricate pattern of cracks in the old leather of the arm rest, becoming more serious. ‘You’re okay down here – with us, I mean?’

So, it is still “us” and “her,” then ... ‘Sure, yes. I’m simply bored, like everyone else. It’s obvious already that I didn’t bring nearly enough to read. Now, in my desperation, I began leafing through these magazines. I was just reading this insane story about some secret bases that the Nazis supposedly had underneath the ice – over in “Neuschwabenland,” or however they called Queen Maud Land. According to the article, they used them to hide some advanced alien spacecraft, which they had found during the War, after it had crash landed there – advanced, as it was. Imagine that: there may even now be a whole society of fascists and aliens living not far from here, planning to take over the world someday through the use of some kind of superior weapon that they developed from the alien technology. Isn’t that nice, Chris? A warm, uplifting thought on an otherwise dreary afternoon.’

‘Yes, I read that too. Unfortunately, we’re not being told how these vast structures could survive inside the ice for decades. That would have been interesting, considering that our own bases don’t last for much longer than ten years, before they’re being torn apart and crushed. Take Aurora, for example: it’s been occupied for only eight years, but none of the floors are level anymore, and in some parts of the outer shell, the first cracks already start to appear.’

‘Tah ... another comforting thought for the day. But I think I know where this belongs.’

‘No, don’t throw it out. What’s wrong with you?’ With a horrified expression, he jumps out of his seat, pulls the magazine out of the waste paper basket again, and straightens it out as reverently as if it were a precious old manuscript.

‘Come on, Chris, it’s only some random nonsense about alien UFOs, hidden on giant Nazi bases under the ice.’

‘Exactly. We’ll be needing this, before the next winter is over. We only just got it with the last relief, you know. Don’t be so bloody intellectual. There’s nothing like reading about the delusions of other people, to keep the madness out of your own head.’

He puts the magazine back on the table and, with an exhausted sigh, slumps into his armchair again. Mechanically, he attempts to brush his hair

back, only to remember that – just a few days ago – it was cropped rather generously by an obliging mate. He glances over. ‘Must have been a bit stressful to be called up at such short notice, when the rest of us had months to prepare for this.’

‘I’m fully qualified, Chris.’

‘Oh, no, that’s not what I meant. It’s just ...’

‘I assure you, I went through exactly the same training as you did, only more concentrated, over a shorter period of time. But I took the same first aid course, went through the same field training in Baslow, had the same boat handling instructions on Grafham Water, and the same sea survival training. I’m sure I don’t have your experience as a diver, but I’ve been diving routinely since ‘84, and clocked hundreds of hours underwater, mostly from the field station at Tarbat Rocks, out in Moray Firth – where, incidentally, the water is bloody freezing.’

‘Yes, I know. I experienced that in the past.’

‘You’ve been diving the Firth then? Because of the dolphins?’

He laughs. ‘I wish. No, that was for inspection and maintenance of the oil rigs there. Over the years, I’ve supported all sorts of diving operations around Britain – mostly at offshore platforms and occasionally for salvage, which is a bit more fun. But the work here has been the most enjoyable so far.’

He looks apologetic. ‘I didn’t mean to offend you, by the way. I only imagine that, if I had been in your situation, being asked to leave everything behind so suddenly and go to Antarctica ...’

‘I know, I overreacted, and I’m sorry. It’s just that all this sitting around and waiting is getting on my nerves. Almost half the summer is already over, and we haven’t even started with our research yet.’

‘I wouldn’t worry too much about that. It was the same last year – one spring gale after the other, well into January. Then, within a couple of days, the weather turned, and we had weeks of sunshine. There’ll be plenty of opportunities throughout the winter too. Actually, once the sea ice is back, we’ll be protected from the wind, at least while we’re in the water – no need to deal with the waves anymore. And with a little artificial light, the visibility is generally much better than in summer. So, I’m sure it’ll be all right.’

Yes ... if only there wasn’t this constant unease following me around, even into my dreams; those repeated nightmares, the sense of falling, falling in water as if it were thin air – thin air, but still suffocating; falling farther and farther away from the surface, without any chance of swimming back up.

That this should happen now, when I cannot, under any circumstances, allow myself to lose my nerves ... But there is only one cure: to finally get back into the water and start focussing on the research.

‘It’s John’s birthday next Thursday.’ Chris has been quietly following his own thoughts for a few moments, now looking slightly more animated. ‘There’s bound to be a big party, and we have to prepare some practical joke again, maybe in the administration this time. But we need to be clever about it. After last year, he’ll definitely be expecting something.’

‘And you want me to keep cave out in the corridor, while you rifle the headmaster’s office?’

‘I’m serious, Siobhán. We’ve got to come up with something. It’s a tradition with the BC’s birthday.’

‘I see ... But if John expects some kind of mischief, we could *not* do anything. And then the joke is he’s stressed out the whole day for nothing. You know, like in a horror film: the scary bit is never as nerve-racking as the anticipation of it.’

‘Hmm ... I don’t know.’ He falls silent again, now studying the orange and brown pattern of the worn-out carpet, casting about for another way into the conversation; perhaps trying to establish the close personal relationship he had with Kevin.

‘Chris, I think it’s only fair to tell you ... because after all, we’re meant to be dive buddies ...’

‘And I hope we will be very soon.’

‘Yes, me too. Because of that, we’re meant to look out for each other, aren’t we? We need to be able to rely on one another. So, if there’s any chance that my – or your – concentration or judgement on a dive might be affected, due to some other stuff going on, the other has got the right to know.’

Chris is listening now with considerable unease. ‘I guess so.’

‘Well, then I should probably tell you that, for the last few days, or several days in fact ... basically, I haven’t slept well, since I came here.’

‘You left unfinished business at home?’

‘I ... yes, I did.’

‘And the new surroundings – the constant sun outside and absolutely no sun in here, together with the strange daily routine – all that isn’t exactly helping either, is it.’

‘That took some getting used to. But now, life on base is fine. No, the real problem ... what happened was ... it began a few days before I left England. There was a lot going on at that time, in addition to preparing for Antarctica.’ – This is going to be complicated. – ‘I suppose you heard about Kathleen Reed, the girl who was abducted from Cambridge and found murdered in the Highlands, just before Christmas. I saw summaries of the first press releases among the old news bulletins by the teleprinter.’

‘You’re right, we did hear about the case. That was terrible.’

‘Yes, it was. But I suspect the Institute didn’t pass on to you that I was personally caught up in the affair – that, actually, I was being interviewed by the police the day before I was scheduled to leave, and that I might not be able to come as planned. The reason for that was that I had stayed in Kathleen’s flat during the three weeks of training, while she was away on some work placement in London. A friend of mine, Alison, had arranged that for me. Just before Kathleen got back, I moved in with Alison. But she invited Kathleen over to her flat the last Saturday before I left, so that I could meet her. When she didn’t show up, Alison tried to reach her by phone, unsuccessfully. So, she called all their mutual acquaintances, but no one knew where Kathleen was. When, the next morning, she still didn’t answer the phone, Alison and I went over to her flat together and rang the doorbell. But there was no response either. Then, Alison got really anxious, and eventually, in the afternoon, she went to the police to file a missing person report.

‘Promptly the next morning, Kathleen’s body was found in that old manor house, after the police had received an anonymous tip-off, most likely from one of the perpetrators. Thanks to Alison’s report, the body was identified immediately. The police then needed to talk to her, to find out about the victim, and why Kathleen may have been abducted and killed in that remote place.

‘By then, it was two days before I was supposed to leave, and Alison knew that. She also knew that, if I got dragged into the case, I would most likely miss the plane and might have to wait for several weeks, before getting another opportunity to fly south. On the other hand, any careful examination of Kathleen’s flat was bound to reveal that another woman had stayed there very recently. I had cleaned the flat before I moved out, but not exactly forensically. At least my fingerprints were all over the place, and possibly several of my hairs. If the police had somehow been able to link

them back to me, both Alison and I would have been in major trouble. So, during her interview, Alison mentioned my stay in Kathleen's flat, while she had been away. Then, of course, the police called me in for questioning as well, initially on that same afternoon, and then again the following day.

'The first interview wasn't a pleasant experience at all. For some time, I even thought they might arrest me and keep me there overnight. What got me into some difficulties was that Kathleen had been abducted from her flat. That was shown by the fact that the door chain had been cut, but the lock was undamaged. So, clearly, whoever it was, broke in at night, either had a key or picked the lock, but then realised that they had to cut the door chain. They were able to do this quietly enough not to wake Kathleen. At least she didn't get the chance to phone for help. They probably surprised her in bed, somehow sedated her, or threatened her to keep quiet. Then they managed to get her out of the apartment building unnoticed and drove up to Scotland. Not surprisingly, the initial suspicion landed squarely on me. I'd left Kathleen's spare key, that I had been using, inside the flat when I moved out. But I could easily have had a copy of it made. So, the police kept asking me these seemingly random, oblique questions, trying to establish what my relationship with Kathleen may have been, and whether I might be connected to this Satanic cult, which apparently is responsible for her murder. They kept on it for more than an hour, but there was nothing useful I could tell them. And so, in the end, they let me go. They still told me not to leave town and to come back the next day.

'The second interview was much more affable. By then, the police had done some background checks on me. They had obtained character references from the Institute and my university in Aberdeen. They also had received confirmation of the reason for why I had been staying in Kathleen's flat. But crucially, based on further anonymous information, they had been able to make the first arrests. They had apprehended at least some of the cult members, and since they couldn't establish any connection between them and me, they simply went over everything once more, I signed a written statement, they took finger prints and a hair sample – for elimination purposes – and then I was allowed to leave the country. After all, they know where to find me, and there's nowhere to run down here.'

Chris nods thoughtfully. 'Blimey ... To be honest, I did have the feeling that there was something bothering you, but I had no idea. Then let's hope the police find the rest of the gang soon.'

‘Yes, let’s. I just wish we could finally get on with our work. Then I could start thinking about something else. I mean, how long can these strong winds last? It’s been going on for weeks.’

‘In winter, this is what you get most of the time. Now, in summer, it should eventually stop. But if you want to know for sure, there’s one place to find out.’



The rope strains in the gale, forming a yellow arc that, despite its bright colour, disappears into the violent cloud of white only a few yards ahead. Piercing cold invades the lungs with each careful sip of air. Nature appears to be intent on wiping out and burying under a blanket of snow any sign of life in this hostile environment. The footprints of previous travellers have already disappeared. However, at a distance, the upper part of the Met Tower still emerges from the cloud, surrounded by a diffuse aura of evening sunlight.

The metal staircase vibrates precariously in the wind. At the top, the raised platform itself oscillates on its four legs, creating the illusion of being on a raft, stranded in an agitated sea, while snowdrifts spill over the sides, creeping along the walls of the paled orange container building.

Another staircase leads up to the observation platform on the roof, with a diverse array of instruments directed skywards.

An inscription above the door reads: *Sub specie aeternitatis*.

Inside the building, the shaking remains. But, thankfully, the unnerving howling of the wind is muffled, while breathing becomes normal again.

A narrow corridor leads away from the entrance, with a small snow-encrusted window at the other end, and a door on either side.

The one on the left is labelled Ozone Lab. The room behind it is unoccupied, with windows shuttered against the harsh elements, and illuminated only by a continuous succession of green numbers running up a computer screen.

Farther down the corridor, the door on the right is identified as leading to the Met Office, with a hand-written sign taped to it: “Knock, knock, knock on Heaven’s door. If no one answers, knock some more.”

There is music playing inside it – “I’m On My Way” – with Iain singing along.

He seems to have heard the second knocking. His singing stops, and the music is turned down a little.

‘Come in?’

‘Just me. I hope I’m not disturbing anything.’

Iain glances up from a map of the Southern Ocean, covered with a variety of hand-drawn symbols and coloured lines. ‘Well, bless me, if it isn’t Dr Dannreuther. I thought you’d never stop by for a visit.’

‘I know, I’m sorry. I wanted to come earlier, but somehow the thought of having to brave the Boot Room for any extended period of time, to go through the elaborate process of putting on all the different layers of outdoor clothing, not to mention having to brave the tempest outside ... I just always remembered that I had other pressing things to do.’

‘Such as lying on the sofa?’

‘Yes, something like that. But I regret that now, seeing how beautiful the view is from up here, looking down onto the drifting snow, rather than being trapped inside it. And you can actually see the sun from here, without immediately freezing to death.’

‘Out of these windows – yes. At least during the evening and night, when I’m on duty.’

‘And you’re feeling a little homesick?’

Iain follows my nod to the tape recorder. ‘Oh, I see ... No, today, it’s not too bad. I just like the tune.’

He puts down his pencil and leans back in his creaking chair. ‘How about you? How are you holding up?’

‘All right. But I thought there would be more to do earlier on during the season. I haven’t even been able to see the penguins yet. The chicks must be about half a year old now. I hoped I would be able to get down to the water and see them, before they lost all their grey baby feathers. Besides that, there isn’t much around here to cheer you up.’

‘Depends on your preferences, I suppose. Since cigarettes and booze don’t seem to appeal to you ... eating lots of chocolate is a popular alternative.’

‘Guess what ... and I’m sad to say it’s starting to show. So, it is high time to get some exercise again.’



‘In that case, I have good news for you.’ Iain points to a sequence of maps, lined up on a long pin board. ‘I’m very pleased to tell you that the weather will begin to turn tomorrow. So, it should be fine by early next week.’

‘Next week?’ – Well, that’s just typical. – ‘I didn’t expect it would change so quickly. You really believe it will be sufficiently calm then to go out to sea?’

‘Indeed I do. I was going to keep it for the weather briefing tomorrow morning, but I don’t mind telling you now. The wind we’re experiencing right now is associated with the last – for now – in a succession of cyclones passing north of us. They will continue retreating eastwards, and with a little luck, starting Monday, it should be quiet for some days.’ He smiles broadly. ‘So, it looks as if you’ll finally get to play outside. Aren’t you excited?’

‘Yes, sure ... And what’s the next window after that, you think?’

‘Why? Are you busy next week?’

‘No, I was just wondering ... trying to plan the research ahead, you know.’

‘Sorry, lass, can’t say reliably beyond five days, or so. But around here, you can’t be too choosy. You’ve got to take each opportunity nature offers you.’

Iain is clearly disappointed by my lack of enthusiasm. He turns the music off completely and scrutinises me. ‘You seem pensive, Siobhán Dannreuther. Everything all right?’

‘Fine.’

But he is still sceptical, waiting for an addendum.

It is time to change the subject. Sadly, the room, cluttered as it is, provides little inspiration for topics of conversation – except about the weather.

A poster-sized print of a photograph is taped to one wall, entitled “On Her Majesty’s Meteorological Service.” It shows the vague outline of one of Iain’s predecessors, tinkering with some scientific instruments in the middle of a blizzard.

On a filing cabinet, surrounded by piles of teleprinter messages with long lists of numbers, is the framed photograph of a young woman. She sits on an ancient stone wall at the top of a cliff – Tintagel Castle, apparently – beaming at the photographer, with the sea glinting behind her in the evening light.

‘Who’s she then? Is she *your* lass?’

Iain laughs. ‘Aye, she’s my lassie. Her name’s Talwyn.’

‘Nice. Are you ...’

‘Engaged, yes, just before I left the UK.’

‘That’s great, Iain – congratulations! Then we must hope that you make it through the second winter all right. At least there isn’t much in terms of temptation around here.’

‘No, not really – present company excluded, of course.’

‘Well, there have to be trials of some sort. But look, I better leave you to your work now.’

‘No worries. I’ve got all night to finish the forecasts.’ He picks up his cup. ‘Here, why don’t you transfer half of my tea into this good-as-clean cup over there by the computer, make yourself comfortable, and tell me a little about the ordinary world – all the wondrous things that happened during the past year.’

‘Sorry, Iain. I appreciate the offer, but I just remembered: I promised Chris I would help him this evening to repair some of our diving gear. There’s corrosion on some of the metal fittings, and some of the valves and seals aren’t as tight as perhaps they should be. We had to do it some time, especially now that we may be able to go out sooner than expected. So, I better start battling my way back to the base again.’

‘Admirable work ethics. Then I shall not detain you any longer. But if ever there is anything ...’

‘Cheers, Iain. I’ll keep that in mind.’



*Scattered rays of sunlight dance underneath the rippled surface of the water. Dolphins glide effortlessly through the gentle waves, with synchronised graceful movements. They are basking in the afternoon sun, enjoying the fine day and chatting among each other, their whistles relaxed.*

*But the light gets gradually darker, the water murkier. The bright blue that once shone down from the clear sky slowly turns to green.*

*The water’s surface is already higher above and still moving farther away, as if the space between were slowly expanding.*

*The dolphin’s behaviour has changed too. They stopped moving about and have assembled in a tight circle, looking down. Their whistles are more urgent now and not directed at each other anymore. They are trying to communicate with me. Their message appears to be important. But they are slipping away, and with them the surface of the water, and the warmth, and the light, and the air.*

*Already, the dolphins are distant figures. And as their warning voices get weaker, other noises become more prominent. Nearby, there is the gurgling sound of water rushing upwards, while at a greater distance, there is an indistinct, muffled droning.*

*With every desperate swimming stroke upwards, the surface retreats faster. And as the sunlight fades away, a suffocating darkness and cold closes in from below. Vague shapes rise out of the depth, getting ever closer, but without becoming any clearer.*

*A void opens underneath, the entrance into an endless world of menace – and death.*

The room lies in near darkness, with only a faint red glow emanating from the alarm clock – 02:35.

This is still Antarctica, and we are still stuck inside an ice shelf.

The base is completely quiet, except for the usual groaning of the protective shell around us, fighting its losing battle against the encroaching ice.

Awoken once more by the same old nightmare of falling down the rabbit hole, turning into another restless morning, as insomnia continues to feed on my health and on my nerves.

And it is no good saying that these are only dreams, when it is the corrosive effect of these dreams that may become a serious problem in the real world; when each nightmare is an additional drain on my energy; when my nervousness about going diving gradually increases, as my energy and fitness decline; when the increasing nervous tension leads to more nightmares and sleeplessness.

Something needs to happen soon to break this destructive cycle. Otherwise, I am going to lose my mind.



## CHAPTER THREE

# ORIGINS

Snow continues to swirl around the access tower, obscuring the view to the outlying structures – the dark circle of the satellite dish, and the angular shape of the Met Tower – while the main part of the base lies hidden underneath a flowing pattern of waves, sculpted from the natural irregularities of the ice shelf.

But the wind is not quite as violent as it was only yesterday evening. The flag at the top of the tower now streams in a more dignified manner in the crisp air. And the glow of the sun, directly above, is much less diffuse than during the past weeks. It looks as if there may actually be some calmer days ahead.

And so, as diving is about to become a reality, all it would take is one good night's sleep, to be able to shed the constant fatigue, and to ease the strained nerves. Instead, here I am, awake again for several hours too long, already weak, and still another sleepless night away from the physical and mental strains of the first dive tomorrow morning.

To make matters worse, half my mind is still stuck in the familiar places half a world away, with the people who matter most.

Gran ... At 2 o'clock her time, on a Sunday afternoon, she has already been to church and had her lunch. Right now, she may be making some coffee, standing in the little kitchen, looking out onto the familiar street – over to the red brick houses on the other side, greyed by the dull winter's light – until, in a moment, the water has percolated through the filter. She may then settle down with a book, or listen to music, or to a serial on the old wireless. Later, she may go to visit one of her former colleagues for tea, or perhaps receive a visitor herself.

And Alison ... Her daily routine is far less predictable, especially now, when she is going through a difficult patch. All these years we have known each other, she has always been calm and collected; always secure enough in her own life, to be willing and able to support those who found themselves in more difficult situations. Even now, affected by the murder, her nervousness and depression does not derive from concern for herself, but rather from the

comprehension of the potential danger that might have affected me – whereas I shrugged the incident off as a tragic coincidence and simply walked away from everything.

But it all happened so quickly during those last few weeks in England, too fast to register properly. A hectic time, which feels quite surreal now.

The heavy door of the access tower crunches open, pushing past the snowdrift that continuously accumulates in front of it.

Iain steps out onto the platform, a pack of cigarettes in his hand. ‘Siobhán ... Taking in the fresh air?’

‘While it lasts.’

‘Oh, come on. You can’t begrudge an old man his last smoke before a well-deserved rest from a long night’s work.’

Nonetheless, he manoeuvres himself into a downwind position and turns away, trying to shield the feeble flame of the lighter. ‘I saw on the rota that *your* first week of night duty begins tomorrow. Then we’ll be on a similar schedule, for a while.’

‘Yes, that should be fun.’

‘It’ll be all right. Just do your rounds regularly, make sure everything is as it should be – respond to incoming radio messages; but that happens rarely, and you can’t miss the warning lights go off throughout the base. The main thing is not to fall asleep. That would get you into serious trouble. Of course, it’s not exactly perfect timing, is it: having to stay up all night, when finally the weather will be as good for taking the boat out as it will ever be around here. I guess you’ll have to try and get some sleep in the afternoon and evening, between returning from diving and the start of your night watch. But maybe, if you asked John ...’

‘No, I don’t want any special treatment. Everyone else manages to accommodate night duty with their regular work, and so will I.’

‘Siobhán, you don’t have to prove anything to anyone.’

No, but you see, I do – I really do.

‘It’s perfectly normal to trade night watches under certain circumstances ... Crikey, this is hopeless.’ Iain gives up trying to light his cigarette and disappears behind the door again.

He soon re-emerges, noticeably more relaxed after his first draught, and leans back against the banister. ‘I was chatting with John just now and, apparently, there’s been some bad news from East Anglia.’

‘What? Have they been invaded by Mercia?’

‘Now that’s not fair, Siobhán. The Institute is not that archaic. And things *are* changing – I mean, look at you.’

‘Me? What about me?’

‘You’re here, are you not.’

‘Yes?’

‘Well, there you are then.’ He watches a trail of smoke dissipate into the pristine air. ‘You have to give us a chance, you know.’

‘Us?’

‘Men.’

‘Aye, right ...’

Iain laughs. ‘Humans then.’

He takes another contemplative draught of his cigarette. ‘Look at it this way ... focus on the positive developments – and it’s not just in the Institute, is it? It’s happening everywhere. Now they’re going to send the first Briton into space – a woman no less – and with the Russians. These are exciting times, Siobhán – the dawn of a brave new world.’

‘Yes ... Utopia, coming soon to a planet near you. All we need to do now is to get rid of these bothersome Irish terrorists, and everything will be absolute tipping for the British Empire. We can all relax again, get back to our tea and tiffin, and jolly well get on with things, as we move ahead into the new Millennium.’

Iain scratches his head in mock confusion, but chooses not to respond.

‘So, what happened in East Anglia?’

‘Nothing official, mind, but the Institute is having some difficulties securing sufficient funding for building the new base next year. So, it’s likely that one more crew will have to manage with this old contraption, before a replacement can be built. Don’t get me wrong, Siobhán, Aurora IV has been a good home to us. But as I told you when you arrived, the base is definitely getting old now, and it’s beginning to show. If you get the chance – during your night duty, for example – go through the access panels behind the building units. You can see that the outer shell is already cracked in several places. And there’s humidity everywhere. After all, Aurora is basically drowning itself in melt water. To keep the heat in a little better, they used plywood for the protective shell, rather than steel as for the previous incarnation of the base, but it makes little difference. And the water creates no end of problems for the electronics. I heard that, recently, they had a short

circuit in the vehicle workshop. In that instance, all that happened was that a fuse burned out, and they had to better insulate some of the connectors. But with things like that, you never know. You can't compromise in such an environment. You do it properly, or you don't do it at all. At some point, it simply gets too dangerous. And if by then the new base is not ready, we may have to interrupt the whole programme here – after thirty-five years of continuous operation and data collection. Perhaps that's the downside of the changing politics at the moment. With international conflicts coming to an end, people may be seeing more pressing tasks closer to home and abandon exploration all together.'

He lets his thoughts trail away with another puff of smoke, then gives me an appraising look. 'You still seem somewhat muted, like yesterday.'

'Do I? I'm just a little tired. I didn't sleep much last night – practicing for night duty, you know.'

'I'm serious, Siobhán. If there's anything that's bothering you, you can talk to us – and you should. We're all in the same boat here. We've all got people back home – our suspended lives in the ordinary world, which keep calling us back. But while you're down here, you cannot allow yourself to follow these calls. When you're physically separated from the rest of the world – as we are here, even now in summer – it's best to let go mentally as well. Keep your mind where your body is. Focus on being here, as much as you can. Otherwise, it will eat you up inside.'

'The story of my life, Iain: letting go of people, moving on ...'

'I know it sounds harsh, but it's the only way. Too much thinking isn't healthy down here. If you retreat into your head, and your thoughts are far away, you disconnect, you lose yourself. And then all sorts of things can happen. I suspect that by now you've found out what happened to your predecessor – Kevin.'

'No, actually, I haven't. Everybody just keeps making these vague insinuations.'

'Then I might as well tell you. It began slowly. At first, he got on well with everyone, and the summer was no problem at all. But then, a few months on ... Nobody knows what caused it. We asked him repeatedly, but he did not want to talk about it. It could have been some trouble with his girlfriend. Maybe they had an argument and could not straighten it out over the long distance, with the limited ability to communicate. Either way, moving into winter, Kevin started to get more and more withdrawn and touchy. His mind



was always somewhere else – back in England, presumably. We tried to involve him in our social activities, but he became increasingly difficult to deal with. Whatever it was, playing cards or snooker or darts, he kept losing, simply because he didn't concentrate. So, he got more and more upset. Eventually, towards the end of winter, he completely cracked up, after he'd lost at cards the whole evening. There was no money involved, of course. We were only playing for points. But he still claimed we were all conspiring against him. To be fair, by then we were all a little shirty, some more than others, perhaps. But basically, we all found it increasingly difficult to deal with his aggressive behaviour. And so, push led to shove. John tried to intervene, and then it all escalated. Kevin attacked him and tried to stab him in the face with a dart. That must have been the first time something like that happened on any of the British bases.'

He looks indignant. 'It wasn't funny, Siobhán. You can never know where these things end. And whatever trivial issues there may occur in any conventional situation, they're amplified down here, with so little distractions and the limited ability to avoid each other.'

'Sorry. You're right, one shouldn't laugh about things like that. But anyway, what happened then?'

'Well, as John is acting magistrate down here, it was up to him to decide whether to pursue the case further. I doubt he ever considered taking legal actions, although it was clear that he had no other option but to send Kevin back to England at the earliest opportunity. By then, Kevin himself just wanted to go home, rather than having to suffer through another eighteen months or so, including also another long winter. Ironically, it was that incident that made him snap out of his destructive state of mind. But in different ways, he was in a pretty bad shape – even more depressed than before, and now he also felt embarrassed around us.

'Then, the only question was how to officially deal with the situation. Obviously, a nervous breakdown like that, resulting in a physical assault, is quite serious. Something like this comes out, and next thing you know, you've got the government meddling in the way things are run down here: tighter supervision from London, stricter safety regulations, introduction of regular psychological evaluations, and so on. We do not need this sort of bureaucracy down here. Antarctica is the last place on Earth where, effectively, you're outside of direct government control. You know how it is in Britain these days: someone is always spying on you and trying to control

your life. Also, for Kevin's sake, there was no need for anyone outside the Institute to know what had really happened. And so he went back under the pretext of some unspecified family matter.

'The Institute, of course, could not afford any more staff problems. But they did not want to give up the biology programme at Aurora either, after they had finally got it funded. So, they tried to get one of the veterans who had dived at Signy or Halo within the past years. But they had all moved on in the meantime – got themselves permanent jobs back home, wives, kids, mortgages, the lot. With all that, the Institute will not let you come back here, even if you wanted to. It would be too much of a liability for them. Since there wasn't enough time to advertise the job again, and to interview a whole bunch of people, they went back to the applications they had received for this tour, hoping that there might be one qualified person among them who could leave the UK at such a short notice, without requiring a lot of training. And then ... well, they contacted you.'

'I see. They wanted an experienced bloke – a genuine man of the world – and what they got in the end was a wee lassie from the sticks. That must have come as a bit of a shock to you down here. In fact, I can just about picture your reaction when you got the news: "Gorblimey, guv'nor, I think they're sending us a – you know – *a woman*".'

He suppresses a laugh. 'Come on, Siobhán, it's not that bad. And you have to understand ...'

'No, it is exactly that bad, because you never manage to treat me as either a man or a woman – and to be perfectly honest, at this point, I wouldn't mind either way. But to all of you I seem to be this strange, awkward, in-between creature who's apparently not male, but still mostly human, and so – by process of elimination – quite possibly female, and therefore someone whom – by some new regulation, I imagine – you're not allowed to treat as such in any way, and simply pretend that ... Oh, go ahead, laugh at me, you big lump.'

Iain attempts too late to avoid the line of snow coming at him from the top of the banister, hitting him squarely in the face. He sputters and suppresses the spontaneous reaction of throwing his soggy cigarette down the access tower. Instead, he puts the stub into his pocket. 'Gorblimey indeed, you really got me there, didn't you?'

He continues to grumble, as he does his best to remove the snow from the collar of his parka. 'I would like you to know, Siobhán, that strangely enough,

we're all very glad to have you here – most of the time. We're all agreed that, apart from the occasional tantrum, you're basically a good mate. But let's face it: you *are* different, and things *are* different, since you came – simple things, you know.'

He abandons cleaning his collar and tries to warm up his hands again. 'Look, we all have our girlfriends back home, and we miss them, naturally. They used to be very far away. But since you came ... it's almost as if you brought something of them with you. It's not just the obvious things – appearance and voice and all that. It's these little mannerisms that women have, you know: how you tuck your hair behind your ears; the whirly way you move your hands about when you gesture; or the way you sit on the sofa, with your legs pulled up – your whole body language. Please don't take this the wrong way ...'

'No, it's fine. I'm quite flattered, actually. I never had so much attention.'

'You're fit enough, Siobhán, you know that. But that's not the point. What I'm trying to say is ... about those old prejudices against having women on Antarctica – we all know they're rubbish. But the administration were still concerned about having you on base as the *only* woman, mostly for your own sake – you must believe that. Nobody doubts your scientific qualifications or your diving skills. And yes, you're happy with your situation here – being alone with the rest of us – but how could we have known that? I must admit, I was worried myself. Fifteen months can be a long period for anyone, and so ...'

He is unsure whether to continue. 'All right, it's probably best to lay it all on the table. It's like this: before you arrived, John asked me if I could look after you a bit – you know, be your main contact in case there are any problems. He must have thought it would be safe to ask the oldest and fattest guy in the team. He also knows I'm engaged to Talwyn. But basically ... try to see it this way: if everything continues to go well with you – as I'm sure it will – perhaps attitudes will change within the Institute.'

'Yes, perhaps ... And sorry about the snow, by the way. I guess if I was as stropky as this all the time, I couldn't really blame you for being a little cautious around me.'

'You're not. As I said, all of us down here on Aurora are behind you one hundred percent. And if there's anything we can do, any one of us ...'

'Cheers – *mate*.'

Iain grins and pulls the pack of cigarettes out of his pocket, but then decides against having another smoke and puts it back again, glancing at his watch. He looks tired and worn-out – not only physically, but also jaded and dulled to the privilege of being in this special place.

‘So, you’re quite serious about Talwyn then? I mean, you definitely *are* going to marry her when you get back?’

‘Well, we still have a bit more than a year to get through, but yes, if we pass that test, I don’t see any reason why we should not get married.’

He rubs his cold hands and yawns. ‘Right, I’m off to kip. Good luck tomorrow for your first time descending into Weddell Sea. And afterwards, if you get bored during your night duty, come over to the Met Tower and tell me all about it.’

‘I’ll do that.’

He nods and walks towards the door.

‘Oh, and Iain?’

He stops and turns back, looking a little apprehensive.

‘Just for future reference – perhaps something for John to mention in his final report – but, you know, age, body mass, and prior engagements are generally overrated as deterrents of female affection.’

Iain smiles, visibly relieved. ‘Careful now, Dr Dannreuther.’

\* \* \*

Chris suppresses a yawn, shivering in the chilly air of the Boot Room. He makes an awkward attempt at closing the zipper of his dry suit, running along the back of his shoulders ... snagging it on his fleece insulation layer ... but succeeding eventually – no need to interfere then.

For a few more precious seconds, there is the possibility to remain sitting on the bench and to let the feeling of dizziness subside a little.

A draft of fresh outside air enters underneath the door to the garage, moving some dodgy looking balls of fluff across the floor, along erratic trajectories of further acquisition and growth. But the soft breeze is barely perceptible and not nearly strong enough to be invigorating in the spent atmosphere.

This is way too early, even under ideal conditions – made only worse after yet another sleepless night. Already, there is the dull hint of a developing

headache. And if the circulation does not start up soon, this might get very awkward – and dangerous.

So, with all that, is avoiding the embarrassment of having to call off the dive really worth the risk?

Under normal circumstances, it should not be. But the truth is, this is not only about diving, nor is it only about me. This is equally about all the others who might follow. This is about me not squandering the rare opportunity I was given. This is about the responsibility of being the first – and the first domino in a row can never fall, for the others to have a chance to stand.

So, realistically, there is no alternative. The necessary decision is an obvious one. It would be inexcusable to wimp out now, after waiting around for weeks.

Chris is already anxious to leave, glancing over more and more frequently. In a moment, he will get suspicious. And when he realises that something is wrong, it will be his duty to call off the dive.

So, it is time to get back on the feet and to get suited up, to pull the outer neoprene shell fully up and over the head.

There is the well-known tugging on the hair, as the long neck seal slides over the face – an unexpected bout of claustrophobia during the brief period of interrupted breathing – the nerves evidently in tatters, but that cannot be helped now.

Darren appears in the door from the garage. ‘Morning all. This is the big day, then. A clear blue sky awaits you outside, and calm conditions, as promised by the weatherman.’

He rubs his hands in an unbearably cheerful mood. ‘Siobhán, your first time out – at last. Anything I can help you with.’

