

Walter

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the
Writer

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Chapter One

“She winked at me!”

Gerry turned to look at the girl sitting at a table on the other side of the cafe then turned back to me.

“Don't be ridiculous,” he said.

“I'm telling you she winked at me,” I said leaning forward and staring at her intently.

Gerry laughed. “A girl like that would never wink at a tosser like you,” he said. “She probably has something in her eye or the sight of you has given her a nervous twitch.”

She hadn't even glanced over at me since I'd thought she'd winked so I ruefully had to concede Gerry was probably right.

“As I was saying,” continued Gerry, and he resumed his complicated and, it has to be said, remarkably uninteresting story about how someone in his office had done something which had caused his monthly figures to be slightly off but fortunately no one had noticed. It was a rather pointless story as well.

I gazed out of the cafe window, watching the passers by and pretending to be absorbed in his story. Actually I was watching the girl out of the corner of my eye in case she looked over again. Not that it would make any difference if she did as I wouldn't have the courage to talk to her unless she talked to me first.

After a while I realised he had stopped and was looking at me expectantly. I gave a small laugh and said “Damn,” and that seemed to be all the reaction he needed.

“Exactly,” he said. “Damn!”

The girl looked up from her phone and gazed out of the window as if looking for someone. Our eyes met in the reflection of the glass and hers slid past mine without a pause or the merest glimmer of another

wink.

“Oh well,” I thought to myself.

“So how are you and Susan?” I asked Gerry. “Still no sign of a baby?”

They'd been married for a couple of years and desperately wanted to become parents.

“No,” he said sadly. “We've been trying but ...” He shrugged his shoulders.

We'd been friends since university and his career had started to progress. He'd joined Unwin Clarkson as a trainee financial adviser and was moving up through the pecking order. He'd also found a nice girl, got married and bought a house, no doubt following his own financial advice. The lack of a baby was the only blip on his carefully plotted path to whatever it was he defined as success.

I, on the other hand, had joined the Council in the Planning Department as a Junior Surveyor and was going nowhere, very very slowly. Apart, of course, from going out to survey the occasional patch of wasteland to make sure it complied with Planning Regulations prior to the construction of some desirable residence that I'd never be able to afford. The pay wasn't bad, which is loser-speak for no bloody good at all, and there was little or no prospect of my getting married in the foreseeable future since the lady who I liked to call my girlfriend had made it fairly clear that there was nothing long term between us.

She hadn't actually come out and explicitly said “We have no long term future together,” but she had a tendency to get evasive when I suggested anything remotely long term, such as “Shall we go out somewhere next week?” and only stayed over at my place infrequently. The question of children had come up once when she'd said “Oh god, the damned thing's turning pink,” but she'd tried again and breathed a huge sigh of relief when it didn't change colour.

But, when all was said and done, Raquel was the closest thing I had to a girlfriend. She was at least a girl even if she wasn't that friendly.

After we'd drunk our coffees and eaten our wraps we left the cafe. Gerry went to the right with a carefree wave and I went to the left with a droop in my shoulders. Back in the office the smell of Sandra's lunchtime orange pervaded everything and the old grey filing cabinets of old grey plans and related documents loomed menacingly like they were from an old Hitchcock movie. I sat at my old grey desk and tried to look out of the window but it probably hadn't been cleaned since the building was built seventy or eighty years ago. I sighed and logged in to my computer.

Loading Planning Application WK491/0008/2019/MRT73 I skimmed its seventeen pages and discovered the applicant, a Mr Matthew Thompson, wanted to construct an extension to his chicken run on his residential property. Apparently his existing run, which housed two chickens, was no longer big enough to contain his ambitions and he wanted to double his capacity to four chickens.

"It must be nice to have ambitions," I thought to myself and began the process of checking a seemingly endless list of regulations. It took all afternoon and the results of my labours would get passed to a Senior Surveyor who would double check what I'd done then pass a recommendation to the Planning Officer who would make the final decision on whether or not the application was sufficiently controversial to be submitted to Council or could be accepted or rejected within the department.

At precisely two minutes to five I shut down my computer, a process which took just under two minutes and at five on the dot I got up and walked to the bus stop. No doubt Gerry would be working late and then driving home in his almost new Toyota SUV.

"I'm sure she winked at me," I thought to myself when I'd found a seat on the bus. "She didn't seem the type who'd just wink at anybody." I had to admit to myself I didn't know what type that was as my experience with girls had been rather limited. I'd taken a degree in Geomatics at uni, which is basically a fancy term for surveying, and found that, inexplicably, girls didn't find the subject romantically endearing.

"Isn't that, like, maths?" said one after I'd tried to explain it to her. "I

hate maths.” She’d then got up and gone to talk to a guy who specialised in Medieval Romantic Literature and who, apparently, had “the most awesome blue eyes.” They looked like fairly ordinary blue eyes to me but then who am I to judge these things?

Three stops later the girl who’d winked, or not, at me got on the bus. A faint flicker of recognition crossed her face when she saw me and then she turned and sat two seats in front of me. I could see part of her head around the passenger in the seat behind her and saw her turn her head as though to glance back at me but a large gentleman got on the bus and stood just behind her seat, obscuring my view entirely.

Four stops later the large gentleman sat down. Unfortunately he sat in the seat the girl had been in and, naturally enough, there was no sign of her. I hadn’t even seen which stop she’d got off at, not that it mattered as she wasn’t a regular on the bus so there was little point in keeping an eye open for her tomorrow.

After a short walk from the bus stop, I slid the key into the lock of the front door and let myself in. There were a couple of letters for me on the hall table which I grabbed before walking up the flight of stairs to my room. I rented the upstairs room at the front which was reasonably spacious and I had the shared use of the bathroom and kitchen downstairs. A middle aged man I’d never spoken to rented the room behind mine. About the only thing I knew about him was that he smoked and seemed to work nights. The landlady, Mrs Quincy, occupied the two ground floor rooms with a yappy little Pekingese called Nigel.

I sat in my armchair at looked at my letters. One was from my local MP who was delighted to tell me that an election was looming and that he was certain he could count on my continuing support. As I hadn’t voted for him at the last election it seemed his certainty was misplaced. The other was a letter from an insurance company offering me an incredible opportunity to transfer my car insurance with substantial benefits that could never be repeated. I balled them both and threw them at the bin and missed.

I got up out of the chair and put the letters in the bin and got

changed then went downstairs.

“Evening Mrs Q, Nigel,” I said, meeting them in the kitchen. “How are you?”

“Oh, not too bad,” she replied, opening a can of dog food while Nigel sat patiently beside his bowl. “Mustn't grumble.”

“Arthritis playing up again?” I asked.

“It's me feet,” she said. Nigel started to tuck in happily.

“Oh, that's not good,” I replied.

“Going to do your dinner?” she asked.

“Yes,” I said.

“I'll leave you to it then.” We didn't have a particularly chatty relationship.

I heard my phone ringing up in my room while I was frying a couple of eggs to have with some slices of ham and some toast. When the eggs were done I dumped them on the toast and took the plate to my room. I had a missed call from Raquel and she'd left a message.

“Can I c u tonite?” it read.

“Cool,” I thought, “where n when?” I texted back and attacked my ham and eggs on toast with gusto.

“urs in 20” came the reply when I'd demolished the first slice of toast.

“She seems unusually keen,” I thought to myself. “Maybe I should have some more toast for energy.”

Her little car pulled up outside twenty five minutes later, not that I was watching for her out the window of course, and she strode determinedly to the front door. I ran down and opened it as she pushed the buzzer.

“Hello sweetie,” I said brightly, expecting a kiss.

She pushed past me and half ran up the stairs to my room. I followed her at a normal pace. Inside she turned to face me.

“I’m seeing someone else,” she said bluntly.

“Oh,” I said. For some reason I didn’t have a ready answer available.

“I met him three months ago,” she continued. “We’ve decided to become exclusive so I’m ending it with you.”

“Oh,” I said. Three months ago? Surely not.

“Did you say three months ago?” I asked

“Please don’t make this hard for me,” she said. “It’s not that I don’t like you, it’s just that well, you know how it is.”

To be honest, I didn’t really know how it was as she was only my second girlfriend. The first, Su Ling, had had to go back to China after her study visa expired. We’d promised to write to each other but she’d never replied to my letter and I hadn’t written a second since I’d obviously got her address wrong.

I just stood there, not knowing what to do. Raquel was dumping me? She’d been dating someone else for three months?

Raquel half lifted her arm towards me, a strained look on her face. I stepped forward to give her the hug she clearly wanted and she stepped back.

“Here’s your key,” she said, opening her hand. I didn’t take it. It was too final. She waited a couple of heartbeats then turned and chucked it onto my bed.

“Well, goodbye,” she said and left. I stood there stunned for a few moments then went into the hallway to run after her. At the top of the stairs I heard her car start and then drive away. The man in the room behind mine was in as I could smell cigarette smoke.

I went back into my room and sat in my armchair. I was confused and felt like crying. I rang her on my phone but she didn't answer.

“I need to talk to you” I texted.

“Please do not call or text me again” came back several minutes later.

I tried to ring her again.

“Your call cannot be connected,” said a happy voice.

I tried several more times and each time the voice seemed to get happier. “Your call cannot be connected.”

I sat there feeling desolate and alone until it got dark then crawled like a baby under my quilt, fully dressed. I felt depressed and empty and I may have cried quietly a little. I did eventually get some sleep though and my alarm woke me.

I had a shower as normal before remembering I didn't have a girlfriend anymore.

“Your call cannot be connected,” said a happy voice when I rang to see if she was talking to me again.

It had been a while since I'd gone happily to work but today was less happy than usual. The bus was more crowded, the exhaust fumes more scratchy, the bus driver more irritable. The Council offices rose up like Mordor, dark and terrifying. The girl who had winked at me wasn't on the bus either. Not that I expected her to be but I had had a faint hope. The Cosmos moves in mysterious ways sometimes. Or so I'd been told by a fortune teller at a market a few years before.

The office was as drab as ever and reeked of Sandra's breakfast orange and stale air freshener. I went into the communal kitchen provided for the entire floor and tried to find a clean mug. There weren't any on the shelf and the stained sink was piled with unwashed mugs and plates in a congealing mass. I decided not to bother with coffee until the morning break when I could go out and buy one from the cafe round the corner.

Turning on my computer I logged in and found I had an email. It seemed I had an appointment with a Ms S Kayle at 11:30 am in Meeting Room C that morning. I acknowledged it and tried to put Raquel out of my mind. It wasn't easy.

At 11 I went out for my fifteen minute break and got a coffee. At 11:15 an alert flashed up on my screen to remind me I had a meeting at 11:30. I confess I'd forgotten all about it as I'd spent much of the morning wondering why I kept getting happy "Your call could not be connected" messages whenever I phoned.

At 11:28 I went down to Meeting Room C, trying to push Raquel out of my mind so I could concentrate on whatever Ms S Kayle wanted to talk about. It wouldn't be important as I was too junior for important meetings and the few meetings I'd had had been about changes to my "primary work function". The door was open so I knocked and went in.

It was the girl from the cafe!

She was sitting on one side of the small conference table, Meeting Room C being the smallest of the three meeting rooms, with a small pile of folders and a laptop computer open beside her. She looked to be my own age or perhaps a little younger.

"Come on in," she said with a half smile and gestured to the solitary chair on the other side of the table. "I see you already have coffee."

I sat down and smiled back. Maybe the Cosmos did move in mysterious ways after all although she didn't wink at me. I thought about winking at her but decided against it.

"I saw you yesterday on the bus," I blurted. "And at the cafe."

She looked up from the file she was reading.

"My car was being serviced," she explained. "I had to take the bus in."

I nodded happily. We were already beginning to relate to each other. This was so cool.

“Now,” she said in a business-like manner, putting down the file. “My name is Sirena Kayle, I’m with Jackson Peaman Consultants. You know why we are here?” She looked enquiringly at me. I noticed she wasn’t wearing a wedding ring. I wondered if she had a boyfriend.

“I’m afraid not,” I said.

She looked faintly puzzled. “I understood a memo was emailed to everyone three months ago. Oh well, never mind.”

“Our email system isn’t very reliable,” I said helpfully.

“Yes, overhauling the existing IT infrastructure is one of our recommendations,” she said. “I expect that’s the reason. Anyway, as you probably know, the Council is facing extensive central government funding cuts and the community is unlikely to be able to significantly make up the shortfall by way of incremental rates increases. Jackson Peaman have been consulted to review Council efficiency in order to implement substantial cost savings while minimising the impact on essential services.”

I nodded. I’m not sure why but it seemed the right thing to do.

“In line with our overarching brief we have looked at staffing levels with regard to service efficiency outcomes and we highlighted a number of issues within the Planning Office, as well as elsewhere and recommendations were drafted and put before the Council. Council has approved those recommendations and Planning efficiency is to be implemented through three phases. Phase one is staffing realignment. Phase two is functional realignment and phase three is IT support realignment. Am I making myself clear?”

I had no idea what she was talking about so I smiled, hopefully.

“The implementation of Planning Phase One, Staffing Efficiency has resulted in one position being identified as surplus to foreseeable operating needs and is consequently redundant. Your employment with the Council is therefore terminated.”

She pushed a formal notice of redundancy across the desk then

proceeded to explain the various benefits to which I was entitled and supported each of them with another piece of paper. The benefit of a job not apparently one of them. I sat there in stunned surprise, not knowing what to say or even how to react. Was she a friend of Raquel's?

She concluded the meeting by producing a large envelope, gathering the pieces of paper in front of me and putting them inside the envelope. Then she gave me a delightful smile.

“Of course, you are not expected to work your period of notice,” she said, “although it will be paid in full. Could you please have your desk cleared and be out of the building by 12:30. I need you to return your Employee Pass now.” She held out her hand.

My Employee Pass hung on a cord around my neck as we were all required to do that so that people who weren't Council employees could be easily spotted. I lifted it off and passed it to her. She thanked me then looked at her watch.

“12:30,” she reminded me. “You have forty minutes.” She closed the file in front of her and put it to one side and pulled another towards her. She clearly wanted me to leave.

I stood up in a daze and thanked her out of habit and stumbled from the room and found my way back to my desk.

Sandra asked where I'd been. I told her I'd been made redundant.

“I'd heard a rumour,” she said. “So it's you. Thank gawd, I've been so worried. You'll find something else I'm sure.” She hurried off to find her oranges.

I sat at my computer and stared blankly at it. Out of my confusion outrage began to grow. I tried to log in to write a rude email to someone, anyone, but my account had been suspended. In frustration I slapped the side of the monitor and the screen went multicoloured then faded to black. Someone came and stood beside me. It was one of the Council security staff. He pretended not to notice the screen.

“You have to be out of the building within 30 minutes,” he said. “Check all your drawers for personal belongings. Do you have a locker or any other space with personal belongings? Any personal files on the computer system?”

I shook my head. The only personal thing I had in the office was a book in my desk drawer. I took it out and he checked it. It clearly wasn't Council property, unless the Council had moved into the realm of science fiction, so he let me keep it.

“Right,” he said kindly. “I'll see you to the door,” and he followed me to ensure I left the premises. No one in the Planning Office made eye contact with me as I left.

Outside on the pavement I turned and took one last look back at the dump. Ms Sirena Kayle had certainly turned my world upside down and not in the way I'd hoped. I made a rude gesture to the building and turned my back on it. No girlfriend and no job, both gone within twenty four hours. For some strange reason I felt my spirits lifting. New loves and new opportunities lay ahead!

There were two fire engines waiting outside when I got home. Apparently the man who lived in the room behind me had gone out and left a cigarette smouldering. The top floor had been gutted.

So was I.

Chapter Two

“I was working in the lab, late one night, when my eyes beheld an eerie sight, for my monster from his slab began to rise and ...”¹

I woke with a jerk and a cry of panic died in my throat. The monster rising from the flame shrouded slab faded into the cold grey of a loosely curtained dawn.

“It was just a dream,” I told myself, “just a dream.”

My heartbeat began to slow.

“Heartbeat, why do you miss when my baby kisses me? Heartbeat, why does our love kiss stay in my memory?”²

Well that wasn't going to be happening anytime soon, was it. The memory of love kisses reminded me of Raquel and the endlessly repeated “your call cannot be connected”. More worryingly, why was I repeating the lyrics to pop songs from forty years before I was born? Maybe all the recent stress I'd been through was driving me round the twist.

“C'mon. let's twist again, like we did last summer!”³

“Oh, shut up” I said to myself and tried to snuggle back under the quilt. Sleep was a long time returning. Half asleep, I deduced why I had these old songs springing up like snakes in a nightmare. Gerry and Susan had given me a bed for a few nights and that night, after the fire destroyed my home, we'd sat watching a documentary on the history of Rock 'n' Roll on TV after spending ten minutes discussing my problems in depth and failing to find any immediately practical short term solution.

“A few nights,” said Susan. “We can't have you lodging here indefinitely but a few nights until you get yourself sorted. I'm sure you'll have another job by Monday.”

1 The Monster Mash by Bobby Pickett, 1962

2 Heartbeat by Buddy Holly, 1959

3 Let's Twist Again by Chubby Checker, 1961

Optimism at its finest, since it was Friday evening when she said it.

Judging by the sounds when they went to bed after showing me the cramped storage room where they kept the spare bed, trying to make a baby was a lot quicker than trying to avoid making one but then, I'm no expert. Su Ling, being a student of Philosophy, tended to wonder if we were "making valid underlying assumptions concerning the intimacy dimension of our primary relationship," and Raquel tended to get headaches.

When I'd arrived home after being made redundant I'd found the house dripping water with broken front windows and thin spires of smoke rising up through smouldering holes in the roof. Mrs Quincey was sitting sobbing in the back of an ambulance and several people had come out of their houses to watch as it was more entertaining than daytime TV.

"You live here?" asked a policeman, as I tried to get up the path to see which, if any, of my possessions were still around.

"Upstairs," I'd told him.

"Front or back?"

"Front. What happened?"

"The fire boys say it started in the upstairs back room," he said, pulling out a notebook. "Can I have your name and address?"

We talked briefly about why I was home early and where the man in the back room might be. I pointed out Mrs Quincey in the ambulance then I went and sat on the wall to stare blankly at my former home and former possessions while the firemen dismantled their hoses and soaked my trousers by accident. All I had left were the clothes I was wearing, my wallet, my phone and an envelope with all my redundancy details. All my other clothes were gone, my books, my cds, my laptop, my poster of Lady Gaga. Not much to show for a life and all gone. Symbolic, I suppose. I sighed and phoned Gerry then squelched into town and bought some new, dry, clothes on my credit card. The shop assistant didn't seem to mind me dripping on her

carpet.

Over the weekend I made a plan. It was surprisingly simple to plan a new life when everything had gone. After all, you don't need to fit things around other things when there are no other things.

Phase 1: Find Accommodation, as it's difficult to find a job when you don't have an address although, if needs be, I could always use Gerry's address for a while.

Phase 2: Find A Job, as I had my pay in lieu and redundancy payout so money wasn't urgent enough to make finding a job Phase 1.

Phase 3: Find A New Girlfriend, which would be easy with my new glamorous, highly paid job and stylish Rock Star style dwelling place.

Phase 4: Live Happily Ever After.

Shouldn't be that hard.

I got the distinct feeling from Susan that I wasn't overly welcome so on Sunday afternoon I rang Raquel. It was just possible she might take pity on me and give me somewhere to sleep, for old times sake.

“Your call cannot be connected,” chirruped happily in my ear, so I went round to her flat.

A rather large gentleman with tattoos on his neck opened the door and stared intimidatingly at me.