‘Don’t fuss, Darren.’

‘I don’t. I was just wondering if you needed anything.’

‘Trust me, I’ve got everything under control – even if I am the Plan-Z-Woman.’

He is taken aback and exchanges a brief look with Chris. ‘Right ... I’ll wait outside then by the snow tractor. The boat is already fuelled, hooked up, and ready to go. I also loaded the filled diving cylinders and the science stuff from the workshop. Unless there is anything else ...’

He returns to the garage, closing the door behind him.

Now Chris is getting edgy too, infected by my nervous tension. He turns away and begins putting on his stabiliser jacket.

But with the suit properly closed, I am almost ready to leave. Just one last check if all the necessary equipment is in place: the gloves and the hood, the mask, the snorkel, and the fins, sufficient weights for the target depth, the dive tables and depth gauge, the knife, the torch, the camera ... and the regulator, of course – all in order.

Chris unnecessarily fusses with the content of his own meticulously packed bag, noticeably irritated by my dawdling.

‘All right, Chris. I think that’s it.’

He manages a valiant smile. ‘So, we’re ready?’

‘Sure, let’s do it.’

‘It’ll be fine. There’s absolutely no stress today. For the first time, we simply ...’

‘Chris, I know the drill. Let’s just get out of here.’



The stretch of open water left in the wake of the *Steadfast* almost two weeks ago still persists, providing a safe fairway for the small boat through the narrow fracture in the ice shelf. Sky-blue cliffs tower on both sides, their tops more than a hundred feet above. Left behind at the head of the icy fjord, the lonely red spot of the snow tractor becomes ever smaller, until it is lost from sight behind a bend.

Gradually, the meandering crack widens. With every curve, the blue glow emanating from the glacial walls gets paler, as more sunlight manages to shine down from above.

Then, after a final bend, the gorge comes to a sudden end, the steep cliffs fall away on either side, and the limitless expanse of the Weddell Sea opens up in front of us, dotted with a few tall icebergs gracefully drifting away.

Following the succession of storms over the past weeks, the sea ice has almost completely vanished. Only a few floes are still scattered about.

With the sun now able to penetrate the water, the phytoplankton is in full bloom, turning the colour of the sea into a deep green, with a faint yellow tint added by bioluminescent krill, which got trapped within ocean gyres. Hordes of petrels and skuas circle above, making the best of this brief season of plenty.

Manoeuvring out of the cracked ice shelf, Darren carefully shirks some of the larger fragments of ice. Then, with the outboard engines at full power, he takes the boat out onto the open sea. The former lifeboat rears up as it gathers speed, barely skimming the calm surface of the water. With the sound of small pieces of ice scraping against the keel, it appears to be skating on a mirror. The cold head wind is refreshing, a welcome change after the stale air inside the base.

This should be enjoyable, but the recurring dreams of the past weeks are not easily pushed aside.

Still, this is not just another nightmare. This is real life. We are currently gliding on real water – water that obeys the ordinary laws of nature. And the one thing we can always rely on – possibly the only thing – is that there are no tears in the fabric of reality.

Darren points at a particularly large iceberg and begins rounding it in a wide arch.

Chris and he are evidently on the lookout for something, intently scanning the leading edge of the ice shelf.

Then Darren seems to have found what they were searching for. He turns the wheel slightly and shuts down the engines.

The noise echoes away along the wall of ice, towering above us once again.

The boat settles back into the calm water, as it runs out of speed, coming to a halt near a relatively smooth indentation in the otherwise craggy cliff, where the large iceberg must have broken off not more than a few days ago.

Darren turns around at the steering console. ‘Right, here we are. This looks stable enough for the moment. It’s also quite close to our favourite spot from last year – remember, Chris?’

‘Yes. And like last year, with all that stuff in the water, visibility is not going to be more than twenty feet, if that – even with the good light we have today.’

He shoulders his diving cylinder. ‘I don’t know if you’ve ever dived in soup like that before, Siobhán, but it’s very easy to lose sight of the boat from down there. And then there are the strong currents. I think we’ll definitely have to rope up.’

Darren nods. ‘Agreed. So, let’s go over the final checks – if you two are ready? Right then: inflate suit ...’

Chris winks cheerfully, while the dry suits expand, amused by our bloated appearance and obviously looking forward to getting into the water.

‘Deflate suit ...’ Darren’s flat tone of voice reinforces the fact that nothing but strict adherence to a precise, well-choreographed routine is acceptable out here – the well-calculated risk.

Yet, simultaneously, the dark water, gurgling maliciously against the thin hull, is a constant reminder that beneath us lurks a sea of unpredictability – with nothing on our side, nothing to keep us from falling all the way to the bottom of the ocean, but the laws of nature – such as we know them.

‘Inflate jacket ...’

It all feels terribly wrong out here – the imposing cliffs above, the murky sea below. Suddenly, the laws of nature seem rather frail compared to the immensity of nature itself.

‘Deflate jacket ...’

All these routines that get us through our daily lives, all these little rituals we engage in without noticing, mechanically, without really thinking about them. And we only wake up when things go wrong and ...

‘Siobhán!’ Darren sounds irritated.

‘What?’

‘Test your weight release.’

‘Right, yes, I’m sorry.’ With a simple pull of the quick-release handles, the weight harness comes loose.

‘Good.’ The boatman is satisfied.

But Chris remains suspicious. ‘You’re all right, Siobhán?’

‘Yes, sure. I just got distracted for a moment. I thought there was something in the water. Only a reflection on the surface, probably. I can’t see anything now.’

Darren glances down into the green depth. There is nothing moving in it but swarms of plankton. ‘Well, let’s get *you* in the water then, shall we?’ He hesitates briefly. ‘Chris, perhaps you go first.’

Chris splashes a handful of water into his face, pulls the mask over his eyes, and takes his first breath through the regulator mouthpiece. He balances himself on the tube of the boat and indicates “OK.”

Darren lays out the tether and checks the water again. He nods. ‘Clear.’

Chris lets himself slide backwards into the icy sea. After a short fall, he comes to a rest, balanced just below the surface, the red of his dry suit



providing a splash of warmth among the cold hues of the water's natural colour palette.

Darren smiles encouragingly. 'All right. Good luck, Siobhán. And don't worry about other large creatures down there. We never managed to see leopard seals or orcas around here on any of our previous dives. But I'll signal down to you, as soon as anything of concern is happening up here – four pulls, as you know.'

And there is the salty taste of sea water – comforting in its familiarity, indicating that it still *is* the same old element, only colder than usual – bloody freezing, in fact.

But cold we can deal with. Simply relax. Let the diving reflex set in and allow the heart rate to go down.

The strap of the mask is a little too tight, but there is no time to adjust it now, with Chris already waiting in the water.

A few deep breaths of compressed air – another familiar taste, but dry this time.

Darren lays out the second tether. 'Ready?'

*Ready.*

He looks out for Chris in the water behind me ... and nods. 'Clear.'

The contact with the water, dampened through the diving suit, followed by an uncomfortable feeling of disorientation – falling backwards – piercing cold impacting the exposed skin of the face – still falling ...

Then the world straightens itself out again, as the stabiliser jacket pulls the heavy diving cylinder the right way up. And cold turns to numbness.

Beneath, the dark abyss of many nightmares opens up. But just above, and well within reach, is the peacefully undulating surface of the ocean, with the indistinct glow of the blue sky shining through. So, the laws of nature are still in charge after all.

And there is Chris floating nearby, closer to the pale face of the icy cliff we are about the descent. He is watching me and signals "OK?"

*Yes, Chris. This is very much "OK."*

In fact, it is brilliant – floating freely hundreds of feet above the Earth's surface, weightlessly, effortlessly, on top of the last uncharted world on our planet. All the stress and aggravation of life above ground are left behind. Time moves at a more graceful pace down here.

Suddenly, though, there is a commotion above, the waves getting more agitated. Then the dark outline of the boat pitches forwards. A moment later, the lighted rack with our instruments and the sampling bottles breaks the surface. Out here, in the vast ocean, lowered slowly on its tether, it is a rather frail looking feeler, a modest token of our desire to penetrate these mysterious depths with scientific understanding, to uncover the secrets hidden in the eternal darkness. But it is a start.

And the descent into the oceans also takes us back in time, for here is where our story begins. This is where we all come from, misguided exiles that we are, descendants of the first pioneers – the bravest, the most inquisitive of our early ancestors – who ventured out onto the land, in wide-eyed and breathless bewilderment.

Eventually, they left the oceans behind. But now, at least temporarily, I'm back.



'Do I bore you, Shivy?' She has heard me yawn.

'No, of course not – sorry, Ally. It's just that I'm on night duty this week. After sitting around and waiting forever, it's all happening now: I go diving early in the morning, take care of the water and ice samples afterwards, and then try to get some sleep later in the afternoon. In the evening, I get up again, have some breakfast, and when everyone else has gone to bed, I begin sleepwalking through the quiet base, checking the water pumps, the generator rooms, the workshops ... until around midnight, when I have lunch in the kitchen – alone, unless the meteorologist on night shift drops by. And then comes the toughest period until the morning, when it's time to go to work again.'

'Exciting ... And how are things with the lads?'

'All right. Much better now that the weather is nice, and we can go outside more often – actually do the things we are here for. But I suspect I shall always be “the new girl” – or “the girl,” at any rate. The other day, they had a game of ruggie outside in the snow. They asked politely if I wanted to join in, but seemed rather relieved nonetheless when I decided to opt out. I would consider football, playing in goal. But at the moment, with night duty, I'm mostly out of sync with the others anyway.'

'So, there isn't anything ...'

‘No, and I can’t think about that down here. It’s too complicated, and you promised not to ask.’

‘Yes, I know. I’m sorry.’ She sounds depressed and falls silent.

‘You went to see Gran over the weekend?’

‘I did, yes. She returns your love with the best wishes. I brought her your letter and the photographs. With all the snowflakes flying through the air, many of the pictures showed mostly blurry white dots. But some came out really well. That’s a bizarre landscape down there, all these natural snow sculptures on the ice – these waves, looking like a frozen ocean. We were both very impressed, Gran and I. Also, from outside, the base looks quite cool, with the towers and antennae, and the flag. About the interior ... well, I’m not so sure.

‘But I remember now what I wanted to say, before you fell asleep. When I left Gran on Sunday evening, before I took the bus back to the train station, I walked along our old way to school. I wanted ... I don’t know. Since you went away, I’ve been thinking a lot about our years in Norwich, about growing up together. It’s strange, but I’ve become a little nostalgic recently. I’m even re-reading some of our children’s classics – quite enjoying it, actually.

‘Anyhow, I wanted to see if Angel Road Comprehensive had changed in any way within the last ten years, or so – and, of course, it hadn’t. It’s still the same block of concrete, exactly as grey as it was right from the beginning. Only time has moved on, and so it feels different now, as if something got lost ... the simplicity of the school years, I suppose – even if, back then, they didn’t always seem quite that simple. But it was nice to see the old hockey ground again. The long afternoon and evening hours we spent there – do you remember? – instead of studying for the exams.’

‘Sure I remember. We were completely obsessed. We – that is to say you – had got it into our heads, that we had to win the East Round, no matter what. So, we only stopped practicing when we were completely famished. Speaking of which: is the old chippy still there?’

‘I’m afraid so, yes – and as smelly as ever, despite being closed at the time.’

‘Hey, I could murder for fresh fish ’n’ chips right now.’

‘How fresh do you think the fish was at the chippy?’

‘It wasn’t as bad as you claimed. And I never got sick from it.’

‘No, but I, watching you eat that stuff. And your gran always prepared such lovely food for you.’

‘She’d been working far too much anyway, throughout her life, without having to cook at odd hours.’

‘Yes, that was always your excuse – and I know you meant it.’ She sighs. ‘These were good times, weren’t they? I wonder whether the current U18 team are still competing nationally.’

‘Not unless they have a captain who is as fanatical as you were.’

‘Or inspirational?’

‘All right, I’ll settle for that. But, Ally, what’s up? You seem a little off colour.’

‘I know. It’s Kathy – still. Normally, I would simply try and get over it, but it’s completely impossible with the public attention the case is getting. And at work, I can’t ignore it either. After all, the original crime – the abduction – happened right here in Cambridge. In the current affairs edition, we usually don’t report on individual murders, unless there’s some larger societal implication. But this is clearly becoming a bigger issue, not only spreading across Britain, but also with thematic connections to earlier incidents of alleged ritual abuse. It’s just that, the more I find out about what happened to Kathy, and the more I think about it, the more sceptical I get.

‘Specifically regarding Satanism – within the last ten years or so, how many cases did we see, spawning a flood of overblown, sensationalised news stories? And in most of these, no evidence of any *ritual* abuse having taken place has ever been presented – Satanic or otherwise. In fact, many of these allegations – including some against close family members – have been proven to be completely unfounded. Only a few months ago, last autumn, that famous Canadian case, which started it all, was finally debunked. So, on the one hand, as a current affairs issue, we can’t ignore this any longer. On the other hand, I’m reluctant to casually run along with the idea that, when it comes to Kathy, we are dealing with a ritualistic killing, and to contribute to a programme in any way that feeds into the already existing hysteria. I’m now at a point where I am convinced that Satanism is only a smoke screen, a cover for something much darker. The problem is, I don’t know what that is, or even what it could be.’

‘Then the case hasn’t been solved yet?’

‘No, that’s just it. I get the impression that the police are nowhere near finding the real culprits. I didn’t want to say too much about that during our last conversation. The time on the satellite phone is far too precious –

literally. I rather wanted to chat about harmless stuff. But since I can't think of anything else ...

'Basically, what happened was, shortly after you left – you were still *en route* to Antarctica at the time – the police managed to arrest the remaining members of that Satanic cult. Turns out, they're all quite young, all in their twenties, from ordinary social backgrounds, without any previous convictions. Most of them are from England, and a few from Scotland. They admit to having met regularly in the abandoned manor house since last August, to perform "black masses," as they call it. But they categorically deny that Kathy had any connection to their group, and that they had ever seen her before. Moreover, they all swear that none of their rituals ever involved any form of blood sacrifice, including animals, and that they never killed anyone.'

'Then what is their version of events?'

'The truth, I think. For a while, there was nothing but wild speculations in the media, because their statements to the police and many details about the investigation couldn't be disclosed, of course. You experienced the early stages of that, before you left. But now, at last, the trials have started. So, a week ago, I went down to London for the initial hearing in the Magistrates' Court, to get more reliable information than what had been published previously.

'In the evidence the cult members gave to the court, they all stated consistently that on that fateful Friday, they travelled to the Highlands in separate cars, assembling at Loch Assynt over the course of the afternoon – by that old ruin of Ardvreck Castle. From there, they drove on to the manor house together, arriving late in the evening. By then, the surroundings were all in darkness. But there were no other cars parked outside; and as far as they could tell, there was no one else in the vicinity. At least from the front of the building, everything appeared to be normal – quiet and dark as always.

'They had forced a patio door open when they had begun to use the manor house, which had remained unnoticed during all that time, since no one really comes out there anymore. So, they walked around to the back of the building, as usual. But as soon as they entered through the open door and into the drawing room, they noticed that in the fireplace the ambers were glowing. At first, they were afraid that someone had returned to the building, and decided to leave. But there was no sound at all, and so they carefully went to check the other rooms. That's when they saw unsteady light

coming from the adjacent dining hall. In the centre of it was Kathy, lying in the pentagram they had drawn on the floor during their previous meetings, with her head, her hands, and her feet positioned in the five corners. The circle of black candles that they had set up around it was lit. Kathy was wearing a simple white dress and a silver necklace with a large pendant – one of these amulets with a goat’s head in an inverted pentangle.

‘The remarkable thing is that this by itself did not surprise them very much. They honestly believed that, through their rituals, the building had become a focal point for demonic powers, that Kathy had somehow been teleported into their pentagram through some form of magic.

‘Upon first sight, she seemed unharmed, without any obvious signs of injuries. She was just lying there, as if in a trance. But then they noticed that the pendant of Kathy’s necklace must have got extremely hot while she had been wearing it, because it had burnt through her dress and into her skin. That’s when it occurred to them that she was in fact dead. And that’s when they panicked and fled the scene. They thought that Satan himself had entered Kathy through the amulet, making it glow, and taking her soul to the afterlife.’

‘Insane ... But then, I suppose, one of them lost their nerves, contacted the police about where to find Kathleen, and denounced at least some of their mates.’

‘No, you see, that’s where it gets mysterious. During the hearing, it came out that in the anonymous phone call made to the police, the caller had not only indicated where to find Kathy, but also that vital evidence had been deposited in a pillar box near the police station. This turned out to be an envelope with several instant photographs, taken through the windows from outside the building, showing Kathy lying in the pentagram, surrounded by the cult members. And there were also photographs of the cars parked outside, with all the number plates.

‘So, evidently, someone else had been in this remote place – but why? What were they doing there? Were they really just witnesses of a Satanic ritual that killed Kathy? Or is what the cult members are saying true? Then it is highly likely that this other group of people is responsible for her murder.

‘Consider this: those who planned and executed Kathy’s abduction in such a precise manner could also be responsible for killing her. But they wouldn’t be the kind of people who then panic and run away, leaving a dead body behind. That is completely ridiculous. The police and defence counsels

must realise this, and I'm sure it will be used as an argument in court. It is much more plausible to assume that these "witnesses," who took the photographs, weren't only innocent bystanders, who just happened to be in that remote spot.'

'But even if those who were arrested aren't responsible for the murder, they're still pretty dodgy characters. I mean, they did break into a lonely old place, and they did perform Satanic rituals.'

'They did. The break-in was illegal, of course – and worse than that, fleeing the scene of a murder without informing the police. But as far as Satanism is concerned, the kind of activities that this might realistically include, tend to be massively exaggerated in the media, presented as being at least morally depraved and corrupt, if not illegal.

'Satanists themselves, meanwhile, have a very different view of their ideology. During the hearing, they described that they see Satan as a tragic hero, a fallen guardian angel for humanity, who was unjustly cast down from Heaven, because he challenged God's authority. Seeing how bad things were down here on Earth, he argued that God, with his omniscience and omnipotence, should act to prevent the suffering of the innocent and bring justice to the world. In the view of these cult members, Satan attempts to lead humans away from God by giving them the gift of reason, and to free them from religious dogma. True evil for Satanists is the rejection of knowledge about the world and acceptance of religious ideologies on blind faith. Christians then turn around and call them materialists, who reject spiritual salvation to give in to the "desires of the flesh," and so the debate goes on.

'But whatever your view is of Satanism, the rest of us I hope can agree that demonic powers have nothing whatsoever to do with the crime that has been committed. In fact, the post-mortem has shown that Kathy was killed by a drug overdose. So, whoever it was who abducted Kathy, knowing that the cult members were going to arrive that evening, killed her shortly before, placed her inside the pentagram, lit the candles, put the necklace into the fireplace for a while, and then ...' She breaks off with a sob. 'Who does such a thing? How ruthless do you have to be? And how sure of yourself? It makes me sick to know that these people are still out there. That's what is so troublesome about it. Whoever did this is far too clever to make any mistakes. They will never get caught, and they will do it again. If we really *were* dealing with Satanic rituals, I wouldn't worry too much – only this is different. How

do you go against such cold-blooded violence? What does it take to defeat this kind of evil?’

‘But, Ally, whoever these people are, in the end, they’re just human. They live among humans, and by humans shall they be defeated.’

‘Now *you* go biblical on me – you of all people, Siobhán Dannreuther. Still, I hope you’re right.’ She chuckles, despite herself. ‘In the meantime, there are far too many open questions – most importantly, what motivates them, these dark figures in the background? The members of this Satanic cult are completely harmless, I have no doubt about that. It is therefore inconceivable that someone would commit such an elaborate and horrendous crime, only to implicate them, no matter how strongly someone might disagree with their ideology. On the other hand, no one would go out to this remote place by accident. So, these other people must have been there with a very specific motive, which has nothing to do with Satanic rituals at all. Their interest, in some sense, must be in the old manor house. That building must somehow be at the centre of these events. And the main purpose of these people cannot simply be to scare others away, as they did with the cult members. If that were the case, the last thing they would want to do would be to make sure that, for weeks, the attention of the whole nation – including a full-scale police investigation – was focussed almost exclusively on that place.

‘And now you see the problem: it is silly to believe that the cult members are responsible for the abduction and murder. But if Kathy wasn’t a random victim of a gang of Satanists, we are right back where we started. And we need to ask ourselves: why her? Why Kathy? And why display the crime in such a public and dramatic fashion?’

‘You’re right, that doesn’t add up. And based on what you’re saying, if this *is* about the manor house, since it hasn’t been occupied for quite a while, the motivation for the murder may be linking way back in time.’

‘Exactly, Shivy. I am convinced that this isn’t about what is happening in that place right now. This is about something that happened there in the past. That is why they’re not afraid to draw attention to it. The murder was clearly set up to shock and to intimidate, almost as a warning. There’s a story here, written between the lines. And while most people following the news only hear about Satanic rituals, there must be a certain group of people out there who understand what is really going on, and for whom the manor



house itself, or what happened there years and possibly decades ago, has a certain significance.’

‘But what kind of a building is it? And whom does it belong to?’

‘Apparently, it’s in private ownership. At least, I couldn’t find it in any of the Royal Commission inventories. When the police conducted their investigation, they must have been in contact with the owners. But according to the official scenario involving Satanic rituals, they probably had no cause to suspect them of anything. That the house has been uninhabited for a while isn’t too surprising, given how remote it is. Without a full domestic staff, it would be nigh on impossible to maintain. The plumbing must be archaic. And it’s quite possible that it never had electricity laid out, up there in the mountains.

‘Regarding the building itself, there’s nothing unusual about it – fairly common Victorian architecture, as far as I can tell. But I can see how the “Gothic” style might appeal to some people who fancy themselves as Satanists. Especially with the building standing all by itself, next to a deep lake, and shielded from view by mountains – a bit like the setting in some old horror film.

‘Considering that, it’s not surprising that the manor house had ghost stories attached to it even before the murder. There are bizarre stories about phantoms and evil fogs that rise from the lake to either induce people to walk out into the water and drown themselves, or to murder others. Allegedly, the ghost of at least one of these earlier victims is already haunting the building. And according to the tabloids, these supernatural occurrences are the “real” reason for why no one has been living there during all this time, if you can believe that.

‘Ghosts, Shivy – phantoms and ghosts: that’s the kind of stuff we’ve had to put up with since you left. I’m telling you, you’re lucky to be far away from all this madness. And I am convinced that someone is taking advantage of these old stories and rumours, to obscure the actual motive behind a very serious crime, and to send a message about something quite different.’

‘Blimey, Ally, I had no idea how bad this got. So, when you put the documentary together, how are you going to sort through all this mess? Did you go and talk to the police again? That detective who interviewed us about Kathleen – he seemed quite reasonable.’

‘DCI Anderson, yes. He *was* rather dashing, wasn’t he?’ She falls into a contemplative silence. ‘But I didn’t go back, and I won’t. He couldn’t tell me

anything new anyway, nothing that wasn't already publicly known. We'll probably have to wait for the jury trial to get more reliable information. The cult members all pleaded not guilty at the initial hearing, but the evidence against them can't be ignored. Therefore, the case was committed to the Crown Court, with a trial date set for some time in summer. Now we've got months of uncertainty and futile speculations to look forward to.

'I know I should let it go. As I said the other day, I barely knew Kathy. But I can't stop thinking about it. To begin with, there's the nature of the crime. Moreover, the murder isn't the only injustice that has been committed. There is a good chance that the lives of a whole group of innocent people are going to be ruined as well. Everything we hear about the incident is obviously wrong. But none of the alternative theories I can think of are without flaws either. So, I keep turning the same thoughts over in my mind, without ever coming up with new and sensible ideas. Now it's got to the point where I can't sleep anymore. I simply cannot turn off my brain. So, I started drinking ...'

'Ally!'

'Not a lot, but regularly. It's useless for me to go to bed without having had at least a glass of wine, or two. I'm afraid, you know, of lying there – half awake, half asleep – trapped inside my own head, with all this crazy stuff going on. And then these silly things they keep talking about in the media – evil spirits and such. I know it's stupid. But somehow, I let this nonsense get to me.

'For days now I've had this vague feeling of being pursued by some malevolent power, like a shadow closing in. It began during the weekend. On Saturday, when I went out to Norwich, it wasn't so bad. But when I left the next day, walking out to Angel Road all by myself ... admittedly, it was in the evening, and it was getting dark, which can play funny tricks on your mind. But I really had this feeling that someone or *something* was behind me all the time. Of course, I never saw anything suspicious. It was only an apprehension I had, but I couldn't shake it off.

'Then, on Monday evening, when I returned from work ... as soon as I stepped into the flat, I had this horrible feeling again that someone had been here. Neither the door nor the lock had been forced – nothing had changed in any way. It was just ... like a strange smell hanging over everything. I thought the fears would subside after a few days, but they didn't. And today, it got so bad that I didn't know what to do anymore, and whom to talk to.

So, after work, I went to your institute to send you that telex. Cheers, by the way, for responding so quickly, seeing how expensive this is.'

'Ally, that's no problem at all. I've got no other opportunities to spend money down here. I don't have any rent to pay. I don't need to buy food. I can wear all the old clothes I wouldn't dare wearing back home. And besides, you're worth it, you know that.'

'You're sweet, Shivy. I wish I could manage somehow to be more cheerful; or at least talk to you in person. But once again, we've tied up your vital satellite link for far too long. I'm sure that's exactly the confirmation of the "girls on phone" cliché your colleagues need.'

'Never mind that. Now that I had the chance to go out and do my job a few times, I feel much more confident among the lads. I know that I can do what is required of me, and I simply have to keep doing it. So, let's not worry about the others. In fact, why not make a tradition of it. Unless something comes up, I'll phone you every Sunday evening – say ten o'clock your time – at least for the next few weeks.'

'Don't you want to talk to your gran occasionally?'

'Ally, she would be absolutely horrified if I called her up from Antarctica. You know how she is about long-distance phone calls. I can barely keep her on the phone from Scotland for more than a few minutes. Then it's always: "Just write me a nice letter, dear." Apart from the costs, I think she prefers that because she can keep the letters and reread them – or, it seems, ask you for explanations about them, clandestinely.'

'You're right. I didn't dare tell her about our last phone conversation. I only mentioned sending you a telex. I imagine she assumed that you had responded in the same manner.'

'I hope so. But look, why don't I phone you again this Sunday evening? If only for a few minutes.'

'All right, sounds good. I'll try not to let these phantoms get to me until then.'



## CHAPTER FOUR

# THE GATEWAY

The night-time sun hovers low above the southern horizon, serenely gliding back towards the east and the beginning of yet another calm and uneventful summer day on Antarctica.

In the dense orange light, the boundless expanse of eternal snow attains a warm glow, and even the acute lines of the Met Tower appear to be softened.

Complete silence hangs all around ... but for the crunching of the boots in the dry snow.

Iain watches me scramble up onto the platform and surreptitiously puts out his cigarette. ‘Siobhán, what a pleasant surprise. What brings you out tonight?’

‘I was checking the external fuel depots when I saw you standing up here, all by yourself. So, I thought I could afford to take a little time off and exchange a few words with the only other waking soul for hundreds of miles.’

‘Awake *and* sober. I wouldn’t be surprised if John’s party is still going on over there.’

‘No, it’s all quiet now. But there’s going to be some cleaning up to do tomorrow.’

‘No worries. In the end, it’s never as bad as it looks.’

‘Nonetheless, I might find that, by the time the others manage to get up, I’m suddenly quite tired and much better off comfortably tucked up in bed. Chris suggested that we might take a day off from diving tomorrow, and I didn’t argue with him.’

‘Is night duty getting to you?’

‘No, not particularly. If anything, I sleep better now in the afternoon, than during the first few weeks at night, when I had nothing to do. Concepts like “day” or “night” don’t make a lot of sense down here. Inside the base, the sun never shines at all, and out here, it never sets. Life on Antarctica seems somehow disconnected from time. I mean, I can see how the hour hand continues turning inside my watch – two rounds for each circle the sun

completes in the sky. But besides that regular motion, nothing really happens. It's just the same cycle over and over again.'

Iain looks a little sceptical and stifles a yawn.

'You've been on night shift ever since I came.'

'Indeed, and I shall be for the rest of the summer. But I like it, and Nigel didn't fight me over it. So, we simply keep our schedules. That way we don't have to adjust to a different rhythm all the time. And I get to meet the other guys when I wake up in the afternoon – and you, of course.'

'Us" and "her" ... 'You're still bewildered by my presence here, aren't you?'

Iain reacts surprised.

'No, don't get defensive. I'm just curious. I know you're not bothered by me.'

'You're right, I'm not, not at all. But since you bring it up, I *was* wondering ...'

'... how a nice girl – such as myself – could end up with a bunch of blokes – such as yourself – in a place like this?'

He laughs. 'Yes, something like that. It's not one of the most obvious places to visit, for most women *or* men. So, there had to be a moment in your life, when you thought it might be a good idea to forego everything and everyone else – for more than two years when you applied initially – to leave everything behind, and come here.'

'But the thing is, I *didn't* think about it in that way. I just thought about the adventure, rather than the social implications – you know, focus on the benefits, and ignore the downsides. Even growing up, I was always more interested in realistic adventure stories, rather than fantasy tales – the old accounts about Amundsen and Scott, for example. Naturally, I thought it would be grand to be able to go and see these faraway places myself. But I never had the opportunity to travel abroad, even within Europe. It was simply too expensive. In fact, this is the first time I'm outside of mainland Britain. I could never work out how to combine these dreams of exploration with real life, and throughout most of secondary school, I was undecided about what I wanted to do afterwards. Then, entering Fifth Form, the one thing that might have compelled me to stay on for A-levels was to go into nursing, as both my gran and my mum had done. But aside from upholding a family tradition, that really didn't appeal to me. I understood even then that I didn't have the necessary social skills or patience – as you can probably

attest to. Meanwhile, across the country, there was the “Winter of Discontent” going on, with everyone going on strike – those who still had jobs, including the nurses. And what little money was earned became less valuable every day. So, I mentally prepared myself to leave school to try and get whatever job there was available. But then I got lucky, I guess.’

‘How so?’

‘Well, you may remember that, adding to the general chaos, it was a particularly cold and snowy winter, with blizzards and all – the sort of weather you love to take as an excuse for staying at home and being lazy. So, on one such evening, coming back from school, I settled down in the living room with a nice cup of tea, flipped on the telly, expecting to be comfortably bored, and there it was: travel, exploration, adventure – all wrapped in one. It was an episode of *Life on Earth*, when it was first shown on the Beeb. And so, after years of sleeping through lessons in school, I had this sudden epiphany that biology was about life – imagine that, Iain – not just about silly schematics in old-fashioned textbooks, or mutilated frogs on the dissecting table. Moreover, I learned to appreciate that, as humans, we are part of an intricate network of life, spanning the entire globe and going way back in time – our planet’s history written in living cells, not stone. From then on, I had to be at home at least a few minutes before the start of each episode, to have enough time to warm up the old television set, fiddle with the antenna to stabilise the picture, and then ...’

*Sitting on the old over-hoovered carpet, leaning back against the equally worn-out sofa – Alison lying behind me, leafing through some magazine; present not so much out of interest in the programme, as for company; occasionally stealing a glance and making a comment if something particularly cute or ugly appears on the screen – like that mudskipper emerging from its mangrove swamp, the bulbous eyes at the top of its head casting about for something to eat, or for any sign of danger.*

*‘Ugh, what’s that?’*

*‘Hey, Ally, look at him. He’s only trying to live, you know. And he’s making a pretty good job of it, considering.’*

*Alison laughs and ruffles my hair. ‘So, you are a romantic after all.’*

Iain has noticed the brief absentmindedness. ‘You’re a strange person, Siobhán Dannreuther. You think too much. That’s not healthy down here.’

‘Well, if I am, it’s all your fault. That’s what you get from stirring up old memories – and some are a little distracting. Anyhow, I knew then what I wanted to do. I stayed in school, got three adequate A levels, managed to get accepted for an undergraduate course in natural sciences at King’s College, left Norwich, where I’d grown up, and moved to Cambridge. That was a bit of a change from life at a humble comprehensive. But at the residence, I was staying next door to an old friend from Norwich, and she always encouraged me to carry on when I was ready to give everything up. With that support, I managed to hang on during the first term, and then I got used to the new pressure.

‘I became interested in marine zoology, which unfortunately wasn’t offered at Cambridge at the time. So, years before getting the opportunity to come here, I already had to make a tough choice: stay at Cambridge and take up one of the subjects on offer there, or pursue the topic I really wanted to do, which meant moving away from friends and family. In the end, it was clear what I had to do. I got my B.A., went to St Andrews for the postgraduate programme in marine mammal science, and eventually got a Ph.D. in dolphin echolocation and communication.

‘Initially, there was hardly any data to work with, which required us to get into the water ourselves, to be able to study these animals. I therefore joined the university sub-aqua club and learned scuba diving. At that time, I also began to collaborate with scientists at the University of Aberdeen. I went on field trips with them in Moray Firth, where we made audio and video recordings, and then tried to distinguish between navigation and communication signals, or to associate certain sound signals with certain types of behaviour. Just then, Aberdeen were in the process of establishing a field station by the lighthouse on Tarbat Ness – that narrow spit of land sticking out into the Firth, along the north coast. Fortunately, they needed people. And so, after my dissertation, I transferred to Aberdeen on a postdoctoral research fellowship. I divided my time between fieldwork in the North, and then analysing the data back at university, and things were going well.

‘But then, less than a year later, before I had the chance to settle in too much, I saw the announcement for the job here pinned to the department notice board. At first, I got excited about it; only it didn’t take me long to find out that, by default, women aren’t allowed at all as members of British Antarctic wintering teams. I knew that it was pointless to apply, but I did it



anyway, in an act of defiance, I guess, simply to annoy the establishment. Obviously, I never heard back from them, and I quickly forgot about it myself.