“Ummm, is Raquel in?” I asked, very intimidated.

“What the fuck are you doing here,” shouted Raquel from inside. She came to the door. Mr Intimidating stepped out of her way obligingly.

“I thought I told you I didn't want to see you no more,” she said.

“Is this Pete or Wally?” said Mr Intimidating.

“Wally,” she said.

He laughed, "Yeah, might have guessed. Doesn't look your type, babe."

"Piss off," said Raquel to me and shut the door.

"Who the hell is Pete?" I thought. "Oh surely not."

I wandered off towards the bus stop.

"I suppose I should be grateful she found any time for me at all," I thought ungratefully.

Things started to look up on Monday morning when I got the local paper. There were a couple of rooms up for rent and I phoned both and went to have a look. The first landlady asked me what my job was.

"No unemployeds," she said and showed me the door.

I told the next landlady I worked for the Council. She wasn't impressed but rang them for a reference anyway.

"No unemployeds," she said and showed me the door.

Gerry and Susan were sympathetic, if perhaps a little concerned.

"You could try saying you're self employed, I suppose," said Susan.

"They'll probably want bank references," said Gerry. "I would. Some people use self employment as a cover for illegal things like drug dealing."

"That's an idea," I said. "How do I set up as a drug dealer? I hear the money is good."

Susan gave me a filthy look.

"There'll be something in Thursday's paper," she said. "That's the day for property."

The fun continued on Tuesday when I started to contact the

employment agencies.

“Not a lot of call for surveyors,” said the first. “We’ve nothing on our books at the moment. Have you tried the Council?”

The second one admitted they had nothing on their books either.

“But if you’ll fill out this form we’ll get in touch as soon as something comes along,” Sonia said brightly, secure in the knowledge that she, at least, had a job. “I’ll need your resume as well and copies of your degree certificate and any professional qualifications to send to prospective employers.”

I explained they’d been burnt in the fire.

“Oh dear,” she said, pulling the form back. “You’d better get copies then, if you can. Let’s leave the paperwork until then, shall we.” She gave me a smile, insincerity giving her lipstick an added gloss.

On Wednesday I phoned the university and explained my predicament.

“Ahh,” said the helpful lady on the switchboard. “You need the Examinations Department. Putting you through.”

I explained my predicament to the helpful lady in the Examinations Department.

“Ahh,” she said, helpfully, “you need the Registrar’s Office, transferring you.”

I explained my predicament to the helpful lady in the Registrar’s Office.

“Ahh,” she said, not as helpfully as the other two had been. “I think that’s Student Services, transferring you.”

I explained my predicament to the lad in the Student Services.

“We only really help find accommodation,” he said.

“Great,” I said. “I need accommodation too. I’m happy to share.”

“Are you a student here?” he asked suspiciously. “I thought you’d graduated.”

He put me back to the main switchboard. A different, but equally helpfully lady on the switchboard listened sympathetically to my predicament.

“Academic Transcripts, love,” she said, “putting you through.”

I explained my predicament to the helpful lady in Academic Transcripts.

“That’ll be £37.50 plus VAT,” said the efficient lady. “I’ll need your student number and the year you graduated and your current address. You can pay now by credit card if you like.”

“I’m afraid I don’t have my student number,” I told her.

“It’s on your certificate,” she said helpfully.

“It was burnt in a fire,” I reminded her.

“You students are so careless,” she said cheerfully. “I can instigate a search for you but that’ll be another £30 plus VAT. I’ll need the address you used when you first registered with the university, the address to which the certificate was originally sent, the address to which the copy is to be sent and a Statutory Declaration witnessed by a Justice of the Peace that you are the person who was awarded the degree and that you resided or are residing at all three addresses.”

“What on earth for?” I asked, bemused.

“You might be trying to obtain a degree certificate fraudulently.”

I had no answer to this so she said she’d post out the relevant form and wait for me to send it back with the Statutory Declaration and payments. That evening I looked up on the internet about how to obtain a ‘fast’ degree. I couldn’t find any for Geomatics.

On Thursday there were four more rooms for rent advertised in the paper.

“Hello, I’m ringing about the room.” I said to the first.

“It’s gone,” said the lady and hung up.

“Hello, I’m ringing about the room.” I said to the second.

A man grunted.

“I, er, don’t have a job at the moment,” I said, trying to preempt a possible sticking point. “I was working for the Council in the Planning Office but I’ve been made redundant. I’m sure I’ll have another job soon.”

“The Planning Office?” the man said in irritation. “You bastards turned down my application for a second shed. Sod off.” He hung up.

“Hello, I’m ringing about the room.” I said to the third.

“You sound coloured,” said a nervous voice. “I don’t want no coloureds.” She hung up.

“Hello, I’m ringing about the room.” I said to the fourth.

“Excellent,” said the quietly spoken man. “I’m Reg Tomlinson, why don’t you come round and see the room and we’ll have a little chat about it?”

We agreed to meet at 2pm and he gave me the address. It was in a good part of town which was exciting and there was a bus that went quite near by.

“Mr Tomlinson?” I said when the door opened. “I rang you about the room.”

He looked me up and down and smiled welcomingly. “Come on in,” he said. “Call me Reg, nice day isn’t it. Mind the step.”

The room was quite nice and seemed comfortable. It had a newish carpet and a double bed which might come in handy if Phase 3 ever got implemented. It also had two armchairs, a desk, a bookcase and a nice view through lace curtains of the nature reserve across the road. Reg also showed me the bathroom which was very clean and had a bath as well as a shower. I was impressed. He didn't have a dog so there'd be no negotiating of puddles of pee in the bathroom first thing in the morning. Nigel had been getting old. I felt a brief pang of guilt for not finding out if he'd survived the fire.

"You can have a TV in here if you want," he said. "There's an aerial socket over by the window, but you'd be welcome to watch TV in the lounge with me too." He laughed and patted me on the arm.

"Come on into the lounge," said Reg. I followed him in and he sat on the couch and patted the seat next to him. He was a middle aged man, quietly spoken and quietly dressed and of medium height and build. Totally average really. The room had no particular odours and was quietly decorated. The couch was very comfortable.

"Now, tell me something about yourself." He smiled happily. "Do you have a job?"

"I've just been made redundant from the Council," I said. "I was in the Planning Office, a surveyor."

"Oh what a respectable role," said Reg. "You must be very clever."

I smiled. "This is going well," I thought.

Then his face clouded over. "So you are unemployed at the moment?"

"Yes," I was forced to admit.

"How unfortunate for you," said Reg. "Well, you seem like a nice lad."

He smiled shyly.

"He's going to give me the room," I thought, "cool."

“Do you think you'll have any trouble finding another position?”

“There doesn't seem to be a lot of vacancies for surveyors at the moment although I am looking.”

“I'm sure a bright boy like you will find something very soon.”

He paused and adjusted his glasses.

“And, hmmm, if nothing comes along for a while and money becomes a little, mmm, tight, shall we say,” he said looking intently at me. “I errm, I'm sure we can come to some arrangement with the room.”

He put his hand on my knee.

“Perhaps, even, in the right ummm circumstances, we might umm waive the rent entirely.”

He started to gently move his hand up my thigh.

“I do hope you don't have a girlfriend. I must say I don't approve of female visitors.”

I jumped to my feet as realisation dawned.

“Yes I do actually,” I said forcefully. “Her name's Raquel. We're getting married and ...” I started edging towards the door. “And we'll need a bigger place, I'm sorry, Goodbye!” and fled.

Three streets later I paused to catch my breath.

“You should have taken the room,” said Susan when I told them about my day's activities that evening. “So long as you kept paying the rent you'd have been alright.”

Gerry sniggered and Susan looked balefully at him.

I went to my storage area not long after dinner to think about what else I could do job-wise. Snatches of low voiced conversation came up the stairs.

"I've never liked him," from Susan. "He's been here a week already for god's sake. I don't think he's really trying."

"We can't just kick him out, not until he finds another place, he is my friend after all," from Gerry

"Well, he gives me the creeps. I can't understand why he's a friend of yours."

"Oh, he's all right, he's just a little socially awkward."

"I hate the thought of him being here all day when we're at work. I'm sure he goes through my underwear drawers and the thought of him listening when we're, you know, puts me off."

I quietly closed the door.

Over the next few weeks I applied for every room that was advertised but my lack of gainful employment was a decided disadvantage, even when I offered to pay for three months rent in advance. Some were made more suspicious by that than they had already been. I also started to widen the scope for my enquiries to anything that involved maths.

"Well, yes, I'm sure you'd make a wonderful accountant. But you don't actually have any accounting qualifications do you? Or any experience?"

"I'm afraid the bank isn't hiring at the moment. In fact we're cutting branches and installing ATMs."

"We are always in desperate need of good maths tutors, of course. Mathematics being so important in the modern world but we'd really prefer some sort of qualification in teaching or tutoring."

"You've passed the Institute of Actuaries exams, of course. No? Goodbye."

"Storeman? You? Don't waste my bleedin time, son."

“I'm afraid you're really a little old for this. It's the chain's policy to preference school-leavers. As a graduate you'd be more suited to a management position rather than a front-line position with one of our fast food franchises. No, I'm afraid we have no management positions available at the moment.”

After two months the atmosphere at Gerry and Susan's house was becoming a trifle tense so I went to the local job centre to see someone about applying for unemployment benefit as my money was starting to get disturbingly low. They might even have some vacancies for me to apply for.

I sat on a hard chair for some time with a number of depressed looking people. I was sure I looked equally depressed to them.

“Ruth,” shouted a voice. A woman three chairs away stood up.

“Walter Ruthe,” shouted the voice. The woman sat down again and I jumped to my feet.

“This way,” I followed the woman to a desk surrounded at discreet distances by other desks. There was a pot plant on her desk which looked to be dead. Perhaps it had just given up hope.

“Sit,” she said without looking up. She rattled through some essential details about me to which I acknowledged accuracy. She fell silent and spent a good ten minutes writing things on various pieces of paper then bashing away at her keyboard and copying things from the screen to yet more pieces of paper. Suddenly she got up and walked away. I sat there like the pot plant.

A few minutes later she walked back with a smile on her face and a piece of paper in her hand. She saw I was still there and wiped the smile. It was the first time she'd looked at me. She sat heavily in her office chair which creaked loudly then grabbed the desk and pulled herself closer to it. She started reading the piece of paper she'd brought back and putting lines through various things.

“Right,” she said. She turned the piece of paper towards me and thrust it across the desk. I leaned forward to look at it.

“I need you to be back here on this date,” she tapped a place on the page while looking at her computer screen. She’d obviously done this many many times before as she was tapping in the right place. “And this time,” and tapped another place. “You will need to bring with you these documents.” She tapped a list with about half the items crossed out. “Do you understand?”

“Yes,” I said. “I learnt to read years ago,” I wanted to say but didn’t dare risk antagonising her. She looked to be related to Raquel’s new, old?, boyfriend. It was something in her attitude.

“Sign here,” she pushed another piece of paper over. I signed.

She went back to her computer and bashed the keyboard for a while. I wondered if they had a special budget for keyboards as they must get through a lot of them. She disappeared again. She was smiling when she came back. I wondered if she actually needed to go wherever she went or if she was having an affair with someone.

She lost the smile as she sat down.

“I’ve made an appointment with a counsellor,” she said and tapped the new piece of paper. “Be here,” tap, “on this day,” tap, “at this time,” tap. This concludes the interview.” She nodded curtly. Clearly I was dismissed so I stood up uncertainly. She gathered all her loose papers and thrust them into a file and put it on top of a stack of files and reached for another file on another stack. She noticed I was still there and frowned.

“You have a question?”

“Umm, is that it?” I asked.

“Yes,” she said and opened the other file. I left.

Chapter Three

The day after my first visit to the Benefits people I found somewhere to live. It was a large four bedroomed place in the poorer part of town that had at one time been a desirable residence when it had been a better part of town. But, as I was discovering myself, times change and not always for the better. The six rooms had been partitioned into twelve and the patio boxed in to make a room and each was let out to people who were having difficulty finding somewhere else to live. Several of the rooms had two or even three people in and there was one bathroom and one kitchen which we all shared, at least technically. I refused to go into the kitchen and did whatever cooking I had to do on a little camping stove in my room. I tried to time things so that I'd need to go to a toilet when I was out somewhere. The man in the room next door seemed to suffer from nightmares most nights. Ho hum. I suppose it was home, although it didn't much feel like it. I tried not to imagine where the stains on the floor might have come from.

“Yo, Wally,” Gerry had said to me a few days before. “Can I have a word?”

He'd looked worried and a little shifty.

“Listen, mate, Susan and I have been, well, talking.”

Actually Susan had done most of the talking, although talking wasn't really the right word for it. I'd heard them the night before, as had several of the neighbours and someone taking their dog for a walk. The dog had barked in fear.

“Yeah, I know,” I'd told him sadly. “Two more nights, OK?”

“Sure,” he had said, looking relieved. “Sorry and all but, you know how it is. You're my friend but my wife has to come first. No hard feelings eh.”

I'd heard about the house from a woman I'd talked to while waiting at the benefits office. Apparently she was often round there and knew quite a few of the residents and she'd heard that a room had become

vacant that morning, the previous tenant having left in an ambulance. She didn't know who ran the place or any phone number to ring.

“Don't worry about it, just move into the room and someone'll come round to get some rent off you sooner or later,” she'd said. “It's pretty casual.”

“Won't someone need to give me a key at least?” I'd asked.

“No locks,” she said. “They've had problems with people locking themselves in and killing themselves so they took all the locks out.”

I hadn't fancied the idea of this place at the time but Gerry had his little chat with me the next day so I thought I may as well go and have a look. After all, I wasn't getting anywhere with the advertised rooms in the paper.

The house had had a large front garden at one time but it had been concreted over and was now littered with discarded rubbish. There was a pale skinned, very thin man sunning himself on the front step wearing just a dirty pair of tracksuit bottoms and a baseball cap on backwards.

“I, er, heard there's a vacant room here,” I'd said to him.

“No idea, mate,” he'd replied, not looking at me.

“Oh.”

“Who should I talk to?” I'd asked after a while.

“No idea, mate,” he'd replied and spat on the ground.

I guess I'd passed some sort of test because while I was standing there looking over the front of the house and wondering if Reg Tomlinson might still be friendly he got up and told me to come inside. In the corridor he'd muttered to himself, slowly looking from door to door then chose one and stuck his head inside.

“Sorry, mate, thought it was empty, like,” he'd said. There'd been some

sort of grunted reply then “Ta” and he'd withdrawn and opened the door to the room next to it. It was completely empty apart from a simple metal framed bed, a rickety chair, some dirty underwear and a collection of used syringes scattered over the floor. It smelt rather strongly of a mixture of things, all unpleasant.

“There you go,” he said cheerfully. “All yours.” He went back outside again.

I went back to Gerry's to get my few belongings, hoping someone else would have moved into the room before I got back. Unfortunately no one had so I had no excuses. I'd found a piece of newspaper in the front garden to pick up the dead rat in the wardrobe before I hung my suit up and then gone out to splurge on a sleeping bag and a tarpaulin rather than lie on the bed directly. It was only after I got back from the camping shop that I'd discovered I needed to get a camping stove as well. I hadn't been in the kitchen on my first visit.

A couple of days later, a very beefy middle aged man with a shaved head, extensive tattoos and surprisingly small sunglasses pushed open my door. His shoulders touched both sides of the doorway at the same time.

“Oo are you?” he said around the cigarette between his lips.

“Umm,” I said, trying to hide behind the chair, “someone said this room was available.”

He looked around the room and saw the syringes and underwear were gone and nodded. He crossed something off in the notebook he held in his hand.

“What's ya name, son?”

I told him and he wrote it down.

“Daily or weekly?”

“I'm sorry?”

“Rent. You payin’ daily or weekly?”

“Umm, weekly, I suppose.” I was used to paying by the week.

“Hunnerd,” he said and stuck out a hand the size of a billiard table, “up fron’ like.”

“I don’t have that much on me. Umm, do you take credit cards?”

“Cash or fuck off.” He was fairly direct in his manner and clearly liked things to be well understood.

“Can I go to the bank?”

“I’ll be back in arf an ’our,” and he disappeared. When he came back I had the cash as I’d run all the way to the High Street, praying the ATM was working. He almost smiled as I handed it over and he made a note in his little book.

Later that afternoon the door opened again, this time more gently. It was Candy, the woman I’d talked to at the Benefits Office.

“Oh ’allo, sweetie,” she said. “Found it then?”

She was a rather large girl in her mid to late thirties and inappropriately fond of yoga pants but at least she was a familiar face.

“Were you looking for me?” I asked.

“No, love,” said Candy, brushing her lank hair out of her face with one hand. “I gotta do some shoppin’ like, and need some cash. You fancy any then luv?” She tried to smile invitingly at me.

“Umm, no, I’ll be doing some shopping in a bit myself.”

“Cool,” she said, looking around. “See you cleaned up then, nice. See ya.”

She disappeared and went into the room next door and came straight out again then went upstairs. I went out into the front yard to get

some fresh air as it made thinking about what to get for dinner easier. My skinny friend wasn't there so I sat in his spot on the step. Ten minutes or so later Candy came back out. She waved a couple of £10 notes at me and grinned.

“Gorra get some dinner for me husband like, see ya,” she called and walked briskly up the road. From behind, her yoga pants looked like two sackfuls of live ferrets.

“I really need to get out of here,” I thought.

The next day I got a job. It lasted almost half an hour before I dropped a fresh hot cappuccino on a customer and the management decided that, reluctantly, they would let me seek alternative opportunities elsewhere. After being paid for the half hour of work with deductions for the lost cappuccino and an estimated laundry bill it worked out that I had paid £3.75 for the privilege of discovering that waiting tables was not my vocation.

I attended the counselling session as instructed. Beatrice, my appointed counsellor, was delighted to see me.

“It's a real pleasure to see someone with qualifications,” she beamed delightedly. “Although we rarely get any positions that need qualifications. I don't think I've had a surveyor before. What exactly did you do?”

I explained, trying to keep it non technical.

“Interesting,” she said. “I think I might have something broadly similar, give me a moment.”

She bashed her keyboard for a few moments.

“Ahh, here we are. Probably the closest thing I have to surveying at the moment.” She beamed at me again then turned to her screen.

“Apprentice Brick Layer,” she said. “No qualifications needed, English speaker preferred but not essential.”

Beatrice gazed at me over her bifocal glasses for a moment.

“I suppose you are a trifle *old* to be an apprentice. Sixteen would be more usual. No, perhaps not.”

She sat back and we watched each other thoughtfully.

“Have you tried the Council?” she said suddenly. “I think they need surveyors for the Planning Office.”

I explained that I'd been working at the Planning Office until they had made me redundant.

She sat back and we watched each other thoughtfully again.

“Do you have to live here?” she asked.

“What do you mean?”

“Would you be willing to move to another area for a job?” Beatrice was suddenly intent.

I hadn't really thought about it but, on reflection, I couldn't think of any reason why I had to stay in this area.

“Yes,” I said decisively. “I'm happy to go anywhere.”

Beatrice bashed her keyboard again.

“There are 406 councils in the UK,” she announced happily. “I'm sure they all have Planning Departments. Why don't you write to all of them. One of them is bound to need a surveyor. If you do it through us, we'll provide the paper, envelopes and stamps.”

It wasn't actually a bad idea, so over the next couple of days I worked out a letter and at the next appointment Beatrice reviewed it and corrected a couple of spelling and grammatical errors before approving it. I typed the letter into a computer they had reserved for use by unemployed losers and corrected her errors in spelling and grammar and printed out 405 copies and 405 copies of my resume

and she spent the remainder of her thirty minutes of allotted consulting time helping me fold them and put them in envelopes.