‘So, it came as a bit of a shock when, more than a year later, I got a call from Cambridge, asking me if I might be able to leave for Antarctica in three months’ time, assuming I passed all the required tests and medical exams. At first, I probably didn’t come across as being particularly coherent. But after a while, I managed to say “yes,” and here I am – and so far, I must say, no regrets.’

‘But you’re going back to Aberdeen, when this is over?’

‘Definitely, yes. I love it up there. I’m temporarily on leave right now, but I’ve still got my contract with the University.’

‘Good man.’

‘I only wish the Dons didn’t play in red. I mean, I’m happy to support them, and I wish them well, but it’s hard to get over that particular aspect of Aberdeen culture.’

‘Agreed, entirely – red has no place on a football shirt. When it comes to that, green must surely be the colour.’

‘Or blue.’

‘All right, I suppose, especially on an international level – anything but red, really.’

‘Your family is from ...’

‘East Coast too – a small place, just north of the capital.’ He suddenly looks up. ‘There, did you see that? I think it was an aurora, very briefly ... yes, there it is again.’

A faint green shimmer flits across the dark blue sky directly above.

‘You see, Siobhán, our two colours joined in harmony.’

‘Yes ... Beautiful, isn’t it? That’s the first one I’ve seen.’

‘Now in summer, they must be fairly intense to show up against the sun, even at night. But this is a prime location for auroras. In winter, you can see them quite regularly. In fact, geospace research was one of the reasons the original base was built here, back in the ’50s.’

‘Thus, the name.’

‘Indeed.’

‘They look like curtains blowing in the wind, don’t they – or a luminescent veil suspended from the sky. How high do you think are they?’

‘They?’

‘The lights, whatever they are.’

‘*They* are trillions upon trillions of excited little molecules falling back into their ground state and becoming thoroughly depressed in the process.’

‘So, how high are they?’

‘Upper mesosphere, lower thermosphere.’

‘Meaning?’

‘Meaning way up – hundred kilometres and more.’

‘I see. But why did all these little molecules get excited in the first place?’

‘You’d get excited too, if you were hit straight-on by high-energy particles from the sun. And the cool thing is, they come in different colours. The green light here, for example, is from atomic oxygen.’

‘You weather people really *are* dull.’

‘Siobhán, that’s got nothing whatsoever to do with the weather. These emissions are much higher.’

‘You’re still dull. The Inuit have a much better explanation.’

‘The Inuit?’

‘Yes, the northern circumpolar peoples, you know.’

‘I do. But what are they saying?’

‘They’re saying that auroras are gateways to the afterlife – at least that version of the afterlife that is reserved for good people, and particularly those, who suffered unnatural and violent deaths. So, whenever an aurora is seen in the sky, it’s a sign that the barrier between the two worlds, ours and theirs, is very thin – a warning that something bad is about to happen, some catastrophe or accident, or even a murder.’

‘Planet Earth According to Siobhán – from the popular series: An Outsider’s View of Our Galaxy.’

‘Don’t be so dismissive. I’m not sure, who told me – wait, now I remember: it was a former flatmate of mine, back in St Andrews.’

Claire ... funny, that I should be reminded of her now.

‘Anyhow, if this barrier is weak, it becomes easier to establish a connection between this and the other world, to communicate with your ancestors and other helpful spirits, to get advice from them and encouragement in hard times; to tell them that you’re still thinking of them, that you miss them, and that you are hoping to see them again.’

Iain looks slightly concerned. ‘Siobhán, you’ve been here for less than a month, and you’re already getting sentimental. How can you possibly make it through the long winter at this rate?’

‘But death *is* a sentimental issue. Think about it: if you could establish a connection to the afterlife ... if your ancestors could communicate with you ... if the spirits on the other side could light torches – as the Inuit belief – to show their loved ones, whose time has come, the right way, so that they don’t get lost and end up in a bad place of the afterlife ...’

He seems seriously worried now.

‘Come on, Iain, say it.’

‘Say what?’

‘That I’m crazy.’

‘You *are* crazy, Siobhán. You think too much. I told you that a moment ago. And you know what your problem is, don’t you? You don’t drink enough. So, start working on your contingency, before someone else does. You’ll sleep much better that way.’

‘Och aye, here we go: spoken like a true Scotsman – not a problem in the world that couldn’t be alleviated with some healthy bevvy, eh.’

He chuckles. ‘All I’m saying is you have to be pragmatic down here, otherwise you can get into all sorts of trouble. You know what happened to Kevin – and unlike you, he was completely normal, when he arrived here.’

‘In other words, I should be a good girl, concentrate on getting my work done, and otherwise keep my head down.’

‘We simply have to make sure we make it through this second year and especially the second winter. Then we can all go home.’

‘Iain, this may surprise you, but I haven’t come all this way just to go home.’

‘No, you’re right. Of course, it’s different for you. You only got here. But why would you care about your ancestors anyway?’

‘Because some are worth it. And family is important.’

‘I don’t know. In my opinion, the usefulness of parents beyond the age of twelve is highly overrated.’

‘You don’t mean that.’

‘Well, that’s my experience at any rate.’ He pushes himself away from the bannister and walks towards the door. ‘And speaking of death: I think it’s time for me to get back inside. Too much fresh air kills.’

‘That’s easy for you to say, living up here. But I’ll take a few more deep breaths, before returning to the pong of the underworld over there.’

Iain nods with a smile and closes the door behind him.

The cool green light still wavers across the sky, blending smoothly into the orange glow above the snowy horizon in the south. Some things *are* beautiful enough to justify a little sentimentality – even if, technically, the truth is less romantic.

And so, as the summer sunlight continues to fade – little by little, every day – giving way to the ethereal lights of the auroras, there is at least one good thing to look forward to during the long dark months of winter.



Chris reclines on the sofa in the otherwise empty lounge. He warms his hands around a steaming cup of tea, attempting to replace the heat lost in the icy waters of Weddell Sea. He gazes vaguely at the television screen, where a beige pick-up truck speeds through the searing heat of the Australian Outback.

A second cup sits on the table.

‘For me? Cheers, mate – exactly what I need right now.’

‘I drowned yours in milk, as I’ve seen you do it.’

‘Perfect. But Chris, before you get too comfortable: there should still be some hot water left in the shower, if you want to take the opportunity while it lasts – you know, before the others come back inside from their rugby match.’

‘In a moment.’ He is evidently too lazy to get up and turns his attention back to the music video.

‘They had a new album out last year.’

‘Did they? Is it good?’ He seems genuinely interested.

‘It’s all right – more aggressive than *Diesel and Dust*. They’re clearly serious about what they’re singing.’

‘Yes, clearly.’ He becomes pensive. ‘You know, we’ll have a lot to catch up with, once we get home after more than two years. All that life that’s been going on while we were away.’

He takes a sip of his tea. ‘It’s funny, isn’t it – home. Watching this makes you realise how far away that really is. I mean, right now, this parched desert is closer to us, here on this frozen continent, than our own rainy little island.’

‘The wonders of geography, Chris.’

‘Yes, never been my strength – science.’ He slumps deeper into the sofa. ‘But I’m going to mend your regulator tonight.’

‘What’s wrong with it.’

‘Nothing major. It’s just that when we ascended today, I saw a few small bubbles come out of one of your first stage connectors.’

‘I can take care of that.’

‘No, it’s all right. You’ve got the samples to deal with, do all the analyses, and I’m no good at that. Kev occasionally tried to explain some of the biology stuff to me, but I never got the hang of it.’

‘I’m not surprised. I don’t know what to make of it myself. The kind of biology we’ve pulled out of the sea and the ice so far is totally baffling. Strictly speaking, these simple organisms shouldn’t be able to live at these low temperatures. And yet, they’re absolutely thriving down there. So, I was thinking the other day, when I looked at them under the microscope: their morphology is really ...’

The old ship’s clock on the wall in the dining room area chimes.

‘Wait, what time is it – seven o’clock? I almost forgot: I’ve got a phone call to make.’

Chris fails miserably to suppress a smirk, glad to escape the biology lecture. Saved by the bell ...



‘Shivy, what’s going on? This is getting seriously creepy! I’m scared! I can’t be imagining these things, can I? Because if I am, I’m going insane, aren’t I. And if I’m not, it’s even worse.’

‘But why would anyone pursue you all of a sudden?’

‘Why would anyone abduct and kill Kathleen? Ask yourself that, Shivy. Why? I’m telling you, there are evil powers about, some kind of darkness that we can’t see. But I can feel it, and it’s coming closer all the time. I’m trying to keep it at bay, by shedding light on it – by attempting to find out what is happening behind the scenes, who really is behind the murder. I’ve been going over every aspect of this case, every little detail I could dig up, again and again, now focussing primarily on the manor house, as I said. I’m still convinced that it’s the building or the surrounding area that is at the centre of the crime, rather than these Satanic rituals. So, in my own time, I’ve spent several evenings trawling through all the news archives, trying to dig up any notable event related to that place. But I couldn’t find anything, nothing at all. With all these old myths about phantoms and ghosts, there doesn’t

appear to be a single recorded tragedy – a murder or an accident – that might have given rise to these stories. Based on what is publicly known, the building is completely unremarkable. And I went right back to the Mid-Nineteenth Century, when it would have been built – approximately, judging by the style. To check the exact date and the ownership, I would have to look up the title to the land in the Scottish Record Office. For that, I would either have to get someone to do that for me, or go up to Edinburgh myself – both being impossible. This is, after all, a personal obsession. It would be rather embarrassing if, for example, the people I work with found out that I’m wasting my time investigating the history of an old building, rather than following the most obvious lines of enquiry that everyone else is pursuing.’

‘Ally, you shouldn’t be too harsh on yourself for being affected by the sensational news reporting about the murder. A collection of papers got here with the post on Friday. So, I’ve seen some of these articles now that you were talking about. They’re completely out of order, especially the tabloids. There were also some photographs of the manor house and the lake – including one of the dining hall, with the pentagram and the candles on the floor. It’s definitely a creepy place. And to think how it must have been for Kathleen to end up there ...’

‘Exactly, that is what I can’t get out of my head. As I said, I’ve tried to make sense of it, but whatever resides in that place I don’t believe can be rationalised. There was no particular reason for why it hit Kathy, and there will be no particular reason for the next attack – because I am certain it will strike again. Moreover, I am convinced that this ... *thing* has been here before. There is something coming back to us from the past – something evil. It has lain dormant for decades, and now something has happened. Something has woken it up – and it wasn’t these Satanic rituals, I’m sure of that. This is much worse.’

‘I don’t know what to say, Ally. I mean, you know what I have to say, and I know what you don’t want me to say.’

‘No, you’re right. I’m being silly. I realise that, as soon as I manage to calm down for just a moment – only, most of the time, I can’t. But I understand that this is an awkward situation for you, and there is nothing that you can do, being so far away.’

‘Haven’t you talked to anyone else about it, in person? Not about the murder, but these ... these fears.’

‘What’s the point, Shivy. I mentioned that I’d told Gran about having known Kathy, and she knows I was rather troubled by the whole affair. Back then, that was understandable, but I won’t bother her with my paranoia now. And if I go to a psychologist, what are they going to tell me that I don’t already know? That I’m having a nervous breakdown, or panic attacks? That I’m being “overwrought” and should take some time off? Fantastic, I can tell myself that. In fact, that’s exactly what I’m planning to do. But until then, I’m stuck here, in the wake of a terrible crime, incapable of making sense of what is going on, and all the while watching myself slowly going mad.’

‘Don’t you go out with your friends sometimes?’

‘I don’t want to impose myself. I’m really no good company at the moment.’

‘I’m sure they would understand. And if it helps you ...’

‘Well, that’s the problem, you see. I’m not sure, it would. I find socialising too exhausting right now, in addition to everything else. Therefore, on balance, I feel better on my own – even if, occasionally, I get caught up in some unpleasant thoughts. I just have to push through, but I’ll be all right.’

‘And work isn’t helping either, I imagine, with the constant reminders of what happened.’

‘No, exactly. It’s obvious that I can’t deal with this on a detached, professional level. I’m too personally involved. I decided therefore that I would not contribute to our planned documentary on the “Satanic Culture of Britain.” Also, it is quite clear that I need to get away from here. So, shortly before our last conversation, I’d requested a sabbatical, and I got the confirmation now – three-months beginning on the 28<sup>th</sup>, that’s Monday week. Normally, you couldn’t make such a short-term request; but I suspect everyone at work recognises that I’m a little out of it at the moment. They were all very nice about Kathy, trying to be supportive. But as I said, this is different now. This is either me being paranoid, or there genuinely is something going on, of which Kathy’s murder was only a small part.

‘At any rate, whatever the truth is, I have to get out of Cambridge for a while, to get at least some physical distance from everything. I’m not sure yet what I want to do. My first thought was to do some voluntary work abroad for the UN. But it turns out they expect you to sign up for at least one year, and I can’t afford to be away from my job for that long. I do want to come back here, eventually. I really like Cambridge. I like the town. I like the old

colleges. I like being surrounded by university culture, even if I'm not studying anymore. And Gran lives nearby, of course.

'Alternatively, I thought I'd like to go to Dublin again, freshen up my Irish, use the National Library to do some research, learn more about the history of the island – Acts of Union and onwards, about the historical background of the Troubles, basically. And then, when I get back, perhaps I can try and get a programme commissioned about that, instead of Satanism, which clearly isn't healthy for me. I don't know. But I definitely want to do something worthwhile, get fresh ideas into my head, and purge the old ones. The good thing is, three months are plenty of time, and there is no need to stress myself out. So, I was thinking: rather than flying, I might take the *Sealink* from Holyhead. I've never done that before. It's much more relaxing, and I'll finally get to see Wales as well.'

'Ally, that sounds absolutely brilliant. You should definitely do that. And in the meantime, don't let these silly news reports get to you.'

'Silly? That's easy for you to say. You don't know how it is back here. Satanism and these ghost stories may only be diversions, created specifically for the media. But there *is* something very nasty behind these events.' She pauses, trying to get her voice under control. 'Shivy, you're not here. I can only tell you how it feels to me. There are shadows all around me, and they're closing in. In the past, I never used the chain at the door, you know that. Now I put it up as soon as I come home – for all the good it did for Kathleen. Still, I'm thinking that maybe it will buy me a few seconds, just long enough to call the police – because I fear it will happen, Shivy. I really fear it will happen. I keep telling you, I have this feeling of being followed, for more than a week now, as soon as I step out of the door. Even in here ... I can't see it, but it's there – creeping out of every dark corner. I keep far too many lights on, all the time. And even so, I don't feel safe anymore in my dear little flat. I can't sleep, and if I do, I have the most horrible nightmares. Then I wake up, but the nightmares are still there, as if the boundary between dreams and reality wasn't solid anymore. And no matter how ... What was that?'

'What do you mean?'

'I heard something, outside the door. Shivy, someone's outside the door.'

There is the noise of a table skidding on the floor. A glass shatters. Then the only sound left is the static crackle in the satellite phone line.

'Ally? ... Ally!'



‘Yes, I’m still here. It’s only the neighbours. I heard their child’s voice.’ She sighs. ‘It’s all right, I’m sorry. As I said, I’m in a bad shape right now. Just let me ... Look, let’s talk again the same time next weekend, as we agreed. By then, I should have made a decision and found something exciting to do during the sabbatical, and then we can chat about that. Right now, I’m feeling awful about a couple of things, but there’s nothing you can do. I’m just being silly, and I’m wasting your money and time. So, I’ll let you get on with your life. But I’ll be thinking of you – love forever, remember?’

‘Ally, wait.’

‘*Go dté tú slán*, Shivy.’

‘Ally, please wait ... Ally?’

She hung up.



Once again, the evening sun floats along the horizon, suspended in a golden haze. In about three weeks, it will be setting again. The short summer is almost over. And so, time does move on around here, even if at a glacial speed. The calm days will come to an end, replaced once again by the endless howling of the wind and the continuous flow of snow from the elusive world of the interior of this vast continent. And then, as winter approaches, darkness will settle ...

‘Siobhán, old girl.’

‘Iain ... Did you come out here for a smoke?’

‘Good point.’ He leans back against the bannister and begins rummaging in the pockets of his parka. ‘I was going over to the Met Tower to start my shift, but I still have a few minutes.’ He finally finds a crumpled pack and pulls out a cigarette. ‘Missing anyone in particular?’

‘A friend of mine – a very good friend.’

He nods slowly. ‘I know the feeling.’

‘She’s like a sister to me.’

He glances over. ‘I see ... family again?’

‘Yes, family. Contrary to what you believe, some of them are worth the heartache – and the tears. But I’ll be all right now.’

‘Anything major going on?’

‘I ... we just spoke on the phone. We didn’t have an argument exactly, but she basically hung up on me. I don’t blame her for that at all, and that’s not why I’m upset. But what hurts me is knowing how depressed she is, and that there is nothing I can do to help.’

‘Why? What’s bothering her?’

‘Alison? Well, it started with the murder of Kathleen Reed, shortly before the holidays. Didn’t Chris tell you about that?’

‘Chris? No. But we did hear about the case through the news bulletins that come in by telex. Then, yesterday, I read about it again in the latest stack of newspapers.’

‘I was just wondering. About a week ago, I told Chris that I had stayed in Kathleen’s flat until a few days before she was abducted.’

‘Blimey.’

‘Yes ... I never actually met her, but she was a friend of Alison’s. So, you can imagine that, when Kathleen’s body was found, she was completely distraught. And it only got worse when more and more of the circumstances of the murder came out. I mean, you saw the papers now. You saw what they’ve been publishing for the last few weeks – all this stuff about Satanic rituals. It makes absolutely no sense, and I agree with Alison – up to a point – that there must be something else behind it. But in her distressed state, she fears that there are some “evil powers” at work, which picked Kathleen at random and will randomly strike again. I don’t know to what extent she thinks of these evil powers as being supernatural. But regardless of that, to me, it seems unlikely that Kathleen would have been a random victim. A more probably scenario is that, while she was in London, she met a new group of people. Through these people, she got herself entangled in some kind of shady activity, most likely without noticing anything at all. It could have been as simple as a single casual conversation in a café or a pub, which she had completely forgotten about by the following day. But during that conversation, she could have mentioned that she was from Cambridge, and that she was going to return there soon. From what she said, it could also have been implied that she was single and living alone. Sometime later, when she does return home, someone follows her, uses the opportunity to abduct her from her flat, and all suspicions are directed towards Satanic rituals, with geographical connections to Cambridge and the Highlands, when really the origin of the crime lies in London.’

Iain nods gravely. ‘Dodgy place – I always said it.’

‘Big place, with some dodgy people living in it. And may I remind you, Iain McDonnell, that it is you these days who lives in the outskirts of this great English city, whereas I ...’

‘Yes, all right, Siobhán, no need to rub it in. And I have you know that I was only following the job – grudgingly.’

‘Fine, just ... Anyway, understandably, all of this had a strong effect on Alison, because it was she who knew Kathleen, and it was she who had to stay behind in this mess, whereas I could simply leave everything behind and come here.’

‘I see ... But you said she is *like* a sister to you. I take it then that you’re not actually related?’

‘No. We met when we were both very young, about two years old, in Norwich. Only a few months earlier, Alison had been in a car accident, which she had survived on the back seat, while her parents hadn’t been so lucky. She was then taken in by an aunt, who was working full-time, and couldn’t mind her during the day. I was in a similar situation, also without parents, being looked after by my nan. So, when we began to attend the same day nursery, being the youngest in the group, orphans in a way, and without any siblings, we naturally gravitated towards each other. But Alison never got on with her aunt. She probably sensed that she wasn’t welcome, that she was seen as a bit of a nuisance at home. Because of that, as she got older, she spent more and more time with Gran and me – whole weekends, usually. And once we were in primary school, she even went on holidays with us. So, just like a sibling, she’s always been there, for as long as I can remember.’

‘Then, I suppose, she was the friend from Norwich who pulled you through the first term at Cambridge.’

‘Yes, she was. Alison is only about half a year older than I am, but there is something about her character that naturally makes her the big sister, in the best possible way. She is not only cleverer than I am, but also more determined and charismatic – better with people, you know, more popular. She’s always been the driving force in our relationship. For example, when we started to attend comprehensive school, Alison got herself onto the field hockey team and wanted me to join as well. But I was a slow runner and felt more comfortable in the water. Because of that, I joined the swimming team instead. Then, in Fifth Form, Alison became captain of the U16 girls and somehow managed to convince the school that they should try and qualify for the National Championship within the next two years. Only they needed

a goalkeeper. So, she kept asking me to give it a go and, eventually, I agreed. I tried out and was accepted, for lack of alternatives, mostly. We managed to get through the East Round by sheer determination, inspired by Alison's enthusiasm. But in the finals, the competition got a little too strong for us. Even so, it was fun. I'd been a bit of a loner until then, and it was good to be part of a group.'

'And she's still staying in Cambridge?'

'She's back there now. Initially, after she got her Master in International Relations, she managed to get herself an internship placement with the British embassy in Dublin. At that point, I and everyone else were sure that she was going to have a successful career in the diplomatic service or in politics, and that we wouldn't be seeing much of her anymore. Therefore, we were all very surprised when, only a year later, she quit the internship, moved back to Norwich, and began working as a reporter for a regional news programme. It turned out that she had got homesick. She clearly felt more strongly rooted in the region where we had grown up, than I ever did. She never said anything, because she didn't want me to feel guilty, but I know that part of her reason for returning had also been to be closer to Gran, who was in her seventies by then and living on her own.

'After a couple of years, the news programme Alison was working for launched a current affairs edition. It is written and presented by a group from Cambridge, with close ties to the University, and is therefore broadcast from a local studio. Alison got offered the position of deputy editor and took it. She moved back to Cambridge and, until recently, she seemed completely happy. But that murder really unsettled her. That is what makes this whole situation even more disturbing – to see her fall apart like this. In the past, she was always the stronger character of the two of us. She was always the one who helped me get through difficult times. Now it would be my turn to be there for her. But I can't, being stuck here – and *here* is where I wanted to be for so many years.'

'That's tough, Siobhán. I had no idea. Otherwise, I hadn't been so callous about distancing yourself from life back home while you're on Antarctica – you know, what I said a week ago.'

'That's all right. I should have talked to you sooner, even if you can do even less about this, than I. I simply have to keep in touch with Alison as best I can, give her the opportunity to talk about those issues she doesn't want to discuss with other people, and hope that, eventually, she gets over her

depression. Which, incidentally, is why I have been using the sat phone more frequently probably than the rest of you together, just in case you were wondering ...

‘But listen, I mustn’t detain you from your duties any longer. I’m sure Nigel is already looking forward to his relief and to some lunch and company over here.’



## CHAPTER FIVE

# THE WRONG DIMENSION

*The entrance hall of the grand manor is filled with pale moonlight, falling through the tall windows on either side of the porch, the slanting paths of the rays traced in a thin mist of dust. The air is completely still, unperturbed by draught or sound.*

*Straight ahead, and flanked by two elaborately ornamented columns, a wide staircase leads to the upper part of the building ... but the landing above lies in forbidding shadows.*

*Down on the ground floor, a door stands half open. The room behind it is empty. The walls are bare – except for a solid frame, off to the right, which appears to be filled with a perfect darkness. Is it window, or a mirror? A darkness looking ahead, or looking back? Or neither ... a painting, perhaps, covered in black to conceal the information it contains, to hide its secrets.*

*Standing in the doorway, it is impossible to tell. The nature of this darkness will only reveal itself upon closer inspection.*

*Instantly, however, under the first step already, the floor gives way, like the surface of a thick, viscous fluid – refusing any solid foundation, any support for further investigation.*

*Waves spread away from the initial disturbance, creeping up the walls and distorting the space around.*

*This room is out of bounds.*

*Here, another frame – definitely a large painting this time, hanging in a long corridor: the portrait of a young woman, elegantly clad in a Victorian evening gown with a richly embroidered bodice; her long, dark hair gathered up in an elaborate design of braids and curls. But despite the festive appearance, her eyes are sad, her gaze unfocussed and aimed into emptiness.*

*At the end of the corridor, a door again stands half open. Faint, unsteady light shines through from the room on the other side.*

*The dining hall, with a pentagram drawn on the floor, surrounded by a circle of burning black candles. A figure lies motionless inside it, wearing a simple white dress – it is Kathleen.*

*The candlelight flits across her face, creating the illusion of movement. Yet her features are rigid, her eyes closed. She appears to be unconscious – but still alive. Her chest expands with irregular, shallow breathing.*

*‘Kathleen! Kathleen, wake up!’*

*She does not move.*

*‘Come on, girl, wake up!’*

*Finally, her eyes open – if only they had not. If only they could have stayed closed in an eternal state of oblivion. Her eyes – glassy and lifeless from the horrors they have witnessed.*

*She begins to speak, attempting to communicate – with some urgency in her expression – but her voice is as empty as her eyes.*

*We must get out of here – and we will get out of here, away from this place. Even if demonic powers are against us, trying to hold us back – we will get out.*

*Only one door leads out of the dining hall – one door. It opens into a smaller room – apparently unoccupied. But there is light emanating from a fireplace.*

*I just need to support Kathleen long enough to find the way back to the main entrance. But she is weak, very weak, her whole body limp.*

*With her arm around my shoulder, she manages to take a few faltering steps towards the door – much too slowly. We do not have the time. Any moment now, the phantoms will realise that we are trying to escape. They will rise up from the deep lake outside. They will come gliding in through the windows – the shadows of the past reaching out to us.*

*Already, there is something moving out of the darkness in the adjacent room, the slender figure of a woman – the ghost. She walks up to the door, where she remains standing quietly, beyond the range of the flickering light from the candles, illuminated only by the red glow of the dying ambers in the fireplace behind her.*

*It is the woman in the Victorian dress – Alison! It is Alison. Everything will be all right now.*

*‘Ally!’*

*But she does not respond.*

*‘Ally, please, help us!’*

*She turns around slowly.*

*‘Ally, it’s Kathleen. We’ve got to get her out.’*

*She takes a silent step away, back into the dark room.*

*‘Ally, wait! Don’t go!’*

*But she continues to recede.*

*‘Ally, don’t leave me! I need you! Don’t go!’*

\* \* \*



*How do you do it? How can you live in this cold world? How do you manage to survive, when all the odds are stacked against you? Tell me, because I would really like to know.*

*And why do you do it? Why do you put up with these conditions? Why do you choose to live at the extremes?*

*All this drive towards life – in the end, for what? Life for life's sake? At any cost? No matter the hardships?*

*What is the meaning of this kind of existence?*

The door standing ajar is pushed open a little further.

‘Dr Dannreuther, working hard?’

Iain ... The peace and quiet could not last forever.

He enters tentatively. ‘What kind of secrets have you brought to light from the mystical ocean depths?’

‘Just critters, but lots of them.’

‘Critters? Is that a technical term?’

‘Critters don’t deserve technical terms – even if, technically, they’re algae.’

‘And they’re so small you need a microscope to see them?’

‘Individually, yes.’

Iain sidles over. ‘Can I take a look?’

‘Be my guest. I have to give my eyes a rest – and I need a good stretch. I’ve been hunched up and staring into that thing for too long today.’

He squints into the ocular with a reaction of surprise. ‘Blimey, I didn’t expect that. There’s a whole zoo down there.’

A zoo of autotrophs ... ‘Exactly, and that’s the problem: *why* are they there? In these numbers, and with that diversity? Conventional wisdom says that, at these low temperatures, single-cell life should be impossible, especially without any sunlight during a large part of the year. Incidentally, how’s the ozone hole doing these days?’

Iain glances up. ‘Just fine, thank you.’

‘Splendid, exactly what these little guys need, one more thing to worry about – increased UV-B.’

Iain is immersed again in the microbial world of diatoms. ‘I don’t know, Siobhán, I think they’re brilliant – completely bizarre shapes down there, no two exactly the same, at least among this lot. Perhaps you’re being a bit harsh on them.’

‘Yes, you’re right. They are quite fascinating, if truth be told. It’s just that I miss my warm-blooded friends.’

‘Them being?’

‘They being chirpy and clicky and whistly and squeaky and squawky – and so unbelievably cute.’

He leans away from the microscope with an alarmed expression. ‘At this rate, the next winter is going to be a pretty rough patch for you.’

‘I know. And I’m beginning to appreciate what a commitment it was to come here for this amount of time. But what really troubles me right now is Alison. I mentioned her about a week ago – remember? She was then quite depressed over the murder of one of her friends. But now, I don’t know what happened to her. We had arranged for me to phone her yesterday evening, and I tried to reach her several times, but she never answered. And then this evening again, as soon as the satellite channel got switched over to the public network, I repeatedly tried her home number, without any success. Sure, she could be at my gran’s in Norwich, but why? She knew I was going to phone her.’

‘Have you not checked?’

‘No. But if I still can’t reach Alison at her place tomorrow evening, I think I shall. And in Cambridge ... the thing is, I haven’t lived there for some years now, and I don’t know any of her friends or colleagues. Otherwise ... I just hope she hasn’t gone away already. This was her first day of a three-month sabbatical – she told me about that, last time we spoke. Back then, she wasn’t sure yet what she wanted to do. She only mentioned she thought about going to Dublin. But if she went there already, why didn’t she tell me?’

‘Maybe she left spontaneously at the weekend, when the Institute was closed, and she couldn’t leave a message for you.’

‘I don’t know, Iain. I guess it would be possible. It just isn’t like Alison to make rash decisions like that. She always plans things out meticulously. No ... I have this foreboding that something isn’t right – and I’m scared, genuinely scared, you know. Last night, I even ... well, I had a bit of a funny dream about Alison. The kind of bizarre dreams you sometimes get about people, when you can see them, and you want to talk to them, but they’re not actually there, or at least they’re not responding – you know that kind of a dream?’

He nods slowly in an attempt to seem understanding.

‘Anyway, with all these things going on, I can’t follow your otherwise good advice of letting go of the ordinary world and focus on being here. I feel disconnected from everything, neither properly here, nor there, you see – as if I were stuck in-between two separate spaces.’

‘Yes, I *can* see that. But if that is how you feel, you should not withdraw into the remotest and loneliest corner of the base. We’re very happy to include you in all our activities – or in-activities, as the case may be.’

‘I know. But when I’m ... like this, basically ... I don’t want to give anyone an excuse to say: see, that’s what you get from allowing a soppy, hysterical woman to work on Antarctica.’

‘Nobody thinks like that anymore, Siobhán. And I can’t see you beating your predecessor in terms of hysteria.’

‘No. I suppose, that would be difficult.’

Iain suppresses a laugh. Then he looks more serious. ‘Can I ask you about your family? It’s just that you mentioned growing up with your nan, and without any parents.’

‘There isn’t much to tell, really. Mum died of pneumonia, when I was very young, only a few days old. So, obviously, I can’t remember her at all.’

‘But what about your dad?’

‘I never had one. It was ... well, one night, coming back late from work, Mum was assaulted by three men. Gran doesn’t like to talk about it, even now that I’m grown up. And quite frankly, I don’t need to know any more than that. I prefer the happy image of my mother, that I can compile from photographs. She was quite pretty, and as I got older, I hoped to become more and more like her. But now that I’m basically the same age as she was when she died, there isn’t much to suggest that we’re related at all. There are no pictures from when Gran was young, but I suspect that Mum took mostly after her dad. Her hair, at least, was much darker than that of her mother. So, I like to think that I’m taking after Gran, recessively.’

‘Rather than ...’

‘Yes – and don’t *you* lecture me on genetics. You better stick to auroras and things like that.’

‘I don’t know. It seems, you have more exiting theories about them as well. But in that context, I have been wondering about what you meant about ancestors, those who are worthy of remembrance.’

‘I was thinking about my mum.’

‘Yes, I realise that now. And I’m sorry about what I said about family not being important and all that. We evidently come from very different backgrounds. But on your mother’s side, have you no relatives other than your nan?’

‘No, that’s another broken line. Gran is from Germany, originally. She came over to England during the Blitz, without her husband. It was only she and her daughter – Mum was only five at the time.’

‘Siobhán, why ... you should have told us you’re Jewish. I’m sure they could have arranged to have the appropriate food for you.’

‘But I’m not, and neither is Gran. That wasn’t the reason for her leaving Germany. It’s ... complicated, and no one really knows what happened. From what she told me, her husband was in the navy, a commander on a submarine. When the War started, he was gone for months at a time. And then, one day, they disappeared – the submarine and the whole crew. The first thought was that they had been sunk. But somehow, rumours sprung up immediately that that wasn’t the case; that instead, they had deserted and gone over to our side. Whether or not that was true, the Germans certainly took it very seriously, and they were going to arrest Gran – for interrogation, to prevent her from escaping as well, or simply as a hostage. Fortunately, she was warned just in time and managed to escape, together with a group of Jewish refugees. In retrospect, she never believed that her husband would have betrayed her and their little daughter in that way. But at that moment ... she didn’t have any other options, did she, especially with my mother. I mean, we know what the Nazis did with people they didn’t like, or whom they didn’t trust. There is no evidence to suggest that Gran’s husband ever arrived in Britain. Nor, as far as we know, was he ever seen again anywhere else. In the end, the most likely scenario is that the sub really *was* sunk, and that all those rumours were completely unfounded. But the damage was done. And so, when the War was over, Gran decided not to return to Germany. She had received some fairly nasty letters from her own and her husband’s family, accusing her of being a traitor who had gone over to the very enemy that had killed her husband. So, you see, my roots in England don’t go very deep. At the same time, I have no desire to find out more about the German part of the family either.’

‘No ... But you know, wars are strange – very confusing. Looking back at them from peacetime might not necessarily give you the right perspective to understand the actions of those people who actually lived through them.

While you're involved in a war, you only ever get to see one side of the story. And your actions are going to be influenced by the views of that side, and not the other. But then again, what do I know. My own personal experiences are minor by comparison with what our parents and grandparents had to go through.'

'You were in the armed forces?'

'Yes, Siobhán, me – a trained killer, if you can imagine that.'

'I'll try not to.'

'Hmm ... but it's true. I was with the Paras – stationed in Northern Ireland, originally. Then, back in '82, when the task force was assembled ... We were on leave at the time, but our unit was recalled to barracks. And before we knew it, we were on an improvised troop transport heading south.'

'You were on the Falklands? How was it?'

'We won.'

'Yes, but I mean – the fighting?'

'It didn't feel very heroic at the time, I can tell you that. My unit was one of the last to be deployed, and it took us more than three weeks just to get there. It was well into autumn and already bloody freezing by the time we made the landing – sneaking in through the backdoor, as if *we* were the invaders. For a whole week, we were dug in and waiting. Our boots had got wet while wading ashore, and now they froze around our feet. That's most of what I remember from those first days – being cold and miserable. Then one night, we finally got the order to launch our attack. So, we marched off in single file, in the dark, over unfamiliar terrain, not knowing the strength and location of our enemy. We simply stumbled along over snow-covered tussocks and peat bogs – the Falklands, that was the real Bogside. I must have sprained my ankle at some point; but luckily, with the cold, I had lost all sensation in my feet by then and didn't even notice it until much later. Shortly after dawn, we got caught in enemy fire, exposed on open ground, and outnumbered by more than two-to-one. The supporting frigate had her gun jammed, and the Harriers and helicopters were grounded due to fog. Then it happened: our platoon commander got killed. They had lured him into an ambush by displaying white flags. That's when it turned genuinely nasty. We ... well, we did it, in the end. We pushed through. But we were badly prepared for the circumstances on the islands – the harsh environment, without any natural cover. Before, we'd been used to controlling urban conflicts, being caught up in street fights with armed civilians. Still, there was

one familiar element: the Argentinians were also Catholics. In their trenches, among the scattered body parts, we found their rifles with pictures of the Virgin Mary taped to the butts.

‘It was a bloody mess. And where was the morality in that? These guys we killed, they were all conscripts. They hadn’t signed up for being in the armed forces, as we had. They were completely under the control of a ruthless military dictatorship. And even with something as morally clear-cut as the Second World War, fighting is never as straightforward as you might want it to be. Ask yourself this: who or what exactly is the enemy you’re supposed to fight? Who or what are, let’s say, “the Nazis”? Sure, they’re a particular group of people, but that’s not what makes them dangerous. That’s just what makes them human. What makes people like that truly dangerous are their opinions about certain things, their attitudes and prejudices, whatever they may be – fascism, racism, antisemitism. And so, what you’re up against are ideas. But the problem is, you can’t shoot at an idea. You can only shoot at people who may or may not, at that particular moment, hold that idea inside their heads. But how many people must you shoot to kill an idea? In the end, you can’t escape ideas or ideologies. You’re always going to be part of one group or another: you’re a Fascist or a Socialist, you’re a Christian or a Jew, you’re a Catholic or a Protestant. And how many opportunities do you get to choose which group you want to belong to?’

He looks down at his hands, twisting his engagement ring. ‘It really was a bloody mess, the Falklands. Stuff like that, once you experienced it yourself, never leaves you alone. Even when we got back to Britain ... On the one hand, I was scared to be deployed again, but I didn’t feel at home anymore on civvy street either. I honestly believe that if I’d been seriously injured myself, perhaps it had made things easier. It has happened at last, your worst fears have become reality, and despite that, you’re still there. Maybe it had reduced the guilt a bit too, I don’t know. Instead, it was Warrenpoint all over again. While my mates died all around me, I walked away largely unscathed. There was no reason for why it should have been them and not me – and why I wasn’t going to be next. I realised then that it was time to get out, and so I left the Regiment.’

‘You know, I remember it, of course, watching it on the telly – the departure and then the return of the task force. But somehow it seemed like a long way away. I never fully understood what we were doing down there

in the first place. And now we're getting involved in the Middle-East again. Wars are strange, aren't they. If you don't pay attention to the media, you could easily sleep through them.'

'Unless they come knocking on your own door. Then it's a very different story. But there was one positive outcome from all this. The Falklands had put the Southern Hemisphere on the map for me, and Antarctica in particular. If you want to get away from armed conflicts, there's really no better place than here – the only continent on the planet where all military activity is strictly prohibited. But of course, at the time, it seemed just as impossible for me to ever get the chance to come here, as it must have for you, when you first applied. Leaving the army, at almost thirty years old, I couldn't afford to indulge in dreams anymore. I had to be realistic. Based on my experiences as a paratrooper, meteorologist was one of the civilian professions that occurred to me instantly. And unlike working as a paramedic, it provided a relatively small chance of ever being confronted with severed limbs again. I was lucky enough to be accepted for forecaster training at the Met Office and moved to Bracknell, as you know. That's where I met Talwyn. I got caught up in our relationship and somehow forgot about Antarctica. But after a while, it kept resurfacing. And when we began to talk about marriage, she insisted that first I should at least try and get onto the wintering team, to get it out of my system. And here I am.'

He attempts to look exited and checks his watch. 'Blimey, is that the time? Just gone past half eleven.'

'What? That late already? How is that possible?'

'Well, I did the 0 UTC observations and balloon release – so that was 2100 hours our time. Then I updated the weather maps, went over to the South Tube for a while ...'

'Yes, all right, I believe you. But doesn't time fly, when you're having fun. The others are probably making assumptions already.'

Iain gets up and stretches himself. 'Let them. But I have to get back to work now.'

'And I better try and get some sleep, just in case the weather tomorrow is still good enough for diving after all – the dire predictions on the notice board notwithstanding.'

'I like your optimism, Siobhán; but you should put more faith in "weather people," as you like to call us. There's a gale moving up from across the sea. It's already started to whistle outside, and by tomorrow morning, it'll be

howling. So, I'm afraid you'll have to take a break for the next few days, and use the opportunity to study these critters here that you already have.'

'Are you sure?'

'Definitely.'

'Right ... Then I think I'll take some sleeping pills and knock myself out. I haven't managed to sleep very well during the last couple of nights. I'll ask John whether he can give me something – if he's still up.'

The South Tube corridor lies deserted. But the unsteady light of the television set emerges from the open door of the lounge, together with the soft music of the final scene of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*.

'Incidentally, Iain: why did you come to see me in the first place? Did you want something from me?'

'As I said, I had some time to kill between routine observations, and I ... well, I thought I could use the gym. So, I came over here and saw the light in your laboratory.'

'Iain ...'

'Fine, I was in the lounge with the others, watching an old video and having a beer – better? And when I didn't see you anywhere in the common rooms, I thought I might go looking for you. I just wanted to make sure you're all right.'

'You know, I think I am ... or at least, I shall be. And I do appreciate you stopping by for a chat.'

He nods. 'Good night, Siobhán – and sweet dreams.'

I wish.

\* \* \*

*Dim light of a grey sky breaks through the sluggish waves. Above the surface, a dark silhouette can be seen, a line of jagged mountains – the mountains around the Highlands loch by the old manor. But an even greater darkness lurks in the water below, wavering shades of green – the world of the phantoms.*

*Suddenly, the deadly silence is disturbed by a wailing sound, the sound of an air raid siren. We are at war. We are under attack. The enemy is coming. There is a battle raging above. And here I am, caught between the fighting above ground and the shadows of the deep.*



*There are loud voices, people shouting – they are suffering, calling for help. I cannot stay down here. I must get up, back into the air. But the water’s surface is high above, always above, too high to reach.*

*Then the siren stops. The shouting subsides. The fighting is over. The war is lost. The din of battle is replaced by a rushing noise, undulating gusts of wind, blowing over the devastation left in the wake of the hostilities.*

*A distant rumbling penetrates the waves, as that of thunder. There is a storm raging above the surface, but I cannot stay down here. It is time to get back up, to get out of the water.*

Total darkness fills the space around. No doubt, however, this is me, having returned to the familiar room in Aurora, at the end of just another wretched nightmare.

But the noise of the wind is still there, still howling at a distance ... howling – that cannot possibly be a storm above the ice. That would not be audible down here.

Also, there is something wrong with the air. It is thicker than usual, and it carries with it an unusual smell – the smell of smoke.

Smoke and the noise – that is not the wind – that is the sound of flames.

The base is on fire.



## CHAPTER SIX

# FALLEN BEHIND

This darkness in the room ... why darkness? What is wrong with the alarm clock? Should the numbers not be lit?

Unseen, here is still the lamp above the bed ... but the light switch flips with a dead click only. The power is already down then; and with it, the heating and ventilation. This leaves us with one choice: we have got to get out of here – even if there really is a blizzard raging above ground. And we will have to do this blind, until a torch can be found somewhere.

Some basic orientation first: the wall on the right, the bedside cabinet on the left. On it, the chain with the two identity discs – possibly about to become useful much sooner than one might have hoped.

Next to it, the watch – its steel casing cool and reassuringly heavy. The dial has lost its glow; but according to the internal clock, it must be in the middle of the night.

A brief contact with a glass, now on the floor ... a glass of water – the pills, those blasted sleeping pills. They must be responsible for the fog inside my brain.

This is serious. I need to wake up now – properly. I need to be alert. I need to get out of bed – now – and find out what is happening.

This way lies the black space of the room. And somewhere inside it, in that general direction, the stairs lead down to the ground floor.

A cold touch of water against the feet – just the puddle from the dropped glass – no reason to panic. This is not one of the nightmares becoming reality. The floor is as solid as ever.

So, here we go, step by step – some clothes first of all. On the chair ... this feels like the dressing gown – no use now; underneath it, the tracksuit – that will have to do for the moment, hoping that the outdoor gear has not been destroyed yet.

One sock also ... one, only one ... the other probably on the floor.

The rough texture of the old carpet ... a book, a thick hardcover near one leg of the chair, and another ... copies of journal articles ... a few paperbacks ... the slippers ... the cassette player ... several tapes ... the

weights and the rolled-up exercise mat ... how could this kind of chaos be allowed to develop?

Luckily, here is one of the trainers ... the left most likely ... and here the other. We are making progress – while still the clock is ticking.

Both legs are numb and feel strangely bloated. My circulation is clearly down. Still, I need to get moving – across the room, to the staircase.

With muscles sluggish to respond, this is like battling through black syrup.

Yet here is a wall ... and here are the stairs. A quick stumble down ... spiralling around ... with a less than elegant landing at the bottom.

Now it is a matter of finding the right line through the maze inside this chaotically crammed storage room. How many times have I come this way – without paying much attention, of course, and never in the dark.

There is not a glimpse of light anywhere – only the noise from the fire vaguely ahead and to the right. That is where the corridor is, and that is where the door is. However, in-between lies a confusing network of narrow paths, meandering between tall stacks of boxes.

Under these circumstances, muscle memory might normally be the best guide. If one simply stopped thinking, silenced the worrying brain, and began walking ... only with legs fast asleep, this is not an option now.

Still, to begin with, it is definitely down this row until ... approximately around here – yes, a narrow space of air opens up towards the right. This feels familiar.

A few paces on, some empty space again, this time on the left – the proper direction for the next turn, but this seems too soon. Just a little farther then, past the next pile ... this might be it, worth a try ...

But almost instantly, there is an obstacle in the way – a solid stack of heavy boxes. This should not be here, if the last turn was correct. Something has gone awry, and any further wrong turns will only lead deeper into an unexplored network of dead ends, lost among the discarded relics of the past.

There is no time now to double back and try again. I shall just have to risk it. Groping sideways into darkness ... an impediment on the left ... but no immediate opposition towards the right.

Then something on the floor – a single box apparently, enough to trip up an unsteady pair of legs. A helpless lunge forwards into a wonky pile of cardboard boxes – the pile toppling over, taking down another – objects crashing down in the darkness, including some wooden crates, by the sound of it.

Now it is total confusion.

With all dignity abandoned, the best approach at this point is to crawl out of the jumbled mess, blindly towards the noise of the fire, even if that means pushing through more barriers. Given the prospect of burning to death, being struck by falling objects somehow does not seem that bad.

But the next obstacle is an immovable wall of heavy crates. Which way now? To the right ... without any further detritus on the floor, this could be it. Follow that path along the barrier ... around the end and, for a short distance, back to the left. Then, with a little luck ... yes, just ahead, down at floor level, is a thin horizontal line of dim light – the door.

Outside, the corridor is filled with dark smoke. Through it, the fire can be seen raging at the far end, most fiercely at the power generator, but spreading along the tunnel. The wooden structure that once housed the kitchen has already broken down. The fire inside it has almost burned itself out, while a fresh line of flames now advances through the dining room and the lounge, the front panel of their prefab construction collapsing into the corridor.

Any moment now, the blaze will break through the common rooms and start attacking the sleeping quarters. There is not a second to lose.

Despite that, no one else seems to be moving about. Why do the others not notice anything? How can anyone sleep through this racket of bursting timber?

Moving along the row of living rooms, the heat gradually increases, as the crackling and whistling of the flames gets more intimidating. And still no one responds to the banging on the doors.

Closer to the origin of the fire, the smoke gets thicker, making it more and more difficult to see and to breathe. And the heat – that is going to be a problem.

But the lack of fresh air we can deal with. After all, we trained for this. This is just like an emergency ascent: do not let the panic get to you, fight back the first breathing reflex – and the second. It is just the carbon dioxide in the blood. There is still plenty of oxygen circulating through the system.

And here it is, the first of the sleeping quarters. Beyond it, the jagged fragments of the common area loom inside the billowing cloud of smoke.

The heat is truly intense now.

With a woeful groaning, the outer cylindrical shell over the kitchen caves in, finally yielding to the pressure from above. A moment later, another

segment of the shell collapses into the ruined space that used to be our lounge.

Now, the full weight of the ice bears down onto the top floor of the first bedroom unit. Although the flames have not reached it yet, it is not going to withstand the strain for long. Already the first cracks begin to form in the upper part of the front wall, as it bulges outwards ... until it crumbles and crashes down into the corridor, piling up right outside the bedroom door. A shower of sparks and glowing splinters of wood comes raining down.

Why does no one notice anything?

Some of the beams and panels are too heavy to shift. But it is still possible to climb over the jumble of broken building material – right up to the door.

Only the door does not budge. It should open inwards, and yet it does not move at all. It cannot be locked. The doors in here are never locked. Then what is the problem? Is the frame already too deformed?

The outer shell continues to groan, sagging lower and lower. Soon it will be resting on the ceiling of the ground floor unit.

The door has to open – it must. What is needed is something like a crowbar, something like ... this broken piece of metal there, lying buried underneath the debris. If I can reach it, perhaps it can be used as a lever.

At a stretch ... there it is – and it is hot, too hot to hold tightly in bare hands. Still, through the sleeves, it is just about bearable.

Now, this must work. Otherwise, we are out of options, and out of time.

The sharp edge at one end of the bar fits inside the narrow crack between the frame and the door.

But the metal is softened by the heat. It bends slowly under my weight ... and then it gives way.

‘Siobhán!’

Two figures wearing silver firefighting suits have appeared in the door from the crossway.

‘Siobhán, what are you doing there? The emergency exit is at your end of the tunnel.’

The outlines are vague in the thick smoke, but Iain’s voice is unmistakable.

After a brief exchange, one of the figures leaves again. But Iain approaches, a breathing apparatus on his back, the mask pushed up onto his forehead.

‘Iain, I was trying to get to you. The fire, you know ... I woke up, and I didn’t see anyone, and I thought you were all asleep. Then, suddenly, the upper floor came down, right here. There were flames everywhere, and your room was going to be next, and I didn’t know what to do, because I thought you were still in there, so I ...’

He lays his hand on my shoulder. ‘Siobhán, I was on night shift over in the Met Tower when the fire broke out – remember? – as every night.’

‘I forgot.’ I must be giving an impression of pure misery and foolishness, choking and coughing.

With an exasperated look, Iain takes the broken shelving part out of my hand. ‘What on Earth were you planning to do with this?’

‘I wanted to use it to force the door open, but it bent.’

‘I can see that – and burned your hands too, right through the sleeves.’ He drops the bar unceremoniously. ‘Come on, we need to get out of here.’

‘But the others?’

‘They’re all over in the North Tube already. Now come on, the smoke is going to kill us, if the flames don’t.’

Iain pushes the solid steel door shut against the heat and the aggressive noise of the raging fire. He is anxious to get farther away, down the crossway and back to the others, but ...

‘Iain, wait a second.’

‘What is it?’

‘I feel a bit dizzy. I need to catch my breath. Just let me sit down for a moment.’

‘Here, use this.’ He takes off the mask of his breathing apparatus.

‘No, it isn’t the smoke. It’s the effect of the sleeping pills.’

He suppresses a curse. ‘Siobhán, I’m so sorry. I should have remembered. I can’t believe we let you sleep in there. We only realised you were missing once we were assembled over in the gym and did the roll call. But with the fire and everyone running around blindly, trying to get Andy and Nige to safety ...’

‘What happened to them? Are they all right?’

‘Alive, for now, but in a bad shape, especially Andy. He was on night duty, as you know, sitting alone in the kitchen, when the alarm went off outside the generator room. He was hit by the blast of the explosion, when he went to investigate. He was being treated in the surgery when Chris and

I got ready to look for you, but there's only so much we can do for him here. We must get him to Stanley as soon as possible.

'And Nige – he was classic. He had fallen asleep in the lounge while they were watching a film – not exactly sober, as you can imagine. The others had left him there when they went to bed. He didn't wake up until the fire broke through from the kitchen. He was completely disoriented, didn't know where to go. But we got him out, just in time. His burns are not so bad, but he inhaled a lot of smoke.' Iain coughs contemplatively. 'You know, I think I'm going to give it up after this, if we make it out alive.'

'What, smoking? I think you should.'

'Oh, look at you, Siobhán. You're in absolutely no position to hand out health advice to anyone. I mean, were you honestly going to try and rescue all of us dressed like this? Or is it considered fashionable these days to only wear one sock when fighting fires?'

'I didn't plan this through in great detail, did I. I woke up with smoke coming into my room and the power down. I knew I didn't have much time, and this was the only clothing I could find in the dark. Then, when I'd finally found my way out into the corridor and couldn't see anyone, thinking you were still asleep, I simply started with the room nearest to the flames – which happened to be yours, by the way.'

Iain swallows hard and nods. Then he studies something on my forehead. 'That bump and the scratch ...'

'I think that may have happened when I got attacked by some boxes earlier on.'

'All in a day's work for Dr Dannreuther ... but it doesn't look serious.' He links his arm with mine. 'Come on, we should get going. The survival suits and everything else in the Boot Room was destroyed. But we've still got the backup suits in the main storage. You can put yours on over that.'

'Actually, I had a big laundry day recently, and virtually all my clothes are hanging in the drying room right now, together with the diving suit – so no problem there. I can wear several layers of socks, if that comforts you.'

He grins. 'All right. Let's go then.'

'But Iain, wait. We can't just let it burn – this is our home.'

'We have to, Siobhán. We've got no chance fighting fires down here, even dressed in these special suits. It's too dangerous underground, and with no water ... You know the rules: rescue only, and then evac.'

'Evacuation? All of us? You mean we're going back to England?'



‘Yes, Siobhán, we’re going back. Before we retreated into the North Tube, we managed to send out a distress call, using the emergency battery power. After a while, Halo responded. They’ll try and get an aircraft through to us, before the weather gets really bad. So, yes, with a little luck, we’re going home.’



‘Siobhán, if you just give me a few seconds to collect my stuff, you can have the privacy of the storage room all to yourself.’

‘Don’t be silly, Iain. This is not the time to fuss over something like that. I can barely see myself in the fading light of this torch – why is it that batteries always run out, as soon as you need them? And anyway, I’m sure you’ve seen these things before, and more.’

‘Not for some time though.’ He grumbles and turns away.

‘Well, there you are then. Enjoy it while it lasts. In a moment, it will all be hidden again underneath this incredibly stylish sports bra ... there, safe to look now.’

He glances over, busy peeling himself out of the firefighting suit. ‘You’re all right? You can manage with your burnt hands?’

‘Sure. It’s not too bad. I don’t think the skin will blister. And in the grand scheme of things ... What I don’t understand is why we can’t stay here, those of us who aren’t seriously injured. We’ve got everything we need right here in the North Tube. Isn’t that the idea behind having the two tunnels: redundancy for emergencies? We’ve got the backup power generator, and with that, heating and ventilation. There’s plenty to eat in the dry food and freezer store. Water we can get from the snow melt for the laundry. And we’ve even got the little washroom and the toilet in the hospital. Then why do we have to evacuate immediately? Can’t we wait for, I don’t know ... the *Steadfast*, that’s it. They’ll be here in three weeks’ time, and perhaps sooner, when they find out what happened. Why don’t we wait until then? And when the others arrive, maybe we can mend it, the base.’

‘Mend it? Siobhán, you saw what is going on over there. The main generator room has exploded. By now, all our sleeping quarters and the Comms Room are probably destroyed as well. And by the time the fire has burnt itself out, there will be nothing left to mend. Even if the flames don’t spread into this tunnel, we would only stay in an absolute emergency; only if

the fire happened in winter, basically, and there was no way out. Since now we may at least have a chance to leave, it would be foolish not to. From now on, flying conditions will only get worse. And just imagine all of us staying in this one tunnel for an entire winter, or even the few weeks until the ship gets here, without the kitchen and a proper bathroom, without the lounge and the bar. We would all be mad within a few days.’ He stuffs the scant remains of his personal belongings that he kept in the Met Tower into an old duffle bag. ‘No, Siobhán, let’s face it – Aurora IV is dead. The base was old when we got here, and now it’s dead.’

‘And Halo?’

‘That’s where we’re going first. But they don’t have enough space and resources to accommodate us for an entire year. And what would be the point of staying there anyway? What would we be doing? – Nothing. And the Government is not going to pay for us to have a year-long holiday on Antarctica. Therefore, we’re going to be moved on to Stanley as soon as possible. From there, we’ll be on the first *TriStar* back to Brize Norton.’

So, this is it – the sad end of a dream. Somehow, the whole situation always was surreal, right from the very beginning, starting with that surprise phone call. Even then, it seemed too good to be true.

And so, here we are, putting on our survival suits, one last time. Not to explore this enigmatic continent – no, to escape it, to run away in disgrace, defeated ...

‘There’s nothing valuable left in your room, is there?’ Iain sounds more compassionate now, having perhaps seen me wipe my eyes.

‘I took my watch, which is the most precious possession I have down here. The rest is minor. But wait – the letters I got from Gran and Alison!’

‘You’ll see them soon enough in person, much sooner than expected.’

Of course, why didn’t I think of that? Now I may even get the opportunity to meet Alison before she leaves for Dublin. And if she has left already, I can visit her there. We will straighten everything out. Everything will be back to normal, the way it always was. So, something good is going to come out of this after all.

‘You know, you’re right. This is definitely not safe down here. We should get going.’

Iain continues standing there in the semi-darkness, watching me shoulder my bag and walk towards the door.

‘Come on then. By now, we’re probably the last ones left down here.’

He finally picks up his bag too, shaking his head. ‘Sometimes, I do wonder about you, Siobhán.’



Leaning against the emergency exit door, Iain uses his weight to push away the snow that has accumulated outside it, within the few minutes since the others left. An ice-laden blast enters the narrow tower.

Iain nods towards the opening. ‘For England, Siobhán.’

‘After you, Scottie.’

He smiles and steps out into the storm. The wind really is howling now, white vortices trailing off in the wake of any manmade structure – reminiscent of the conditions during my arrival here just over a month ago. But now, a true air of desolation hangs over the whole compound.

Clearly visible by the sagging surface of the ice shelf, the South Tube hull has continued to collapse, with smoke and steam rising up the ramp from the garage at one end. The lights in the Met Tower are out now, the raised platform reduced to a diffuse silhouette, as dark as that of the satellite antenna.

The early morning sun is still low in the southeast, its rays struggling to break through the dense stream of snow near the ground. But there is the unsteady glow of torches from a small group of people, huddled together between the red shapes of the two synthetic igloos. Human life still clings to this hostile environment – the Thirteenth Aurora Wintering Team, to whom I almost belonged myself ... almost. The last to arrive, the last to leave. And now, all that remains to be done is to close the door.

*Good-bye, Aurora, and thank you. It was a privilege staying with you, if only for a little while.*



Suspended ice crystals circle above in a hypnotic fashion. But the wind, and with it the realism of the situation, is pushed away, muffled by the balaclava, the woollen hat, and the hood of the thick survival suit. It sounds distant and soothing, like the rushing of waves on a beach.

And immersed in the wind are the quiet voices of the others, only a few paces away. They are still waiting, although the sun is now high in the sky ... a few minutes before eleven.

I slept for six hours straight, dreamlessly, better perhaps than ever before on Antarctica. Who would have thought that this was the way to do it: lying on the seat of a snowmobile, looking up into the turbulent sky, rocked gently by the wind in the outskirts of a blizzard, and bundled up comfortably, with feet nice and warm inside a pair of mountaineering boots and a double layer of matching socks.

Chris' grinning face comes into view. 'Hello, mate. Glad to see you could join us again on this memorable day.'

'Did I miss anything?'

He chuckles. 'No, not at all. We're only having a picnic out here, enjoying the scenery.'

'Right, that's lovely ... Just give us a hand, mate. I want to get up – cheers. I realise now that the sleeping position wasn't quite as comfortable as I thought it had been immediately after waking up.'

'Yes, I was wondering about that. But after establishing occasionally that you were still breathing, I decided that you probably knew what you were doing.'

He fills two polystyrene cups of coffee from a large thermos flask. 'We managed to get the stoves going – eventually. But we forgot to take any milk powder out of the storage when we left the base. So, I'm afraid you'll have to make do without.'

He looks tired but defiant, perhaps even a little confident. Generally, with the increased daylight, the atmosphere is more optimistic than it had been during the early morning hours. The initial shock has subsided. The others are sitting together in small groups, loosely gathered around two simmering camping stoves, set up between the two igloos. The other snowmobiles are lined up as barriers against the wind and the encroaching snow.

'How are Nigel and Andrew?'

'Nigel will be fine. He's in here, still on oxygen, but breathing more normally now. And Andy ... he's over there in the other shelter. For him, the main thing is a severe head injury, then the burns and several fractures. John patched him up as well as is possible out here, but there's nothing more that can be done at this point. He'll need some fairly advanced surgery in a

proper hospital, and quickly. They're keeping him sedated now to reduce the pain. But basically, we're all just standing by for the arrival of the aircraft. One of the *Twin Otters* left Halo around three o'clock this morning, as you probably heard before you checked out. So, if everything goes well, they should be here any moment. Then it all depends on the wind, whether they'll be able to land.'

'If they managed to take off at Halo about eight hours ago, the main storm must have passed there already. Then it's currently over the sea and is going to hit us soon.'

'Yes, that seems to be the current situation. They were going to try and outfly it, skirt the northern edge of the system and use the storm's circulation to their advantage, but it will be tight. The way it looks, we'll barely have enough time for refuelling. John has the mobile radio set with him in the shelter. He is in contact with the pilots and was mildly optimistic about an hour ago. Still, we're not going to leave the base until we get the confirmation that the aircraft is approaching. We can't go back and forth, especially with Andy.'

'Darren and Iain went off in the snow tractors to bring fuel drums to the landing site. On the way, they're grooming the track, to make sure we don't get stuck at the last moment. They'll also mark the skiway with flares. But we won't light those until the aircraft is actually coming in. Until then, all we can do is wait.'

In that case ... 'I just remembered all the stuff in the lab. While we're standing around here, doing nothing, I should get that out. Otherwise, all our work, all the sample collection in the freezing water was for nothing.'

'Don't be stupid, Siobhán. You can't go back inside. The fire may still be going down there. Who knows, it may already have spread into the North Tube. You can't rely on the crossway to hold back the flames forever. With a constant supply of air through the ventilation shafts, the fire won't stop until all combustible material is used up: the wooden building units, drenched in diesel fumes, the furniture, the carpets, mattresses, books – everything.'

'Exactly, all my notes, the rolls of photographs – Chris, that expensive underwater camera I brought with me! The Institute are going to kill me, if I leave that behind.'

'They're definitely going to kill you if you die down there. You open that door to the emergency exit tower again, and if the fire has spread into the

North Tube, the draft could create an explosion that blows you sky high. Of course, if the aircraft can't pick us up today, we'll have no other choice. Then we'll have to see if we can get down there again. But I'm not looking forward to that.'

'They're still going to kill me, you know. I should have thought of that' ... instead of my clothes from the drying room – my clothes of all things, exactly what they would expect from a woman.

But Chris is unconcerned. 'Compared with the loss of the base, none of this really matters, as long as no one dies. That's the main thing right now. Although ... I saw our boat when we rescued the snowmobiles out of the garage. It was parked a little farther back, closer to the South Tube entrance. When the main generator room exploded, the fire must have caught on to the fuel left in the outboard engines. If I hadn't known that we'd left it there ... it was all ... I barely recognised it. There were the remains of the sledge, but the rest was nothing but charred bits of rubber and lumps of molten plastic.'

'I'm glad I didn't have to see that. It's strange, isn't it. What is it with vessels, that you get so attached to them? They should simply be utility vehicles, shouldn't they?'

'Only they're not.'

'No, they're definitely not. And it was *our* boat.'

Chris nods. 'Our boat ...'

He shuffles his feet, drawing a random zigzag line in the surface of the trodden down snow.

Suddenly, the hatch of one of the igloos opens. John emerges and straightens up gingerly after hours of crouching inside the low shelter. His expression is optimistic. 'All right, listen up everyone, we just got the confirmation: the *VP-FDC* is approaching, and there's still a good chance they'll be able to land. So, this is it – we're moving out. You all know what to do.'

He exchanges a few encouraging words with the lads, as everyone prepares for departure. Then he notices me standing by the snowmobile, some distance away from the others. 'Siobhán, are you ready to leave?'

'Yes, but I was thinking ...'

'Good. Then you can lower our flag – if you find that the main access tower is still safe to climb.'

*The flag? Why on Earth? With all the things I should get out of the lab ...*

John gets impatient. ‘The flag, Siobhán – please.’  
He turns away, without accepting any response.



The iron rungs of the ladder leading up to the roof are overgrown with weeks’ worth of windblown snow. They are slippery and difficult to climb with the bulky boots.

At the top, it is impossible to stand upright in the strengthening wind, without hanging on to the flag pole, itself shaking violently.

The rope to which the flag is attached is encrusted with ice, as everything else on the elevated structure.

After some fiddling, the simple knot opens. But the rope refuses to run through the narrow wheel at the top of the pole, stiff as it is.

The flag is stuck – the bloody stupid pointless thing.

At last, under the pull of my full weight, it allows itself to be lowered, rattling indignantly all the way down, reluctant to admit defeat. It has only been flying above the base since the return of the sun at the end of last winter, a little less than half a year ago. Even so, from up close, it already looks weathered. The colour has faded somewhat, and the edges have started to fray.

It was intended to stay up until the last sunset before the winter. But by then, the ice shelf will be a frozen wasteland, abandoned by human life. And the remnants of our modest dwelling will be buried in eternal snow.



Some clothes, a diving suit, and a tattered old flag – that is all I shall be bringing back from my Great Antarctic Adventure.

John comes over again, evidently taking exception to my unceremoniously stuffing his precious Union Jack into the bag. ‘I’ll take that – thank you.’

He straightens out the crumpled fabric and folds it carefully. ‘These things are important, Siobhán, even if they seem to have no practical value.’

Well, if that’s true, then things with a practical value should be even more important.

But this is clearly not a topic for debate. John dedicates himself again to more pressing tasks. Whereas for me, if getting the flag really was the best thing I could do, I'm obviously not much use for anything.

Meanwhile, there is one important thing that I should be doing; and it would turn everything around – failure into at least partial success. Instead of returning empty-handed, I would have accomplished everything that could be expected under the given circumstances. It would only take a few minutes, and all the other dominos did not have to fall. On the other hand, if I do not go back inside, the biological research at Aurora will have been a total failure for a second time. The programme will undoubtedly be terminated, especially with the additional costs of rebuilding the base. And if that happens, who knows when it will be reactivated, if ever. After all, how dangerous can it be? There was no indication that the access tower in the middle of the crossway was destabilised just a moment ago. Even now, the fire cannot possibly have spread over into the North Tube.

Faint lights inside the heavy snow, approaching from the direction of the landing site, indicate that Iain and Darren are only now returning. Since everyone else is busy too, breaking up the temporary campsite, digging out the snowmobiles, attaching sledges to some of them, this is still going to take some time out here. No one pays any attention to me. I shall be back before the others are ready to leave, and no one will ever know.



Fresh snow has piled up again outside the emergency exit. The solid steel door is freezing cold. And in the snow all around the frame, there is no sign of any previous melting due to intense heat from inside.

Blocked as the entrance is, this will have to be done by force. One hard pull – the door swings open ... and nothing happens. Inside the dark tower is complete silence. No smell of smoke, no explosion, no drama, no sweat. But quickly now.

At the bottom, the door to the North Tube is cold too, with no sound coming from the other side.

It opens smoothly, without any indication of deformation by either heat or increased pressure from above. The whole structure still appears to be intact.



There is a dim shine in the middle of the tunnel, but not from flames. It is pale sunlight, coming down the ventilation shaft.

Everything seems normal, the biology lab exactly as Iain and I left it last night.

So, what do we need?

The camera, first of all, sitting conveniently on the table – out of its bag for drying, but easily packed up again ... together with all the undeveloped film rolls.

Then there are the notes and sketches on the desk – many only doodles, which probably deserve to go up in flames; but there is no time to sort through them now. The whole stack will have to come along – even if it does add up, all this loose paper.

Kevin's old folders, meticulously labelled and arranged on the shelf ... He was evidently better organised than I am, up to a point. At least the last one here should be preserved, with his latest results. And it has enough space left to stuff my notes in as well.

Now, what else?

The diskettes – all in one box; but without another bag available, they will have to go down the front of the suit, together with the folder.

And one last thing: the most recently used diskette, still in the drive. That can go into the side pocket of the suit.

The rest must stay, all the precious samples in the freezer and the incubator.

Right, this is it – no more time to lose.