“I'll put them through our franking machine,” Beatrice promised me. “They should be in tonight's post. Good luck.”

Over the next four weeks I got 83 'sorry, no' letters, 19 'we'll keep your details for the future' letters and one letter offering me an interview. When I phoned to confirm I'd be attending the interview the Chief Planning Officer's secretary apologised. It seemed that that Council had decided not to replace the surveyor who was leaving. The other 302 never replied.

Mind you, it wasn't all bad. I had a three day stint as a Traffic Management Operative, ironically for the same Council that I'd used to work at. It was my role to hold a sign which had STOP on one side and GO on the other and twist it appropriately on the instructions of my counterpart at the other end of the roadworks. He had the more senior role as he was more experienced than I was, having started the week before. Unfortunately it was only a minor road repair and I didn't have sufficient time to impress the crew foreman with my work ethic so that I could be promoted to raking steaming tar. Back to the drawing board.

As the summer drew to a close and my fourth month of unemployment came to an end I had developed a routine. Noise levels at the house tended to increase significantly after dark so I ended up going to bed late and getting up late so that I could get some reasonable sleep. After a light breakfast around midday I usually went into town and generally ended up at the library where I could spend the afternoons in peace. I'd scan the vacancies advertised in all the local and national papers the library subscribed to and apply for anything that I felt I could remotely do, using the Benefits Counselling's resources. Most of the time I got no response but occasionally I got a polite 'thank you for your interest but' letter.

Beatrice had told me not to give up as she was convinced something would come along sooner or later. Unfortunately she didn't sound very convincing when she said this. She also let slip, I'm sure by accident, that the longer I was unemployed, the less likely it would be that I

would find a job since employers mistrust the 'long term unemployed'. I'm generally an optimistic sort of person but it was disheartening. I'd applied for a couple of hundred jobs in addition to writing to all those councils and, apart from the three days on the road repair gang and the half hour at the cafe, I had had no other paid work and it was getting increasingly difficult to sound positive in my job applications. The near certainty that the effort would be fruitless undoubtedly showed in the way I worded covering letters and 'Statement In Support Of Application' sections on application forms.

I was 25, a graduate with three years of solid work experience in my field and had never taken drugs or been arrested yet I was fast becoming long term unemployed, was living in a room in a house that could only charitably be described as a flea pit and my financial resources were just about depleted. I spent much of every night waiting for those around me who suffered from various demons to fall into exhausted sleep, listening to motivational songs downloaded from the internet illegally at the library onto my phone.

"We've been broken down, to the lowest turn, bein' on the bottom line, sure aint no fun, ... The only way is up, baby!"⁴

and

"You can walk my path, you can wear my shoes, ... , I'm singing it now, things can only get better!"⁵

being a couple of the better ones.

I'd lie there on my bed, singing out loud and contributing in my own small way to the ethos of the house community, punching the air when appropriate to encourage myself.

That History of Rock documentary I'd seen at Gerry's had had some uses. The only way is up (yeah!) and things can only get better. I hoped pop music had some influence on the cosmos since I didn't appear to have any myself.

4 The Only Way Is Up, Yazz & The Plastic Population, 1988

5 Things Can Only Get Better, D:Ream, 1993

One day I was sitting in the library, as usual, looking a little scruffy, as usual, reading the papers, as usual. The economy wasn't looking too strong, unemployment figures were due out and were expected to be higher, there'd been a bombing somewhere, the usual stuff. I turned to the vacancies advertisements. One jumped out at me.

According to the advertisement, my local Council needed a surveyor for their Planning Office. It had been six months since they'd made me redundant so no doubt enough time had passed for them to have realised their restructuring had been a costly failure and they could legally reinstate the position. I scanned the ad wondering whether or not to apply. Then I saw it, at the bottom of the rectangular box with the Council's crest at the top.

“Previous postholders need not apply”

Oh great. The ad had my name written all over it. “Go away Wally, we don't like you”, loud and clear. I confess at that moment I wondered if life was really, when all's said and done, worth living. I went and sat in the library toilet and had a little cry. Self pity is best done in private.

When I went back to where I'd been sitting, no one had disturbed the newspaper so for want of anything better to do – it wasn't like I could afford to go and get a coffee and a doughnut after all – I carried on reading the vacancies. Old habits die hard.

“Executive Director, Used Car Sales”

“Tyre Fitter, experience required”

“A Grade Electrician”

“Customer Services Support Manager”

“Mistress Jenny offers lessons in discipline” Ooops, I'd accidentally turned two pages and was in the Personals section. I turned back a page.

“Senior Communications Engineer”

“Lighthouse Keeper”

“HGV Driver”

“SP/Physio/Psych/OT”

“Mental Health Spiritual Care Practitioner”

What???

I scanned back, looking for whatever it was that had fought its way into my consciousness.

“Lighthouse Keeper”

Now this was unusual. I read the ad carefully. No qualifications needed. Tick. Must enjoy peace and quiet. Tick. Reliable and trustworthy. Tick. Good communications skills. Tick. 25 or over. Tick. Accommodation provided. Double tick.

I sat back and thought about it. I didn't know much about lighthouses. After all, I was a city boy and very few cities have lighthouses. Although come to think of it, the lighthouse at Alexandria in Egypt was one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. At least I thought it was. Anyway, I wasn't in Egypt so it didn't matter. More importantly the ad didn't say you needed to be an expert in lighthouses. I wondered if they still used wood fires. Probably not. They'd be more likely to be electric or maybe gas these days.

The ad didn't say where the lighthouse was but it was probably on the coast somewhere which was fine by me. I'd always liked the seaside when my parents had taken me during school holidays. It was fun pottering about on the beach in the sunshine with my bucket and spade or burying my dad's car keys. That was always fun.

Downsides? Well the money was not good. But then presumably the accommodation was free and it was still better than unemployment benefit. Probably the job didn't involve working with other people so it might get a little lonely. On the other hand, it couldn't be any lonelier than living in a doss house with a bunch of psychopaths who

screamed at alcohol and drug induced goblins and god knows what else half the night.

Upsides? It was a job and it had a romantic ring to it. May even attract a girl. It couldn't do any worse than surveyor or unemployed job had done.

Maybe, just maybe, there was a light at the end of the tunnel. Or at the top of the lighthouse. I chuckled quietly to myself.

“Sod it, I'll apply. The worse that can happen is they don't bother to reply.”

I looked around to make sure no one was watching me then tore the ad out of the paper and stuffed it in my pocket.

“I'll buy a stamp for it myself,” I thought. “Sod the bloody benefits counsellors. Time to invest in my own future!”

The only way is up! OK, probably up several flights of stairs but hey, it'll keep me fit. Things can only get better.

Chapter Four

I sat on the train to Charing Cross Station in London in my best, and only, suit which had been dry cleaned since its soaking by the Fire Brigade, apprehensively anticipating my first proper job interview since I'd started at the Council. In my mind I ran through some of the questions I was likely to be asked and decided to get off at the next station and go home.

“Why did I want the job?” Because I'm unemployed, virtually homeless and desperate didn't seem to be a particularly endearing response. I couldn't imagine why anyone would grow up wanting to be a lighthouse keeper. Maybe 'I want to run away to sea but get sea sick' might be an acceptable answer.

“What skills do I bring with me?” I couldn't really see any particular use for surveying or even maths in a lighthouse and I suppose being able to light matches wouldn't really be good enough in this techno world.

“Where do I see myself in five years?” Although true it probably wasn't appropriate to answer 'In an asylum for the suicidally depressed'. What on earth was the career progression of a lighthouse keeper? Some sort of admin work?

“There is a massive storm raging and the light in the lighthouse has failed. You hear the siren of a passenger ship not far out to sea and heading for the rocks. What do you do?” Ummmm

“A thousand passengers were killed when their cruise liner smashed into the rocks at the foot of your lighthouse when you failed to turn the light on. How do you avoid the ensuing bad publicity, court case and imprisonment for negligence?” Ummmm

“Can you find your own way to the door?” Yes, very probably.

At least I'd get one right.

I got off at the next station which unfortunately turned out to be Charing Cross Station so for want of anything better to do I wandered

down Villiers Street to the Embankment Underground Station. It was a beautiful, warm Autumn day and London hummed with activity. An attractive middle aged lady dressed to look like a gypsy thrust a small poesy of lavender into my hand as I walked passed her.

“For luck,” she said in an obviously fake Irish accent.

“What a charming lady,” I thought, smiling at her. “I could use some luck.”

A faint smell of lavender wafted through the air,

“£5,” she said, not letting go of my hand.

I gave her back the poesy of lavender with my other hand and she let me go with ill humour. I'd only just enough money left for the train fares and while a good luck poesy might well bring me luck, I couldn't be sure it would protect me against London Transport ticket inspectors if they caught me without a ticket.

Being a suburbanite, I rarely travelled on the underground and on those odd occasions when I do I feel as though stepping on the escalator to get down to train level is comparable to descending through the gates to Dante's Inferno. 'Abandon Hope All Ye Who enter Here' should be inscribed in large, fiery red letters over every underground station entrance.

The descent is almost invariably on a rumbling, juddery, rickety escalator through a miasma of advertising signage. For some technical reason the handrail always moves at a different speed so you are gradually dragged off balance and have to release your death grip momentarily to secure another while several people behind are pressing forward and blaming you for their being late for work. On a cold bare concrete platform, fluorescently lit to mimic graveyards in the moonlight, you can see gaping caverns at either end, yawning pits of blackness from which strange screeches and growls, long drawn out like souls in torment, emerge incessantly to echo and bounce off the cavernous concrete. You stand, a lost individual in a sea of bored commuters, helpless as a gale starts to come out of the tunnel like the breath of Satan, getting stronger and stronger until suddenly a

garishly lit tube of metal hurtles out of the tunnel, brakes screaming like banshees, and bursts open, disgorging passengers and sucking others into its many mouths before racing off into the darkness of another tunnel.

Why would anyone invent an alien abduction story when all they have to do it take a ride on the London Underground? Late on a Saturday night after the pubs close there's also a fair chance of an impromptu surgical procedure for any unwary traveller trying to reach one of the few late night stations still open.

Still, the Underground had one huge advantage over other forms of travel in London. It took my mind off the upcoming interview. My semi-panic lasted all six stops to Tower Hill Station where I was disgorged, like a sliver of decaying meat spat from a dragon's mouth. It was still a nice sunny Autumn day and I had survived a journey comparable to that of Orpheus through Hades. With a jaunty step I strode manfully to Trinity House, administrative home of English and Welsh lighthouses.

“Hello,” I said in a carefree manner to the gentleman at the reception desk. “My name is Walter Ruthe, I'm here to see Mr Royston Rolls.”

He checked a list covered with names and found mine and ticked it then picked up a telephone and murmured discreetly, “A Walter Ruthe to see you.”

“How many Walter Ruthes were coming?” I wondered. “Surely he could just have said 'Walter Ruthe to see you' or even 'The Walter Ruthe to see you' but 'A Walter Ruthe'?”

“Mr Rolls will be down momentarily,” he murmured discreetly to me. “If you would care to wait in the ante room ...” and gestured gracefully towards an open door.

I smiled discreetly, the whole place reeked of discretion, and went into the ante room. It contained a very long, polished oak table with a long row of ornate but uncomfortable looking chairs. I selected the one closest to the door and sat down, with a strong feeling that I was being watched. I looked around and discovered that I was being

watched. By Sir Winston Churchill. A huge portrait of him hung on the wall at the far end and his face radiated displeasure at my intrusion while his eyes bored into me. I tried to ignore him, my false bravado from surviving the Underground leaking all over the immaculate carpet.

Several hours later, or perhaps a minute as it is difficult to estimate time when under stress, Mr Rolls walked discretely into the Ante room and coughed. It echoed. I leapt to my feet and held out my hand. For some reason I was still clutching my Underground ticket and he looked at it in puzzlement.

“You’re Mr Ruthe?” he asked. “Here for the interview?”

I nodded and shoved the ticket into my pocket. He looked relieved.

“Let’s go to my office,” he said and we started to climb a long sweeping staircase.

“At the earliest opportunity,” Beatrice, my Unemployment Counsellor, had told me, “say something that shows you have done some research on the organisation. It tells them you are interested.”

Near the top of the staircase I cleared my throat.

“This is a magnificent building,” I said. “I believe it was built in 1794 by Samuel Wyatt.” I’d read that in Wikipedia at the library.

“Actually it was 1953, by Sir Albert Richardson,” he replied, dryly. “And refurbished in the 1990s.”

Wikipedia hadn’t mentioned that. I felt foolish.

“Wyatt’s original 1794 building was completely gutted by a German bomb in 1940. Richardson rebuilt it from photographs taken by Country Life Magazine in 1919. He did a good job I think. Here we are. Can I offer you a coffee or something?”

He gestured to a dull looking but comfortable office chair. I declined a coffee as I was scared I’d need to go to the toilet. He sat down on his

side of the desk and gazed at me as though it was him being interviewed.

Beatrice had also made me watch a YouTube video with tips on interview technique. The presenter said it was vital to set the tone of the interview as soon as possible so I should ask why I'd been selected for interview before the interviewer managed to ask any questions. Apparently it forces the interviewer to focus on your good points right from the start rather than lead off with, say, "why were you sacked from your last job?" which isn't a particularly positive point and is unlikely to lead anywhere better. It seemed like a good tip to me as presumably I must have some good points otherwise they wouldn't be bothering to interview me.

"I was wondering, Mr Rolls, before we begin, what aspects of my resume or covering letter persuaded you to interview me?" I said. "Neatly phrased too" I thought to myself smugly.

At least I was trying to be proactive which was surely a good point in itself. Mr Rolls gave an abrupt laugh.

"You seemed fairly normal," he said and pulled out a handkerchief and started to polish his glasses.

I was stumped for a way forward.

He replaced his glasses on his nose and leaned towards me.

"You see, if someone advertises for a surveyor, such as yourself, or a cook or whatever, they tend to get responses from people who want to be surveyors or cooks. On the other hand, when we advertise for a lighthouse keeper we tend to get a lot of applicants with, shall we say, diverse expectations."

He sat back and gazed at the ceiling.

"We get a lot of writers applying actually. Not established writers, of course. People who think they're going to be famous for their first novel if only they had the peace and quiet in which to write it. We've found in the past that few writers can actually cope with the isolation.

They have this romantic idea of locking themselves away for a few months and becoming the next Dickens or Tolstoy. Doesn't work of course. They don't seem to realise that we want lighthouse keepers to actually do the job of looking after a lighthouse. We're not here to act as a charity fund for prospective novelists."

He looked at me.

"Were you planning to write a book?" he asked.

"No," I said. "I don't think I could."

"We also get a lot of applicants with, umm, social issues. People trying to hide from society or some guilt ridden past, some trying to escape a criminal background. A few who see it as an opportunity for penance or a means of getting closer to whichever god they adhere to. Generally fundamentalist types, of course. Even had a Buddhist applicant once. Thought he could meditate twenty four hours a day."

He beamed happily then his face clouded.

"I remember one chap, many years ago, not long after we started automating the lights. He seemed to believe that the beam could be used to search out sinners."

He shook his head at the memory.

"Which reminds me. I need to explain why this post has been advertised."

I had presumed that it was because the previous incumbent had left, but I didn't say so. I just smiled encouragingly.

"Back in the 1960s we started to automate lighthouses. It's a lot cheaper than manning them after all and most of our houses were automated by the mid nineties. In fact the last was automated in 1998. Since then we haven't employed any lighthouse keepers. Saved us a fortune I have to say."

I frowned in puzzlement. If they were all automated, why was I there?

“The thing is,” he continued, “it's saved us a fortune for most of them. There's one, however, which is causing a problem. Welsh, of course.”

I wondered about his views of the Welsh but he didn't expand on it.

“Up in north Wales, automated in 1997. Caused no end of problems since. Our technical lads leave it working perfectly but within a couple of months it's going haywire. The lads go out and check it all and leave it working perfectly and a couple of months later, kaput. Poof. They've tried all sorts of things, at great expense but, after a couple of months, nothing.”

He gave a deep sigh.

“Most of the time all that needs to be done is to reboot the computer. Nothing else seems to be wrong. Oh, every now and then something fails, that's to be expected, but no one knows why the computer gets the jitters. They replaced the computer any number of times, rewritten the software, installed redundant parallel computers, even remote sensing but nothing works. Every couple of months it all dies. Costs a fortune to send out the technical lads. I daresay they make a holiday of it too, can't blame them for that.”

He reached into his desk drawer and pulled out a pipe and started to fiddle with it.

“Damned no smoking policy. Can't think properly without my pipe. Hmmm. Smoke do you?”

“No,” I said.

“Shame. Helps the brain, calms the nerves. Of course the lighthouses are officially non smoking but no one would ever know. You should take up a pipe, my boy. Where was I?”

“Technical lads going to the lighthouse,” I said.

“Ah yes. Well there you have it. We've decided to try manning the lighthouse. Have someone on site. Sort the problems when they happen rather than wasting three or four days while the technical boys

go out there. Can't stop the shipping to and from Liverpool for four days while we sort out an infernal computer. We're under a lot of pressure from the shippers and the insurance companies."

"I'm afraid I don't know anything about lighthouse automation," I said.

"Doesn't really matter," he replied. "Most of the time it's just a reboot that's needed and you can learn that in a minute or so. If there's any other problem you'll have a radio to talk to the technical staff direct. We'll send you on a course, of course. Learn to use the radio and what have you. And we're going to install a separate manual system as backup as well. So if there's a real failure you'll run that while you're fixing the automated system."

"Sounds very expensive," I said.

"Not really," he replied. "The technical staff are paid a fortune and they're worth it when the damned systems are working but it's far cheaper to pay someone like you to live there in this particular case and seven ships have been lost in that area over the last twenty years. All very probably due to the lighthouse not working. Damned bad. Damned bad indeed."

He stared at his pipe then reluctantly put it away and slammed the drawer shut.

"Pah," he said. No smoking policies clearly infuriated him.

"One reason you're here today is you're a graduate in a technical subject. You shouldn't have any problems with a few minor technical issues. The Met Office also wants us to get the keeper to monitor some weather instruments and report back to them so your maths will come in handy. Can't say we'll ever re-survey the site again though, I'm afraid."

I nodded thoughtfully.

"Still want the job?" he asked unexpectedly, cocking an eye in my direction.

“Yes, I think I can handle rebooting a computer. And with some training I’m sure I can cope.”

“Always say you can when asked if you can do something,” Beatrice had told me, “even when you can’t. You can find out how to do it later when you’ve got the job.”

“Why do you want it?” he asked.

“Oh shit.” I thought. “I’ve still not thought of a decent answer to that.”

It looked like my chances of getting this job were rapidly sinking, like a ship without a lighthouse to guide it.

“Because I’m desperate,” I blurted out.

Mr Rolls leaned back in his chair and stared at me calmly.

“I’ve read through one thousand two hundred and forty seven applications for this position,” he said slowly. “I’ve interviewed eighteen candidates. You’re the nineteenth. You’re the only one who’s given me an honest answer. The bullshit that some people come up with ...”

He threw his hands in the air.

“Real writers know how to suspend disbelief, most of the ones who applied are clueless beyond belief and incite disbelief. You are well educated and communicate quite well. Tell me why you are desperate.”

So I told him about Raquel and being made redundant and the house where I lived being burnt down. I told him about all the Councils I’d written to and the jobs I’d applied for and how my Council was re-advertising my job and how previous postholders need not apply. I told him everything. Once burst, the dam waters could not be held back.