The others have finished packing up, but are only now beginning to leave. The first two snowmobiles towing the sledges with Andrew and Nigel, bundled up in sleeping bags, slowly and carefully depart into the thickening cloud of swirling snow.

Iain is waiting at the end of the line, a sledge hooked up to his snowmobile, laden with some bulky objects under a canvas cover.

He looks around nervously, when he sees me emerge from the direction of the base. 'Siobhán, where were you?'

Best if you don't know, mate.

He has pulled my snowmobile behind his own. The engine is running now – warmed up and idling steadily.

And above the dense current of snow, the sun still shines directly above our heads.

It will be all right.

Iain observes me closely and recognises the camera bag. His eyes are hidden behind goggles, but his gesture of exasperation is telling enough. ‘You’re unbelievable, Siobhán. You really are bloody unbelievable.’

‘Don’t panic, Iain. I got the stuff out, and now I’m here – no problem. Anyway, what’s all this lot on your sledge?’

‘Some of the sensors and other equipment from the Met Tower. But ...’ He pre-empts my response. ‘... these things genuinely *are* expensive, and I didn’t have to go down again into a burning base to get them, just when we’re preparing to leave – honestly, Siobhán.’

‘It was perfectly safe. Don’t worry about me all the time.’

Still, as more and more objects emerge from my suit, Iain continues to mutter to himself – ‘unbelievable, un-bloody-believable.’

But it all fits into the bag, nicely cushioned by all the clothes.

Witnessing the good progress, Iain gets a little more relaxed. ‘Darren and I marked the track with a fresh row of flags on the left side, moving out, at intervals of about 200 feet. But with the low visibility at the moment, you may not necessarily be able to see the next one. So, we have to make sure we keep the taillights in front of us in sight. And be careful not to get off the groomed track. With all this drifting snow since last night, there are some majestic sastrugi on both sides.’

‘I’ll watch out for them. But what happens to the snowmobiles?’

‘We’ll leave them at the skiway and secure them under tarps. When the *Steadfast* gets here next month, they’ll take care of them.’

‘Then the ship is still coming?’

‘Yes, Siobhán. But we’re definitely not staying here.’

‘No, I understand. I was just wondering ... And I’m ready now.’

Iain nods and lets his snowmobile slide forwards a few feet, at the same time as the figure ahead of him drives off. But then he stops, turning back and indicating “lower your goggles.”

*Cheers, mate!*

Seen through the coloured lenses, the scene suddenly looks surreal. Everything is tainted yellow, and the weak contrasts in the diffuse light are unnaturally enhanced, lending a sense of comforting detachment.

The gauges on the dashboard show no sign of any trouble. The tank is almost full.

It will be all right.

I have done this before. Slowly release the clutch – very carefully. Do not stall the machine now.

And with only a small change in the engine noise, the snowmobile slides into motion.

There we are – this is no more difficult than riding a scooter. It may even turn out to be fun.

The others are already on their way, the taillights near the front of the line becoming fainter in the white haze.

Iain smoothly accelerates away, the sledge swivelling behind him.

Then, turning around again, he raises his hand in a questioning gesture. He understands my wave and speeds up a little.

But he continues to look back, to see if I am keeping up, while those in front are gaining on us.

*Stop worrying about me, Iain! Go ahead!*

Finally, he accelerates properly, trying to keep the lights ahead of him in sight.

At a greater pace, this is quite a different story. It takes nerves, developed through practice, to drive in conditions like these. The effect of every irregularity in the snow surface is amplified with increased speed. And if the snowmobile toppled over, I could never make up for the time lost.

Meanwhile, the storm continues to intensify. Already, the sun is nothing but an indistinct glow in the white cloud surrounding us, whereas the outlines of the Met Tower and the satellite antenna behind us have long vanished.

These goggles are not helping either, accumulating snowflakes faster than can be wiped off. And every time one hand is taken off the shaking handle bar, the snowmobile threatens to careen off the track. This is useless. I might just as well take them off ... there, that is better.

But in the few seconds of being distracted with the glasses, Iain's taillights have vanished – briefly. Then a pair of dim red lights becomes visible again, slightly off to the right, and moving fast. I need to speed things up a little bit.

Instantly, the ground gets choppier, as the texture of the snow surface becomes rougher. Somewhere up ahead, the groomed track must have made a turn to the right, and this is now an unintentional shortcut.

To get back onto the track, I would have to veer away from the occasional flicker of lights ahead. But while it is impossible to see the way markers, the worst that could happen now would be to lose sight of the others. And so, the only chance is to continue straight ahead, and attempt to catch up again. While the runners of the snowmobile manage to skip over the irregularities, there is nothing to worry about.

It will be all right.

Then perhaps a little faster still, while the going is good.

And there is the wave. Without a warning it appeared out of the whiteness of the streaming snow. Caught in the beam of the headlight, it gracefully rises up in the wake of a pressure ridge. An isolated sculpture, frozen in a permanent process of breaking. With it, time comes to a halt, paralysed in the moment.

Its regular shape has a simple beauty, despite being created by nothing but random collisions of individual ice crystals, driven by the ceaseless action of the turbulent wind – an image for the shaping of a meaningful existence out of the chaos of everyday life.

The inevitable impact is nothing but a sudden tug in the stomach. With a roar of the engine, the snowmobile's track loses contact with the ground.

A quick ascent ... and a fall into weightlessness.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

# A MURMUR OF A PRAYER

Continuous low humming, quiet but purposeful. And moving about it, a fluctuating buzzing at a higher pitch, like a beehive ... like the buzzing of busy bees.

It is all right. It is only the sound of a beehive on a fine summer's day.

And there are voices too ... distant voices ... people in a park ...

*Waterloo Park, on a sunny afternoon. Gran sits on a bench, reading, allowing me to wander off a little, to look at a flower bed.*

*There is a bee climbing in and out of the petals. It is working very hard, moving farther and farther into the midst of the many colourful plants. But I can follow it, carefully crawling among the stems, without frightening it away.*

*Gran comes up behind me. 'What have you found there, darling?'*

*'Look, Omi, it is climbing into the flowers.'*

*'Yes, but be careful, darling. Don't get so close. It might sting you.'*

*'No, Omi, look: it's a bummel bee. They're very friendly.'*

*But Gran is worried. She does not believe that a nice bee like that does not sting.*

*Suddenly, it flies off, struggling at first to get airborne, heavily laden as it is.*

*Then, finally, it ascends into the clear blue sky, sailing higher and higher ...*

... its humming becoming more and more distant, until it is gone.



There is snow piled up all around ... soft snow ... and the dry whistling of the wind, still depositing more snow in the wake of the icy ridge nearby.

Some larger, broken pieces of compacted snow are scattered about.

It is cold ... desperately cold.

I should get up. But the legs are numb and heavy. They refuse to move.

Lying across them is an irregularly shaped object, covered in snow, with only a handlebar sticking out ... a bicycle ... I fell off my bicycle.

*There it is, on the pavement. The beautiful new bicycle Gran had to save up for, working so hard, for such a long time. And now I scratched it.*

*'Come, darling, get up.' Gran is neither sad nor angry. 'Get up again and we'll dry your tears. It's not so bad. See, your bicycle is lying right here. We pick it up, and then you can try again.'*

*But then I fall off again, until everything is broken, the bicycle and I.*

*And there is Alison, still sailing along down the pavement, unaware of what happened. She does not fall. She never falls. She continues chattering away about all the faraway places we are now going to visit.*

*Finally, she notices that I am not keeping up anymore. She comes to a wobbling halt and turns around, shocked to see me lying on the ground. 'Shivvy!'*

*She puts down her bicycle and begins running towards us. 'Shivvy, I'm coming ...'*

Alison! I have got to go back. I have got to meet her. I have got to talk to her, support her. Otherwise, these shadows, these phantoms that she spoke of – they are going to get her. And then she will be taken away, just like ...

No, that cannot happen. That must never happen. I shall be there for her. I shall protect her. Unless ... it is already too late. Because, where was she when I tried to phone her? Why did she not answer? If she had been at home, she had never ignored the persistent ringing, especially since she knew I was going to call.

So, where was she, and why did she leave – so soon, without saying anything, without sending a single message?

No, this is not right. And she did not talk to anyone else about it, about how the shadows were closing in on her. I am the only person who knows about the danger she is in.

This is serious. I must get back to England. I must warn the police.

And what am I doing here, lying face-down and buried in snow! That is ridiculous! Why would I do that?

There is something dark in the snow, down in the depression where my head rested, some frozen liquid. It looks like blood – it must *be* blood.

Right, that is it, enough of this. I have got to get up.

But there is something wrong with my legs. Something is weighing down on them, something bulky, hidden underneath the snow. It seems to be a snowmobile – turned over onto its side.

Clearly, something bad happened here, some kind of an accident.

The seat of the snowmobile is resting on my hips. The metal edge of the running-board must have fallen straight down onto my thighs.

The right leg is completely stuck, without any feeling or strength in it at all.

The left moves a little. If I can wriggle that out, maybe I can push the snowmobile away.

Of course, if only one leg is broken ... if the bone fragments are being displaced ... if they cut through the femoral artery ...

Then again, if I do not risk that, I shall freeze to death out here for sure. So, it is a simple choice, really. I might as well try.

After some effort, the left leg slides out sideways – not broken, then. But a dull pain develops in the right thigh, as it is forced to take the full weight of the snowmobile.

A desperate push – and the heavy machine slides off. I am free again, free to turn around ... carefully.

Also the right leg seems to hold together, but completely numbed from having its circulation cut off in the cold. It will take some time to let strength flow back into it, enough strength to get me on my feet again.

What a place ... Only diffuse sunlight breaks through the dense current of snow racing across the ice shelf, making it impossible to see for more than a few yards in either direction.

Beyond the constant howling of the wind, there is a deadly silence and endless emptiness.

I am alone – alone on Antarctica.

But the base cannot be too far away ... Aurora. I would not have gone far from it, not on my own.

Then where is it?

And how did I get here?

There were the others – not too long ago, it seems. We were leaving the base. We were trying to get to the aircraft. We had to leave, because of the fire. We were driving through the snow, and then ... then it must have happened. I had an accident, somehow, and the others left – they left without me.

The strong wind has long obliterated any tracks in the snow. Still, this cannot be too complicated. Surely we can work this out.

We were driving to the skiway. Therefore, the base must be south of here.

It is a little after one o'clock. So, if we add one hour for solar time, with the number twelve on the dial of the watch aimed at the sun, the base should in the seven o'clock direction, less than two miles away.

But without any visual reference, it is easy to get confused. What happens if the sun gets completely hidden above the billowing snow? The only real hope then is to catch brief glimpses of the dark shapes of the Met Tower and the satellite antenna, closer to the base.

And as the legs get warmer, the circulation starting up again, the previously dull pain is getting more acute. What if it becomes overpowering before I am able to trudge all the way back through the deep snow? How can I be sure that I shall continue walking? What guarantee is there that I shall not collapse again? It is easy to doubt your own weakness before the pain begins.

The snowmobile, carelessly pushed away, is still lying on its side, and almost covered in snow again. Nonetheless, it provides the best chance now of getting out of the cold.

The windscreen is broken, but there are no traces of motor oil or petrol in the snow. The engine and tank appear to be all right. With a little persistence, it should start up again – it must.

First, it needs to be turned back onto its running belt.

A firm push with one shoulder, weak legs dug into the loose snow ... The seat lifts off the ground, tilting grudgingly – until the machine tips over and comes to rest again the right way up, with the bag still safely secured on the luggage rack.

Now then, at least for the next half hour or so, it is a simple enough rule: drive away from the sun and veer slightly towards the right, checking occasionally with the watch – if the engine starts.

So, this is the moment of truth. Pull the starter rope in one determined but smooth stroke ...

Instantly, a stinging pain breaks through the numbness of the right wrist. But for all that, there is only the empty spluttering of a lifeless engine.

*No, please, don't do this to me. You cannot do this to me – not now.*

A second attempt, using the other hand – awkward with the weaker arm ... and the same result.

*Look, I'm sorry I kicked you earlier on, and I probably yelled at you too. I can't remember, but I'm sure it wasn't nice – and I apologise, sincerely.*



Another fruitless pull.

*Please don't be mad at me. I know it's all my fault. But it's just the two of us now. And we must stick together, you and I. Otherwise, we are both not going anywhere.*

A few red drops fall onto the seat ... as again the engine remains silent.

*No, don't make this difficult for me. Surely you don't want to stay out here forever. I can get us back to Aurora, but I need your help.*

Silence ... but for the triumphant howling of the wind.

*Come on, one last journey is all I ask for, to get us out of this. Then you and I can rest, I promise.*

Once more the engine stutters, but slightly less reluctantly than before. A little bit of throttle – and it starts up!

Revvng the engine sounds perhaps a little harsher than it should, cold as it is, but it is definitely running now. The man-made noise pushes against the wind, fighting back with a determined roar. The lights come on. The vibrations of the mechanical pulse register even in the numb legs. Warmth slowly spreads throughout the ice-encrusted metal.

Life has returned to the wasteland.



Clean white steam emerges from the ramp down into the garage – but no smoke. The fire did drown itself in the end. And the acrid smell that hung over the compound has been carried away by the wind.

The wooden shell of the South Tube has almost completely fallen in at this point. But the access tower in the middle of the crossway still stands.

Yet even from the distance, it is apparent that the main entrance is completely iced-up and blocked by a snowbank. And at the door to the emergency exit tower, the situation is bound to be the same.

With the pain shooting up from both legs getting more and more persistent, I shall not have the energy to battle my way through that – which only leaves the garage entrance to get back into the base. Judging by the even snow surface, the steel hull there appears to have withstood the fire.

The surface of the ramp leading down to it is almost sheer ice, but the snowmobile slides down eagerly, sensing the end of our journey, then running down its momentum in a dense layer of slush at the bottom.

We made it.

As soon as the engine is turned off, complete silence settles – except for the occasional dripping from the ceiling.

With all other vehicles gone, the first half of the garage is empty. Farther back, the sad remains of the dive boat float in a shallow pool of melt water, swathed in a veil of fog that rises into the cold air.

Time to get away from this depressing sight. But the bag will have to stay out here on the snowmobile. It is too heavy to carry at the moment.

The rolling gate to the vehicle workshop requires the usual determined push to open, sending fresh waves of pain up the legs. But at least there is no indication of immediate danger inside the large room. No signs of damage can be seen in the dim light from the garage.

The power is down, as expected, but a solid-looking torch lies on one of the shelves ... seemingly with fresh batteries this time.

Silent shapes of abandoned machinery appear in the narrow beam of light, resting lifeless in the pattern of moving shadows. Among them, the air compressor and our diving cylinders. And there, on the table, the science rack – all useless now, remnants of a lost opportunity.

A ghostly atmosphere hangs over the North Tube corridor, without any sound or movement. Beyond the range of the torch, the hint of a pale glimmer descends from the skylight. Even the early afternoon sun is incapable of struggling through the suffocating stream of snow, relentlessly burying the base.

Despite that, the tunnel looks exactly as it always did, only darker. There is no need to lose the nerves like this, simply because of a small change in illumination.

All the vital equipment and supplies are still here. There must also be some liquid water in the snow melt, left over from yesterday. The main store is crammed with food – most of it dry, of course, or deep frozen. Chocolate bars, cookies, and cakes will have to do then for the next few days – but who ever complained about that? So, really, this could be a lot worse.

And it is going to be soon. Judging by the thin layer of condensation on the metal door handles, while the temperature still appears to be above freezing, it has obviously dropped already by a few degrees. And with the power down, the remaining heat is going to dissipate soon.

Something will have to be done about that.

The inside of the back-up generator room is an intimidating network of pipes and tubes and cables, connecting the engine, the fuel tank, the air intake and ventilation shaft, the heat exchanger, and the snow melt.

For more than a month living in the base, I could never be bothered to find out how these things actually work. I simply took it for granted that there was always light and warmth at our disposal, even while we were surrounded by permanent ice. The regular chugging of the engine was a well-known component of the background noise, together with the pervasive diesel fumes – it was there, but mostly unnoticed. Even during the week of night duty, if the beast sounded and smelled normally, it appeared to be healthy, and that was good enough.

Now, the circumstances are different. The sleeping beast cannot be ignored anymore. There must be an operation manual somewhere. It must describe how to turn the power generator back on. And if someone else can write about it, I can learn it. It will give me something to occupy myself with, to pin my hopes on, and to keep my sanity.

But it will have to wait until tomorrow. Tomorrow, I shall work it all out. Now, I am too exhausted. The throbbing in both legs has become seriously distracting. Additionally, a discomfort in the chest is getting more noticeable with every breath.

So, while I can still think straight, taking care of the pain must be the highest priority at the moment.

The surgery is in total disorder – a gruesome reminder of the events that led to the evacuation.

The head end of the operating table is covered in coagulated blood. More blood has run down the legs and collected on the floor.

A pattern of dark footprints leads back and forth between the table and the supplies cabinet.

The rubbish bin overflows with bloody swabs and cut-up clothing. A discarded medical needle with a piece of thread lies next to it.

And, alarmingly, all the bottles of Entonox, which usually stood in that corner, are gone. But there should be some painkillers left, something more potent than aspirin.

The supplies cabinet – fortunately not locked again in the haste of evacuating. In it, stacks of syringes of different sizes, bandages, a variety of drugs ... and on the bottom shelf, a cardboard box labelled *morphine sulphate*,

containing several glass vials, together with a lengthy list of instructions and dire warnings.

It is hard to keep the small print in focus, while straining eyes only aggravate the pounding headache. I cannot deal with this right now. This is not the time for reading. This is a time when common sense must rule – with a little bit of luck.

Another wave of pain races across the chest, as the left arm is pulled out of the thick sleeve of the survival suit. The situation is clearly getting more serious with every passing minute. This has to succeed, and fast.

Still, it is probably best to start conservatively, with the smallest syringe available – one of these slim ones. If the morphine is being provided in any sensible concentration, that cannot be too much, surely.

Drawing the clear solution from the vial and getting rid of the air bubbles – that was the easy part. Now comes the real fun. And it will have to be done single-handedly.

The lifelong fear of needles and injections – that has to be put aside now. This time, it will not be possible to look away. This time, it will be necessary to watch the needle pierce the skin, push into the bloodstream, and then ... steady ...

But the shaking tip rips through the vein, followed by a trickle of dark blood that seeps out from its mutilated vessel. The flash of pain erupting from it is only fleetingly distracting. Then it simply adds to the overall agony.

Let's face it: this is hopeless. I cannot do it.

I would have to steady one hand long enough to be able to push the plunger down smoothly, without completely shredding the vein or giving myself an embolism. Following the disastrous first attempt, both hands shaking wildly now in nervous agitation and pain, there is little chance of that. And how many times would I have to repeat that procedure before receiving proper medical treatment?

Enough ... no more. I have come a long way from lying face-down in the snow. And if this is an exercise in dying-in-style, then fading away in here, as the base grows cold around me, is probably as good as it gets under the circumstances.

Admittedly, the hospital bed is not the most glamorous of final resting places. It has been used recently, and the linen is crumpled. But it is clean, without any sign of blood. The mattress is comfortable, and the soft weight of the blanket consoling.

Light out then. There is nothing more to see, nothing more to do, but rest.



A void of blackness all around ... and the constant crackling of the ice shelf ... while consciousness remains locked inside the aching body, without any hope of escaping into sleep – although it must be in the middle of the night by now. Impossible to tell down here, as once again, the dial of the watch has faded away.

*But I can still hear you ticking in the dark. You're still alive too, aren't you? Still hanging on. Still with me, metering out my time, down to the last second.*

*Do you remember how we met, all these years ago, when life was simple – at the beginning of things, rather than the end; when I began diving, still full of plans and enthusiasm; when we went to see the dolphins for the first time – do you remember? You weren't cheap exactly, but you've been worth every penny. You never let me down; and we did have some exciting adventures together, didn't we? Some close calls, admittedly, but we always managed to get through, you and I.*

*And all the many exams we sat together ... you always kept ticking at a steady pace. Even when time ran out, you always kept ticking.*

*So, you just keep ticking now, when time may be running out for me once and for all.*

*You carry on. You carry on ticking, even if my heart cannot keep up anymore.*



A pale shine has developed in the corridor outside the open door. The sun is high up in the sky again. A new day has arrived after all, a brief extension on life ... but also bringing with it an extension on uncertainty, on fear, on growing desperation – and all this, to what end, if there is no escape from this situation?

No. Eventually, they must come back for me – they are bound to. If they could not find me out there in a blizzard, if they could not wait any longer to fly out with the injured – that is understandable. But surely, they must come back as soon as the storm subsides.

Only how long can that take? A few days, or even weeks? Either way, one thing is certain: I shall have to stay submerged in this frozen ocean, let the storm rage above, and hang on for as long as I can.

Meanwhile, there is no point in lying in the hospital room all day. I have got to move about, at least occasionally, to try and keep the circulation up, if not the spirit – and I need to drink.

Even at rest, pain is now pulsating freely across the chest and through both legs. The right one buckles under my weight at the first attempt to get out of bed. But the thirst is serious, and it is not too far to the washbasin – just a few steps – one after the other.

Upon opening the tap, there is an ominous groaning from the direction of the snowmelt some distance down the corridor ... a hissing, getting closer ... then a fountain of crystal clear water comes gushing out of the pipe, still tasting perfectly fresh – only cold, already very cold. But with the drain plugged, the basin fills quickly – a reservoir sufficient for at least two days ... unless it freezes, of course, and that will be the end of it all.

Until then, there remains hope. And as long as there is hope, there are things that need to be done, and battles to be fought.



A drizzle of afternoon sunlight falls through the dusty, stagnant air underneath the skylight at the top of the silent ventilation shaft. Somewhere up there the sun still shines – that one thing is certain: the sun still shines. And when it breaks through the turbulent cloud of snow again, the others will return. Sooner or later, they will return.

When that happens, I shall be ready. I shall be sitting here in the bright column of light, shining down on me from a clear blue sky above. It will be far more dignified than lying in bed – weak and helpless, and in the dark.

And when they find me here, and I cannot talk to them any more ... when I cannot explain to them what happened and how I ended up here, maybe they will say: ‘Look, there’s that girl – Siobhán, remember her? Perhaps she wasn’t quite as silly as we always thought. Perhaps she could have been one of us – if she hadn’t died.’

But maybe I am seeing this the wrong way around. Maybe it is not the snow drifting over the stationary base at all. Maybe it is the snow and the cold that are at rest, staying behind on Antarctica, while the base is speeding along, taking me back home again, back to life.

Even so, the pain still stays with me. And as things stand at the moment, everything else having failed, the cold is the only thing left that can take the

pain away – and it will, eventually. Until then, pain and consciousness continue to be inseparably entwined, trapped inside the same broken body.



The snow still flies across the skylight, in the faint glow of the evening sun. Another day fades away; another night approaches. The shadows are back again, creeping up to me from either end of the tunnel – the phantoms of the night closing in once more.

My shallow breath begins to condense in the calm air. The last amount of heat is gone. The base is dead.

So, this is it then. This is really it. It is finally time to leave.

But it cannot be. This is too soon. I am not ready yet. I cannot allow myself to be ready, to abandon the responsibility that birth has presented me with. Or is that responsibility no longer my own? Is it already in the hands of another, someone who is wiser and more powerful? And if that is so, is that someone aware of their responsibility – aware of me? Or are they distracted by more important things, by all the other people who, at this very moment, are also about to depart this life.

*If you are out there, and if you really care ... you cannot simply ask me to give up, when until now, I managed to accomplish so little with my life, when I know that there would be so much more that I could do. If only I could get a second chance. If only you could have a little faith in me. Let me have a new beginning, and I shall try, I shall do my best, do everything I can, not to disappoint you.*

*Because my heart, my brain, it's all good – just cold, just tired – but it could still work so well. All I need is a little bit of warmth, a few hours of sleep – away from the pain – and you will see, I'll be right as rain again. Surely, that isn't asking too much?*

*I cannot simply let go. I did everything I could to get back in here, back into the base, to keep myself alive. I tried to keep my mind together, despite the pain. It was just that, with the morphine injection ... well, when that failed, I tried to turn the power generator back on, but all I ever got were warning lights and alarms, until the battery was drained. It was hopeless without the instructions. They must have been kept in the administration office, over in the other tunnel, you see. I tried to get back in there, but it's all burned down – it's all lost. Yes, it is all over now.*

*Already, I can feel myself slipping away, falling asleep. And this time, it will be final. I can see that now. But if you could just ... the pain, you know ... it makes it hard to concentrate. And there are a few things I would like to say, while I am still able to. Perhaps*

*somehow you can find a way. Perhaps, from the perspective of eternity, things do look different than they appear to us. As for me, I have come to the end of the road. I have run out of ideas and strength. So, let me try and say this:*

‘Our Father, who art in Heaven,  
hallowed be thy name;  
thy kingdom come;  
thy will be done;  
on Earth as it is in Heaven.  
Forgive us our trespasses ...  
Give us our daily bread ...’

*No, this is not how it goes – forgive me. I shall try again. It’s just ... it has been a while, you know. So, please be patient.*

‘Our Father, who art in Heaven,  
hallowed be thy name;  
thy will be done on Earth ...’

No, I cannot do it. I cannot remember the words. It all fades away with the last daylight – all the words, all the thoughts, all the memories – the flow of consciousness dissipating, and never forming again. But the words are not mine anyway. That is not what I want to say at all.

*You see, what I really want to say is much simpler. I know I haven’t spoken to you in a long time. I am tired now, and I cannot think clearly anymore. But if it is in your power, please, listen to me. Try to understand.*

‘Our Father, give me certainty.  
End this darkness and let me step into the light.  
If I am to live, take away my pain.  
Give me the strength to follow the path appointed to me,  
so that, when the end does come, I shall not have lived in vain.  
But if I am to die, take away my fear.  
Let me fall asleep and, in the final moment, stand by me.  
Let me rest, knowing that I did all I was meant to do down here.’



## CHAPTER EIGHT

# INVASION

Voices, echoing above ... remote and vague, as if sounding from a great height, reaching down into the valley.

Soft white light up ahead in the distance, steady and welcoming ... with a darkness leading up to it, like the path through a tunnel.

The voices become clearer, descending onto me, calling my name – calling out to me, for me to join them. But everything is so heavy down here, making it so hard to move.

A tall figure appears in the light, itself even more radiant, with a blinding halo around its head. It raises a hand, as in a greeting ... and the halo vanishes.

A masked face emerges from the glare, with the eyes of an ordinary man – a man wearing a red survival suit.

Standing inside the column of light underneath the ventilation shaft, he turns back towards the crossway. *‘Torsten, Frank! Sie ist hier!’*

A short answer is shouted back from the direction of the South Tube.

They are Germans – the Germans are coming – the Nazis, from their secret base under the ice. But what do they want? Protecting their secrets? Or are they looking for something?

Whatever the reason, they have broken into the base, and now I am too weak to defend myself. Sitting in the middle of the corridor, there are exits on either side, but too far to reach in my current state. The only other way out leads through the main access tunnel, which is blocked by the men.

A crippling pain rages in both legs, making it impossible to get up. The chest hurts with every breath. The mouth is parched, the throat tight, the voice gone completely. And it would be futile to call for help anyway.

The man comes a step closer and takes off his headlamp and balaclava.

He is young, and he smiles as he kneels down next to me. ‘Hello, Yvonne. I am Stefan. I have come to get you out of here.’

He takes off one of his gloves and holds out his hand. My hand grasps his, automatically. He does not try to pull me up. He simply wants to say hello – very formally – but his hand is warm.

The logo on the chest of his survival suit indicates that he is from the *Deutsches Institut für Polarforschung*.

His smile widens. ‘I am glad I found you. But better if you stay sitting here, only a little longer, to see how you are doing. Then we can leave.’

He motions towards his two companions, who have now entered the corridor. ‘These are Torsten and Frank, by the way.’

They all try to appear optimistic, but they are clearly uneasy about the situation.

Torsten approaches tentatively. ‘*Stefan, das sieht ziemlich schlimm aus da drüben – alles ausgebrannt und vereist. Die äussere Röhre ist fast komplett eingestürzt.*’

Frank looks up and down the corridor. ‘*Was glaubt ihr wie gefährlich das hier ist?*’

Stefan shakes his head. ‘*Keine Ahnung.*’

He turns back to me. ‘Yvonne, do you know how dangerous it is in here? Has this tunnel been damaged by the fire as well?’

*No.*

He seems relieved. ‘Okay. But the air is pretty bad. I imagine there was no ventilation since the fire, so no fresh air for two days.’

Torsten is still nervous. ‘*Wir sollten uns hier nur so lang wie absolut notwendig aufhalten.*’

But Stefan is confident. ‘*Wir fangen gleich an. Dazu müssen wir sie aber bewegen. Und wir brauchen die Ausrüstung.*’

Frank nods and disappears into the crossway again.

Stefan smiles, seeing my utter confusion. ‘Yvonne, just in case you are wondering: we are from the Helios station. I don’t know if your colleagues managed to tell you that we were coming ...’

*No!*

‘Apparently, the power is out in the whole station, so maybe not? Well, what happened was, we received your emergency call on the radio, first about the fire, and then later when you got lost. But the weather was terrible, of course, too bad for flying. So, we came over the ice.’

He pulls a thermos flask out of his rucksack, having noticed my difficulties with speaking. ‘Here, you must be thirsty. It is fresh water. We melted it this morning.’

*Too tired ... And I don't feel so good right now.*

‘Okay, maybe later. But we were told that maybe you had an accident? Are you hurt? Can you tell me what happened?’

*Your guess is as good as mine.*

‘All this blood is from your nose, yes? And it has stopped bleeding now, so no problem. We will get you out of here as soon as possible. But before we can move you, I have to make sure that you do not have any bad injuries.’

‘Femur – right.’

After a moment of shock, Stefan manages a reassuring smile and nods. ‘Okay, I understand. I don't believe it is broken, if you were able to get back here – bruised maybe. But we will be very careful. And I can give you something against the pain.’

He picks up two gloves lying next to me. ‘You probably need them. Your hands are very cold. And you burned them a little in the fire. Is that why you took the gloves off, because they hurt on the skin?’

*Can't remember.*

Stefan is unconcerned, as he puts the gloves back on. ‘I think it is okay now. There are a few blisters, but they are all closed.’

Frank returns with a large bag and a folding stretcher. Stefan excuses himself and turns away to converse quietly in rapid German with the other two, as they assemble the stretcher and unpack a comfortable looking, thick down sleeping bag.

Despite all their pretend optimism, they are well aware of the difficult situation in which they find themselves. Having driven over the stormy ice shelf for two days, all the way from Helios, a long journey home still lies ahead, over treacherous ground and with low visibility. They could not have had much sleep since they left, if any, and must be getting weak themselves. This adventure is far from over, and they know it.

Stefan turns around again, holding a large pair of scissors. ‘Yvonne, I will have to cut open the sleeves of your survival suit.’

*You what?*

‘Until we know exactly which injuries you have, I do not want to move your arms around. But we have this sleeping bag for you. And in the snowcat it will be very warm.’

As he begins to cut along the sleeves of the survival suit and the fleece jumper underneath, the others prepare a syringe for a morphine injection. Relief is finally nigh. Whatever may happen on the journey out of here, at least it will not hurt too much.

As Stefan peels away the cut sleeves, he notices the traces of my own botched attempt. He hesitates. ‘Did you have an injection already?’

‘Tried ... I couldn’t.’

He looks uncertain, afraid of administering an overdose.

*Stefan, please, I really need this.*

Apparently, he can see the pain and fear in my eyes and nods. ‘Okay.’

Torsten hands him the syringe. Stefan is still a little nervous, but his hands are steady. He takes my upper arm in a firm grip, but the cold blood vessels are all hidden beneath the skin. Only slowly, under the pressure of his fingers, the cephalic gradually emerges.

For an instant, the tip of the needle is poised over the swollen vein. Then, against the smallest resistance, it pierces the thin layers of tissue. And with a steady push from the plunger, the drug enters the bloodstream.

Stefan smoothly withdraws the empty syringe and covers the tiny puncture with a plaster.

It is going to be all right now. With every heartbeat, the opioid is circulated more widely through the body. Soon, the first molecules will make it into the brain. They will bind to endorphin receptors and cut off the neural pathways from the damaged tissue. That is all there is to it. Pain is only a repetitive signal, a redundant flow of information, which can be turned off without any harm. It is not real. It is just a bad memory, still slightly annoying, but fading ... fading ... fading away.

And with the pain retreat the stress and the aggravation. The busy movements of the others dissolve behind a hazy curtain. The noises echoing along the tunnel become distant.

I am floating away into a wonderful state of lightness, as the cold, wooden floor softens.

‘Yvonne, don’t fall asleep now, please. You need to keep breathing.’ Stefan’s agitated voice sounds remote, as if emerging from a different room. But his warm hand is on my cheek ... now gently brushing the hair out of my eyes.

How long has it been, with everything else going on ... moving from one place to the other ... the field work up north ... then coming here ...

‘Yvonne, you need to breathe. We do not have oxygen for you. So, you need to concentrate on breathing.’

His face is very close – much closer than his voice. But it is hard to get into focus ... there it is again. He is not bad looking, really – perhaps a bit young.

‘That’s right, Yvonne, stay with me. I need to know more about what happened to you. You do not have to speak, if it hurts, or if it exhausts you. Simply nod or shake your head, okay? First, can you tell me if you have any other injuries?’

*Oh, no. I’m fine now, thanks. I am really very fine.*

‘Yvonne, you were out with the others, on the snowmobile. You were going to the landing site. But you got separated and had an accident, yes?’

*But that was so long ago. Why are you still concerned about that?*

‘Yvonne, please, stay with me. I will let you sleep in a moment. But first, I need to know: when you fell off the snowmobile ...’