“The lighthouse is on a isthmus and is cut off from the mainland twice a day when the tide comes in and it’s eleven miles to the nearest village by road, three in a boat. It is pretty isolated up there. Think

you can cope?”

I told him about having to leave Gerry's and the place I was living in now. He sympathised.

“Had to live in a place like that myself once. Orphan you know. Wasn't a happy time for me, especially when the adults who are supposed to care for you ... well, back in the sixties it wasn't as regulated as it is now. Greater public awareness now, light in dark places, that sort of thing.”

We both sat quietly for a few moments.

“Right,” said Mr Rolls. “Got a couple more to interview. Should have a decision by the end of the week. Have you any questions for me?”

“I was thinking of questions you might ask me on the train,” I said. “There was one I had no idea how to answer.”

“What was it?”

“There is a massive storm raging and the light in the lighthouse has failed. You hear the siren of a passenger ship not far out to sea and heading for the rocks. What do you do?”

His face fell and he turned to look out of the window.

“Not a damned bloody thing you can do,” he said quietly. “Except maybe get on the radio and alert Air Sea Rescue or the Coastguard. Poor bloody sods.”

He jerked round to face me again, his face deadly serious.

“That's why we've got to get this lighthouse fully operational, you see. We're responsible.”

Chapter Five

I got out of the taxi and turned to pay the driver then got my rucksack and bed roll out of the boot. He gave me a friendly wave, and a receipt, and quietly drove away. I watched for a few moments then turned to look at my new life for the foreseeable future. It wasn't inspiring.

The grey sea merged with the grey sky and a strong, cold wind blew in across the Irish Sea. I was wearing a jumper under my jacket but the layers weren't enough to keep out the chill. The lighthouse towered overhead and the small one bed-roomed cottage nestled at its foot. There were no welcoming lights, no sounds other than the moan of the wind and the occasional lowing cow in the distance. Not even a seagull noted my arrival.

I hoisted the rucksack and picked up the bed roll and pushed open the gate in the hip high wire fence and walked, hunched against the wind, to the front door of the cottage. The keys were in an envelope in my inside jacket pocket and, a little to my surprise, not only fitted the lock but turned smoothly. Since the place had been abandoned over twenty years previously I'd rather expected the lock to be rusty or even seized but perhaps the technicians had oiled it on their visits.

I swung open the door. It was dark inside so I felt around for a light switch. On my course I'd been told that there was a cable that carried roughly a megawatt of electricity to the lighthouse and everything in the lighthouse and the cottage ran off that cable. I flicked on the light switch and the place stayed in darkness.

I hadn't had a three day course in troubleshooting for nothing! Well, actually it had been two days of radio training but there had been almost an entire day on troubleshooting. I dumped my bags in the doorway and went over to the lighthouse itself. Again the key turned smoothly and I flicked on the light switch there. The place lit up. It was just a storage area with a narrow staircase that went to the beacon at the top but the important thing is that there was power to the complex so the problem must be at the cottage. I felt empowered.

“Check the easy stuff first,” I'd been told so I did. I walked around the

cottage and found an old fashioned meter box. Opening it there was an old fashioned fuse box with a single fuse and a switch next to it, in the OFF position. Clearly someone experienced in troubleshooting had been here at some point since there was a roll of fuse wire and a small screwdriver in the box as well. I flicked on the switch and nothing happened, which was encouraging as I'd rather expected an explosion or something. Back at the front door I turned on the light switch and there was a flash and a loud ping as the light blew. Oh well, at least there was power now.

It was gloomy but not pitch black as there was some daylight coming in the doorway and I could make out that there was a smallish hallway just inside with two doors leading off. I opened one and felt around for a light switch. I was getting good at that. It's called learning from experience. The light came on and I could see that this must be the lounge or bed room as it was completely empty apart from an electric radiator fitted inside a fireplace and a lot of dust. Leaving the light on and the door open I tried the other door. The light worked there too and this was also a lounge or bed room. There was nothing obvious to indicate which so I guess since I'd be the only person living here it was up to me what I used the rooms for.

Back in the hallway I could see now that it went all the way to the back of the cottage and there were three more doors further down. The one at right angles to the hall was probably a back door to the outside. It had a lock and there was a key in it but it wouldn't turn so I left it for another day. Opening one of the other side doors, I found what was obviously the kitchen as it had an old electric cooker in it, a sink, some shelves and a couple of cupboards attached to the wall. The cupboards were empty so no one had thought to leave any spare light bulbs.

“Great,” I thought. “Lounge, bedroom and a kitchen, what more could I want? Cool. I wonder what the other room is? A storage area?”

Opening the last door I found something I hadn't thought of. A bathroom and toilet.

“Handy,” I thought to myself and availed myself of the facilities to get rid of some of the several coffees I'd had waiting for various

connections to get here. It didn't flush. No water came out of the tap when I turned it on either.

“Oh well, that's not an immediate problem,” I thought. “There's probably a water pump and a separate fuse box for it or maybe the water had been turned off somewhere.”

I wandered round the little house basking in my good fortune. It was quiet and not draughty and the radiators worked so it would be warm in a while. This was so cool. My own place at last! No more sharing!

I spent ten minutes trying to decide which of the two front rooms to use as the bedroom and which my lounge. It's not as easy as it sounds. If I got up in the night to use the toilet did I want to go on the same side of the house or the other side of the hallway? When I took some food from the kitchen to the lounge did I want to do a U shaped trip or a zig-zag? These decisions are important in your first proper home. I decided to use the room the same side as the kitchen as my bed room in the end since it had a more relaxing feel to it. A kind of ambience that suggested sleep. I dumped my bed roll on the floor and unrolled it to mark my territory.

I pulled out my phone to check the time and discovered there was no signal. That was going to be a problem as Trinity House, who administered lighthouses, had bought me a Toyota Land Cruiser which would be available to pick up in Holyhead the next day and I'd planned to get a taxi into Holyhead, which would be difficult if I couldn't ring the taxi company. I went round the house holding my phone high in the air but there was still no signal. Outside was the same but I did discover, tucked between the cottage and the lighthouse, a large water tank, a small box beside it containing a pump and a switch and next to that a small hot water tank. I opened the valve to the water tank and turned on the switch. There were a couple of clanks and a whirr then the pump fell silent.

“Ahh, it primed itself,” I said, hopefully. They hadn't covered water pumps on my course and I imagine a plumber wouldn't be too happy with a thirty mile round trip to sort it out.

I turned to go back into the cottage and the hot water tank gurgled

throatily and spat a small jet of rusty water out of a thin tube at the bottom. I bent to look and the water pump started to whirr and I could hear the hot water tank filling. Cool. I couldn't see another switch to turn on the heating part of it so I crossed my fingers and hoped it knew what to do.

Back in the house I ran the kitchen tap and, low and behold, water came out! OK, it wasn't too clean looking but after running for a few moments it cleared and I tasted it. Yup, it definitely was water. I ran the taps in the bathroom as well until they ran clear and congratulated myself for a job well done. Any achievement, however small, is to be congratulated. I hadn't had many recently.

“Hey” I suddenly thought, “maybe there's a signal at the top of the tower.” It was time I had a look at my workplace anyway so I turned off all the taps and scooted over. It had started to rain, a squally drizzly type rain although the dark clouds out to sea suggested it would turn into something worse later.

Inside the tower the ground floor was more or less empty although there was a large cupboard. Inside I found an assortment of electrical spares, a tool box and five extremely large light bulbs. On the course I'd been told the beacon used a 1000 watt light bulb but it hadn't occurred to me that they'd be any bigger than a normal household one.

Upstairs was the control room which contained three computers, two radios, and a manual control panel for the lenses. They were familiar looking as I'd played with replicas on the course. There was also a table and chair and an old filing cabinet containing a single folder of weather observations dated 1997, an empty whisky bottle and a much thumbed almanac of tides and sunrises. The room above contained the mechanism for rotating the lens and nothing else, apart from a 5 litre can of lubricating oil and a monkey wrench.

The final flight of steps led me out onto a balcony that went the full way around the tower. Peering over the rail, the ground looked a very long way down and I felt a little giddy so I stopped looking and instead admired the view. The sea occupied about a half, going pretty much from the west all the way round to the east. Behind, to the

south, was the bay and the promontory that led to the isthmus. Craggy, low cliffs stretched away interspersed with small sandy beaches. It was all windswept and gorse and heather covered with a few trees that had bent as they grew. It was fairly desolate in the leaden light of a chilly November afternoon. The wind was a lot stronger up here too. Checking my phone I saw it had one bar of signal. I had a link with the world after all, however tenuous. I cheered and got a mouthful of salty sea spray.

The balcony was built around a cylindrical room of clear glass panels and it took me a few moments to figure out how to get inside; one of the glass panels slid open. Inside, in all its glory, was the beacon, the whole point of the entire structure. A huge electric light bulb with a nine foot high curved reflector behind it and an array of curved and fluted lenses in front which concentrated and focused the light so it shone twenty miles, penetrating cloud and fog. I touched the lens array and it moved freely on its gimbals. It was very impressive, even though I could see that one of my regular tasks, cleaning the lenses and polishing the reflector, would be a long and arduous task.

Back in the control room I turned on the monitor of the main computer and logged in. Opening the control software I could see that everything appeared to be working correctly. I opened the log file and scanned through the entries. Since the last reboot and check over some three weeks previously the system seemed to have been behaving itself with no shut downs or reported failures. This was good news. I'd been told there was internet access and sure enough there was so I checked my email. According to the two emails waiting for me, some Russian women were keen to make my acquaintance and if I should go bald I'd be happy to know there was an instant, guaranteed solution available. Secure in the love of the Russians and my long term hairiness I sent an email to Mr Rolls to let him know I'd arrived safely and everything was working. On impulse I checked for taxi firms in Holyhead but it seemed none of them had yet taken advantage of the internet.

I slid the chair on its little wheels over to one of the radios and turned it on. It came instantly to life and I used the push buttons to tune in to channel 16 (156.8 MHz, if you're interested) which is the international channel for distress calls. I listened for a couple of minutes but

received nothing which was great. I checked a few other channels and picked up some faint messages from some ships about their movements. No doubt I would get bored and lonely enough to spend much of the day listening on these frequencies for any human contact but at the moment I was far too excited and very keen to immerse myself in my new life.

Taking the chair with me I went back outside and saw that not only had the rain stopped but the dark masses were moving to the west and the sky overhead was clearing. I fancied even the wind had died down a little. I took the chair into my cottage. I liked the sound of that. My cottage. It had a certain ring to it.

I plonked the chair down in the middle of my lounge. *My* lounge, awesome, and sat in it and swivelled slowly round three or four times. Then I got up and wheeled it into my bedroom, *yay*, and swivelled again. It felt more like a lounge this time so I rolled up my bed roll and moved it to the other room.

Home! It felt good. I leaned forward and drummed my feet on the floor then leapt up and did a little dance. Home. Yes.

I pulled a supermarket bag of supplies out of my rucksack and took it into the kitchen. OK there wasn't a table in there yet but I'd get one so I emptied the bag and laid it on the floor and put my cold cooked chicken and loaf of bread on it and proudly put my jar of coffee, packet of tea bags, bag of sugar and carton of milk in a cupboard.

“Time for a celebratory cup of coffee,” I said to myself.

There was no kettle, no saucepans, no mugs, no teaspoons. There wasn't anything except a cooker, a sink and a tap.

“Shit,” I said out loud. “I hadn't thought of that.”

I'd been told that the cottage had been stripped when it was vacated and that I'd have an allowance for refurnishing the place but it had never occurred to me there'd be absolutely nothing. Even my flea pit doss house had had some basic cutlery and crockery even though I'd been too squeamish to use them. The refurnishing allowance had

seemed generous at the time as I'd thought it was really just for a bed and a couple of chairs but looking around more carefully I began to realise that I was also going to have to get a fridge, maybe a microwave, some rugs, crockery, cutlery, pots and pans, dishcloths. Jesus. The allowance had seemed generous and I'd imagined myself with a fancy four poster bed but that was paling into a cheap divan. I couldn't even have a cup of coffee. Shit.

I tried the hot tap and moderately warm water came out. The boiler was doing its thing so at least I'd have some hot water to drink. Maybe it would even get hot enough to dissolve coffee granules. I ripped a hunk of bread off the loaf and tried to smear it with margarine using my finger which wasn't overly successful. What the hell, I ate it anyway with some chicken and some cold milk. It was still home.

It was beginning to get dark so I went outside to see if I could watch the sunset. I could see some rays from the sun fanning out above the clouds on the horizon to the west so I sat on the ground with my back to the wall. The wind had died down and there was an incredible silence, broken only by the regular hiss as the waves gently rolled in. I breathed deeply and marvelled at the crisp fresh cleanness of the air. The nearest pollution was several miles away. I saw a rabbit hop tentatively across the field behind the shoreline. The rays of sun began to die. The sun must be just disappearing but the clouds prevented me from seeing my first Welsh sunset. Still, there'd be plenty more. Dawns too if I ever woke up in time.

Startled, I looked to my right. There'd been a kind of thwump sound, low pitched and not loud but certainly unexpected. I couldn't see anything that might have caused it then I saw a glowing trail heading out to sea. A stairway to heaven? It grew stronger and started to move with a faint rumble. Wow! The lighthouse had come to life. I'd forgotten all about it.

It took several minutes to come to full brightness. A solid beam of light, looking strong enough to walk on, slicing through the increasing darkness. Round and round it went, sweeping the sea and land indiscriminately. I could see why that man Mr Rolls had mentioned thought it could be used to search out sinners. It was like the eye of God, forever watching over us. In the darkness, with the sea in my

ears, I began to appreciate how a lost soul at sea would be cheered by the flashing light, a beacon of warning and yet of safety, warning of potential dangers but reassuring whoever saw it that they were no longer lost, no longer alone on the dangerous sea. I could almost hear the beam crackle as it passed overhead.

I went to sleep that night, a faint vibration thrilling my body. For some reason I dreamt of the Statue of Liberty in New York Harbour. The effigy of Libertas proclaiming Freedom, holding a beacon of hope, leading the way into the future. I woke a couple of times in the night feeling uneasy but dismissed it as being in a strange place. After a breakfast of slightly stale bread and warm water I went outside and looked up at the tower.

“I wonder how high it is?” I thought.

Being a surveyor I did the obvious thing and paced out thirty feet or so and held up my arm to point to the top and estimated the angle then did the trigonometry in my head. I reckoned about 190 feet or so. Pretty decent climb.

I climbed up to the control room and checked the computer log. No problems during the night. I went out onto the balcony to phone for a taxi. In the bright early morning the view was spectacular. On the far horizon I could make out the pale form of a large container ship made tiny by the immensity of the world spread out before me. I walked round the balcony to get a good view of the land I'd come to live in and found I was surrounded by water.

Mr Rolls had told me the lighthouse was on an isthmus but in my excitement of coming here I'd forgotten. It must have been low tide when I'd arrived the day before as the taxi had driven up to the fence but now, with the tide in, the strip of land was under water.

I climbed down and went for an exploratory paddle. It was only a foot or so deep and judging by the piles of seaweed on either side it wasn't far off the high tide point so it was unlikely that I'd be trapped completely in an emergency. There were two tides a day so, worst case scenario, it would probably be no more than three hours before the track was clear again. But it was still an exciting development. At least

for part of each day I'd have my own island. Way cool!

I climbed back to the top of the tower and phoned for a taxi, hoping that three hours would be plenty for the waters to subside then I went back down to the waters edge to see if I had any luck commanding the water to part to let me through. OK, it didn't work but hey, it might have done.

“You're a nutcase,” I thought to myself. “Just as well no one was watching.”

The taxi took me to the Toyota dealership in Holyhead.

“Helo, sut wyt ti?” said the salesman and shook my hand. A badge clipped to his lapel proclaimed his name as Alwyn.

“Hi, I'm Walter Ruthe,” I told him, “I've come to collect the Land Cruiser for Trinity House.”

“Yes,” he said. “Recognised you when you came in, isn't it.” He had a pronounced Welsh accent.

I must have looked puzzled so he retrieved a newspaper from a stack of newspapers on a low table next to a couch. Apparently there had been an article about me on the front page of the local paper the week before, just above the advertisement for sheep dip.

“Ceidwad Goleudy Newydd” said the headline. I vaguely remembered the photograph being taken when I'd gone back to see Mr Rolls for a briefing before my training course. I'd thought it was for an ID card or something. It wasn't a particularly good picture of me as I had been scratching my ear when it was taken.

“What does it say?” I asked.

“You don't speak Cymraeg?” Alwyn said in surprise. “New Lighthouse Keeper', see bach.”

“Is that Welsh?” I asked.

He nodded.

“I’m English,” I admitted.

“Ohhh,” he said, “Saes.” He looked saddened by the news. I thought I could see his point. Wales had the only lighthouse keeper in Britain and he was an Englishman. He brightened when he remembered that one of his most expensive cars had been bought for me.

He took me round the back to show me my brand new shiny green Toyota Land Cruiser. It looked very smart, with the crest of Trinity House and Pwyntyderwydd Lighthouse written on the sides. Made me feel a bit like a celebrity as I drove through the town looking for a second hand furniture shop and somewhere that sold kettles.

Chapter Six

The tower and cottage were on the top of a large rock at the end of a promontory with half a dozen steps leading up from the narrow strip that flooded at high tide. There was a fence around the top of the rock which seemed fairly pointless to me as there were no neighbours to be segregated from until one day I slipped in some mud and discovered why the fence was there. I landed on my backside and banged my head on the ground and, because of the slight decline of the ground around the cottage, rolled gently into the fence. Without it I would have dropped the six or seven feet into the sea or onto the jagged rocks which would have been a lot worse than just a soaking.

On the other side of the drawbridge, which was how I thought of the strip, the rocky ground rose up gradually on one side and then sloped away down to another bay. A couple of bays further round in that direction was apparently a nuclear power station which had been decommissioned a few years before. Presumably all the radioactive material had been taken away. I'd looked in that direction a couple of times at night but I couldn't see any glow over the hill top. In the other direction the water's edge led away into a long, curving bay with a beach further along.

The immediate coastline was very rocky with small sandy spots. As far as I could see, which was a fair way from the top of the tower, there were fields that went almost to the water's edge although what grew there I had no idea. I'm no botanist but I would guess the soil around here was fairly salty.

Just beyond my drawbridge was a reasonably well defined path stretching off in both directions. A week or so after arriving I went for a walk along the path, heading for the old power station and found that it was a planned, maintained path as on the other side of the hill there were a couple of solid wooden bridges over streams that ran into the sea. In the next bay there was also a small, makeshift jetty with a small row boat attached to it and a gravelled area that looked like it might have been a car park for maybe three or four cars. I guessed the car park and maybe the path itself were maintained by the Council but I found out later that it was in fact maintained by the Friends of the Isle of Anglesey Coastal Path. It turned out that the path was

something like 140 miles long, so it was just as well that I didn't try to walk to the end of it that afternoon, and was quite popular with tourists and bird watchers. I hadn't even got as far as the power station.

I'd also counted the steps inside the tower up to the beacon. One hundred and fifty seven, all told, including the step from the ground into the tower. Each step was about seven and a half inches high so that made it ninety eight feet to the top step so adding another fifteen feet or so for the beacon room made the tower around one hundred and ten feet high. Just goes to show how inaccurate my early estimate of one hundred and ninety feet was and the dangers of doing trigonometry in your head. Still, a hundred feet is about seven stories in an office block which is a fair old climb.