*Why do you insist on talking about that silly accident? It was embarrassing, all right. I messed up. But I’m not always like that. I can be quite sensible. I can even make myself look representable, if I take the time.*

*Look, Stefan, why don’t we have a normal conversation. You could ask me, for example, what kind of music I like. Or perhaps you could ask what I did before I came here. Go on, you’d be surprised. Because, you see, when I left school, I went up to Cambridge, don’t you know – not bad for a working-class girl, eh? King’s College ... yes, I liked it there. All the old buildings ... Gran used to visit us occasionally, to go to the concerts in the old Chapel – Mozart, for example. You know, I was thinking about the Requiem earlier on, before you came – so beautiful, isn’t it? And the lyrics: lux perpetua, just like here in summer, isn’t it? Perpetual light and eternal rest – requiem æternam ...*

○ ○ ○

Falling ... tumbling headfirst down a deep shaft or a well, while diffuse light dances on its surface. Down, down, down it goes, falling deeper and deeper ...

The young German hurries next to me, clearly worried about something. The mood is tense. We are trying to escape from something. But where are we going?

Aurora – the North Tube – and we are heading towards the garage exit.

‘No! No, no, no! You can’t take me away from here. I cannot leave right now. I have to talk to Alison.’

‘Yvonne, there is no one else left in here. All your colleagues are already at the Halo station.’

‘No, you don’t understand. Alison is not here. She is in Cambridge, but she’s not there anymore. They took her, you understand? She was abducted. She knew something. She didn’t know what it was, but it was something everyone else overlooked, because they all thought it was about Satanism, and it wasn’t – of course it wasn’t, what an idea ...’

‘Yvonne, please. You have to remain calm. I promise you that all your friends are safe.’

‘How can you say that. You have no idea about what is going on. I am telling you, that was before the accident. When they followed her, when they entered her flat, while she was out. Why didn’t I take her seriously? I should have believed her, right away. To think that she would become paranoid – even after that horrible murder – that’s completely ridiculous. I know Alison too well. She isn’t like that. She’s never been like that, all these years we’ve been together. And then, suddenly, she’s gone. She’s gone, and all that’s left is silence. So many times I tried to phone her, and never got an answer. But I know what I have to do now. I just remembered something.’

‘Yvonne, you cannot get up right now. Your legs are very badly injured. If you try to walk, you will only hurt yourself more. No, please, stay on the stretcher and we will get you to your friends as soon as possible.’

‘There’s no time. Don’t you understand? You have to put me down. I have to go to the Comms Room – now, immediately! I have to phone Gran. I am such an idiot. Why didn’t I think of that before?’

‘Yvonne, you can send messages from our station. And you can phone anyone you like – no problem. But you really cannot get up right now.’

‘No, please, lie back down again and let us carry you out to the snowcat. It will be very comfortable in there and you can ...’

‘Yvonne, no!’



There is warmth and softness. And there is motion too – a soothing rocking motion, as if lying in a boat, floating on a calm lake.

This is only an illusion, of course. If I opened my eyes, I would find myself still hunched up and miserable, sitting underneath the ventilation shaft, on the hard floor of the North Tube corridor. I am simply falling asleep ... falling asleep at last, drifting away from all the pain and fears.

But I must not. That is how you freeze to death. You forget you are cold. You fall asleep, and you never wake up again.

So, open your eyes and realise that ...

This is not the North Tube after all. Nor is it anywhere else in Aurora. It is a strange room – small, with a low ceiling.

And the motion is real. It is accompanied by the monotonous droning of a powerful engine.

The lights built into the roof of the vehicle are turned off. Instead, pale daylight enters through a frosted window in the side wall. It is cold outside, but a warm flow of dry air enters through a vent directly above.

The softness is provided by a thick sleeping bag, unzipped halfway down, and secured to a narrow bench by a compression strap wrapped around it in the middle.

Then the jumper I am wearing – light blue, made of a soft fabric, with a German logo on the chest and a polo neck. It is none of mine. But it is cut for a woman – quite stylish and obviously expensive, well above my pay grade. And it has a wonderfully fresh smell about it – a little foreign, in a nice sort of way.

The young German sits on a bench along the opposite side. His eyes are closed, and his head nods with the movement of the vehicle – sleeping, apparently.

Stefan was his name. And it was he who got me out of Aurora, he and the other two. And now, we are on the way to their base.

But they do not understand what is really going on. They do not know what happened previously. They do not know about the shadows. They do not know how the shadows gathered around Alison, before she disappeared;

how close the shadows got to me before leaving England; how close they got again, here on Antarctica. The Germans do not realise that, perhaps at this very moment, the shadows are closing in on us once more, having followed us out of the lifeless base to make another attempt.

I cannot stay here. I have got to get back to England as soon as possible. I have got to find Alison, meet up with her. Together we are strong. Together we can defeat any danger.

But getting up turns out to be difficult. There is a heavy numbness weighing down onto the whole body, leaving no strength in both legs at all and barely any feeling.

I am obviously not in a great shape right now, but there is nothing for it. I definitely cannot stay here with the Germans.

Somehow I need to get out of this sleeping bag ...

Stefan opens his eyes as soon as the buckle of the compression strap clanks down onto the floor. He must have been dozing only.

‘Listen, Stefan, I’m sorry I woke you up. But you can go back to sleep. I’ll just ... I’ll be on my way.’

He seems confused and blinks several times, evidently still not fully conscious. Then he gets up and crouches down next to me, to fasten the strap again.

‘No, Stefan, don’t do that. You’ve got to let me go. I can’t explain the situation right now. It’s a bit complicated, because ... The thing is ... I don’t know when, but they’ll come after me again, sooner or later. And when that happens, you will be in danger too. As long as you’re with me, you’ll be in danger. It’s the shadows, you see. They’ve already killed once, and they will stop at nothing. So, just ... just abandon me here and return to your base. You will be safe there – yes, you will be safe.’

He smiles faintly and puts his hand on my forehead. ‘We will not abandon you, Yvonne, and we will definitely not allow anyone to kill you, I promise. Try to sleep and, tomorrow, we will be at Helios.’

Gran used to stroke my hair like that, many years ago, when I woke up from a nightmare. Perhaps this will turn out to be just another nightmare after all – a nightmare I can only escape by falling asleep.

\* \* \*



The sudden impact of a wave of piercing cold ... but we are still indoors. There are bright floodlights underneath a curved ceiling made of glinting steel.

Indistinct noises echo within this dome. Obscure shapes move about erratically. An oppressive atmosphere of restlessness and agitation hangs over everything.

And away at a distance, people are talking in a great confusion of voices.

Then a single voice, closer by ... The vague outline of a woman, her face hidden in the glare above. But she has shoulder-length dark hair – it is Alison.

She reaches down to me, speaking my name.

But I am caught in a swift backwards motion, carried away in a current of distorted sounds and blurred images.

Ally, I'm sorry I left you. I'm sorry I wasn't there for you, when you needed me. I know I should have been, like you always were for me. I should never have left you. I meant to come back sooner, then something came up. I got delayed, but I'm here now, as promised. Remember, I said I would return from Antarctica, and here I am.

Alison is speaking faster now. The words are unclear, but there is a sense of urgency in the tone of her voice, and of concern – concern for me. She is worried about me. She is trying to warn me of something, some kind of danger.

The space between us is distorted, as if seeing her through a layer of water, looking up to her from underneath the waves. And it is getting harder to breathe.

I need air. I need to talk to Alison. But the water is too deep and too heavy.

The phantoms have finally caught up with me. They have lured me into their cold, dark lake. And now they are pulling me farther and farther down, until I sink all the way to the bottom and never rise up again.

An object is placed over my nose and mouth. It is going to suffocate me. But with a panicked gasp, fresh air rushes into the lungs.

Alison fades away.



## CHAPTER NINE

# BORROWED TIME

A line of palm trees on a white sandy beach sways in a gentle breeze. Behind them, the blue-green sea stretches to the horizon, under a clear, sunny sky.

Beside the poster, the rest of the wall facing the bed is taken up by a cupboard with a glass front and a shelving unit, both containing medical supplies.

One corner, near the door, is separated from the rest of the room by a white curtain, with a washbasin and a mirror next to it.

The bed itself has a simple white frame, while the mattress and duvet are dressed in green linen. An empty pole for intravenous drips stands nearby.

On the bedside cabinet is a box with tissues, a water bottle, a glass – and behind it, my watch.

Twenty minutes past one – in the morning or afternoon? Impossible to tell in a room without windows. The self-winding mechanism is still going. It cannot have been lying there at rest for much more than a day.

And something else glints behind the glass – two identity discs on a chain:

O POS  
AXIII-630517-0  
DANNREUTHER S  
GB CofE

So, I guess that must be me, then. And that is something for certain at least.

On the floor by the bedside cabinet sits a large bag that also looks familiar – the kit bag for Antarctica.

Antarctica, yes ... the surprise of being selected for the team ... the frantic training period in England ... finally the day of departure ... walking into the RAF station, alone and completely out of place ... the long and exhausting journey south in the transport plane, surrounded by all the military guys ... the stopover on Ascension Island ... switching aircraft on the Falklands ... the restless night at Halo ... the flight across the Weddell Sea, and finally arrival at Aurora ... the Christmas and New Year's

celebrations ... being the newcomer, the outsider ... with terrible weather all the time.

But this is not Aurora. This must be another base, judging by the sparse nature of the room – a hospital room, obviously. Something went wrong then.

The right wrist is bandaged. The palms of both hands are a little sore, as if they had been burnt recently. In fact, they probably have. More worryingly, a blanket of pain lies over the whole body: dull throughout the legs, more acute and piercing in the chest, and throbbing with every pulse in the head.

But the sterile interior of the room contains no clues about what happened, or anything that would reveal its location.

The only additional information carried inside is an indistinct mixture of distant sounds – intermittent human voices over a constant background of mechanical noise.

Then closer by, the swift steps of a single person, slowing down and stopping outside the door.

The handle slowly moves downwards ... until the door is pushed open, very carefully ...

She is good-looking, in a rugged sort of way. The cold and dry Antarctic wind has obviously got to her. Her dark brown hair falls in wavy strands that, under normal circumstances, would probably be shiny and soft. But the more robust style suits her, whereas my own hair must be a lank mess.

‘Hello, Siobhán. I am glad you are awake. I did not want to disturb you. But I hoped I could talk to you, before we leave.’ She has a distinct German accent ... a bit like Gran.

As she approaches, she picks up a stethoscope from the shelf. ‘How are you now?’

Apparently, she expects me to recognise her, and perhaps I should. Clearly something significant happened, something I need to remember now.

‘Can I sit here, while I check your pulse and breathing?’ In an unconscious movement, she tucks her hair behind her ear, as she settles onto the side of the bed. ‘No, you don’t have to move. I have enough space. And raising your upper body hurt, didn’t it? I suspected already that you have some fractured ribs. At least your chest is badly bruised. So far, there are no

signs of any complications, but we will have to be careful.’ She inserts the earpieces of her stethoscope. ‘Just let me slide this underneath your shirt. It will be a bit cold, but only for a few seconds.’

As the diaphragm moves over the chest, the pain over some ribs becomes more intense – definitely broken, then. And that means no diving for at least a month, possibly even longer.

There are many questions to be asked about what happened. But she probably would not want me to speak right now.

She appears to be in her late thirties, at the peak of life, when persisting health and fitness are matched by professional skills and life experience. She has a plain wedding ring; but although her ear is pierced, she does not wear an earring at the moment.

She glances up from her watch and smiles, as she notices my scrutinising her.

With an encouraging wink, she removes the stethoscope and straightens out my shirt. ‘Still nothing to worry about. Your heart and lungs sound exactly as they should. There is no sign of damage from either smoke inhalation or your broken ribs. Just try to breathe normally and deeply. And if you need to cough, it is important that you do, even if it is painful. If it hurts too much, I can give you more pain medication, rather than having the risk of you getting a pneumonia.’

‘But perhaps I should introduce myself again. You don’t seem to remember our earlier meetings. My name is Monika – Monika Wendt. I am a medical doctor and also the outgoing manager of the German Helios station. That is where you are now. We used to have daily radio contact with Aurora, to see if everything is all right. But unfortunately, we can only meet very seldom – so maybe you have not heard about us?’

‘In any case, Helios is on the Ekström Ice Shelf, about nine hundred kilometres northeast of Aurora. The scenery here is very similar to what you know from your station. And you are not our only visitor right now. A few days ago, a group of emperor penguins from the nearby colony came by to say hello. Do you like animals, Siobhán?’

‘Yes. I’m a biologist – a marine zoologist.’

‘That is very interesting. There are no biologists working here. So, what kind of research have you been doing here on Antarctica?’

‘I ...’ Good question.

‘Have you been studying the animals at the Aurora station?’

‘Yes, the dolphins ...’

‘The dolphins?’

Dolphins ... *Tursiops truncatus*, common bottlenose ... ‘No, I’m sorry. That was before. At Aurora, I was ... Well, there were the penguins, I suppose, just like here ... although, I can’t really remember seeing them.

‘Oh, and we were diving, of course. That was the main thing – cryobiology, that’s what I have been doing: collecting water and ice samples, and then analysing their physical properties and biological content – mostly algal cells and protozoans, trying to work out how they manage to live under those cold conditions, with near darkness for months on end. It was intended to be the start of a long-term monitoring project, but I fear that’s come to a permanent end now.’

‘So, you remember what happened?’

‘Yes, I remember it now – the fire and the evacuation ... The others, did they make it?’

‘Yes, all your colleagues managed to get to the Halo station. The two who were severely injured were immediately brought to the Memorial Hospital in Stanley. I heard they will both make a full recovery. The rest of the team waited at Halo until it was clear that you were safe. They are now on their way back to England.’

The tone of her voice has dropped in pitch. Her expression is more serious. The casual chat is over. It is time to face the facts, to find out why I am here, in the hospital room of a German Antarctic research base.

‘Somehow I got separated from the others, didn’t I? I remember being out there with them in the storm. We were leaving the base on the snowmobiles. I remember the red taillights in front of me disappearing into the swirling snow. Then I got off the groomed track and ... I don’t know.’

‘Well, you definitely had an accident, that much is obvious. You probably hit something with your snowmobile, at high speed – a pressure ridge, for example, or a sastruga – and you were thrown over the handlebar. This would explain the fractured ribs. I also think that the snowmobile must have landed on top of you, because your thighs are badly bruised, front and back, as if they had been squashed – not only hit on one side, as from a fall. It is possible that the internal bleeding extends all the way down to the bones, especially on the right leg. The bones themselves are intact. But with contusions like that, I am sure it will be painful to walk for several weeks.’

‘My wrist?’

‘Sprained, I believe, not severely – definitely not broken. But it is a little swollen. You can take the bandage off, as long as moving your hand does not hurt. My main concern right now is to get you hydrated again. Drink as much as you can. Try to get yourself to use that at least once this evening.’ She nods towards the curtained-off corner.

‘And when you see yourself in the mirror, don’t be alarmed. You have some frostbite on your cheeks and nose, but nothing major. It will be gone in a few days, long before you are back home. So, I think that overall this adventure could have gone much worse for you.’

‘Still, I did mess up in the end, didn’t I – as they always knew I would, sooner or later.’

Monika looks confused for a moment, then she smiles. ‘You know, Siobhán, this is Antarctica. Men have died down here long before you and I arrived. No one is going to blame you for what happened.’

She shifts a little to get up, but then settles down again. ‘And if you feel any resentment towards your colleagues for having left you behind ...’

‘No, I don’t, not at all.’

‘Okay, good. Because, you know, they did try to find you before they left. But you remember how difficult it was to see anything. And as soon as you were lying on the ground, you were probably covered by drifting snow within a few seconds. Eventually, they had to break off the search, when someone else almost got lost as well. The wind only kept getting stronger, and the aeroplane could not wait anymore. They had to get out. You know how badly injured at least one of your colleagues was at the time. To leave some people behind in the station, when they did not know how far the fire would spread, and how long they would have to stay there, would have been very dangerous. And there would have been nothing for these people to do until the weather got better, at which point someone could have flown in from Halo.

‘Meanwhile, we had already started to prepare for a land rescue when we received the first distress call about the fire, just as backup, if your aeroplane was unable to land. So, we had equipped the snowcat for a long journey over the ice, with a sledge for the fuel barrels. And we had worked out the best route, because we had never done this before. When we heard that the aeroplane had landed, and the weather was still good enough to get out, it was a big relief for us, as you can imagine. But then, shortly afterwards, the message came in that you had got lost during the evacuation, and that they

would have to leave without you. Of course, we knew that we would not have any better chances of finding you outside than your colleagues had. But we thought that there was a small possibility that somehow you would manage to get back to Aurora on your own. Then, maybe we could pick you up and get you out sooner than your colleagues, who would have to wait for the weather to improve before they could do an airlift again. And so, when we heard about you, the boys left immediately. Do you remember the three?’

‘Vaguely ... yes, I do now.’

Monika nods. ‘One of them, Stefan, is a geophysicist, but he worked as paramedic during his ... well, instead of going to the military. And when we got the wintering team together, he was trained as my medical assistant. As the distress call came in, I was in the process of organising the handover of the station to the new manager, and to prepare for our departure. Out there, without proper medical equipment, there was nothing I could have done for you anyway that Stefan could not do as well. So, I sent him out, together with two experienced drivers for the snowcat. But, to be honest, when I watched the boys drive away from here and into the blizzard, I did not expect this to be a rescue mission at all. We knew that, even if things went well, it was still going to take about two days to get through to Aurora. And after that time, if you had still been outside in the cold, or even in a powerless station ... But you can be certain that, if we had not found you, your own people would have come back, as soon as it was possible to fly, and as soon as it had made any sense to begin the search again.’

‘I don’t doubt that at all. In fact, I’m glad they left when they did. It’s bad enough that I made a fool of myself, without putting everyone else at risk. I only regret that I forced them to make that difficult decision. A really bad case of *cherchez la femme*, I guess.’

‘I am sure your colleagues do not see it like that. I spoke with John on the radio, while you were on the way here. The connection to Halo was not great to begin with, but when I told him that the boys had found you alive, and that you were not in a critical condition, there was this strange noise in the background. It sounded a little bit like interference with a broadcast from a football stadium – after a goal, you know. From then on, it was hard to understand what John was saying; but I got the impression that they will give you a very nice welcome, once you are back in Cambridge.’

She notices my tears and hands me a tissue. ‘Don’t be so hard on yourself. In the end, you came closer to death than anyone else on your team, and



your colleagues know this. You had bad luck in a dangerous situation. You got into trouble, and then you got yourself out again. The main reason why you are here today is that you *did* manage to get back to the station and survive there for two days all on your own. So, stop blaming yourself and take your time to recover. Yesterday afternoon, when you arrived here, although you did not speak, I could tell that you were in a lot of pain. I had to give you an analgesic, so that you could sleep. I hope, you are feeling better now.'

'I'm all right. Only ... I have this headache, and I'm still a little confused. I can't properly remember anything that happened after the accident. I've got some vague memories, just blurry images that are now coming back. But I can't be sure if they really are memories or simply hallucinations.'

'I am not surprised. You received fairly strong painkillers during the last three days. And you are probably concussed as well. Normally, with injuries like that, you should stay in bed for at least a week. But the problem is, my team is leaving tomorrow on the ice-breaker. We are going home, and I think you should come with us. Otherwise, you would have to wait until an aeroplane manages to get through again, and that could take several days. As you will see, the weather is still quite bad. Who knows to which station they would bring you first, and how many stops you would have to make before you are back in England. This could be very exhausting. On the ship, the whole trip to Germany will take about five to six weeks, and it is quite comfortable, with good food and plenty of fresh air on deck. There is also a sauna and a swimming pool. You can start your reha on board, and by the time we arrive in Bremerhaven, you will have completely recovered. Then you can fly home from there.'

She puts her hand on my arm. 'You will enjoy the crossing. There will be other biologists you can talk to and find out what they are working on. We will see a lot of animals – especially whales, they are my favourites. But I am sure we will also see some dolphins, when the ocean gets a little warmer.' She winks cheerfully.

'Sounds brilliant. Ordinarily, I'd give everything for a cruise like that.'

'That will not be necessary. I already got confirmation from the ship that they would have a berth for you on C-Deck, where most of the scientists are. And about your friends and family at home: John told me that the Institute contacted your relative and told her about what happened, that you are safe, and that you are coming back a year earlier.'

‘My relative? I suspect they must have talked to a friend of mine – Alison. She was my primary contact. My only surviving relative is my gran. But I didn’t want her to hear about any bad news from anyone but Alison.’

‘I see ... maybe a little misunderstanding. Although it was good news, in a way, given the circumstances – disappointing, of course, that your stay on Antarctica was much shorter than expected.’

She gets up. ‘So, I will leave you in peace now.’

‘Monika, just a second please: these lads – Stefan and the other two ...’

‘Torsten and Frank, yes. You will meet them again on the ship.’

‘If they aren’t too busy, they could ... I mean, I wouldn’t mind. I’d like to ...’

‘I know, Siobhán. But I don’t think that that would be a good idea right now. They were asking about you, but I told them not to bother you. I have to draw a line. If I let these three in, everyone else will want to see you too. You are a bit of a celebrity at the moment, and I do not want the whole nosey team parading through the hospital – two teams, as a matter of fact, outgoing and incoming. Try to get better first. What you need now most of all is rest – and water.’ She indicates the bottle on the bedside cabinet.

Then she spots the kit bag. ‘I saw that you have plenty of clothes here. That is all you really need on the journey home. The boys found the bag on a snowmobile when they left Aurora. And since it had your name on it, they took it. Yesterday evening, when I looked for fresh clothes for you, I noticed that you have a very nice camera in there too. If you have films left, you will be able to take some great photographs on the ship.’

‘We will take you to the ice-breaker in the same way as you came here – in the snowcat. So, I promise you do not have to get on a snowmobile again. And it is a short trip this time. The docking site is only about ten kilometres from here.’

‘We will begin to move out to the *Polaris* at about six o’clock in the evening. I will be in the last group to leave the station, and it will probably be best if you come with me. Then we can bring you on board without creating a lot of excitement around you – you know, when all the others start partying already and are busy meeting old friends from home, who are doing research on the ship. But before we leave, we still have plenty to do – pack up the last boxes and bring them to the ship. That’s what this noise is about outside in the corridor.’

She walks to the door, where she turns back. ‘I will check on you again in a few hours. Then we decide what medication to give you for the night. By the way: your watch is still running, but on Falklands time. You should set it forward by four hours, to synchronise with us.’



My relative ... was that really a misunderstanding? Would the Institute have used that term, had they spoken to Alison? Her family name, being different from mine, would not naturally suggest a kinship between us.

Otherwise, it could only have been Gran. Her name and address would have been in my personal records, but they would have had to look up her phone number. Knowing that I had explicitly asked them not to contact her in case of an emergency, they would only have done that had they been unable to reach Alison after several attempts. And that would imply that she must have been away from home for days, outside of regular working hours ...

The sabbatical, of course. If the watch still shows the correct time, the date should be correct too – the 3<sup>rd</sup> of February. With an arrival here yesterday, after a two-day journey, we would have left Aurora on the 31<sup>st</sup>. Then the fire and the botched evacuation would have happened two days prior, on the 29<sup>th</sup>. And Alison would have been on her sabbatical since the previous weekend. So, that seems to be the solution: she had already left for Dublin when the Institute attempted to contact her.

And yet, something feels wrong about all this; as if something bad happened, unrelated to the evacuation and the accident; some vague fear from before the fire, now creeping back; like the distant memory of a nightmare, unreal but nevertheless menacing.

This might not seem too surprising at the moment, when everything is in a state of confusion and uncertainty. But there is still that persistent foreboding that something has gone terribly wrong; that the second chance I was given by the rescue out of Aurora will come at a price.



## CHAPTER TEN

# THE LAST TWILIGHT

The steep flight of stairs rises threateningly up ahead, undulating like a wave, ready to break at any moment, while the feeling of heaving and rolling increases with every laboured step.

Below, the steady droning of the diesel engines is too determined for them to be just idling. We really appear to be on the move now, cutting through the windswept sea. Still, it would be unfair to blame the dizziness and nausea on the swell alone. My sense of balance must be completely out of order, with seasickness setting in for the first time in my life.

Up on the landing, the music is even louder than on the deck below and clearly emanating from the forward part of the ship. Also audible now is the buzzing of many excited conversations – too many, and far too excited. Neither my nerves nor my stomach would currently be capable of withstanding the exertion of socialising, particularly with a group of happy people, who are returning from a unique and wonderful adventure they shared.

Fortunately, with everyone else at the leaving party, the corridor is empty in both directions. A green sign is pointing left, away from the commotion and probably towards an exit. It will be miserably cold outside, after lying in bed for more than a day. But more than anything else, open space and a steady horizon is what I need right now – something reliable to focus on.

The corridor ends at a steel door, painted white, with a small, round window. It opens onto a narrow gangway. Freezing air hits instantly, biting into the lungs and eyes. Nonetheless, the view remains obstructed by two red life boats.

It must be late at night already. Only a faint natural shine lies around the ship – except for the few exterior lights on the deck above. Despite the fading sunlight, the view from there might still be better.

A ladder leads up, its metal rungs slippery with frozen sea spray and fog. Should I lose my grip now ... should I fall here ... The injured legs are screaming in protest, but it is only a few more steps.

The red navigation light comes into view, and the illuminated instrument panels behind the windows of the bridge. All other rooms on the upper deck lie in darkness.

Finally, the safety of the railing ... But the wind is even stronger up here, howling past the funnel and the radar tower of the bulky ice-breaker. At least the noise from the party is blocked now, while the regular humming of the engines lies dampened far below.

Petrels circle all around us, taking for granted their freedom and effortless mobility. Watching their graceful movements, after a few deep breaths of the crisp air, the senses become sharper, and the nausea subsides. It is as if all the cooped up negative energy that accumulated over the past days were absorbed by the wind and carried away.

Negative energy ... funny, who used to say that?

Claire, of course ... Claire again – silly, superstitious, loyal, old Claire. What she might be doing now? Still living at the old place in St Andrews – with a better flatmate, perhaps, or with a boyfriend?

Strange how, after all this time and halfway around the world, there she is returned to memory, and as vivid as ever.

However, it is too soon to turn the mind back home, not while we remain under the spell of the Southern Ocean.

Here on port is only the dark expanse of the open sea. But Antarctica may still be visible on the other side. Just to see it one last time, to offer a grateful farewell to this tragically beautiful continent, which almost refused to let me go.

On the open deck, the only way across the ship seems to be up another ladder, past the aft windows of the observation room, and onto the platform above the bridge.

Someone is already standing there: a lone figure in profile, outlined against the glow of the sinking sun, and looking back towards the vast snowfield in the distance. I am not alone up here after all, not alone in solitude.

Stefan does not hear me approach over the noise of the wind and the excited birds.

He is startled when he realises that I am standing right beside him. ‘Hello, Siobhán. I did not notice ... How are you?’

‘All right, I guess. I’m just really weak – tired, somehow.’

‘Yes, I noticed. You fell asleep almost as soon as we were in the snowcat and began to drive away from the station. We were talking a little about something, and I got worried when you did not respond anymore. I even checked your pulse, to be sure everything was okay. You did not even wake up when we brought you on board. That is why I was surprised to see you now all the way up here.’ There is a mild tone of reproach in his voice.

‘You’re right. Strictly speaking it is far too early for this kind of excursions. But when I woke up, I felt claustrophobic in my cabin. I had to get some fresh air and see the horizon. And I have to say, it was worth the effort.’

Stefan nods and gazes back towards the retreating edge of the ice shelf. He seems uneasy around me; perhaps due to the forced closeness that existed between us for the duration of an emergency, rushing ahead of true familiarity, and against the ordinary rules of social contact; an experience he remembers, but I don’t. And now we are back on the level of common courtesy that is acceptable between almost strangers.

He looks tired. He probably has not slept much during the past week. And the physical and mental strain of the rescue mission has clearly taken a toll on him.

‘Stefan, with the hectic during our departure, I never got the chance to thank you and your two mates for getting me out of this mess.’

‘Oh, no problem. You would have done the same for us. I wanted to visit you earlier, when we were still at Helios, to see how you are doing. But we were not allowed to go into the hospital room. Monika had put a sign on the door, you know: Entrance *Verboten*.’

‘I see. And you don’t mess with that, do you?’

‘No, not with Monika.’ A more relaxed grin spreads across his face. ‘So, how are you? Your ribs are still broken, obviously, but your legs?’

‘Not as bad as they could be, I suppose. They just don’t look very pretty, do they?’

‘No.’ He is shocked by his own spontaneous response. ‘I mean, with the bruises ... but they will go away, the bruises, in a month or so.’

He is evidently embarrassed about his intrusion into my private sphere. ‘I’m sorry I had to, you know ...’

‘Don’t worry about it, Stefan. I’m a big girl. Actually, I meant to ask you about what happened, after you found me.’

‘You don’t remember it at all?’

‘I’ve got these blurred scenes circulating in my head, but I can’t suss out which are real and which are fantasy, or in which order they occurred. It’s driving me mad. The last thing I’m sure about is leaving our base with the others. I know I must have had an accident with the snowmobile. But after that, it’s all confused. Somehow, I must have managed to get back to the base, since that is where you found me. Until you got there, nothing significant could have happened. I must have been just sitting around somewhere, waiting for ... something, I don’t know – to die, probably, by the end of two days. Then you three arrived, and there had to be a fair amount of activity and excitement. But even so, all I have from that moment on are vague recollections – mostly hallucinations, I’m sure – of falling or flying, of indistinct figures without faces, or of hearing the sound of voices without words.’

‘I know, that was my fault. I messed up the analgesic. I had no idea how strong this new fentanyl stuff really is. Based on your reaction, I think I must have given you a dosage that was a little too high.’

‘Yes, that would explain things ... But I imagine I wasn’t complaining too loudly at the time.’

Stefan laughs. ‘No. You fell asleep almost immediately. That was the problem. I was afraid that you would stop breathing, or something like that. That would have complicated things. With anaesthesia, you have to supply oxygen, and we did not have that. Also, I did not know then what kind of injuries you had, and I needed to talk to you, to find out. Therefore, I was definitely not trying to put you to sleep.’

He is unsure how to continue. ‘You know, in the end, it was much less dramatic than we thought it would be. When we left Helios, all we knew was that there was a fire in your station, and that you had got lost during the evacuation. About you, we only knew your name – sort of. Otherwise, we had no idea about what had happened to you, where we could find you, and in what state you would be. The drive to Aurora was mostly boring. There was not much to see with all the snow in the air. Torsten and Frank took turns driving, while I chatted with whoever was awake, or I tried to sleep myself. When we got there, the weather was so bad we knew we had no chance of finding you outside. So, we went down into the station, just to see if it was completely destroyed. And, suddenly, there you were.’

‘When I saw you first, half lying on the floor, with blood all over your face, I thought you were dead. Then I noticed that your eyes were moving a



little. You did not speak, but you were conscious. You responded when I said hello. You shook my hand, remember? You had taken your gloves off, and I could feel that your hands were very cold. I was not sure whether it was only your hands, or whether you were really hypothermic. Well, as I said, I gave you the pain killers, and then ... The return trip was a bit more entertaining with you for company. Mostly I was trying to keep you hydrated, when you were awake. But if you cannot remember, you did not miss very much.'

I wonder ... 'So, when I *was* awake, how was I – mentally, I mean. Did I say anything?'

He is definitely uncomfortable now. 'You know, at the beginning, when we found you, you were in shock. But that is not surprising, everyone in that situation would have been: after the fire and getting lost during the evacuation; having to find the way back to the burnt-out station; then two days on your own, without knowing if someone was going to pick you up, injured and in a lot of pain. The fact that you were still alive is remarkable enough. And on the way to Helios, under the influence of the drugs, you were kind of ... a little worried.'

Right, "worried" ... it must have been pretty bad then – a major tantrum, no doubt. And that is probably the real reason why he treads so lightly around me, as if I were mentally unstable. But that cannot be changed now. I simply have to try and be as sane as I possibly can for the rest of the journey.

If only the cruise was something to enjoy, to appreciate, as the unique opportunity that it clearly is. If only there was not this overpowering desire to get back home; born of a constant fear, a foreboding that some danger remains hanging in the air.

'So, at least five weeks on the ship before we get to Germany. Do you know what you'll be doing during all that time?'

Stefan nods tentatively, but without much conviction. 'I thought I could work a little on my doctor thesis. It was a great holiday down here, but now I have to get back to normal research. The seismological measurements that I was making at Helios are part of a global network. And the topic of my dissertation is to use all that data to try to distinguish natural earthquakes from nuclear tests. But things happened so quickly while we were on Antarctica. Two years ago, when I got the subject, we were still in the Cold War, remember. Now it is all different. We are not even returning to the same country that we left – although from what we heard, the West has not

changed very much. So, who knows what is going to happen. The Russians are maybe not the only scary people on this planet.'

'No, perhaps not. There might well be others. We just need to rummage round a bit.'

He laughs and then becomes serious again. 'I was looking forward to the cruise. But now ... I want to be *somewhere*, you know, either here, or there – not stuck between two worlds ... a little stupid, I know.'

'No, Stefan. That's not stupid at all. In fact, I know exactly what you mean.'

He glances over. 'Now it is probably good for you to be here on the ship, until you are healthier. But you could go from board in Cape Town.'

'Cape Town?'

'Yes. We will be there in about two weeks, only for a short stop. But you could get a flight to London from there. It is very expensive, of course, but it is possible. I am thinking about it myself.'

'Are you anxious to get home?'

'Anxious? No, not really. No doubt it is going to be very different. Hamburg is a big and busy place. And we have been away for more than a year. But I am more anxious that, as soon as I get back, everything here ... well, *there* on Antarctica, will feel very far away, like a dream, you know, as if it never actually happened.'

Like a dream ... yes, that is exactly how it feels: a dream that evaporated, and a nightmare that materialised in its stead.

Stefan watches the petrels, which continue to follow us, sailing close to the waves and diving for the food that is being churned up in the wake of the big ship.