This was why I'd bought a cheap reclining garden chair to leave on the balcony. I told myself it was so I could sit and admire the view but secretly it was to recover from the long ascent. I'd also bought a book on Welsh Wildlife from a second hand bookshop and ordered a cheap pair of powerful binoculars from China on eBay so I could sit on the balcony and watch the birds and animals.

With luck I might also spot the occasional cute female walker on the coastal path but that wasn't likely in November. Maybe next summer when some of the more daring might even not wear a heavy top coat. Anyway, that was the plan but no matter where I left the chair, it would soon find its way back to the same spot, looking out over the sea towards Ireland. I figured it was a combination of small distortions in the balcony floor, the ever present dampness from the spray and some aspect of the wind dynamics around the top of the tower. Since very little on the ground was clearly visible without binoculars I ended up leaving the chair where it wanted to be.

It was early December when I started getting a pain in my tooth. One of the rear molars. I did what I always do when I have toothache; ignored it and hoped it went away. It's a technique that rarely, if ever, works but there's something about holding my mouth open while a stranger sticks sharp things that buzz angrily in it while holding my head tightly that puts me off. For some reason dentists also seem to expect you to enjoy watching their overhead TV while they're doing

this. As if somehow root canal work makes daytime TV better. But, after a couple of days the pain was getting worse and the aspirin wasn't particularly effective so I climbed to the top of the tower to ring a dentist.

I chose one by looking at a map on Google. Call me a scaredy-cat but for some reason I distrust backstreet dentists. It's like they're plying some sort of illegal or sordid business like illegal abortions or hardcore porn. I like a dentist with a proper frontage on a main street, bright lights and lots of people in the waiting room. There's safety in numbers. When I called a happy, cheerful girl with an Indian accent answered and we made an appointment for me which fitted in around the tides. The Toyota had a ground clearance of about eight inches so at high tide about a foot of water would be lapping around the bodywork. It could probably quite happily cope with that but I couldn't. I'm a city boy, unused to driving underwater.

Anyway, the following morning a little before eleven, I parked in the car park behind the bakery on the main street and strode nonchalantly to the dental surgery. The Indian lady in a gorgeous emerald green sari at the Reception desk checked her computer to make sure I really did have an appointment and handed me a clipboard and a pen and told me to fill in the form. There were half a dozen others waiting so I found a seat and filled in the form. I handed it back to her and she smiled happily at me. This was the longest interaction I'd had with a woman for nearly two months.

There's something about a doctor's surgery that often encourages people to talk about the many and varied illnesses that they have but at a dentist it's like no one dares to open their mouths in case a drill accidentally slips in. So we sat there in silence, even the children, subdued by anxiety, staring silently at anything except each other, willing the time to go even slower.

My turn came and I followed the dental nurse in to the consulting room. I seemed to have hit on a multi-ethnic dental practice as the dentist was a tiny Chinese lady, less than five feet tall and someone I could probably overcome if I was forced to make a bid to escape. Her being Chinese was encouraging too. The Welsh, on the whole, don't have any great love for the English and I had been a little worried

about entrusting my gnashers to the care of a rabid Welsh Nationalist. He, or she, might even have a special anaesthetic that enhanced English pain rather than reduced it. As far as I knew the Chinese have no special dislike of the English so I was a little relieved although she had a very strong Welsh accent which was distinctly unsettling. Anyway, it turned out that I only needed a minor filling and her anaesthetic worked fine. As is so often the case, anticipation is far worse than the event itself.

I had to pay the Indian lady on reception and in a delirium brought on by a mixture of medically applied narcotics, falling adrenaline levels, relief and over active hormones I tried to pick her up.

“That’s £44,” she said with a smile.

I handed over my credit card.

“What’s your name?” I lisped, trying to impersonate Tom Cruise despite half my face still feeling numb.

“Aashrita,” she replied, sexily swiping my card through her little machine.

“Can I take you out sometime to celebrate my filling?” I asked.

“I’m married,” she said, without turning a hair or even bothering to look up. “Please enter your PIN and press the green button.” She handed me the little machine.

“You’re not wearing a wedding ring,” I pointed out, entering my PIN and pressing the green button as erotically as I could.

“I’m Hindu,” she said, pointing to the red dot on her forehead.

“Oh,” I said, feeling slightly embarrassed. I’d often wondered about the dots on Indian women’s foreheads but never once did it occur to me that they might be the equivalent of wedding rings.

“Transaction Approved,” said the little card machine.

Aashrita tore off my receipt and stapled it to the printed invoice that had magically appeared and handed them both over. The gold stud in her nose gleamed almost as brightly as her Arctic white teeth.

Her mouth said “Have a nice day” but her dark, gorgeous, soulful eyes said “loser” in English, Welsh and Hindi.

The man waiting patiently next to me laughed. I ignored him the way Tom Cruise would have done if he'd been in at multi-ethnic dentist in North Wales.

Outside on the pavement I vowed never to go back to that dentist again. The pain of toothache was one thing but the pain of rejection was even worse.

I debated whether to go and have a coffee and a muffin and risk dribbling in public and decided to go to the library for a while until some sensation returned to my jaw. It was only a few minutes walk away and by the time I'd got there I'd changed my mind about that dentist. The dentist herself, Ying Yue Yuan, had the gentlest hands I'd even encountered and the filling had almost been a pleasure.

I browsed through the fiction for a while and selected three or four books, mostly because they were thick and would therefore take longer to read. I bit the inside of my cheek and found it hurt a little so I decided it would be safe to find a cafe. On the way to the checkout I noticed a book on display about the history of Wales which I grabbed on impulse and borrowed that too. It had a large red dragon on the cover and, unsurprisingly, it was by someone called Jones.

The cafe was very bright and cheerful and beginning to fill up with lunchtime shoppers and office workers. I ordered a cappuccino and a white chocolate and raspberry muffin, which may be a contributory factor in my tooth decay, and found a seat at a table. Many of the steady flow of customers seemed to be getting takeaway coffees. I put my pile of library books on the table and started to pinch and prod my cheek. Feeling was definitely coming back and I felt confident I could manage my drink without having to ask for a straw.

After a few minutes an elderly woman in a black apron brought over

my coffee and muffin and silently handed me a small fork then pushed the bowl of sugar sachets half an inch closer to me. I smiled a thank you. An elderly man at the next table leaned over.

“Oes genny ch i ddiddordeb mew n hanes” he said. He seemed to have left his dentures at home.

“I’m English,” I said, emptying two sachets into my coffee.

“Ohh,” he said sorrowfully. “Are you interested in history, then?” He tapped the red dragon.

“I thought I ought to learn something about Wales,” I said. “Now that I live here.”

“You’re that there lighthouse man,” he said thoughtfully. “Thought I’d seen you somewhere before.” He took a slurp from a large pink milkshake.

“Yes,” I admitted. The conversation lapsed.

“Daffyd,” he said after a while and limply held out his hand. “I live next door.”

“Walter,” I said. I touched his hand and felt the callouses of a lifetime of hard work.

I ignored the fork and bit into the muffin. Heaven exploded in my mouth. “To hell with tooth decay, live in the moment,” I decided.

“Next door to the cafe?” I asked.

“No, man, to you.”

I looked surprised. I didn’t know I had neighbours.

“You seen that old house bout five mile from you? Driving past like?”

I nodded.

“That’s me,” he said. “47 hectares round your lighthouse. Sheep and cattle.”

“All on your own?” I asked.

“Nay, man, the wife helps out. And me three sons.”

I’d never met a farmer before and didn’t really know what to say. I suppose I could have asked about livestock prices but it never occurred to me.

“Tell me something,” I said thoughtfully. “Do the Welsh really hate the English?”

“Since 1282,” he replied, and laughed.

“What happened in 1282?” I asked, curious.

“Your bloody Edward killed our Prince Llywelyn ap Gruffudd,” he said like it had happened the week before. “Up here in Anglesey it was. Haven’t got rid of you bastards since.”

“That was a long time ago,” I said, feeling apologetic.

“We don’t hate you,” replied Daffyd. “Just teasing you boyo. You’re still a stranger, see. Few years time you’ll be one of the locals. See if we still hate you then.” He wiped pink milk off his greying moustache.

“Wife’s doing some shopping,” he continued. “I hide here till she be done.”

He pulled an old fashioned pocket watch out of his old waistcoat and glanced at it then swallowed the last of his milkshake.

“She be ’bout done,” he said. “Gotta go. Nice talking to you boyo. Even though you are English.”

He was still laughing when he went out of the door.

I looked up Llywelyn ap Gruffudd in the index of my history book.

There were several pages devoted to him and it seemed he'd died in Builth Wells which is in South Wales, rather than Anglesey. There was a flash of green and a swish as someone took the table next to me. I finished reading the section then looked up. It was Aashrita from the dentist.

"Maybe she followed me," I thought, then remembered how long I'd been at the library and sitting in the cafe with Daffyd. It didn't seem likely.

The old woman in black brought a plate with a couple of samosas and a pot of tea and cleared away Daffyd's remains.

Aashrita glanced over at me then poured herself a cup of tea.

"Nothing ventured, nothing gained," I thought to myself.

"Hello," I said, trying to be friendly.

She glanced up at me again, smiled briefly and concentrated on a samosa. I got the impression she had no idea who I was.

"I was at the dentist earlier," I said, pointing to my cheek as though it would help her remember me.

Her pretty face creased slightly as she sifted through the many patients who had no doubt passed through her computer that morning, then cleared as she remembered.

"I'm still married," she said lightly and bit into the samosa with her perfect teeth.

I went slightly pink.

"Sorry about that," I said. "I, err, over reacted to the anaesthetic."

She poked a pea that had fallen out of the samosa with the nail of her little finger. The curry sauce made it glisten.

"Do you live round here?"

She turned those lustrous eyes on me again.

“Yes,” she said, slightly exasperated. “With my husband and son.”

I gave up and went back to my car then changed my mind and went to the post office to check the PO box. There was a card saying there was a package waiting so I went in and claimed it. Back at the car I opened it and found it was the binoculars. They had only taken three weeks to arrive from China which was fairly fast.

I drove back to my sanctuary, noting Daffyd's house as I went past. There was no sign of life so I guessed he was still in Holyhead waiting for his wife. The tide was just lapping at the drawbridge so I drove across and parked.

I unwrapped the binoculars and looked at them. According to the ad on eBay they were zoom binoculars and magnified anywhere from thirty times to two hundred times. I got out of the car and focused on the beacon at the top of the tower. It looked quite large and I fiddled with the zoom and it suddenly went to maximum and I could make out the clips on the metal frames of the glass panels. Impressive. The only problem was that their sheer size made them very difficult to hold steady, even though they were lightweight. The clips bobbed and danced all over the place. I decided I'd treat myself to a tripod on the next payday.

Climbing the tower to test the binoculars from the balcony, I stopped off in the control room to see if there was anything noteworthy in the logs. For the first time since I'd been there, there was. It seemed transistor A23 in the backup control circuit for the lens assembly was predicted to fail in the next forty eight hours. I have no idea how electrical circuits are able to predict when electrical components are expected to fail. Maybe it's something to do with the rate of flow of electricity through the component or maybe it's just a statistical thing. Either way, it's impressive.

I decided to go up to the mechanism room and see which component A23 was so I would have some idea of what to look for in the store room down below. I ran lightly up the stairs, it was only one flight and I was a lot fitter than I had been, and removed the panel covering the

electrical system. Each of the components was neatly labelled with their identifying codes and A23 was a red transistor, about an inch long, with three pins that looked to simply pull out. This was excellent news as I was not much good at soldering and had a tendency to let the solder run so that it short circuited whatever I was soldering. The only downside was that if there was a spare it would be all the way downstairs which meant a long climb all the way back up. I decided to postpone replacing it until the morning. After all, the log did say I probably had 48 hours.

I stood back up and replaced the panel and headed for the staircase. My foot kicked something and it skittered across the floor. I bent to retrieve it and stared at it in astonishment. It was a red transistor about an inch long and had three pins. I turned it over and there, on the other side, was a neat label saying A23.

“Wow,” I said to myself. “What an amazing coincidence. I wonder if it still works or if its a faulty one left by mistake when it was last swapped? Only one way to find out.”

I took the panel off and flicked the power switch. Very little happened but the low hum stopped and the lens control mechanism lost its poised and ready look. I gently pulled the A23 transistor out of the circuit board and inserted the one I'd found on the floor and put the old one in my pocket. Then, gritting my teeth, which didn't hurt anymore, and crossing my fingers on my left hand I flicked the power switch back on. The hum returned and the control mechanism suddenly looked alive again. This didn't mean A23 was working though. No doubt the technical boys knew exactly what it did but I didn't have a clue. It could be that its role only happened when the mechanism was doing something or even, conceivably, when it had failed to do something. A23 could be part of the backup lighting system rather than the backup control system.

I went back to the control room and checked the log. Sure enough, the power off and power on had been noted and there was an entry saying that A23 had been replaced and was working correctly and was not in a pre-failure state. I breathed a sigh of relief. Time to check out the binoculars!

I went to the table where I'd left them and they weren't there. This was very strange. I distinctly remembered putting them on the table when I went into the control room, before checking the log. Still, the mind can play tricks on you so I figured I must have left them downstairs in the car. I certainly wasn't going to go back down to get them and climb back up here again. They could wait until tomorrow.

I checked the time on the computer and saw there was still a good hour until sunset so I decided to go up to the balcony and enjoy the view for a while, even though I didn't have the binoculars. I confess I was scared to go up after dark as I was afraid of the sheer power of the beam of light from the beacon and I didn't want to get cut in half if it acted like a laser. Even if it didn't, it might give me cancer or make me sterile or something. Certainly it would blind me if I looked directly at it that close up. They'd warned me about that on my training course.

I stepped out on to the balcony and gazed around. There were plenty of clouds but it wasn't raining, in fact it hadn't rained all day, and it was pretty clear. There were two container ships far out on the horizon and, closer in, there was a smallish power boat heading towards Holyhead. I went over to my chair to sit down and froze in astonishment. There, sitting on the seat, the neck cord neatly coiled and the lens caps in place, were my binoculars.

Waiting for me.

Chapter Seven

I spent Christmas that year all on my own.

Both my parents were dead, my dad when I was ten and my mum a couple of years ago and I wasn't close with any other relations. My friend Gerry would probably have been pleased to see me but his wife Susan didn't like me and the only contact I'd had with him since moving out of his house was a brief phone call when I told him I'd found a job and he wished me well in my new career and hadn't made any suggestion of staying in touch. Raquel, of course, was history.

Up here I was on nodding terms with a few people and it was unlikely that Daffyd or Aashrita would welcome my company. I didn't even know if Hindus recognised Christmas. So I did myself roast chicken and roast potatoes and a steamed chocolate pudding and toasted the sea and the rain with a bottle of local cider on the desolate foreshore. Life and shipping goes on regardless. I light up the world every day, I told myself, so who needs false gaiety?

As a special treat I visited the Christmas sales in Bangor and got myself a lovely, thick, fluffy, long dressing gown in Debenhams, marked down by 80%. It was russet brown in colour with a silvery grey sheen and had a hood. Perfect for the chill evenings and misty mornings of my part of the seaside and kept my head warm, although I was growing a beard and my hair was getting a bit shaggy. Not that it gets especially cold but sometimes the wind can be icy when it hurtles down from the north and forces its way in through the gaps around the doors and windows.

I also wandered into a fishing shop as I had a vague idea about taking up fishing so I could supplement my income and diet with some fish every now and then. Not that I knew anything about fishing or even what to do with a fish if I ever caught one. The man in the shop, Dai, convinced me to get a 'surf fishing combo' which apparently was exactly what I wanted since it was designed to be used from the shore rather than a boat and came with an impressive collection of accessories such as fishing line, hooks and a reel. It came with a guarantee for parts and labour although not for fish sadly, those would be down to me.

Dai also tried to sell me a subscription to Survivalist UK Magazine which I declined although I did feel tempted by some sexy looking guns. For a few fleeting moments I imagined myself in the SAS, stalking seagulls in seaweed camouflage but I knew even less about guns than I did about fishing and at least a fishing rod wouldn't shoot me in the leg by accident. The fishing hooks were extremely sharp though and I managed to prick my thumb with one and the dot of blood made me wonder about the validity of the whole endeavour but I quashed the doubt and stood firm and resolute. I would be a fisherman. The UK's only fisherman lighthouse keeper. Pretty cool huh.

I also found a pop up book shop and doubled my collection of cook books by buying, for the princely sum of £3.50, a book which not only showed me how to cook fish in seventy five tantalisingly different ways, mostly using herbs and spices I'd never heard of, but also how to clean and gut them. The illustrations were somewhat off putting. When I got home I put the fishing stuff in a corner of the kitchen and put on my dressing gown and pretended I was Laurence of Arabia for a while until I fell off the back of the couch while preparing to blow up a Turkish train and bruised my shin.

On New Year's Day I spent some time in the late afternoon sitting on the balcony of the tower watching a tremendous storm out to sea. Most of it was over the horizon but I could see the flashes of lightening flicker and hear the thunder muffled with distance, like a war was raging. As the sun set and I retreated into my little hideaway, rain was starting to fall and the wind was getting gusty. According to the Met Office the storm was around fifty miles wide and slowly heading south east. Anglesey was going to be in for a wild night and I would be the first point of contact.

I went to sleep with rain lashing the windows and the wind moaning under the front door. Something metallic thumped against the side of the house and rattled noisily for a few seconds then stopped. It sounded like the bucket I kept next to the water tank and was probably already halfway to Cardiff. I snuggled deeper into my bedclothes and tried to think happy thoughts. Storms have an awesome intensity and when you're all alone on the edge of the world it's a struggle to stop them from feeling personal.

The storm had intensified when I was woken. It was a little after 6am and the wind howled. Rain and, very probably waves, tried to smash my windows and the little house shuddered as thunder shook the entire isthmus. Still, I'd slept through it up till then so what had woken me?

There it was again. A voice from the hallway.

I very nearly wet the bed. Who on earth would be in my little cottage on a night like this? On any night come to think of it. I sat up in bed and listened hard. Had it been the wind and my imagination? No, I heard it again. I couldn't make out the words but it sounded male. I slid out of bed and slipped on my dressing gown and grabbed a pillow to use as a weapon.

I crept into the hallway and listened intently. The wind made it impossible to hear anyone breathing or light footsteps but I was so alert I was sure I would be able to *feel* another presence. I felt nothing, other than sweat inside my dressing gown and a looseness in my bowels. I crept down the hall keeping contact with the wall and heading for the kitchen where I'd find a knife to supplement my pillow.

“Mayday, mayday, mayday, KWM Pride, mayday, over,” came from directly in front of me and I screamed.

I ran to the light switch and turned it on and the hall was deserted. I ran from room to room, turning on every light and brandishing my pillow as threateningly as I could. After a minute or so it repeated.

“Mayday, mayday, mayday, KWM Pride, mayday, over.”

It seemed to be coming from the hallway, at the kitchen end. I went into the hall and stared intently from behind the pillow.

“Mayday, mayday, mayday, KWM Pride, mayday, over.”

Ahhh, it seemed to be coming from a small, grey box tucked into the ceiling in a corner above the back door. I'd never noticed it before. I went and stood under it and realised it was a small speaker.

The message was being repeated every minute or so. It suddenly struck me that the lighthouse control system must have picked up a distress call and was relaying it down to the cottage.

Shit! There was a ship in distress and not far from my lighthouse! I threw down my pillow as it was no longer reassuring and ran to the front door to pull on my boots. I opened the front door and was immediately slammed in the face and chest as the wind tried to blow it through the back door. I eased myself out from between the door and the wall and remembered to grab my keys before using all my strength to pull the door shut behind me.

Rubbing my chest, I made my way to the tower, pressed against the wall by the wind and getting thoroughly soaked before I was able to unlock the tower and get inside. I grabbed the towel I kept hung up beside the door as it frequently rained and ran up the steps leaving wet footprints. In the control room I flicked on both radios and slumped into my chair, wheezing like a heavy smoker. It was the first time I'd actually run up the stairs. I really needed to stop eating white chocolate and raspberry muffins.

"... KWM Pride, mayday, over." came over the radio I kept permanently tuned to channel sixteen, the International Distress channel. Something was clearly wrong as the message had been repeated for at least five minutes and there had been no responses. Usually the Coastguard responded almost immediately.

I reached for my protocol folder and found the page for handling a distress call. The first thing I had to do was respond to the call and note the time in the Distress Call Log Book. I grabbed the log book off the shelf above the radios and tried to pick up the microphone and flick the transmit switch at the same time and dropped everything. My heart was pounding and my mouth was dry and I was dripping onto the top of the radio.

I forced myself to calm down a little and leaned back so I didn't short out the radio. I picked the log book off the floor and opened it to a fresh page; I couldn't remember the date and I didn't know what the time was. I reached over and turned on the computer monitor to find out the date and time.

“Mayday, mayday, mayday, KWM Pride, mayday, over,” echoed through the room. Well, they hadn't sunk yet which was a positive.

I grabbed the pen and tried to write the date but the frigging pen wouldn't work. I scribbled on the page and licked the tip but nothing. I hurled it across the room in frustration. Another pen appeared beside me.

“Thanks,” I said, without thinking, and wrote down the date and time leaving damp spots on the page. I pulled the microphone cord to retrieve the microphone and managed to flick on the transmit switch.

“KWM Pride, KWM Pride, Pwyntyderwydd Lighthouse here, distress call logged at 6:38 GMT, repeat Pwyntyderwydd Lighthouse, distress call received, over,”

I tried to sound calm and confident, perhaps the greatest sham of my life so far. A ship in distress really doesn't want to talk to anyone in a panic, it just makes things worse. They'd told me that on my training.

“Lighthouse, Lighthouse, KWM Pride receiving, KWM Pride receiving, nice to hear your voice, over,”

Perhaps it was my imagination but the calm voice sounded relieved.

I switched quickly through several channels on the other radio. The first few were either full of static or had voice traffic.

“KWM Pride, KWM Pride, Pwyntyderwydd Lighthouse, switch to channel 7, repeat switch to channel 7, over”

The protocol book said to do this so that the distress channel was reopened in case there were other vessels in distress.

On the other radio I transmitted “KWM Pride, Pwyntyderwydd Lighthouse, acknowledge, over” then flicked to receive.

Sure enough channel seven crackled to life.

“Lighthouse, lighthouse, KWM Pride, receiving you, over”

“KWM Pride, Pwyntyderwydd Lighthouse, identify yourself and the nature of your emergency, over.” I needed this for the log book and, of course, it would help me decide what, if anything, I could do.

“Lighthouse, KWM Pride, registered in Panama, carrying 80,000 tons of petroleum, out of Rotterdam, bound for Barrow, Captain Markus Janssen, crew of seven, I repeat,” and he repeated all the details so I could jot them down.

“KWM Pride, Pwyntyderwydd Lighthouse, what is the nature of your emergency, Captain?”

“We were hit by lightning and had an electrical fire and have lost all steerage. We are drifting in a storm,” he replied calmly as though it were perfectly normal routine. “Could you spell the name of your lighthouse? I can't find you on the charts.”

He sounded Dutch or German and Pwyntyderwydd wasn't the easiest name to get your head around. I spelled it out to him and flicked to receive.

“Jezus, wat doen we daar?” I heard faintly over the radio, then “It appears our navigation system is faulty too. We appear to be a lot further east than I thought.

I used the computer to get the bearing of his signal.

“KWM Pride, you are on a bearing of three five seven point two degrees from me, distance unknown,” This meant they were almost directly due north of me.

“Thank you lighthouse,” he made no attempt to say the name. There was a long pause then

“I can see a light on that bearing. It must be you, over”

This meant he was only a few miles away and since the storm was still heading south east it looked like 80,000 tons of refined petrol was heading almost directly my way. Shame the Toyota was diesel.

“Have the coastguard made contact?” I asked.

“No, you are our only contact.”

I leaned over to the other radio and switched it to channel zero, used exclusively by the coastguard. There was nothing but loud static. I tried transmitting but there was no response.

“KWM Pride, I am unable to contact coastguard by radio. Will try to contact by phone. Ending transmission on this channel. Suggest you resume transmission of distress call on channel sixteen until I contact you again, over”

“OK, thank you,” said Captain Janssen. He didn't seem particularly worried but I guess nervous types don't get to become captains of oil tankers.

I got the folder of contacts off the shelf and found the phone number of the coastguard. I reached into my pocket for my mobile.

Shiiiiittttt! I'd left it in the cottage!

I flew all the way downstairs and ran to the cottage getting soaked again on the way. I grabbed my phone and ran up the stairs to the balcony at the top. The wind was almost gale force and the rain was horizontal. The occasional wave crashed over the isthmus. I clung to the railing, gasping for breath with my legs trembling from the effort. I worked my way round to the south east side and huddled in the lee of the tower, protected from the worst of the wind. I tried to dial the coastguard's phone number and found I'd left the number in the control room.

I staggered back round to the doorway and down to the control room and grabbed the contacts book and the log book so I could relay the details then I stopped.

How on earth was I going to be able to hold two folders and read from them and operate a phone with all that wind and rain up there?

My heart sank. There were only two options. One was to wait until the

storm had died down, by which time it would be too late for Captain Janssen and his ship and very possibly me if they actually hit the lighthouse or, scarifying though it was, I would have to go inside the beacon room. While the beacon was working. With over 500 pounds of lenses and reflectors spinning relentlessly six times a minute. With a 1000 watt light bulb generating heat like a furnace.

Still, I'd been in there enough times to clean the lenses so I knew there was a wide enough gap between the array and the glass panels if I was careful and, if there was a signal there, I might be able to lie on the floor.

I stuffed the folders inside my dressing gown and made my way up to the beacon. I timed my way into the beacon room so that the light wasn't shining on me and dropped to the floor and slid the panel shut. There was a signal, thank god.

“Coastguard Dover,” answered a female voice.

“Pwyntyderwydd Lighthouse,” I said, trying to sound official. The last thing I wanted was for them to think this was a prank call. “I have a vessel in distress to my north.”

“Where on earth is Pwyntyderwydd Lighthouse?” said the voice.

“North Wales,” I replied. “Where are you?”

“Kent. For some reason the system's been putting all calls through to us tonight. It should be routing you automatically to your nearest coastguard centre. Ahh yes, I have you on the map. I'll put you through to Holyhead Operations Centre.”

“Coastguard Holyhead,” came another voice, almost immediately.

“Pwyntyderwydd Lighthouse here. I have a vessel in distress bearing three five seven point two, KWM Pride carrying 80,000 tons of petroleum. They have lost steerage and navigation and have not been able to contract you.”

“We've been having magnetic disruptions all night,” said the man.

“What channel did they contact you on?”

“Seven,”

“Give me all the details you have.”

I gave him everything I knew.

“OK, we will take over from here. Please continue to monitor channel seven until we make contact and call us if the situation changes. Thank you.” He hung up.

I crawled back out of the beacon room, my dressing gown and pyjamas nicely dry, and made my way back down to the control room. I could hear the coastguard trying to contact KWM Pride on channel seven and telling all other vessels to clear the channel. I used the other radio, still on channel sixteen.

“KWM Pride, KWM Pride, Pwyntyderwydd Lighthouse, Pwyntyderwydd Lighthouse, over.”

“Lighthouse, KWM Pride here, over.”

“Have contacted coastguard, switch to channel seven, over.”

“Channel seven, thank you lighthouse, switching now, out.” There definitely was relief in his voice this time.

I heard KWM Pride acknowledge the coastguard and stayed listening in. The coastguard explained that due to the weather conditions they could not dispatch a helicopter to locate KWM Pride but three coastguard ships had already launched and were on their way to follow my bearing to try to locate them.

I had a sudden thought and checked the bearing of KWM Pride's signal on the computer.

When there was a break in their conversation, I jumped in quickly.

“Coastguard, coastguard, Pwyntyderwydd Lighthouse, Pwyntyderwydd

Lighthouse, bearing of KWM Pride now three five five point niner from me, repeat three five five point niner, acknowledge, over.”

“Pwyntyderwydd Lighthouse, coastguard, bearing three five five point niner, acknowledged, thank you, out.”

There was silence as he broadcast that update to the three coastguard ships on their way.

It was half an hour before the coastguard ships found KWM Pride and another three hours before they managed to attach lines to the ship and get it under tow, using all three coastguard vessels. In the middle of a raging storm. Without crashing into each other. I was seriously impressed as it was hard enough for me to simply walk from the cottage to the tower on solid ground without having to deal with rising and sinking forty feet with every wave.

I kept an eye out through the control room window and an hour or so after dawn I was able to see KWM Pride and one of the coastguard vessels dimly through the storm. I estimated they were perhaps a mile away which meant they were only scant yards from the edge of the shelf that Anglesey sat on. It was a shallow water shelf with jagged rocks which was why the lighthouse had been built there in the first place. The nearest port big enough to handle a medium sized oil tanker was Liverpool.

When they reached the safety of Liverpool I went down to my cottage for a late lunch and several re-hydrating drinks. Exciting though it had been, on reflection I thought I preferred the quiet life when nothing happens. Then I remembered the pen and my unconscious acknowledgement that someone or something had given it to me. Had there been a spare pen on the desk, which there hadn't been as the spares were in a handleless mug on the table, I would have just picked it up without feeling the need to say 'thank you'.

There had been a number of strange occurrences which I'd tried to explain away rationally, like the A23 transistor, but I felt the time had come to finally face facts. My subconscious clearly had already which, I figured, was why I wasn't freaking out. Besides, whatever it was, it wasn't malicious. With the possible exception of repeatedly moving my

chair on the balcony, everything else had been helpful and maybe whatever it was thought that spot was the best view. Anyway, the chair never moved when I was sitting in it and the binoculars, the transistor, even the pen that morning had been benevolent helpful acts. As I sat there nursing my third cup of coffee I realised something else. Everything strange had happened inside the tower. Nothing strange had happened inside the cottage or outside on the isthmus.

Then another thought struck me. I'd been there a few days over two months and the last time the lighthouse had failed had been a month or so before I arrived. That mean that a system failure was long overdue. Interesting. It was too early to be sure but maybe the mere fact that I was here meant the failures had stopped. Maybe, and this freaked me out a little, just maybe whatever was in the tower got lonely and fiddled with things to attract attention. Oh boy.

A week or so later I did my regular PO box run and found there was a large, heavy package addressed simply to The Keeper, Pwyntdyrwydd Lighthouse, Wales. Inside were four large bottles of Bols Geneva, the Dutch national spirit, and a handwritten note that said

“Many thanks, Capt Marcuss Janssen and crew, KWM Pride.”

It was disgusting, but I swallowed a glassful anyway on the tower balcony, raising my hand in salute in the general direction of Liverpool. I left another glassful in the control room as an experiment. It was still there the next day although the level looked a little lower than it had. Maybe some of the alcohol had evaporated or there was a drunk mouse or two sleeping off a hangover.

Or maybe not.

Chapter Eight

To: jruthe@plh.trinityhouse.co.uk
From: rrolls@trinityhouse.co.uk
Subject: Congratulations and update
15:21 16/01/19

Well Done Walter!

We received a letter from the CEO of KWM Oil yesterday, copy attached, formally thanking us for your attentiveness and efforts in preventing the loss of their tanker LWM Pride and the damage to the environment that the leakage of potentially 80,000 tons of petroleum over the Welsh coast would have caused. The cost of a clean up would have been equally horrific. The Chairman of Trinity House will be writing to you in the next few days with our official commendation as well.

On a practical note, we have given permission for BBC Wales Today to produce a ten minute documentary about the lighthouse and, of course, its keeper. The interviewer, Sian Thomas, and her crew will be down on Friday, 18th, and I will motor over to be with you to represent Trinity House. I'll come down tomorrow and stay in Holyhead so you don't need to put me up for the night. I trust you will join me for dinner?

I'm also informed that you had to use your own cellular phone to contact the coastguard as there is no telephone at the lighthouse. This was a regrettable oversight on our part. The telephone was disconnected and removed when the site was automated and the line converted for data signals. In the next couple of weeks a technician will drop by to install a VoIP telephone system for you.

Finally, we've noted that there have been no system failures for over three months now. Have you identified the cause(s) of the earlier failures?

Once again, excellent work.

Regards

* * *

A nice email but potentially a bit of a problem.

I'd been happily rationalising every strange occurrence, usually in terms of my forgetting something or not noticing something, like the speaker in the hallway, for example. I'd been told on my training that if anyone used the Distress channel for more than six minutes that the channel would be routed to the cottage but I hadn't thought it through. There must have been any number of distress calls made while I'd been Pwyntyderwydd but the coastguard had responded promptly so the calls had not been routed down and I'd never thought to look for a speaker. It's surprisingly easy not to notice things.

So when transistors appeared or whatever, I usually found a way to explain it in terms of what's acceptable, such as a minor lapse of memory, rather than what isn't, such as the supernatural. It wasn't as though any of this was even scary. Maybe if knives had suddenly hurled themselves at me in the kitchen it would be different but who screams and runs away when they find a pen on a table unexpectedly?

Anyway, as I said, my subconscious had clearly known for some time and my conscious had finally caught up. The lighthouse was haunted. And, since I'm a fairly rational sort of person and understand the principle of cause and effect, it seemed to me that, given there was some paranormal entity in the lighthouse and the lighthouse regularly shut down for no reason that the techies could fathom, the two must be somehow connected. How to test this hypothesis was one problem but not the major one. The major one was what to do about it. My boss was clearly hoping for some sort of explanation for the failures and why they'd stopped and there was the chance that something unexpected might happen while he or the BBC were there.

I could just up and quit. Not a desirable option as it hadn't been that long since I'd been unemployed and more or less homeless and I didn't want to do that again. Equally, there seemed to be no threat to

me or even irritation. It was really no worse than having a mouse in the house with the benefit that it didn't eat my food or, as far as I knew, carry any disease. I also didn't really have any plausible reason to quit.

On the other hand I could report my suspicions to Mr Rolls. Even if I felt I had proof this would not be a good pathway and getting proof would be almost certainly impossible. At one extreme I'd be held up as a crank weirdo and sacked and at the other extreme he'd send in an exorcist or someone like that and get rid of the ... thing ... and then sack me because they didn't need to man the lighthouse any more.

I could only think of one option that meant I could keep the job and my little house. Live with it and keep quiet. After all, people keep Pitbulls and Rottweilers and snakes and so on as pets and they have known undesirable qualities. My ... pet ... had no apparent undesirable qualities.

I scouted a little on Wikipedia and decided I probably had a poltergeist since I had never seen any shapes or even ectoplasm, as if I'd know what that looked like anyway, and objects moved which seemed to be the basic definition of a poltergeist. Having decided to adopt a pet and as I have a strange sense of humour I decided to call it Mr Polly after a book by H G Wells although I didn't know if it derived from a male, a female or even a human. I was pretty sure Mr Polly wasn't demonic although, having watched some spy thrillers, I suppose it could have been a sleeper. Waiting there for some future signal to launch some sort of assault but if that were the case why draw attention to itself?

So I did what any rational person would have done under the circumstances, I read the email out aloud in the control room and asked Mr Polly to keep quiet until everyone else had gone. I figured exorcism would not be in Mr Polly's best interests and presumably even poltergeists have some survival instinct.

* * *

To: rrolls@trinityhouse.co.uk

From: jruthe@plh.trinityhouse.co.uk

Subject: Re: Congratulations and update
16:39 16/01/19

Thank you for the congratulations. Do you like Dutch Geneva?

Re BBC Wales Today, should I get a haircut and wear a suit?

Rgds Walter

To: jruthe@plh.trinityhouse.co.uk
From: rrolls@trinityhouse.co.uk
Subject: Congratulations and update
16:44 16/01/19

Hate the stuff.

This is TV – you have to look the part. No suit, no haircut. Tidy the place up though as there'll be mums watching and we don't want them to see anything inappropriate.

Regards

Royston Rolls
Operations
Trinity House

* * *

Inappropriate? I wondered what he suspected he'd find. To be safe I washed my dirty dishes and bundled my dirty laundry into the wardrobe.

I met Mr Rolls at Tafarn y Llew Coch, basically the Red Lion Pub, in Holyhead. He was wearing a tweed suit and looked out of place. I was wearing a dirty sweater, jeans and boots and looked like one of the locals and we both had fish and chips which were nice. I resolved to get out my fishing rod and have a go at catching my own fish.

“Damned good show over the KWM Pride,” he said after he'd finished eating. “I knew you'd do something like that one day.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“Your attitude,” he said, finishing his Guinness. “Another cider?”

“Oh, yes please, thanks.”

He went to the bar and came back with replacements.

“Remember that question you asked me at the interview? About what to do when the light's failed and there's a ship about to hit the rocks?” he asked.

I didn't really remember. The whole interview was hazy but I nodded anyway. Nodding is a useful skill in conversations.

“You were the only applicant who showed any concern about the ships. That's why I gave you the job. All the others were concerned about the benefits to them of the job. Good attitude. Keep it up.”

I thanked him and we watched the local darts team losing to a team from Penrhos for a while.

“Umm, in your email about getting a haircut you said you didn't want any mums seeing anything inappropriate,” I said. “I'm curious, what do you think I get up to here?”

“Ohhh, we've had all sorts, back in the days when we had keepers.” He clapped as one of the local players managed a triple twenty on the dart board.

He turned to me and started to reminisce with a happy smile on his face. I got the feeling that he didn't wholly favour automation. In fact, I think he was a bit of an old romantic.

“Ohh, I remember Bert Postlethwaite,” he laughed delightedly. “I turned up one day with a reporter to find Bert passed out drunk on his bed and a homemade still in the machine room. He'd rigged up a belt so as the lens array turned it mashed barley for him. Damn ingenious chap.”

He took a mouthful of Guinness.

“And Kate Truemann, one of our few lady keepers, down in Portland. She used the beacon to dry herbs for her homemade medicines and love potions and what not. Did a roaring trade at the local markets I heard. And then there was Old Tom Bunston, up at Souter on the east coast. He was a character. He had ... an arrangement of sorts with a local sheep farmer. I turned up one day to inspect the place and he'd slaughtered a sheep and it was hanging on the washing line dripping blood into the grass while he butchered it. Have the RSPCA round now, of course.”

We applauded as the local team won that particular leg to level the score in the third set, two sets to none behind.

“And Hamish Travers, up at Walney. The silence drove him a bit off the rails and he got religion, poor chap. Got through a lot of nails and when we asked why we found he was using them to engrave the Bible on the beacon glass so the Word of God would blaze out across the world.”

He pulled out his pipe and lit it contentedly.

“And Dave Varney. Now he was a strange lad. We had to get rid of him when we found he had over a hundred stray cats living in the lighthouse. He said there was a mouse problem.”

I was feeling a little relieved. Not only did he not think I was a drug addict or something but Mr Polly wouldn't seem to be that bad after all. I was in good company. The locals were now three sets to none behind. The barman came over.

“Friad it's no smoking in here,” he said gruffly. “You'll have to go outside.”

Mr Rolls lost his good humour and retired to his hotel very soon afterwards.

The next day dawned overcast and gloomy. Mr Rolls was delighted. He was puffing away on his pipe.