It is difficult to size him up. He must be in his mid-twenties, but he comes across as an overgrown boy. Out of the thick survival suit he is skinny, and with his regular glasses instead of the glacier goggles, he looks more like an academic than a tough Antarctic explorer. But he has done his job well. And now he can return home with his head held high, and with a collection of very special memories that will last a lifetime. He probably has a nice girlfriend waiting for him, just as quiet and blond and blue-eyed as he is, who wrote sweet letters to him, telling him that she is thinking of him every day, and that she misses him; someone he could think of and miss and rely on, while he was in this harsh and unforgiving place.

He squints into the low sunlight. ‘Do you believe you will go back there sometime?’

‘I don’t know. I might – eventually. It was a close call for me the first time around. But then again, of all the places to be dead in ...’

‘You will be okay, Siobhán. We are both a little depressed today. But tomorrow, everything will be better. It will be a good journey. And when we are in Cape Town, you can decide whether you are fit enough to fly back from there.’

He nods confidently and makes an effort to lighten up. ‘By the way, there is a party going on right now, down in the bar on B-Deck, to celebrate our departure. It started up here when we left, but the others went inside very soon. It is warmer there, and there is more to drink. Maybe you do not want to stay very long. And with the drugs you are taking, you should definitely not drink any kind of alcohol. But it would be good if you would come anyway. I could introduce you to the others. Then you are one of us, not some mysterious stranger, who was secretly carried on board under the cover of darkness.’ He gives me a cheerful wink.

‘Sure, good idea. I’ll join you in a minute.’

The sharp edge of the white coastline slips farther and farther away, as *Polaris* continues on its steady course, heading northeastwards, away from the last rays of the setting sun.

Antarctica, once again, is bathed in a dense twilight – the last twilight over Antarctica I may be seeing in a long time.

For now, I am going home.



PART TWO

# THE BLACK MIRROR

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

William Shakespeare in *Hamlet*, Act 5 Scene 2



# PROLOGUE

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## CHAPTER ONE

# SHADOWS OF DOUBT

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

'So, the base is beyond repair?'

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

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

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

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

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

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

‘No, you’re not. Just look at you.’

‘I am simply tired from the journey.’

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

\* \* \*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

‘No, thank you, Chief Inspector.’

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

'She and your grandmother are close?'

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

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

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

'Miss Dannreuther ...'

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

'Not worried at all, then?'

'No, but ...'

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

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

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

'She planned to take the train via Holyhead.'

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

'No.'

'Did you have an argument, for example?'

'No ... not really.'

'Then you did have an argument?'



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

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

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

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

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

‘Miss Dannreuther, the flat?’

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

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

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

‘And her passport?’

‘I couldn’t find it.’

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

‘She would never do that.’

‘... cause self-harm?’

‘Never.’

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

‘No.’

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

‘And the other bills?’

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

‘Does she keep a diary?’

‘No, not that I know of.’

‘Does she have access to a vehicle?’

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

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

‘Most likely, yes.’

‘Then this is consistent with her being abroad?’

‘Unless ...’

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

'And the owners of the manor house?'

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

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

'Not since we completed our investigation.'

'I need to know if Alison is there.'

'You don't think that ...'

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

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

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

## CHAPTER TWO

# THE MESSAGE

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Unless it is in the bedroom.

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

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

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

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

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

*Ultima Thule*  
*Where is the Secret?*  
*Who guards it?*



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

I need to talk to someone like Claire.

## CHAPTER THREE

# THE WAY BACK

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

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

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

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

In an instant, quick footsteps descend the old staircase.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

‘Now look who’s talking.’

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

‘Sure ... for old times’ sake.’

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

'Negative energy?'

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

'I didn't ...'

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Claire shakes her head silently, looking sad.

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

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

A shrill whistle erupts from the boiling kettle.

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

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

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

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

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

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

‘Like what?’

She looks embarrassed and throws out the teabags.

‘Claire?’

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

‘And you don’t believe that.’

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

‘Your boss?’

‘Why not?’

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

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

‘Claire ...’

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

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

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

‘Ask him about Ultima Thule.’

‘And why would I do that?’

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

‘Did we?’

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

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

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

‘Oh, Si. Some things never change.’

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

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

‘News reports? What news reports?’

‘About the accident on Antarctica, silly.’

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

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

‘You mean it was on television?’

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

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

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

‘Dead? I wasn’t dead!’

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

‘Claire ...’

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

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

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

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



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

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

'Will he? What did you tell him?'

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

‘I’ll do my best.’

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

‘I understand. Don’t worry.’

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

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

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

## CHAPTER FOUR

# ULTIMA THULE

‘Load of tosh!’

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

‘Yes.’

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

'The police?'

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

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

'Found her where, Professor?'

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

‘Aren’t you returning to Cambridge tonight?’

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

‘It’s a deal, Professor.’

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

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

‘Likewise, Professor.’

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

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





## CHAPTER FIVE

# GHOST STORIES

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

‘No. Tea would be grand – cheers.’

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

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

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

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

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

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

'Is it nice for hiking up there?'

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

‘And I’m Siobhán, Siobhán Dannreuther.’

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

'What, at this time of the year?'

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

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

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

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

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

‘Dannreuther, Hannah, she just told me.’

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

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

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

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

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

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

*Am I?*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

## CHAPTER SIX

# THE BLACK MIRROR

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



## CHAPTER SEVEN

# THE PHANTOM AND THE FAE

This appears to be the grandest of all the bedrooms. It is still completely furnished, and was probably used by the couple upon their return. Being also noticeably less dusty than the other rooms on the upper floor, it must have been cleaned after the conclusion of the police investigation.

The long curtains are opened, such that the narrow columns of the bay window stand out as a dark silhouette against the fiery red of the evening sky above the curving crest of the mountains.

A comfortable-looking armchair stands by the window, but dominated is the room by an over-sized four-poster bed. The mattress, protected by a threadbare velvet cover, is far too soft to be comfortable and a little uneven, the worn-out springs groaning under the sudden weight. Still, with the sleeping bag spread out on top, it should be able to serve its purpose for one more night.

Above the fireplace is yet another mural of the blonde girl. This time, she is sitting alone on the parapet of a fortress wall, or of a tower, built at the top of a mountain – high up, and surrounded by a few scattered clouds. She is still wearing an armour here, with her weapons placed by her side. This, then, must be before her fall from grace and her exile to the lonely wasteland, while she was still living at home. It is night-time now – a sleepless night, as she gazes thoughtfully over the landscape far below, where the calm surface of a lake glistens underneath the full moon.

Not unlike the view from this room, in fact. Even better than from the drawing room directly beneath, Loch Cuirinnein can be seen resting at the foot of the mountains, outwardly peaceful but impenetrable, reflecting the world above – always reflecting, never revealing its own secrets.

The bathroom too has been thoroughly cleaned not long ago. The brass fittings of the large roll top bath in front of the fireplace glow in the last evening light.

Only a thin layer of dust has accumulated on the elaborate wash basin, while the taps show no sign of any fingerprints at all – a reminder that it is

advisable to keep it that way. Any amount of water that may be left in the pipes, by now, should be of a questionable quality anyway. For brushing teeth and drinking, the bottled water from the shop will have to do.

Above the wash basin, the large mirror, though slightly dulled, still reflects the image of the dark-haired girl above the fireplace, alone now too. She stands by the bank of a river, apparently preparing to take a bath. Her helmet lies on the ground beside her. Her shield and spear lean against an ancient oak tree. Her head is bowed, but not in shame or dishonour – out of sheer exhaustion, it seems; possibly suffering the effects of battle, but no wounds are visible on her body. Her gown and cloak are intact, her weapons unbroken. Unlike her sister, she is unburdened by guilt. Whatever struggle or hardship she was involved in, she prevailed – still undefeated and pure.



*Loch Cuirinnein lies quietly under a shimmering blanket of moonlight, itself as black as the jagged outline of the mountains that surround it. A succession of gentle waves runs smoothly up and down on the narrow beach.*

*Away from the shore, the ground slopes upwards towards the top of a low hill, where some Scots pines stand together in a desolate group, their branches deformed by age-long exposure to the harsh winds.*

*Beyond them, glinting faintly in the moonlight, water again – there is water all around. This is an island, right in the middle of the lake – the Isle of the Phantom.*

*The moon is full, floating almost directly above in the dark sea of the night-time sky. It must be close to midnight. Any moment now, the phantom will appear, out on the hunt for a new victim. Over there, among the dark group of trees it will stand, until it emerges from them, gliding silently down towards the water.*

*No ... there must be a way off this island, the same way that led here – a boat, somewhere along the shore must be a boat.*

*A mass of dark boulders is strewn across the beach, making it difficult to walk in the dim light. But this is the only solution – always following the water's edge; that way is bound to lead to the boat.*

*And keep an eye on the trees. Seen from a changing direction, their branches seem to move – not irregularly as if shaking in the wind, but rather systematically, deliberately, each tree in its own fashion. Although ... is that truly an illusion? Or are they moving for real, all by themselves?*



*A dense fog is beginning to form above the lake, carried towards the island on a soft breeze, while the moon continues to rise higher above the horizon. There is not much time left.*

*Suddenly, the rocky slope comes to an end, as the shoreline makes a sharp turn to the right. Beyond the bend, the ground levels out, and the rocks are replaced by a wide sandy beach, stretched out between the water and the trees.*

*Some fifty yards ahead, a pattern in the sand shows up, looking regular and deliberate, like symbols or letters – a message, perhaps. This could be important. Only the pattern is still too far ahead to be decipherable.*

*The surface of the beach is soft, yielding instantly, like quicksand, getting softer with every further step. And as the feet sink in deeper and deeper, it takes an increasing effort to carry on.*

*Now, there is nowhere else to go, with the water on the left, and the trees on the right – already much too close and far more threatening than before, the irregular spaces between them filled with shadows that are about to come alive.*

*There is no choice but to stay on the sand – and keep moving, one laboured step after the other. Never stand still, no matter how tiring it gets, or the phantom will have won.*

*The pattern in the sand is getting closer now – ordinary letters, it appears – definitely a message then.*

*Simultaneously, though, the atmosphere is beginning to change, something is about to happen. The trees start to rustle ominously, as the wind is getting stronger. The waves too come in more rapidly now, each running higher up the beach than the ones before. Soon, they will wipe out the writing in the sand. Then it will be too late, and the message will be lost forever.*

*The sand relentlessly strengthens its grip, as the water continues to rise. The tide is coming in, as the full moon reaches its zenith.*

*I need more time. Time and tide ... and both wait for no one. This is my last chance.*

*But the tide ... in a small lake? That is impossible. The water cannot be rising – and yet, it is.*

*Unless it is the island that is sinking. Then this is not the phantom's lookout after all. This must be the hidden abode of the fae, which has temporarily surfaced, responding to some imminent threat, but is now about to submerge again.*

*And there she is, the fae, up on the hill: a pale figure among the trees, clad in a long white dress, standing utterly still, as the wind continues to get stronger, and the branches around her wave ever more violently.*

*And as the water washes higher and higher over the beach, the letters in the sand become legible. They form a single word ...*

‘Alison!’

The room is almost dark, illuminated only by the ghostly glow of the moon outside the window. No one else is in here. The old building is completely quiet – except for the silent echo that seems to linger in the still air, as if someone spoke just a moment ago.

The old mattress continues to undulate, like water, no doubt disturbed by a violent movement during the impulsive awakening. It must have been an uneasy, troubled sleep, during which the sleeping bag got hopelessly twisted in a tight spiral around the legs – not the best starting point, if a sudden need should arise to run from ghosts or other nightly intruders.

Although it was a dream, of course ... only a dream. But in it, there *was* water, dark water, and it was rising. So, nothing new then, just the once loved element turning hostile again inside my own head, this time inspired by a wobbly mattress.

And with all that, it is true what everyone says: I really need to rest, to finally shed the constant physical and mental exhaustion. But as it is, a few minutes before midnight, it would be futile to try and go back to sleep. At best, that would only result in yet another descent into some nightmare.

Outside the sleeping bag, the air streaming down the chimney and out of the fireplace is refreshingly cold – while the old windows give no indication of allowing any draft to enter.

The moon now hovers directly above the valley, only a day or two away from being full. And judging by the scattered clouds drifting across the sky, the weather is beginning to turn. The previously smooth surface of the lake is now broken up into small ripples by the strengthening wind ... unless the disturbance originates from below. Now that the rigid boundary has been dissolved, and the shimmering light from the waxing moon percolates ever further down into the hidden depths, what ancient entity may be awoken? What danger may rise up and emerge from the surface?

Just uneasy meditation of a weary and lonely mind? Perhaps. But even the jetty ... from up here, it almost looks like an arrow, drawing attention towards the centre of the lake, or to the island – inviting, even demanding investigation. A hint at the presence of secrets that remain to be uncovered.



*There is someone inside the room after all, speaking in a soft voice – the voice of a little girl, saying my name.*

*She stands by the open door of the bedroom, framed by the darkness of the landing behind her.*

*Now that she has attracted my attention, she falls silent. But she knows me. And she evidently expected me to come here.*

*She turns around and slowly descends the wide staircase leading down to the ground floor. She wants to show me something. She has been waiting for this all these many years. And now she can share her secret at last.*

*The entrance hall at the foot of the stairs lies deserted in pale moonlight. All is quiet. It is only the two of us moving.*

*Through the empty parlour she walks, and into the drawing room.*

*The French window now stands open, the curtains moving gently in an unfelt breeze. She passes through them, as if they were air.*

*Out onto the patio she steps, and down the lawn towards the lake.*

*But some power is holding me back, tying me to the old building. No matter how fast I walk, the little girl gains on me. As the ground stretches between us, I am left behind, powerless, forced to watch her approach the edge of the lake.*

*No, don't go. You are going to fall in. You are going to die. I understand that now. I know what is going to happen. Don't go.*

*She must have heard my desperate thoughts and halts at the beginning of the jetty. She turns back and holds out her hand to me. She does not want to take these last few steps alone, steps she already took a long time ago, and is bound to take again.*

*She grips my hand tightly and with a comforting smile – yes, comforting and compassionate, towards me. She is the one consoling and pitying me, as if this was my last journey.*

*And so, down the rickety pathway we walk together, suspended precariously above the darkness that opens up beneath us.*

*At the end of the jetty, the lake stretches out far ahead into the distance, completely unperturbed. And reflected in it am I, looking up from beneath the surface ... I alone, because the little girl is no more.*

*I am left standing on my own, lost at a dead end, as my reflection falls away from the calm surface, to be swallowed up by the impenetrable depth and vanish forever.*

A beam of icy moonlight floods in through the window. The formerly refreshing chill of the night-time air has now turned to a freezing cold.

Despite that, I somehow managed to fall asleep, still sitting in the old armchair, my aimless thoughts carried away into another nightmare. But this one feels real and intensely personal, like the distorted memory of something that actually happened, even if it was many years ago.

The jetty ... that unstable walkway leading out onto the lake ... and the growing sense that it has an important role to play – but in what? In solving the mystery surrounding this building? Or as a reminder of something else entirely.

*Alison and I ... we are out on a jetty, feeding the ducks – I am feeding the ducks, and the swans. Alison is engaged in some pretend ballet dance, imagining the rough planks to be her grand stage. We are very young, maybe four years old. And Gran is there with us. She is preoccupied with Alison, worried, telling her to be careful, not to dance so close to the edge.*

Where was that? A jetty by a lake ... better maintained than the one here and a little wider, but similarly surrounded by mountains.

The image is so clear now, it must be real. It definitely was not by the seaside. And young as we were, we could not have gone hiking in the Peak District yet. It had to be Ullswater then – and if was, of course, the first summer we were there.

It was Alison's idea to go out onto the jetty, although Gran had told us to stay on that nice patch of sand with our shovels and the pail, and not to go away while she went to chat with some other grown-ups nearby.

*But there are the swans, near the end of the jetty. Alison loves swans, and she is the brave one.*

*'It's all right, Shivy. Don't be scared. You can take my hand. Gran is still over there. She can still see us if she wants, even if we go and say hello to the swans.'*

Obviously, Gran spotted us as soon as we began walking towards the jetty. She immediately came after us, telling us to wait for her, as she collected a few leftover slices of bread from our lunch.

*There are some ducks with their young. They never seem to get any of the bread, as the big swans with their long necks snatch up everything first. I need to lean over and reach down to the ducklings to put the crumbs right into their little beaks.*

*Suddenly, a whirl of flapping wings ... excited quacking ... the impact of a paralysing cold ... the indistinct humming of water against the ears ... wavering green light from above ... long strands of algae closing around the legs like slimy fingers, pulling me down ... an attempted scream ... the stinging pain of water inside the lungs ... and darkness.*

*Then there is Gran, dripping wet, holding me tightly in her arms. Alison crouches alone on the grass some distance away, crying and being ignored by everyone. Why does no one care for her? Why does everyone fuss about me?*

Because it was *I* who fell into the water. That is what this is all about, these vague fears when walking out onto the jetty down there by that lake. It was not the premonition of some ancient evil lurking beneath the surface, nor was it the psychic perception of the tragic death of a little girl half a century ago. It was not, in fact, about anything that happened here. It was simply the distant memory of a traumatic childhood event, which was stirred up once again and disguised under the influence of all these ghost stories. Just echoes of the early fear of water in the aftermath of that near-drowning, being afraid for months of even getting into the bathtub; then, one day, this fear turning into an obsession, the desire to learn to swim; starting with the frightening first lessons, gradually becoming better at it, the training getting ever more serious; finally leading up to the school competitions, the interest in the oceans, marine zoology, diving – all the way to Antarctica.

But while this might explain the nervous reaction to the surroundings here, it answers none of the questions about the old rumours – about how much of them is true. Was there ever a child being hidden up here? If so, why and from whom? And what tragedy befell it? The need for secrecy during the last days of the child's life would certainly suggest that some form of criminal activity was involved, even if the death in the end was not the result of murder.

The death of a secret child – a secret death, in other words ... that would require a secret grave. Moreover, considering how strongly that death appears to have affected the couple who looked after the child, they may even have established a secret memorial at some other place that is neither linked to them, nor to the manor house, but still not far away.

And so, as a new morning approaches, one final clue remains to be followed up – a clue the police with their professionally conducted enquiry could never have found, as it lies hidden in local myths and unsubstantiated rumours. Nonetheless, if these stories are to be believed, this obscure clue might lead to a solid piece of evidence that is literally written in stone.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

# THE LAST DRUID

From the vantage point of the dunes, the blend of farming and fishing cultures of the small community becomes apparent: the patchwork of crofts on either side of the country road, dotted with simple farm houses; and closer to the coast, a few fishing bothies and ice houses, with nets draped over drying poles; all of it held together by scattered groups of sheep wandering aimlessly about.

Towards the west opens Clachtoll Bay, its white sandy beach framed between two rocky headlands. Up on the one in the south, somewhat removed from the other buildings, stands a little chapel. Despite its prominent location, it has a simple dignity about it, humbly blending into the surrounding rocks.

The afternoon sunlight twinkles over the sea, with only a few clouds high up in the sky. But away from the shore, the waves seem agitated, their crests already suspiciously white, indicating the approach of a major storm, itself still out of sight.

Anne walks out to the very edge of the dry sand and lets the waves run up to her feet. She deeply inhales the fresh wind from the sea, then she glances over. 'For me, this place will do. I may not have seen as much of the world as others have, and I'm rarely even leaving Scotland these days, but I don't need to see any more of the world before I'm happy to settle down here.'

'It's lovely, yes; easy to see why people would choose to stay out here.'

She nods. 'But many do leave, those who can't manage to support themselves. My family has been living in this region for generations, but it's getting more and more difficult. The old way of life is dying out, both the farming and the salmon netting. Me too ... after I left school, I moved down to the city, hoping to make some money – that was about twenty years ago now. I wasn't terribly successful with the job search myself; but, eventually, I found a husband with work. Everything went all right for a while, until it began to go bad for the steel industry. When the marriage didn't survive the years of unemployment, I got divorced, reclaimed my family name, left

Glasgow, and moved back up here. Tourism was picking up a bit at that time. So, with some support from my father, I bought what was then an old farm house and turned it into the B&B. It's been going well so far. Recently, I was able to pay back my dad, and now it's mine. But usually it's quiet during the winter months.'

'As I mentioned, I'm only moving through at the moment. But seeing this, it would be grand if I could stay for a few days and relax.'

'I imagine you could do with a break, after everything that happened – although you still got away lightly, considering.' She smiles and lays her hand on my shoulder. 'I did not want to bring it up before, but I immediately recognised you from the news reports on the telly.'

'About what happened on Antarctica? Yes, I suppose I did have a little luck down there.'

'I noticed you're still limping.'

'It's not so bad. I just need to get a bit more exercise, to walk it off, you know. In fact, I wouldn't mind strolling up onto the headland over there and taking a look at that little chapel. It's sitting in such a beautiful spot.'

'It does; and from the outside, it is quite nice. But the interior, at least in my opinion, has been spoiled by renovations. I can show you, if you want. I've got the key here. I was put in charge by the community as our local tourist guide of sorts. Especially now, when the campsite is closed, the few visitors we get end up staying at my place anyway.'

'There have been recent renovations inside the chapel?'

'Not particularly recent, no. It happened during the early Forties. The chapel had been in a steady decline for many years – since the Reformation, really, and then throughout the Highland Clearances. So, by the beginning of the Century, it had fallen quite badly into disrepair. There was no money for restoration or even maintenance in the community until, during the War, a generous donation was made by a rich couple – from London, apparently, but no records seem to survive anywhere about who these people were. As I understand it, the agreement was that they would renovate the chapel, it would still belong to the community, but they would be allowed to put up a memorial stone for their daughter, who had died recently.'

'All the way up here, despite them living in London?'

'Yes. They had probably seen the chapel on one of their travels, and liked it. Then, when their little girl died, they remembered it and wanted to have her memorial here, in a peaceful location, away from all the fighting and



destruction. London, of course, was horribly destroyed at the time, under constant attack from the air, with bombs dropping all over the place, including the cemeteries. Nothing was safe down there, not even the dead.’

She leads the way up an overgrown path and onto the headland. Although not much higher than the beach, the wind is noticeably stronger here, as it whistles over the steep outcrop that suddenly rises from the waves, and around the little chapel.

With its weathered exterior, and constructed from local material, it gives the impression of having grown naturally. The only exception is the arched iron gate at the entrance. Anne selects an old key from her bunch and inserts it into the lock. After some jiggling, it turns, and the gate reluctantly allows itself to be opened on its rusted hinges.

Two shallow steps lead down into the small room with a low vaulted ceiling. A narrow glassless window is set into each of the two side walls. Through the one on the left, a slanting beam of sunlight falls onto the centre of the floor.

Old stone benches are located underneath the two windows, while set into an alcove in the wall facing the entrance is a memorial stone. Clearly visible near its top, above an inscription of bronze letters, is the elaborate engraving of a flower. And this time, there can be no doubt about what kind of flower it is.

‘Is that a rose on the memorial stone?’

‘Yes – and very well crafted, isn’t it, with all that intricate detail. Someone put a lot of effort into this. There is also another matching one on a flagstone in that corner over there.’ She points to the right of the entrance, where an identical engraving is set into the floor.

‘That’s a bit unusual, isn’t it, up here in Scotland.’

‘Well, the couple who renovated the chapel were English. But I suspect the real reason is that the girl’s name was Rose. Otherwise, the epitaph is incomplete, somehow.’

She nods towards the memorial stone.

HER SOUL, O LORD,  
WHOSE BLOOD WAS SHED  
ON THE CROSS,  
WE PLACE IN YOUR HANDS

‘You see, it appears as if the rose engraving at the top is a substitute for the name.’

‘Yes ... although that is a bit strange as well. I mean, why would they choose to keep the memorial anonymous?’

‘I don’t think they would have seen it that way. Perhaps it was too painful for them to spell out their daughter’s name, now that she was dead. But you’re right, Siobhán, I have often thought that there was something strange about this inscription. For example, consider the combination of an engraving in stone with this bronze lettering – a weird artistic choice. Surely, to be consistent with that sophisticated rose symbol, you would expect the words to be engraved as well. And then, there is the inscription itself. Normally, this type of epitaph, with this type of lettering, is found on memorials to famous people. In here, inside this plain chapel, it looks far too extravagant and out of place.’

Yes, these words are definitely intended to be noticed. And whether this is a deliberate choice or not, the memorial *is* anonymous – no question about that.

Then there is the significance of the roles played by two London couples: one, the owners of the manor house, their wartime actions shrouded in mystery, with rumours concerning the death of a child; the other establishing a memorial to their daughter less than twenty miles away from that building. That cannot be a coincidence. They have got to be the same people. And that means that there really was a tragedy that befell them, involving a little girl – a tragedy they had to keep secret.

Nonetheless, albeit anonymously, they felt compelled to leave such a conspicuous memorial – almost as a challenge for someone else to uncover the secret they themselves could not reveal. Then there must be something else hidden in here, something that solves that mystery, or at least indicates the right direction to follow during an investigation. And if that is so, in an empty room like this, the clue must be hidden underneath the flagstones, and underneath one flagstone in particular. A buried secret ... possibly the actual grave, even. Could it be that a rose marks the spot?

‘Anne, that other engraving back there in the corner ... it’s curious, isn’t it? It too is somehow out of place – quite literally. After all, it is rather strange to put so much effort into decorating one of the flagstones, only to put it into such an unremarkable location – seems a bit random, doesn’t it. So, I’m wondering, is there any chance that, since the renovation, the stone has been

moved there from a more prominent location? Or could it be that it already existed at the time of the renovation, and that it was moved into the corner then?’

‘I don’t know. But as you said, you would not usually expect to find a rose engraving in a late medieval chapel in Scotland. I’d therefore suspect it was put there during the renovation, exactly matching the engraving on the memorial stone and representing the name of the little girl. Why they chose to put one engraving into that corner, I honestly don’t know. But these stones are very solid. And with their irregular shapes, the floor is like a jigsaw puzzle. You would have to rearrange many of the pieces to make them fit again as closely as this. I can’t imagine that any of them have been moved since the floor was laid down initially. But I agree, it is a little weird. Almost as if the person who made these engravings wanted to practice on a similar type of material, before tackling the memorial stone. I suppose the explanation could be as simple as that. But here, take a look at this.’ She points along the top of the sidewalls. ‘They are somewhat eroded now, but you can still make out the original engravings, dating from the period when the chapel was built – Thirteenth Century, as far as we know – and still very much in the Celtic tradition. You can see the beautiful knot pattern running all along the ceiling on both sides; and woven into it, the crosses and harps, and those rampant lions over there.’

She steps closer to the memorial stone. ‘Now look up there, above the alcove. There is another more recent inscription. It is a bit hard to read in the dim light, but it says: “And at the Great Dawn, the Truth shall be revealed by the Flames of Heaven”.’

‘Blimey ... what do you believe does that mean?’

‘I asked myself that question many times – myself and others. No one around here knows the answer, but everyone is convinced that the inscription was put there during the renovation, together with the memorial stone.’

‘I don’t know ... I have to say, I find that rather disturbing.’

‘Agreed. Of course, it is touching, in a way. The couple were obviously devastated by the loss of their young daughter – understandably. And if it hadn’t been for their support, the chapel would now be in ruins, like so many other religious sites in the Highlands. But as much as I sympathise with their grief, there is something about all this, that gives me the creeps.’

‘Although both inscriptions are clearly religious.’

‘Oh, yes, no doubt about that. The epitaph on the memorial stone is quite standard, and in a different context, I doubt it would attract much attention. But the other inscription above it ... that is a different story. It’s not a direct quote from the bible, at least not from the King James Version. The closest match I can think of is in the Book of Revelation – you know, on the Day of Judgement, when all hidden truths are revealed, all injustices uncovered, and all wrongs righted; the ultimate battle between good and evil, during which the Saviour will return with his flaming sword, vanquish and cast down all wrongdoers, and bring back from death all those who are worthy of resurrection – the dawn of God’s kingdom on Earth.’

‘I find that rather ominous and gloomy for a nice little chapel like this.’

‘Well, I guess it’s an allegory for our own daily struggles, small as they may be by comparison, to find the right path through life. But you’re right: in here, it does come across as being just a little too grandiose. We probably must remember the conditions that existed when these inscriptions were put up, at the height of the Second World War, with horrific air raids happening nightly all across Britain.

‘In the context of that time, apocalyptic writings like these would have been interpreted as being much less allegorical and far more realistic than now, when fighting is happening a long way away from home. Think specifically about the book with the seven seals that is mentioned in Revelation. Evidently, the first four of the seals had already been opened, with the four horsemen of conquest, war, famine, and death galloping all over Europe. Then, as the violence and oppression spread, and the cries of the innocent victims of persecution and extermination rang out more and more loudly, it would have felt as if the fifth seal too had been opened. And with no end to the fighting in sight, it was natural to assume that all this would ultimately lead to the opening of the sixth seal, to the total destruction of all cities, and to the blocking out of the sun by smoke and ash.’

Anne walks to the sunlit window and squints up into the sky. As her voice trails away, the room is filled with the soft noise of the wind streaming by, bringing with it, more distantly, the rushing of the waves.

‘And the seventh seal?’

Anne hesitates for a moment, then she turns away from the window. ‘Silence ... the calm before the inevitable storm, when something bad has happened, and everything has gone quiet, with a foreboding of something even worse to come; when the whole world appears to be holding its breath,

the birds stop singing, and time stands still. But you know that, very soon, the clock will begin ticking again, and your grace period will be over. That is when the seven trumpets sound, the sea turns to blood, and the bottomless pit opens.’

Silence ... yes, there is silence in this place – and fear. But not about things to come; about terrible events in the past. Everything in here, these old stones themselves, seem desperate to scream out the truth, echoing perhaps the cries of at least one innocent victim. Only, there is no one here to listen. And until someone is prepared to do that, the secret will remain hidden, encoded in this fearful silence.

But at the right instant, when the sun rises, what might there materialise in this empty space? What may become visible?

‘Anne, those letters on the memorial stone ... I suppose they would glow, wouldn’t they, if the sun shone directly onto them.’

‘Most likely, yes.’ She looks a little confused. ‘Oh, I see: you’re thinking about a truth that might be revealed by the flames of heaven. But that could only be ... let’s see.’ She glances out through the entrance to get her bearings. ‘Well, it would have to be very early in the morning, immediately after sunrise. Later during the day, the sun is too high in the sky and too far south – coming in through this window here, in fact, as it does now.’

Exactly ... ‘The Great Dawn.’

‘You’re right.’ She gets more excited and walks up to the memorial stone. ‘But you can read the words anyway, at any time of day. What difference would it make if the sun shone directly onto them?’

She crouches down in front of the inscription and wipes over it with her jacket sleeve. ‘See here, they’re really just ordinary bronze letters.’

As the thin layer of dirt is being removed, the metal surfaces obtain a faint golden glow in the diffuse light from the window. It would certainly be more intense in direct sunlight, but that would be all. The letters could not rearrange themselves; no new words could form, that would reveal the truth about the death of a little girl all these many years ago. On the other hand, the inscription above the memorial stone, together with the orientation and the layout of the chapel – again, that cannot be a coincidence. But rather than bringing with it new information, the rays of morning sunlight entering the chapel are intended to point out and illuminate something that is already there, information that simply needs proper interpretation. And so, instead of the deliberately obtrusive inscription, the real clue may lie in the

inconspicuous engraving of a rose at the top of the memorial stone, in turn pointing to an otherwise unremarkable flagstone in a corner.

Clearly, this investigation is not over yet. There is more to be done here, more to be discovered ... with possibly a gruesome outcome. Therefore, it will have to be done alone – and at night.

‘Sorry, Anne. It was only a silly idea that popped into my head. Somehow, there is something about this place that makes supernatural occurrences seem more likely than would normally be the case.’

She ends her close-up inspection of the memorial stone and straightens up again. ‘Yes, I know exactly what you mean. I have often thought that the chapel should be restored to its original state. I could try and find out who exactly is in charge of it. Maybe we can get it scheduled and properly protected.’

She shivers. ‘Let’s go back to the house. I can make us some tea, if you like.’

‘That would be nice, thank you.’

She leads the way back outside. ‘Just pull the gate shut. It will lock by itself.’

A small pebble lies near the entrance. With a soft kick, it rolls into the corner of the door frame. The iron gate jams against it without locking.

Anne does not notice. She has turned away, gazing north across the bay. ‘By the way, these inscriptions inside the chapel are not the only mystery around here. If you look over there, to the other headland, behind the netting station, on top of the natural rocks, you can just about make out a mound of regular stones. These are the remnants of Clachtoll Broch, an Iron Age roundhouse. It is almost entirely collapsed now; but when it was built, more than two thousand years ago, it would have been an impressive defensive structure, forty feet tall, or so. No one knows exactly what it was used for – as a storage tower perhaps, to protect vital supplies from raiders, or even as a residence for the rulers of this region.

‘But whatever its role was, according to a local legend, it became the final resting place of the Last Druid.’ She winks conspiratorially. ‘Now, if you remember from your school days, it is generally accepted that, in Britain at least, the druids were systematically wiped out by the Romans, as they retreated farther and farther west into Wales and eventually onto Anglesey. Sadly, they left no written records. Theirs was a purely oral tradition.

Therefore, when all the druids were taken out in one single blow, with them vanished their whole culture – all their knowledge and beliefs.

‘And this leaves us with that perennial, tantalising question what it was about the druids and their society that worried the Romans sufficiently to devote so much effort to their destruction. Especially because that was not the Romans’ usual attitude towards other peoples’ religions, and towards the Celtic deities in particular. *Aquae Sulis* is an excellent example for that. The Romans came across the hot spring on their way to Wales. And just as they built a magnificent temple and bath complex dedicated to the same goddess that the Celts had worshipped there for centuries, not far away, they ruthlessly slaughtered the last remaining druids.