“Can't have it looking too idyllic,” he said, rubbing his hands together. “People need to understand you're doing an important job, not having an extended holiday at the taxpayers' expense.”

He peered over the fence behind the lighthouse at the waves crashing into the sharp jagged rocks.

“Excellent, excellent. Now my boy, leave all the policy questions to me. You just answer anything they ask about this lighthouse and what the job entails and so on. And be ready to tell them all about your heroism.”

“It wasn't heroic,” I protested. “I just sat by the radio.”

“Play it up, boy, play it up. They don't want to hear that it's like working in a supermarket. They want excitement and glamour! Danger! Romance! Who knows, this documentary may help get our funding increased.”

The BBC people turned up around midday. I was expecting two or three large trucks and cameramen with massive cameras on huge trolleys that lifted them into the air. Instead a single Ford Focus pulled up and three people got out. Sian Thomas was inappropriately dressed in high heels and a white knee length dress with goose bumps on her bare arms. Her cameraman was a bored looking middle aged man with a thick beard and an impressive beer gut and carried a small handheld camcorder. The third was a young boy of about 17 dressed in a very tight pair of stretch jeans and a faux leather jacket with a bright pink scarf around his neck. He carried a large metal suitcase which turned out to be full of makeup.

Sian picked her way carefully up the steps to the cottage.

“Royston? Walter?” she asked, looking at us anxiously. “I'm Sian Thomas from BBC Wales Today.

“I'm Royston Rolls,” he said charmingly. “This is Walter, the keeper.”

Sian gestured towards her companions. “Wayne, my cameraman, and Dominic, makeup.”

Wayne was wandering around the enclosure, looking at the lighthouse and cottage and sighing miserably.

“Light’s shite,” he called to Sian. “Need some floods.” He lurched back the car and buried his head in its boot.

“We’ll, umm, need a power point or two,” said Sian. “I’m thinking we’ll do the interview with the lighthouse in the background.”

Dominic was leaning against the wall of the cottage.

“Bit windy, dear,” he said. “Not sure I’ve got enough ultra strong hair spray.”

Sian’s usually stylish shoulder length blonde hair was looking a bit like a car wash roller.

“Too high,” said Wayne, returning with two small black boxes on a T shaped contraption and a large reel of electrical cable. “Either the people’ll be tiny or we go so far back the lighthouse’ll be tiny. Either way loose impact.”

Sian looked crestfallen.

“You might like a shot of the rocks over the fence over there,” suggested Mr Rolls.

Sian and Wayne went and peered over. “Dangerous,” she said. “Very nice.”

“Best do outdoor shots with no people for general background and either do the interviews in the cottage or up top there, with the light itself,” said Wayne.

“Let’s do it in the cottage,” I said brightly.

“Up there,” said Sian, pointing up. “Get some views as well?”

Wayne grunted approval.

“Must get awfully lonely up here,” said Dominic to me, his eyes travelling up my legs.

“Got the key, Walter?” asked Mr Rolls, trying the door to the lighthouse.

I unlocked the door and let everyone in.

“Ooooh, that wind,” exclaimed Dominic. “Hmmm, very austere in here. Very manly.” He put his hand on my arm.

I went to the foot of the stairs.

“Only one hundred and fifty steps,” I said. “This way.”

Wayne started up the steps, closely followed by Sian and Mr Rolls.

“Lead on,” said Dominic, “I like the way you move.”

“You first,” I insisted. I didn't fancy him staring at my bum all the way up. “Then I can catch you if you fall.”

“Mmmm,” said Dominic and I let him get some way ahead since I had no desire to catch him if he did fall.

We paused for a rest in the control room. Interestingly Wayne, despite carrying his belly, the camera and the lights was still breathing normally and wandered round the room taking some general footage of the equipment and the view. Sian, on the other hand, sagged into the chair, panting and fanning herself. Dominic was resting on the steps some way down.

“I suggest you use this room as your base,” I said. “It's got a table and power outlets.”

“How far up is the beacon?” asked Wayne. “I've only got fifty feet of power cable.”

“That'll be plenty,” I said.

“Oh, you must be so fit,” said Dominic, arriving at last. “Your legs must be superb.”

“Use that table,” said Sian.

Dominic obediently dumped his suitcase on the table and started unpacking his makeup things. Wayne disappeared upstairs trailing electrical cable.

“Bit tight up there,” he said when he returned, “but we’ll manage. Effing awesome clouds, use ‘em as backdrop.”

Dominic started fussing over Sian, making her look the cool, calm, gorgeous presenter she was on TV. Then he turned to me.

“How do you want him?” he asked Sian.

Sian studied me like a prize sheep.

“More windswept,” she said, “more Heathcliffe, more vitality. Shame about the jumper. Have you got one with holes in?”

I had to confess I hadn’t. She was disappointed and eyed a pair of Dominic’s scissors.

Dominic made me sit in the chair then spent ten minutes doing my hair and beard while Sian and Wayne discussed angles and other technical things. When he’d brushed and combed my hair to his satisfaction Dominic then started to tousle it carefully, using small twists of his hands and stepping back every now and then to check the effect. Then he plastered makeup all over my face.

“For the right colour balance,” he explained when I winced.

Sian came back down and looked critically at me.

“More windswept,” she said. “More masculine.”

Dominic put a few more twists in my hair and did something with a thin paintbrush around my eyes and dabbed something else on my

cheeks.

“I like it,” said Sian.

“Mmm, so do I,” said Dominic and pouted at me, wide eyed.

He held up a mirror. A tough looking pirate looked back at me.

“If only Raquel could see me now,” I thought.

“Where did I put that brush?” complained Dominic, looking around. “How did it get over there?” It was sitting on top of one of the radios.

“Magic,” I said.

“Ooooooh, I wish,” he giggled.

Wayne came down.

“One of me lights isn't working,” he said to us all generally.

“Problem?” asked Sian looking up sharply.

“Nah, just saying. Sun's coming out, won't need the floods.”

“OK,” said Sian. “I want to open with a general line or two about lighthouses and the need for them. That'll be you, Roy.”

“Royston” said Mr Rolls. Sian smiled disarmingly.

“Then cut to you, Walter. I'll ask you to tell me about that ship you saved. Then back to Royston,” with only a slight emphasis on his name, “for the Trinity House perspective then back to Walter for some background on how the light operates. Then we'll close with a tour of the cottage and some outside distance footage of the lighthouse and the rocks. OK?”

“OK,” said Mr Rolls.

“Light won't last forever,” said Wayne.

I nodded, wondering how I'd be able to look the same way the next time I bumped into Aashrita.

"Where's me frigging foundation gone?" asked Dominic, packing away. "Expensive stuff that is."

We did the interview. Mr Rolls had experience with these things and glibly rolled off apt phrases in the first take. I was nervous and stumbled a lot and needed three takes. We then stood and watched as Wayne filmed Sian with several different expressions and nodding interestedly in different ways.

"We'll edit it all together back in the studio," he said when he saw me watching. "Make it all look natural."

"OK, we're done here," said Sian. "Down to the cottage."

When he got to the door of the lighthouse, Dominic pounced.

"My foundation! How did it get here?" He looked suspiciously at Wayne who ignored him.

"Pig," Dominic muttered under his breath and pocketed the pot.

I took them on a tour of the cottage then Wayne went outside to do some distance shots of the lighthouse. Dominic took my hand and led me into the kitchen where he sat me down and scrubbed all my makeup off.

"Want me to wash your hair too?" he asked, running his fingers through it.

"No thanks," I said.

"Shame."

"He prefers girls," said Sian, coming into the kitchen and raising one manicured eyebrow at me. "Don't you."

I went a little red and stayed silent. She'd obviously noticed where I'd

been looking much of the afternoon. She laughed.

“Right, that's it. We'll be off. Nice to meet you Roy, Royston,” she shook his hand briskly, “and you Walter.” She shook my hand a lot more slowly. She handed us both business cards.

“Call me if you want to make changes and we'll discuss it,” she said looking at me. “My mobile's on the card.”

They piled back in to the Focus and left, Dominic giving me a long wave. Another twenty minutes and they'd have had to stay for dinner as the tide was coming in.

Mr Rolls saw me looking at Sian's business card.

“Don't waste your time,” he said kindly. “She'll have forgotten you before they're over that hill. She just acts that way so you stay amenable until after the broadcast.”

Two days later I received an mp4 format copy of the broadcast from Sian's secretary/assistant. I suppose it was quite good but I found it excruciatingly embarrassing to watch myself although Dominic clearly knew his business. I toyed with emailing Sian to ask if she'd have dinner with me but it was a long way to Cardiff and I doubted she'd want to come back here either. At least that was my excuse. The good news was that Mr Rolls had never once mentioned the failures while he was here.

Chapter Nine

“How be doing, man?” said Daffyd when I walked into the cafe.

I went into town every week to do my shopping and check the post and usually treated myself to a cappuccino and a muffin or two afterwards. I'm a creature of habit and slip easily into routines.

Daffyd hadn't been in for the last couple of weeks but he gestured in a friendly way for me to join him so I did.

“Been busy?” I asked. I'd never seen any sign of activity on his farm whenever I'd driven by, other than cows and sheep grazing.

“Calving,” he said. “Nightmare old time, need the vet soon I reckon.”

“One of your cows sick?”

“Allus is when calving. Them two year olds specially. First time see. Old uns used to it, like.”

Bronwyn, who owned the cafe and did a bit of waitressing when it got busy, brought my treat.

“Have you been on the farm long?” I asked.

“Born there, isn't it.”

“So did you know any of the previous lighthouse keepers?”

“All of them, since I were a lad.”

I didn't quite know how to ask if any of them had told him about strange happenings.

“What were they like?”

He sucked his teeth.

“Lonely ole job that. Make any man a bit strange, see.”

He peered at me shortsightedly.

“Mayhap you'n will too. Gi' it time.” He laughed into his pink milkshake.

“What do you mean strange?”

“See things after a time, hear things,” he said. “Llewellyn, back in the fifties, saw partitions, so 'ee said.”

“Partitions?” Things must be bad if someone thinks they are seeing temporary room dividers.

“Ydy, spirits. Most likely out of a bottle or two, isn't it.” He guffawed.

“Ohhh, an apparition,” I realised.

“Did any of the others see the apparitions?”

He stopped laughing and looked at me shrewdly.

“You seeing 'em then, man?”

I shook my head.

“No I haven't seen apparitions.” Which was true. “Just wondering what other keepers are like, seeing as how I'm the only one in Britain.”

I figured I'd gone as far as I could with this line of questioning. It sounded like the other keepers had had experiences and Daffyd was almost expecting me to go the same way.

“Do you know when the lighthouse was built?” I asked.

“This 'un, between the wars I heard say.”

He looked around and spotted Bronwyn on the other side of the cafe.

“When was lighthouse built, Bron?” he shouted. “You's older 'n me, see”

Bronwyn dumped a tray of dirty crockery on the counter and came over.

“1930s, isn't it,” she said. “Or you mean the old one?”

“Were there two then?” I asked.

“Nay man,” she replied. “Old 'un caught fire. This 'un was built to take its place. Separate cottage, see, on account of the keeper an' his family dying. Fried to a crisp they was.”

“Was bombed by Germans,” interrupted a one-legged man in a cloth cap.

“I yerd twas blown up when keeper dropped his lantern on his dynamite on account of how he was using it to catch fish.” This from a middle aged bottle blonde by the window. “Me mam said.”

“It were German bombers,” insisted the one legged man. “I seen 'em so I did.”

“G'orn with you, man,” said Daffyd. “War ended twenty years afore you was born.”

The one legged man glared at him and thumped his tea mug on the table.

“Gareth'll know. You talk to him,” Bronwyn said to me. “I can't sit here standing all day.” She went back to work.

“Who's Gareth?” I asked Daffyd.

“School teacher, up at Ysgol Gynradd,” he replied. “President of the History Society, see.”

I wandered up to the Primary School after Daffyd went to meet his wife on the off chance he'd still be there. He was.

“I'm Wal Ruthe,” I said, “the lighthouse keeper.”

We shook hands. I'd had a chance to think up a cover story while walking to the school.

"I was talking to Daffyd, who owns the farm around the lighthouse," I said. "He was telling me about ghosts in the old lighthouse. He thought you'd know something about that since you're President of the History Society."

"There isn't a History Society," he said with a smile. "No one else much cares, they prefer their local legends to uncovering the truth. It's my hobby."

He invited me to sit and I perched myself on a chair designed for eight year olds. It was surprisingly comfortable.

"At the cafe they couldn't even agree on how the old lighthouse got destroyed," I admitted.

"It wasn't destroyed. It was pulled down because it was getting unsafe and they wanted to upgrade it from the old oil fuelled beacon to electric," said Gareth. "I forget exactly when but it was after WW2. There's a plaque on the wall with the date or I could email you if you're interested. It's in my records somewhere."

I'd never noticed a plaque on the wall.

"So the keeper and his family didn't die in a fire then?"

"Oh there was a fire, back in the 1890s. The oil storage tank in the machine room caught light but it only held enough oil for one night's operation and didn't do a lot of damage. No one was hurt."

Well that put paid to my idea that Mr Polly might have something to do with a past keeper being burnt to death.

"Did any of the keepers die in the lighthouse?"

"Now that's a difficult question. I really couldn't say. A lighthouse was first built there in around 1822 or 23 so I would think in almost two hundred years someone would have died there but I don't remember

coming across any nasty stories. I'm guessing that's why you're asking. Ghosts you said?"

I nodded.

"Come to think of it, I seem to remember hearing that a lighthouse keeper was stabbed with a pitchfork because a farmer thought he was trying to seduce his wife and followed her one day and caught her in the act, so to speak. I think it was in the court records. He didn't die anyway, well obviously he did since that was well over a hundred years ago but he didn't die from the pitchfork stabbing at any rate. I seem to remember that the charge was against the farmer for taking the pig belonging to the lighthouse trust that owned the place after he'd stabbed the man."

He beamed at me delightedly. Obviously he didn't get much opportunity to talk about his hobby.

"Fined thirty shillings. What made it stick in my mind was that I saw the farmer's wife's name listed at the wives market a few weeks later so he was obviously trying to get his money back."

"The what?" I asked. Surely that wasn't what it sounded like?

"Yes, exactly. Fairly common in those days. Started in England in the late 1600s because divorce got so expensive only the very wealthy could afford it."

"You mean husbands would sell their wives at a market?" I was quite shocked.

"Oh absolutely. Round here they had a wives market every six months or so. The husband would put a halter around the poor woman's neck and auction her to the highest bidder. Daughters too sometimes, although that was frowned upon."

"Was it legal?"

"Well it wasn't illegal, let's put it that way. In fact, it wasn't unknown for the Poor Law Commissioners to force a husband to sell his wife so

they didn't have to accommodate the family in the workhouse. The last wives market in Anglesey was in 1898 although there were still some going on in England until the First World War, which of course had a dramatic impact on many local customs.”

“Didn't the women have any say in the matter?”

“That's a good question. Unfortunately most records from history are about men and very little has been kept about women unless they were related in some way to a particularly prominent man. I have heard though that in some cases the wife was able to choose her new husband although one imagines that those who were auctioned didn't have that option. The ones who could choose would probably have been sold privately. Still around of course, although it's illegal now in Britain but not in many countries. Look how many men have Filipino wives they've bought off the internet.”

“Good god.” I was quite stunned by this revelation. It had never been mentioned in History at school. About the only thing I still remembered from that was the code names of all the beaches that had been used in the Allied invasion of Normandy during WW2 - Omaha, Utah, Sword, Juno and Gold. Why I had to memorise them I'll never know.

“Anyway, back to ghosts,” said Gareth. “Your lighthouse is very isolated. No one has ever lived there other than the lighthouse keepers of course. I don't know a lot about ghosts but I think there'd have to be something very nasty about someone's death for them to hang around as a ghost and I've not come across anything nasty about any of the keepers.”

“How about a shipwreck?” I asked.

“Well, of course there have been hundreds, literally hundreds. That's why the lighthouse was built. The coast is littered with wrecks. But why would a ghost from a shipwrecked mariner haunt a lighthouse? I would expect the ghost to stay around the wreck itself. Although I suppose someone might have struggled ashore there before dying. No, I have to say I'm struggling myself here with that idea. Millions of people have died in shipwrecks and drownings and so on without

becoming ghosts.”

He stood up and went to clean his whiteboard.

“I think, if you want to have a ghost in your lighthouse, we're going to have to go back to the druids.”

“You mean like Gandalf and Merlin?” I asked.

He laughed. “Gandalf is fictional, although Merlin very likely was real. Sadly the druids didn't keep any written records so all we have to go on are the accounts of Roman writers and historians and they were very biased. You have heard of druids, I suppose?”

He turned away from his whiteboard to look at me.

“Yes, but I don't know anything about them except that they were wizards.”

“Oh my word, no,” he said enthusiastically and came back to sit in his chair.

“The druids were the aristocracy of the ancient Celts. There were some who may well have dabbled in sorcery of some form but most were priests, bards, healers, judges. They were fairly widespread throughout parts of Gaul, Ireland, Wales and Scotland. Even England I believe. Certainly all the Celtic areas.”

“What happened to them?”

“Oh the Romans wiped them out. Julius Caesar didn't approve of their ritual sacrifices and ordered them obliterated. Bit hypocritical really since he loved a good killing in the amphitheatre but then that was income earning entertainment rather than religious practice. Not a lot has changed really. Anyway, history is full of hypocrisy. Now, after Caesar's Gallic conquests the gallic druids either died or fled to Anglesey.”

This was all news to me.

“Why Anglesey?”

“Because Anglesey was sacred to the druids, a bit like Mecca to Muslims or Bethlehem to Christians. They called it Ynys Mon. It was their training centre and their spiritual centre. According to the Roman writers it took over twenty years to become a fully fledged druid which is probably why most only completed part of their training and stayed as bards or priests. After Claudius invaded England in AD 43 the Romans found the druids were thriving there and he banned them in 54. In 60, the Roman General Gaius Suetonius Paulinus, who was in command of the Roman army in Britain, decided to launch an all out assault on Anglesey in a final act of annihilation.”

“Did it work?”

“Ohh yes, most decidedly. There may well have been isolated druids who survived, particularly in Ireland, but the training centres or *nemeta* as they called them, sacred groves, were all on Anglesey and were destroyed and all their sacred knowledge was lost. Of course it came at a cost as Suetonius' focus on Anglesey left the rest of Britain undermanned and the Iceni on the other side of the country took advantage and rebelled. You've no doubt heard of Boudicca?”

He peered at me like a true school master.

“I don't think so,” I had to admit.

“Boadicea?” he prompted.

“Oh yes, I've heard of her.”

“Well she led the Iceni in their rebellion and scared the bejesus out of Nero who was about to order the withdrawal of Roman troops from Britain after Boudicca captured London when the news arrived that Suetonius had managed to defeat her army somewhere in the midlands. That was pretty much the end of any resistance to the Romans. They stayed here until 410 and the beginning of the collapse of the Roman Empire in the west. Personally I believe it was due to the destruction of the druids since that said that the gods had deserted the Britons and they just gave up resisting but I've no way of

proving that, of course.”

This was interesting stuff. I wished Gareth had been my history teacher at school.

“So there you have it. If there are any ghosts at your lighthouse they'll most likely be either druid sacrifices or possibly druids themselves who were killed by the Romans. There's no record of what the Romans did to individual druids but they certainly weren't squeamish people and they seemed to have a particular hatred of druids so it's quite possible that one or two may have died in a particularly gruesome way. Either way we're looking at around AD 60 or earlier. ”

He glanced at his watch.