‘So, if it wasn’t Celtic spiritual practices that bothered the Romans about the druids, then what was it? Why did they deploy their victorious Fourteenth Legion against them – in Nero’s own words, his finest? The same legion that, prior to the conquest of Britain, had been involved in avenging the catastrophic defeat of Varus in the Teutoburg Forest. The same legion that would later go on to defeat Boudicca’s overwhelming army after the sacking of Colchester and London. And speaking of which: why did the Romans allow this to happen in the first place? At a time when trouble brewed with the Celtic tribes in the East, why did they move this legendary fighting force away from their main settlements and into difficult and unknown terrain on the other side of the island, to go after the druids with such determination and brutality? Not only to kill the men, but also to lay waste to all their shrines and sacred groves?’

‘What was it about the druids specifically that the Romans hated or feared so much? What exceptional powers did they believe that small group of select people might possess that threatened them? And to what extent were their fears justified? Sadly, we will never find the answers to any of these questions, because the Romans were very successful in eradicating all meaningful traces of that culture.

‘However, our story goes that, during the final slaughter, one single druid did manage to escape. Alone, in a small boat or a canoe, he travelled north along the coast, until he reached unoccupied territory. From there, he continued his journey on land, gradually moving northwards, always trying to stay ahead of the advancing Roman forces, bringing with him the ancient wisdom of his people, all the while searching for someone with whom he

might share it, someone worthy of becoming a fellow initiate – but without any success.

‘And so he became a restless wanderer, roaming the land like a ghost, moving from place to place without ever settling down, holding on to an understanding of the world that only he remembered, and hoping that one day he might find someone after all whom he would be willing to entrust with his secrets, before he could allow himself to die. Then, after many years, he arrived here, where he found shelter in the broch, very old and very weak by that point, and unable to travel any further.

‘Now, there are two different versions of that story. According to one, the Last Druid, even at death’s door, was unwilling to confide in anyone, deeming the local population of farmers and fishermen unable to truly comprehend the old wisdom. And so, as he died, lonely and with a broken heart, the sacred knowledge of our Celtic ancestors was lost forever.

‘According to the other version, he was cared for by one of the local girls. And as he felt the end approaching, and as he had to accept that he would not be able to continue the search for his rightful successor, he suddenly understood that, all this time, he had been looking for the wrong person anyway. You see, Siobhán, the druids had formed a fraternity. Therefore, throughout all his journeys, he had exclusively been looking for another man – a man, moreover, who was already learned and in a position of influence in his community. But, in the end, he had always been disappointed by the leaders that he had met, realising that they were only going to use his powerful knowledge for their own benefit, to gain control over others, rather than for the good of the community. Now it became clear to him that the person most worthy of the old secrets was indeed the young, uneducated woman who so selflessly cared for him. So, he told her who he was. And as he passed all his knowledge on to her, his spirit was released at last. His soul slipped away, and he died peacefully. But through the young woman and her descendants, the wisdom and the power of the Celts was preserved for many generations.

‘And there you have it: the two versions of *The Legend of the Last Druid*.’

‘Interesting ... but I think I prefer the second one.’

Anne laughs. ‘Me too. Then let us assume that this is how the story ends. Admittedly, it’s not entirely original. For example, there are some obvious similarities to the story of the Fisher King, who, wounded and old, becomes the last guardian of the Holy Grail. On the basis of that, some like to take



our story further and say that the Last Druid not only brought his sacred knowledge with him, but also some powerful physical object, a secret weapon of sorts; and that, before his death, he gave that weapon to the young woman to hide it away, to keep it safe until she or her descendants could use it to defeat the invading enemy.

‘But then the Romans left, defeated by ordinary forces on the Continent, only to leave the door wide open for another wave of invaders of the British Isles – the Saxons. According to the Celtic sources and the later Medieval romances, the Britons were then united by a new leader, King Arthur, who led them to many victories until, finally, he was killed in the Battle of Camlann by the traitor Mordred. Through all this, Arthur was served by his mighty sword Excalibur which, as you may remember, had been given to him by the Lady of the Lake.

‘Now, according to our legend, that sword was actually the magical weapon of the old Celts, guarded by the druids for many years, rescued by their last survivor from the Romans, and eventually brought here. The Lady of the Lake, of course, was none other than the humble country girl, whose contact with the sword had given her supernatural powers and eternal life. Some like to believe that, having saved Excalibur from Camlann after Arthur’s death, she went into hiding again, waiting for the right moment to return, or to pass the sword on to a new leader, to continue the battle begun by Arthur and, this time, perhaps to finish it; to accomplish what earlier generations had failed to achieve, and to defeat the old enemy.’

Anne sighs. ‘The problem is, there are no epic battles anymore, are there. The grief we get from the Saxons these days comes in the form of poll taxes and pit closures. A magic sword is not much use in mundane struggles like these. And in any case, it would be hard to find with all the many lochs we have up here in Scotland.’

‘I don’t know, Anne. Maybe it isn’t in a lake at all – and, moreover, very close to home.’

‘In the old broch, you mean? Yes, people have suggested that.’

‘Has it never been excavated?’

‘Some archaeological work was done by a university group a few years ago. They found several chambers in the remaining structure above ground. There is also the possibility that the tower is positioned over some underground passages or natural caves. But it would require some major effort to move all those massive blocks of stone that came down from the

collapsing walls. And you know, generally speaking, I think that legends are best left undisturbed. They tend to be more exciting than the factual truth. So, perhaps, we should let the Last Druid and his secrets rest in peace.'

## CHAPTER NINE

# TWO ROSES

The wind has become stronger than during the day, as the distant storm has moved a little closer. Yet the dark sky is still mostly clear. Only occasionally, scattered clouds move across the moon, perfectly round now, with the stars fading behind its bright glow.

While the reflected light glints on the agitated water of the small bay, the sun itself is hidden on the other side of the planet. There are more than six hours to go until sunrise.

At night, the sea becomes a scary, heaving mass of hidden powers, rushing up against the land, wave after wave, crashing against the exposed headland, groping, and pulling away with it all within its reach.

Everything changes in the dark. When the light fades away, so does our rationality. As our eyes become useless, and as other senses take over, we enter a new unseen reality – a world of phantoms and ghosts.

Meanwhile, the lonely outline of the little chapel is the same as it was in the daylight; the same low, arched entrance, with the iron gate still wedged against the pebble.

The same screeching sound erupts as the gate turns, uncomfortably loud, and seemingly carrying farther on the wind than during the day – more intimidating too, perhaps hiding the wailing of an escaping host of spectres, as they rush past, out of the gloomy opening.

After that onslaught, all that remains inside the chapel is deadly silence. The inscription on the wall just below the ceiling is now hidden in darkness. But the words on the memorial stone are still discernible in the pale moonlight that enters through the windows – the same words, the same anonymous cry for salvation ... but salvation for whom? An innocent little girl? Or, more likely, for those who set up the memorial.

Two roses ... intricately worked into solid stone with such loving care and attention – once in a prominent spot, facing the entrance and instantly noticeable; and then again, barely noticeable at all in that corner by the gate. There must be something hidden underneath it.



Earth ... only earth ... a thin layer of soil above the natural rocks of the headland – nothing else, no concealed passage or burial site, no funereal secret, no clues at all to the tragic circumstances of the death that is being commemorated here.

It would be pointless to search any further. If the secret is not hidden here, it is not hidden anywhere underneath this floor.

Having been disturbed from its long slumbers, the rose-engraved flagstone readily slumps back into its old bed with a definite thud. And with the crumbs of dirt brushed back into the gap around it, everything looks as it did before. Only upon close inspection, the small dents left by the tools along the stone's edges are still visible, but they will weather away in the months and years to come, as time continues to wash over the chapel, removing whatever last traces of the past there may be left in here.

Even Anne's trowel and cultivator, though slightly worse for wear after the digging, are not scratched badly enough for the damage to be noticeable when spring gardening commences in the Highlands.

Everything will be back to normal, and nothing will have been gained. Once again, this artificial cavern will be occupied by nothing but ghosts, which were left behind in the wake of the traumatic loss of a loved one – memories that may already be extinct among the living. And we are left with a physical reality that is stripped of its original meaning; a physical reality that does not communicate to us anymore and will guard its secrets forever.

So, if that library book was intended to be a guide into some kind of magical realm that lies hidden behind a wardrobe, it certainly accomplished that. Following the obscure clues it seemed to contain has led into a world of dreams and myths, of vague rumours and ghost stories, where, by the intervention of supernatural forces, spirit messages from beyond the grave can materialise in thin air, carried along by a ray of sunlight.

If, on the other hand, the book itself was hidden behind the wardrobe, everything changes, and the world gets very dark. All the horror of a fantastical world of nightmares suddenly comes bursting into our ordinary reality, as demonic powers become an actual threat. The boundary between dreams and reality being eroded away ... Alison talked about that; about the premonition she had of shadows closing in around her; about some kind of evil returning from the past. What if she was right? What if her fears were justified? What if she was pulled back by her nightmares, away from our waking reality? And where was I when that happened? Far away and unable

to help – but worse than that, unwilling to take her fears seriously, and to see in them more than simple paranoia. If she did deliberately hide the library book behind the wardrobe, where in this surreal world of shadowy evil is the message meant to lead then? Into which direction do these words point, and what would it take to decipher them?

The same unanswerable questions circling through my mind, slowly driving me insane. If only I allowed myself to sleep properly for just a few nights in a row, instead of climbing out of bedroom windows in the middle of the night and rifling other people’s garden sheds. If, instead of going ghost hunting, I stopped behaving like a ghost myself, I would probably get my old sanity back, and these other apparitions would disappear all by themselves.



*The small room is illuminated by unsteady light ... though not from within; nor is it the cold light of the moon.*

*Instead, the sky is aflame, turned red by billowing clouds of raging fire. And underneath it, stirred up by an infernal wind, the ocean seethes; the waves now regularly crashing over the headland and swirling around the ancient walls of the chapel – a little island stranded in a turbulent sea.*

*Even so, there must still be some way out of here – up the few steps to the entrance, where the screeching iron gate swings in the violent flood, and then ...*

*‘Where are you going, Siobhán?’*

*Alison is standing in front of the memorial stone, her dark hair and white gown streaming in the blasts from the burning sky.*

*‘Where are you going now? Are you leaving me again?’*

*‘Ally, I was looking for you. I came back from Antarctica, looking for you.’*

*She does not respond. She simply remains standing there, a lonely figure, illuminated by the blaze outside.*

*‘Ally, the fire and the water – it’s coming. We’ve got to get out of here.’*

*But she does not react to my outstretched hand. ‘Why do you always run away, Siobhán? What are you afraid of?’*

*‘Alison, please ...’*

*‘Why did you have to leave me, when I needed you most? And where is Kathleen? Where did she go, Siobhán? Where did she go?’*

*‘Ally, please, let us get away from here – together, as it always was.’*

*'Too late, Siobhán. It is too late.'*

*Flames erupt from the memorial stone; Alison vanishes, as they burst through her.*

And a fiery inscription is revealed:

HER  
BLOOD  
ON  
OUR HANDS

The words glow golden-red in the otherwise dim chapel, as the first rays of the sun come streaming in through the entrance, lighting up the bronze letters. The silent scream that has reverberated inside these walls for half a century, now finally reveals itself.

And so, a message was there all along, hidden in plain sight, just waiting to be found – encoded in a few small perturbations of our physical reality; nothing but imperceptible ripples, slight differences in the way the letters are angled on the rough surface of the stone; seemingly random irregularities that, in fact, mask a systematic pattern. Only if viewed from the right direction, and under the right light, all extraneous details are being filtered out, and the true meaning emerges.

The death that these desperate words proclaim could not have been an accident; while the anguish and intense feeling of remorse they express suggest that those who wrote them were not the perpetrators of the crime. They may have been mere witnesses, but nonetheless attached significant culpability to themselves. They saw themselves as being responsible for a child that, most likely, was not theirs. Possibly she was a refugee from the Continent, who, for some reason, continued to be persecuted by the enemy, even here in Britain. Or they took her in after the death of her parents, who may have been killed in a bombing raid, or may even have been murdered as well.

However the little girl came to be in their care, they immediately took her to their remote manor house, obviously trying to hide her, but in the end were unable to protect her. For this failure, they blamed themselves for the rest of their lives. And the dark shadow of the evil that overtook them all these many years ago still hangs over the old family home, as they are kept away from there by the recollection of these traumatic events that have not stop haunting them.

But why then leave this message in such an obscure fashion? For fear of prosecution from the legal system, if they were genuinely innocent of committing the crime themselves? More likely for fear of retaliation from the real culprits. It appears they got caught up in some dark network that had established itself around here during the War. It was that connection they had to keep secret; a connection that even now, much later, cannot be publicly admitted. Out there, somewhere, there is still the threat from an enemy that may return at any moment and strike again. And now, with the murder of Kathleen, perhaps it has.

Whatever happened here in the past, it is not over yet. This message, and the manner in which it was hidden, is more than an admission of guilt. It is a challenge. That is what this chapel is intended to do: to send out an eternal cry for justice, for anyone to hear who is willing not only to come all the way out here, but also capable of identifying and reading the signs correctly; someone who is willing to step off the beaten track and see things from a different angle; someone resourceful and courageous. That is the kind of person whom those who established this memorial must have had in mind – an ideal hero of their old mythology come to life again; the one person in the crowd capable of pulling the sword out of the stone; someone worthy of receiving their message. This is their call to battle against the same enemy who defeated them half a century ago, in the hope that someone might hear it who is more virtuous than they had been – not someone like me, who simply stumbles into the situation, blindly starts digging in the dirt, and then gets lucky, again.

But regardless of how the message was received, it comes with the same responsibility, the same burden of taking action against an invisible foe, who is hiding in the darkest recesses of our life. And I shall not run away again. Nefarious activities have been going on in the old manor house for far too long now. It is time they are uncovered.

*Poor little Rose ... how did you get drawn into this tragedy? How does your short life fit in with the fate of millions of other people whose lives were destroyed as the world was at war? When there was hardship everywhere, violence and injustice, what horror was it that befell you? What evil powers were they that took you away from your home – and what happened to your parents? When you were gone, was there anyone left who loved you and who missed you? You know I cannot do that for you. But I will not forget this, and I will find out what happened to you – I promise.*





## CHAPTER TEN

# A SUDDEN PAST

The humming and beeping of the printer fills Alison's abandoned flat as, gradually, line by line, the account of the last six days emerges. Well-organised and spelled out in the regular computer font, black on white, the bizarre sequence of events seems to be taken out of the realm of myths and into our ordinary world, lessening the uneasy sense of impending doom that hang over it only yesterday – as if looking back with a waking consciousness to a dream that becomes difficult to pin down, a nightmare that loses its threat as it fades away in the daylight.

But this is just an illusion, of course. It was the morning sun, after all, that brought the startling confirmation of a violent crime that occurred in a distant past, and the possibility that the same dark forces may still be at work today. Since the return from Antarctica, it is the mundane reality itself that has become surreal, containing all the frightening supernatural elements of a nightmare, but none of the magic tools of a fantastical world to deal with them – and without any chance of waking up. In what should be ordinary life, none of the mysterious circumstances have changed by laying them all out on paper – the hidden messages, the disappearances, and the murders. Nor have any of the open questions been answered. If anything, this journey through the Highlands has thrown up even more and more difficult questions, only leaving me with yet another mystery to worry about.

Nonetheless, although it does not convey the true nature of events, the printed word cannot lose its nerves and throw a tantrum, precisely when it knows it should not do so. It always remains calm and rational. And if that makes it easier for the police to take the narrative seriously, and to probe more deeply beyond the rational surface layer into the strange reality that lies hidden beneath it, then the written account will have served its purpose.

Otherwise, there is nothing else to do. Without any sign of life from Alison, without any important letters among her most recent post, or any revealing messages on her answer phone, there are no more leads to follow. There is not even a convincing reason to suspect that her absence may not be exactly what it appears to be; nothing definitive to suggest that it may be

related to Kathleen's murder, and even less to the tragic death of a little girl fifty years ago.

On the other hand, no new information has emerged to diminish the fear that Alison may have been overtaken by the same dark forces, nor anything to diminish the guilty feeling of having abandoned her in a situation where not only did she need mental support, but may even have been in physical danger.

Moreover, the fear persists that, right now, I may be failing her again. If the library book really was intended as a clue, it would have been so easy for me to overlook or to removed it. And if that is true, how many more clues could there be hidden in here that I simply fail to see? How many more signs are there, clearly visible to anyone? Signs I do not recognise, and therefore cannot interpret correctly.

The library book ... Without anything else to go on, it all comes down to this one ordinary object and the few handwritten words inside it, which are just as mysterious as they were before the visit to Scotland. It is as if the book were taunting me, refusing to let the letters fade away, and to remove the mystery in that fashion; while simultaneously refusing to give away any more secrets, to be able to solve the mystery. It provides just enough information to raise questions, and not enough to answer them. But as long as there is no definitive explanation, these words cannot be ignored. And so the same uncertainty remains: are they inconsequential ideas noted down in a state of intoxication, or do they form an important message?

Page after page of printed text, with a few unremarkable annotations in the margins made by others ... No further note tucked away inside the book, or folded up and hidden behind the spine ...

The telephone – ringing like an alarm bell over the monotonous noise from the printer.

A phone call on a Saturday – that must be personal; finally, someone else wondering about Alison, trying to get in touch with her.

'Hello?'

'Miss Conway?'

'This is Siobhán Dannreuther. Alison ... I'm afraid she isn't here at the moment.'

'Miss Dannreuther, what a fortunate coincidence. It is you, in fact, I was trying to reach. My name is William Brenton. I'm phoning from your

grandmother's home and ... I'm very sorry to tell you, Miss Dannreuther, but your grandmother fainted and fell. She was taken to hospital, just a few minutes ago.'

'Gran? Why? What's happened?'

'Regrettably, I can't tell you that. It all came about so suddenly, while she was on the phone. It was such a shock – I was here at the time. I'm delivering the post for her, you see, and have been doing so for a number of years now, since I was assigned the new district and Wingfield Road fell onto my route. But I had known her before. She cared for Evelyn – my late wife – when she was taken ill. Therefore, I recognised your grandmother when she answered the door one day. She had to sign for a registered letter, you see. That's why I'd rung. And so, since then she has occasionally asked me in for a quick cup of tea. It's always nice when people do that, especially now with the rain and the snow, just to get a little warmth back into your body ...

'But I must tell you about today, of course. I didn't have any letters for her, but she saw me passing. So, she came out and asked would I like to come in for a little chat. I had read about you in the papers, and had meant to ask her if you had got back all right, and she said you had, and she told me everything about your adventures. I have to tell you, Miss Dannreuther, I was very impressed. She was going to show me some new photographs you had brought back from Antarctica, but then the telephone rang out in the corridor – we were sitting in the kitchen, you see. She excused herself and left the room, and then ... Obviously, I didn't pay attention to what she was saying, nor would I have been able to understand anything, had I tried. But after perhaps a minute or so, I heard the telephone dropping to the floor. Naturally, I got worried. So, I went to enquire, and she had fallen – fainted, as I said.

'When I took the receiver to dial 999, I thought the person on the other end might still be holding the line, but they weren't. I assumed they must have realised what had occurred and had rung off to phone for an ambulance. But, all the same, I phoned the emergency services myself, just to be on the safe side, and they came as fast as they could, I'm sure. It took no more than ten minutes, but it felt like ages, I can tell you. Your grandmother was still breathing, thank God for that, so I didn't try to interfere. I simply put a pillow under her feet and covered her with a blanket. The ambulance men said it was good I had done that. They took her to the casualty department at the N&N.

‘Afterwards, I allowed myself to check her address book, to see if I could find any contact information for you. I found the old number in Aberdeen, and I knew you weren’t living there anymore. Underneath it was another address and phone number in Cambridge. Your grandmother had told me you had been temporarily staying there during the training programme, prior to leaving for Antarctica – so I knew I wouldn’t be able to reach you there either. But then I found this number, and I remembered your grandmother telling me about Miss Conway, how the two of you have been close friends since childhood – and I’ve seen all the nice photographs of the two of you here in the flat, at different ages ... I’m glad I caught you on the phone, Miss Dannreuther.’

‘Yes, thank you very much for all your help. I’ll go to the train station straight away and come out to Norwich as soon as possible.’

‘All right. You know, of course, where the hospital is, where your grandmother worked for all these years. And I would like to say, Miss Dannreuther, she is very proud of you – all the interesting research you are doing, first in Scotland and then on Antarctica. She showed me the letter you had sent back from there after the holidays, and she read parts of it to me. She was so excited. She appeared to be decades younger. You know that, after the tragic loss of your mother, she very much thinks of you as her daughter, and it gives her the greatest pleasure to see you realise your dreams, even if they take you to the ends of the world. Also today, she was so happy. I would like you to know all this, just in case ...’

His voice trails off, leaving nothing but a suffocating emptiness. What is going on? Only a few days ago, Gran was doing so well. And now, within an instance, the whole world is falling apart ...

‘Miss Dannreuther?’

‘Yes, I’m still here. Thank you so much again for notifying me. With luck, I shall be at the hospital in about three hours.’

‘I’ll go on with my round then. I shall shut the door and put the key underneath the doormat, unless you’ve got a key yourself?’

‘I do.’

‘All right ... But I shall leave my number here by the telephone. Please, feel free to ring me up whenever you need local assistance, if there is anything I can do.’

‘I shall. Thank you very much again, and good-bye.’

‘Good-bye, Miss Dannreuther. And my best wishes for your grandmother.’



With calm determination, the matron leads the way through the deadened silence that fills the sparse corridor of the coronary care unit.

‘They brought her in from Casualty about an hour ago. Initially, her condition was quite unstable, with an irregular heartbeat. But she is doing better now, and she has been sleeping since she arrived here. So, you must be extra-quiet in her room. Don’t touch her, and don’t sit on her bed. What she needs now more than anything else is rest. Should she wake up while you are there, under no circumstances is she to excite herself. Just talk to her calmly and cheerfully, all right? And most definitely, do not ask her about that phone call. We don’t know if it had anything to do with her collapsing. It may only have been a coincidence. Perhaps she got up a little too quickly, took a few hurried steps ... At her age, a latent cardiomyopathy is not uncommon, and even harmless things like that can be enough to bring on a temporary heart failure. On the other hand, if the conversation itself excited her for whatever reason, there is no point in reminding her. Meanwhile, you probably should try and find out who it was who phoned her, and what that was about. Maybe there was an emergency in your family – you can never know, can you. There is a public phone in the waiting room by the reception. If you need a phone card, you can get one in the shop on the ground floor.’

She slows down in front of one of the rooms, where grey curtains are drawn across the large windows to the corridor.

‘So, this is it. Very quiet now.’ She carefully opens the door.

Gran looks ancient, her skin completely pale, almost transparent. Her breathing is shallow, the movement of her chest barely noticeable underneath the blanket – but fairly regular. Despite her weak appearance, she seems to be sleeping peacefully.

The white cotton bedclothes are still smooth, as if they had not registered yet the presence of the frail human being they are meant to shelter.

Without any windows to the outside world, the room is only dimly illuminated by the displays of several instruments mounted on a rack on one side of the bed, including an electrocardiograph.

‘She’s being monitored then?’

‘But of course she is, dear. This is a CCU. All our patients are being monitored around the clock. If there are any significant changes in your grandmother’s heart activity, we will be alarmed immediately.’

She points to the single chair by the side of the bed. ‘You can wait here if you want. Although, I’m afraid you’ll have to sit in the dark, while she is asleep.’

‘Anyway, I’ll leave you two alone now. But I shall be on the ward until the evening. You can get in touch with me through the reception desk, if need be – ask for Elaine Foley.’



That phone call ... that was no coincidence. Even if, understandably, her heart was getting weaker as she got older, Gran still appeared to be too healthy to simply collapse after getting up from a chair and taking a few steps. The last time walking to the corner shop with her, she gave no indication at all of slowing down, or of breathing more heavily. Obviously, these things can happen without any warning, but there is still the possibility that, physical exertion aside, there was something about that conversation that disturbed her sufficiently to bring on such a shock that she lost consciousness.

There is currently only one kind of bad news that has the potential to do that. This had to be about Alison – the one phone call I have been dreading myself for more than a week. And once again, at the critical moment, I was away on my own, determined to follow my own private investigation, rather than staying at home, allowing myself to recover, and to trust the police to do their job.

Whether it was an accident or something more sinister, it had to be the police who phoned, following up on the missing person report. And even if it was someone else, the police would at least be in a position to trace the call. Either way, this is not something to speculate about. While Gran is still asleep, now would be an opportunity to go and find out.

‘Siobhán ...’

‘Omi, I didn’t mean to wake you. I just ... How are you feeling?’

‘Siobhán, sit down here and listen. You are in great danger.’

‘Don’t worry, Omi. Everything will be fine.’

‘Siobhán, listen, this is very serious.’

‘Omi, it’s all right. I’m here now. And I won’t go back to Antarctica, I promise. I’m not leaving you again.’

‘Siobhán, what are you talking about?’

‘You don’t need to worry about me anymore. I am safe now, and I’m sorry if the news reports upset you. I didn’t even know that the fire and the evacuation had been reported back here in England. It was all exaggerated, you see. In reality, it wasn’t nearly as dangerous as they made it out to be.’

‘Siobhán, I’m not talking about that silly accident on Antarctica. I always knew you would get through that. But you are in real danger now.’

‘Don’t excite yourself, Omi ...’

‘Siobhán, you must find him. That is the only thing that can save you.’

She is clearly becoming delusional. There is genuine panic in her eyes. Her hands are shaking uncontrollably. Her heart is not going to stand this. Why is there no alarm?

But I must not get agitated myself, if there is to be a chance of calming her down.

‘Please don’t excite yourself, Omi. Here, lie back down. You have to rest now. Then you’ll be feeling better tomorrow.’

‘Siobhán, listen, this is about Alison – they took her. They ...’ She breaks off with a sob. ‘I don’t know. It’s the War all over again. People vanish. People get killed. And I still don’t know who does it and why.’

‘Don’t worry about Alison, Omi. She’s just gone away to Dublin for a while, on that sabbatical, you remember? She’ll be ...’

‘Siobhán, you must ask yourself, why is it beginning again, after all this time?’

‘Please, Omi, you should be resting. I’ll get the nurse. She will give you something so that you can sleep.’

‘Siobhán, listen to me! I don’t have long now; can’t you see that?’

‘No, please, don’t talk like that. Everything is going to be all right. You just have to rest a little.’

She tries to raise herself from the pillow, but fails, and falls back again with a sigh, her breathing getting more agitated.

‘He was so young – still so young and inexperienced – but very honest and very loyal, always loyal. I should have known, I should never have believed the rumours. But when we were warned, it was too risky, you see. The Navy, the Government, they all believed it. So, we had no choice, we couldn’t stay.’

‘But that journey ... at night, across the Channel, in those little boats ... and then London ... seeing the total devastation – the shame over what we had done. And then the others got lost, exactly as I had feared. We should never have separated. I should never have let them go back down into that terrible tunnel. I told Ingrid it was too dangerous for us. I knew it, and I let them go.

‘And Hans, of course he did not desert. He did not abandon us. He never betrayed anyone, in his whole life. It was all because of that secret mission. That is when it all started, and it is still going on. Even before, he had never said where they went on patrol and what they did during those long months at sea. But that mission, when they left Kiel for the last time, they all knew it was special, I could feel it. And then something went wrong, and they disappeared.

‘But you must find him, Siobhán. I know you can. You’re just like him – a wanderer, restless, always searching. You’re named after him.’

‘Omi, don’t worry about the War anymore. It’s all over. Now, the only important thing for you is to rest and to get well again.’

She feebly shakes her head. ‘Siobhán ...’

She breaks off, but manages to sit up a little. The panic and uncontrolled agitation have left her eyes. Instead, they are now filled with a calm confidence, as she intently looks at me.

Suddenly, she is overcome with emotions. Her fingers around mine regain a convulsive strength. She tries to speak, to finish her sentence. She takes a deep breath. ‘Find him!’

All tension leaves her body, as she calmly exhales. She will be fine now. Everything will be all right. She will get up any moment and tell me not to fuss about her.

But her head drops back onto the pillow. The alarm goes off, as the instrument lights begin flashing.

People rush into the room – determined people with clear, well defined tasks. They all know what to do. Their lives have a purpose, are well organised, following a meaningful routine. They still have their families, with all the associated reassuring problems. They have their daily commutes, their fixed work hours, and their weekends.

And I am left standing alone, clueless, lost in a space without any point of reference, as Gran falls away into the whiteness of the linen, dissolving into the blinding light that now floods the room.





The rattling of the cables against the empty flagpoles ... the screeching of the seagulls sailing carefree in the breeze ... the rhythmic rushing of the waves. But underneath that blanket of natural sounds, Yarmouth Beach lies deserted in the evening light. The kiosk and tea room are boarded up. Britannia Pier rests dark and quiet – still hibernating, waiting for spring to arrive, while the cheerful music of summers past carries on the wind only as a distant memory.

The elaborate dream castles that Alison and I once built in the sand have long been washed away; and Gran will never again be sitting here in a deckchair, reading, trying hard to resist the pull of a comfortable afternoon nap – too anxious about the two of us to allow herself to fall asleep.

Now she *is* at rest, after a long and turbulent life – but even so, mercilessly torn away before her time, before I was given the chance to pay back all the years of loving care that I received from her.

And today ... I should have been with her, doing the one sensible thing there was to do – to wait by the phone for any information about Alison, and to intercept the painful message that became more and more likely with every passing day. Had I only answered that fateful phone call myself, everything would be different now. Gran would still be alive and, for better or worse, we might finally have a definite confirmation about Alison.

As it is, the agonising uncertainty continues. Once again, I am trapped in a situation that is impossible to evaluate, in which no conceivable scenario makes perfect sense.

If the phone call itself brought about the shock that caused Gran to lose consciousness, it had to have been some kind of bad news concerning Alison. But then why did that person never try to call back, when the conversation was so abruptly interrupted? And why do neither the emergency services nor the police know anything about Alison, when they should have been the first to be notified in the case of an accident, or of any crime having been committed?

Conversely, if it was not the phone call itself that provoked Gran's strong reaction, it would imply that she really was weaker than she appeared. It may have been that they had just finished a completely harmless conversation, and Gran was about to hang up. In fact, it could have been Alison herself,

calling from Dublin at last, telling her that everything was all right – only a cheerful chat that Gran insisted on cutting short for financial reasons, or because she began to feel dizzy.

But that would not explain her fear for Alison – and even for myself – in a complete change of mind from the last time we spoke, when she had not been worried at all. Could that be attributable entirely to confusion? When she regained consciousness, waking up only a few minutes before her death, not knowing where she was, perhaps not able to remember anything that happened since the phone call. Then, in her dying mind, Kathleen’s murder, my recent near-fatal adventure on Antarctica, and Alison’s absence during the last month might all have merged with the memories of the most significant events of her past: her husband’s mysterious disappearance; having to leave home, and the dangerous escape to the enemy; losing “the others,” for which she obviously blamed herself.

The others ... who were they? The wives of other crew members? The people who warned her of the imminent arrest? And then they got lost, “down in that terrible tunnel” ... that had to be a bomb shelter in one of the underground stations. Had these others survived the War, by now, they would have surfaced again somewhere. Therefore, they probably got killed during a bombing raid, when their shelter took a direct hit. As they were in the country illegally, they could never have been identified. They would never have been registered as deceased, and eventually they would have been buried in an unmarked grave.

All these disappearances ... how easy it is for us to vanish without a trace, and how quickly it can happen. Just this morning, Gran was still alive and happy, looking forward to many more years in this world. Now, she survives only in the minds of those of us left behind who remember her.

And without her, who is left to carry on the memory of her companions, who accompanied her on that perilous flight? Have they already faded away into history? And who is left to remember her husband? During the last moments of her life, her greatest regret seemed to be that she had never been able to find him again. Did she blame herself for that, thinking she had not exhausted every possibility? Was it the fear that he too might slip out of living memory that caused her to urge me to find him – together with her usual overconfidence in my abilities, her unrealistic belief that somehow I can do anything I put my mind to.

It would be far too easy to rationalise away her dying fears and to dismiss her last words. In a way, she may have been right. Despite the many years that have gone by, we may now be in a much better position to try and find out what took place during the War, as record keeping in Britain and Germany has had time to catch up with the multitude of tragic events, as electronic databases make it easier than ever to search and cross-reference.

Currently, there is nothing more for me to accomplish here. I have reached the limit of what I can do. The police are in possession of everything I can provide them with, every confusing clue, every tantalising hint, every outrageous speculation. And they must take this very seriously now. They must make any attempt to uncover whatever connection there might exist between the wartime death of a little girl, possibly by the name of Rose, and the abduction and murder of Kathleen. After all, it would be easy enough for them to confirm the existence of the secret message in that remote chapel by the coast. From then on, there can be no doubt that some tragedy occurred there that cannot be ignored, no matter how long ago it was.

Moreover, even if no evidence has survived the ages that connects the owners of the manor house to that memorial, the police can go back for a proper forensic examination of their old family home, to look for any evidence that Alison was there, if somehow she too got caught up in these dark affairs.

So, while I am still on sick leave, and until developments here reveal any new information, it would be inexcusable not at least to try and honour Gran's last wish; not to do anything in my power to turn back the clock and to retrace her steps. Far too many questions finally need to be asked, that should have been answered a long time ago.

In the fading light of the sinking sun, my lonely shadow is cast over the windblown ripples in the sand and out onto a stormy sea.

Over there in the east, hidden below the horizon, lies Germany – and a dark past.



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 1<sup>st</sup> 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 7<sup>th</sup> 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 7<sup>th</sup> 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 *Laplender* for another attempt to destroy the oil factories. At around noon, just after sighting the *Laplender*, 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 *Laplender*, 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 *Laplender* 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 *Laplender*.’

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 7<sup>th</sup> 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 1<sup>st</sup> Flotilla. They were stationed there until August 1944, when they were transferred again, this time to Norway, and attached to the 13<sup>th</sup> Flotilla stationed in Trondheim. In December that year, they were moved even further north, to become part of the new 14<sup>th</sup> 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 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.