“I'm afraid I have to go, my wife will be expecting me for dinner. It's been very nice to have met you Mr Ruthe. It's been delightful talking to someone who's interested in these things.”

It had been a fascinating afternoon. I drove slowly back to the lighthouse in the dark. The beacon lit up the sky and I could see it sweep the undersides of the clouds, welcoming me back home. The tide was in and I sat in the Toyota for an hour or so waiting for the water to subside enough for me to brave driving across.

I tried to imagine the area before it had become fields. Forests of oak, beech and horse chestnuts. Communities of robed Celtic priests and bards among the trees, practising their arts and rituals, gathering and sharing their knowledge. Armed Roman soldiers rampaging through the trees, the moonlight glinting off their breastplates and swords. The shouts and screams of battle, the dead and dying druids, the fires destroying their homes and nemeta. Perhaps even a druid chased to my isthmus, a Roman soldier or two after him. Looking out to sea in desperation before dying, perhaps praying, his blood mingling with the waves and the seaweed, his soul forever searching for final peace. I found it hard to believe.

I fixed myself a meal and settled down with a book I'd picked up in the library, *The Fabric Of Sin by Phil Rickman*. It was about an Anglican priestess who was also an exorcist who is called in to clean a

haunted house. Probably not the best choice for someone living alone in a lighthouse with a poltergeist that may well have druidic origins. Despite the radiator the cottage seemed a little chilly and the dark corners slightly threatening.

I suppose it was inevitable that when I woke in the middle of the night I would be frightened by the scratching at the window. My first thought was that whatever was in the lighthouse had managed to make its way to the cottage and was trying to find me. Still, I didn't study maths and science for nothing and I was able, after a distressing large number of overly tense moments, to logically conclude that if something paranormal had managed to escape the tower then it probably wouldn't have too much difficulty getting into the cottage. And, many long tense moments after that, I wondered why, if it harboured any ill will towards me, it hadn't already done something to me while I was actually in the tower and presumably an easier target. Still, it takes a long time for logic to overcome emotion and fear is one of the strongest emotions of all.

While the war raged between the hemispheres of my brain the scratching continued. Four or five scratches then a long pause then four or five more, with a faint moan of the wind as an eerie backdrop. I put on my bedside lamp, bought on special in a reject shop and which worked most of the time although it was a little temperamental and sometimes needed coaxing. Tonight though it was full of energy and gleefully filled the room with pale yellow light. The scratching stopped. Excellent.

“Probably just a large moth,” I thought to myself and turned the light off to resume my interrupted sleep.

Of course, logic is remorseless. Useful though it is for quelling fear, when the fear has been quelled you really don't want logic reawakening it.

“Moths are attracted to light,” said my left brain. “If it was a moth it would scratch when the light is on, not off.”

“Shut up, you friggin nuisance,” said my right brain. “Go to sleep.”

“Scratch, scratch, scratch, scratch,” said the window.

“Click,” said the lamp as I turned it back on.

I pulled on my trusty dressing gown and pulled the hood over my head for protection and flung open the curtain. There was nothing there, of course. If there had been it wouldn't have been making scary scratching noises. It would have mooed like an escaped cow or knocked on the door like any sensible person would. I went to the kitchen to get my torch to shine through the window and heard the scratching again. It was coming from the window with nothing there.

Armed with my torch and the carving knife I went to the front door and opened it, aiming my torch in the general direction of my bedroom window. A dim shadow flashed between my feet and I jumped back and swore in panic. I shone my torch down the hallway, which was a bit of overkill since the hall light was on.

“Miaow,” said the shadow and stalked into the kitchen as though everything was my fault.

I followed it into the kitchen and the black, brown and white cat went unerringly to the fridge and started rubbing itself against the edge.

“Where the hell did you come from?” I asked it.

“Maiowwwwww,” it said.

I put the torch and knife on the kitchen table and went back to shut the front door. When I returned to the kitchen the cat had jumped onto the edge of the sink and was attacking the remains of my dinner, its front paws in the frying pan.

I got a dish out of the cupboard and put it on the floor with some milk. The cat ignored it and concentrated on the frying pan. I put on the kettle and sat in a chair watching it.

“Looks pretty young,” I thought, “probably someone dumped it nearby and its come here.”

The nearest habitation was about four miles as the crow flies so it almost certainly wasn't a runaway. I made a cup of tea and watched the cat finish the washing up. Then it jumped down and proceeded to explore the kitchen. It didn't find the milk until I'd almost finished my tea.

“Sod it,” I said out loud. “Stay here if you want, I'm going back to bed.”

I turned off all the lights and went back to sleep.

In the morning it was pretty evident that the cat was female since she was stretched out on my quilt with her backside a couple of inches from my face. She stretched luxuriously and started to clean behind her ears. When I went to the toilet she glanced at me then moved to the warm patch where I'd been lying and curled up and went back to sleep.

When I was fully awake and breakfasted I went outside and walked all around the tower, studying it for any signs of a plaque. I couldn't find one so it looked like Gareth had been wrong on that point. I unlocked the tower door and went inside to check the logs and start collecting the morning's meteorological readings.

“Morning, Mr Polly,” I said conversationally, entering the control room. “Are you a druid?”

Chapter Ten

Holding the hook gingerly I carefully threaded the fishing line through the hole and tied it the way the man in the video on YouTube had done. It was easy. I let the hook dangle from a couple of inches of line and picked up a small ball of cheese and carefully pushed it onto the sharp point of the hook. The hook slid gently off the line and fell to the sand at my feet.

It was a lovely sunny day and I'd been psyching myself up into going fishing for a while. Ever since I'd bought the rod as a Christmas present to myself, in fact. It doesn't do to rush these things. The surf fishing combo kit had sat in the corner of the kitchen largely ignored since then, apart from one occasion when I'd unpacked it all onto the kitchen table to inspect and I'd ended up using the rod as a sword and repeatedly trying to kill a tub of margarine. I'd only used one segment of the rod for that though as its full length of ten feet was slightly longer than the kitchen.

The day before I'd watched some videos on how to surf fish and asked Mr Polly a few questions. I'd figured that if he lived on Anglesey before supermarkets were invented he must have gone fishing at some point in his life or at least seen others do it but he never answered any of my questions.

I picked up the hook and retied the line and gave a sharp tug to test it. The hook slid into my thumb and the cheese broke and fell off. Cat looked up from licking her bottom to see what I was swearing at and decided it was of no importance so she tried to kill a piece of seaweed that flapped unexpectedly in the breeze.

I eventually managed to tie the hook to the line but in a way I'm sure would never appear on YouTube. There were small red smears on the lure and the fresh piece of cheese on the hook and I hoped my blood wouldn't attract any sharks. I was in a small sandy cove about fifty yards or so from the lighthouse and if a shark attacked me I had nowhere to run. Hopefully sharks wouldn't be able to follow me up the eight or ten feet of grey sandstone. Dolphins could though. I'd seen them once at Sea Life Aquarium doing a display of acrobatics and jumping through hoops and stuff. I had a nagging feeling sharks were

related to dolphins.

With phase two complete I could move to phase three. Phase one, of course, had been assembling the three piece rod and reel and feeding the line through some rings. In the video the man had gracefully flicked his wrist and the hook had flown miles out to sea. I mimicked his stance, released the thingy on the reel so the line could run freely and almost as gracefully flicked my wrist and the rod forward. Wow! The hook had gone so far I couldn't see where it had hit the water. Impressive.

I clicked the locking mechanism of the reel and started to wind the line in gently. It was a dead cert that a fish would bite it as I pulled the line towards me. The rod started to twist backwards and now that it was taut I could see the line stretching back behind me. The hook had caught in a tuft of grass. Cat twitched her tail in disgust.

I disentangled the hook from the grass and retrieved the piece of cheese. I'd read online that cheese is almost as effective as worms and I really didn't like the idea of shoving a sharp piece of metal through the guts of a worm and letting it bleed to death while drowning. I had no such compunction with cheese. I tried again and managed to snag the back of my sweater. I had to take it off to get the hook out.

Third time lucky! The business end of the line flew all of fifteen feet into an incoming wave and washed gently inshore to land at my feet. Still, this was definite progress. The fourth attempt went sailing about twice as far but way over to the right and landed on a rock jutting out of the surf. I reeled the line back in but the hook caught on the rock and I had to wade out up to my knees to untangle it. I'd always thought that fishing was supposed to be relaxing, undemanding and gentle but this was turning out to be stressful. Standing back on the little beach, my jeans and boots soaked, I resolved to keep at it. Cat had disappeared.

After several more attempts I was able to cast the hook more or less in the direction I wanted and more or less, mostly less, as far out as I wanted. This might sound impressive but since I had no idea what I was doing what I wanted was a fairly meaningless concept.

I caught something after about ten attempts. The cast had gone high and straight and splashed down just beyond where the surf began. I started to slowly reel it back in and suddenly, there it was, a heavy drag on the line. I imagined myself stepping up to receive the Fishing World Beginner Of The Year Trophy and took a firm grip on the rod. It started to bend as the line took the strain. It wasn't a rock as slowly the reel brought the line in, inch by agonising inch. It felt heavy. As whatever it was came into the shallows I could see it was alive. It was black and mottled and it thrashed and tumbled in the surf.

"I hope it doesn't bite," I said to the wind as I stepped forward, ankle deep in the incoming tide. As the wave fell back my fish got very agitated then fell quietly to the bed as the sea gathered itself for another inbound wave. I took advantage of the sudden stillness to leap forward into a foot or so of water and grabbed the line perhaps a yard from the hook and hauled it rapidly onto the beach. I'd caught about eighteen inches of tread from a tractor tyre.

Back home I had fish for lunch, the way God intended it. Filleted and crumbed from a packet from the frozen food aisle, with chips and tomato sauce, while my jeans and boots steamed in front of the radiator.

I was not the only person to take advantage of the sunny weather. That afternoon I was up on the balcony of the lighthouse, enjoying the sunshine and occasionally peering through my binoculars at some inoffensive wildlife that caught my eye when movement on the coastal path down to the bay attracted my attention.

Using the binoculars I could see a couple of hikers. The intense sort rather than the "let's have a picnic" sort. Even from this distance I could see them striding along in matching anoraks and woolly hats, purposefully speed-walking in hiking boots that would not have looked out of place on the north face of Everest. As they came closer I could see they weren't talking or paying much attention to the views. They clearly weren't locals since the locals drove everywhere and if, in an outburst of carefree jollity, any actually went for a picnic they'd unroll a blanket next to the car and sit on it, leaning back against the mud splattered metal. It must be the start of the tourist season and I had been warned that tourists liked to look around lighthouses.

The view from the balcony was excellent and it took them an hour or so to reach the edge of the isthmus, by which time I'd gone down to the cottage and put my jeans back on. They might want to see the lighthouse but they probably didn't want to see more than that.

"Oh look, a lighthouse." I heard a male voice drifting up from down by the drawbridge. It shouldn't have been a surprise as it was visible for miles. "Let's go and have a closer look."

"Must we?" said a female voice. She didn't sound too happy about the idea.

"It'll be an experience," said the male voice.

They appeared at the top of the rough steps and stood by the fence.

"That looks like a house," said the male voice. "I wonder if anyone still lives there. They're all automated now you know."

"Well, there's a cat in the window watching us," said the female voice.

"Right you are then," said the man. "Let's go and talk to them."

"They probably don't want to be disturbed," said the woman. "Let's go back to the car, my feet hurt."

"Nonsense," said the man, pushing open the gate. "Lonely place here, they must be desperate for company. Come on darling."

"If they wanted company they probably wouldn't have chosen to live in such a lonely place," said the woman.

For some reason I didn't relish the idea of them exploring my cottage trying to find out who lived there so I opened the front door and went to greet them, closing it firmly behind me.

"Ahh, hello," said the man. He held out his hand. "Cyril Forsythe, my wife Edith." He looked to be about thirty five and had the clipped tones of the Home Counties.

“Hello,” I said. “Nice day for a walk.”

“Yes, that's what we thought,” he said. “Only doing fifteen miles today though. Walk off the winter fat and get in shape for the summer.”

They were both very lean people, intense, focused.

“Management consultant,” he said after a moment. “Damned interesting things, lighthouses.”

He marched over to the tower door and tried to go in.

“It's locked,” he said. “I suppose you need special permission to look inside.” He snorted.

“So,” he said, coming back to stand with me and Edith. “You're a farmer? You live here?”

“Yes, I live here. I'm the lighthouse keeper.” I replied.

“Ahh a squatter,” he said and tapped the side of his nose. “Don't worry, I won't tell anyone.”

“No,” I said. “I really am the lighthouse keeper.”

“Don't be absurd,” said Cyril. “They're all automated, everyone knows that.”

Edith sighed and sat down on the ground.

“OK,” I said. I didn't really see the point in arguing about it. I already didn't like him although I felt a little sympathy for his wife.

He peered up at the beacon at the top.

“Two hundred feet, I'd say,” he said.

“One hundred and twenty,” I replied.

“If you really were the lighthouse keeper you'd know its definitely

much higher than that,” he replied, happy that he’d caught me out. “More like two twenty.”

I wished he’d go away. I’d got used to the relaxed approach of the locals.

“He lives here, Cyril,” said Edith, “he’s probably got a better idea of how high it is than you have.”

“Nonsense, darling, anyone can see it’s a lot more than a hundred and twenty feet high. Anyway,” he glanced disdainfully at me, “who do we see to have a look around inside?”

“Me,” I said.

He looked puzzled. “Why you?” he asked.

“I’m the lighthouse keeper,” I said pleasantly.

He snorted again. He obviously didn’t believe me.

“Well, come on then, let us inside since you’re the man to see.”

“I’m afraid you need the proper authorisation code,” I said. I was beginning to find this quite amusing.

“What damned authorisation code?” said Cyril, getting irritated.

“I think he wants you to say ‘please’” said Edith. “Since it’s his lighthouse and we’re trespassers.”

I smiled at her and she smiled back. We both waited patiently.

“Oh, for god’s sake,” said Cyril. “Very well then, please.”

I pulled out my keys and wandered over to the tower. Edith got up and they both followed me.

“It’s not my lighthouse,” I told her. “I’m just the keeper. It belongs to Trinity House.”

I held the door open and they both walked in. Their footsteps echoed.

“I’m going upstairs,” announced Cyril and headed for the steps.

“I’m staying down here,” said Edith and went and sat on the doorstep.

I followed him up.

“What’s in here?” he said outside the control room.

“That’s the control room.”

He pushed the door open and went in.

“Please don’t touch anything.”

He ignored me and marched over to one of the radios and flicked the power on. It flicked off immediately. He tried again and the same thing happened.

“Not very well maintained,” he said and flicked on the other radio. That flicked off immediately too. He slipped off his napsack and dumped it on the floor then tried to turn on one of the computers. Nothing happened.

“Hmph,” he said and peered out to sea for a few moments.

“Right, let’s see the mechanism.” He disappeared out the door and went upstairs. I got there just as he was putting his hand against one of the large cogs. There was a clank and something nipped the side of his hand.

“Ouch,” he said and inspected the injury.

“I did tell you not to touch anything,” I said. I’d cleaned and greased the mechanism many times and it had never clanked or nipped me. I was beginning to think Mr Polly didn’t like him either.

“Right then, let’s see the beacon itself.”

"I'm afraid not," I said. I was a little worried Mr Poly might make him fall off the balcony and I really didn't need that kind of hassle.

"Why on earth not?" He stared at me challengingly.

"High voltage electricity," I said, thinking fast. "I'll need to shut down the entire system before anyone can go in and I won't be able to get it back online before sunset."

I could see him trying to work out an argument against this so I firmly said "Let's go back down," and walked to the steps.

He bristled but decided to follow me. Back in the control room his napsack was gone.

"But I left it here," he said.

"I thought you left it downstairs," I said, hoping that that was where Mr Polly had put it, or at least would leave if after hearing me say that.

"No, I definitely left it there," pointing to the spot where he'd left it.

"You couldn't have done," I pointed out reasonably, "since it isn't there. Unless you are accusing me of stealing it?"

He looked as if that was exactly what he was doing but didn't say anything. He abruptly turned and stalked off down the stairs. Beside the tower door, on the inside, was his napsack, neatly folded and leaning against the wall.

"There it is," I said, relieved to see it. I didn't want a complaint to go to Trinity House.

He picked it up and rummaged through its contents to check it was all there.

"Oh, there you are," said Edith. She'd gone to look over the fence at the sea.

“Right,” said Cyril, marching off and slinging his napsack over his shoulders. “Let’s go.”

“Thank you,” said Edith, smiling politely at me. She followed him.

I silently lined up my fishing rod sword and plunged it into his retreating back. Metaphorically speaking of course. As they disappeared down the steps to the drawbridge, I distinctly heard him say indignantly “What do you mean that was rude of me? He was just a damned squatter anyway.”

“I suppose I should be thankful they didn’t think my cottage was a cafe,” I muttered to myself. “I hope there aren’t any other tourists like that.”

The next day I was woken by sounds from outside. Something seemed to be moving around. I peered out of the window but there was a thick fog. It was after dawn so there was a lightness but there was hardly any visibility.

“Probably a cow,” I thought. Cows did occasionally get past the cattle grid on the other side of the drawbridge.

Resignedly I got up and put on my dressing gown. Because the fence around the lighthouse wasn’t as strong as the ones around the fields I worried whenever a cow got in that it might fall over onto the the rocks and get badly injured so I rounded them up when it happened and herded them back to their fields.

The first time or two had been scary as cows are, frankly, huge. They just stand there and stare at you and chomp their jaws threateningly but it didn’t take long for me to realise that they are surprisingly docile and generally go in the direction you push them. Daffyd kept his bulls way over on the far side of the farm so I hadn’t yet had to deal with that problem.

Cat was nowhere in sight so she was probably off partying with some mice or other small rodents. She’d obviously decided that this was a nice place to live and that she could tolerate my existence but she also liked her freedom. Yawning, I went outside and listened for the

sounds.

They seemed to be coming from around the back of the house so I went around and walked straight into a girl.

She stared at me and I stared at her. She seemed nervous and I was frankly petrified. I find girls quite scary at the best of times and coming upon one in the fog in my back garden in the early hours of the morning when I was expecting to find a cow was a surprise to say the least. She started backing away, staring at me wide eyed and tense.

Despite not having had any coffee yet I managed to pull myself together and smiled the most becoming smile I could manage under the circumstances and said "Hello, I'm Wal Ruthe." After all, she was quite pretty and didn't look old enough to be married with children.

Now on the rare occasions that I've managed to introduce myself to a girl I've had a variety of negative reactions but I've never had one scream at me and run away in panic. It's quite disheartening. The fog deadened her running footsteps but they seemed to be heading for the drawbridge and faded away. I didn't hear any car doors slamming or engines starting. In fact I couldn't hear any other sounds at all so I figured the sounds I'd heard were her and not a cow. I went back inside but I was too agitated to go back to bed so I made some coffee.

"Oh god, I hope she wasn't a tourist," I thought. "I can't cope if they're going to come in before I've even got up."

After a while I started to wonder if she was a burglar.

"Why would anyone come all this way to rob a lighthouse?" I said out loud. "There's nothing here really worth taking, except maybe the computers and radios but you'd need a van for those and I'm miles from anywhere. Anyway, why would a girl be robbing me? Surely if anyone was going to do it it would be a group of men. One girl isn't going to get far with a bunch of computers."

Well, I didn't have any answers and since she'd disappeared it didn't look as though I'd be getting any anytime soon. And, since she'd been terrified, I didn't think she'd be coming back.

It took three hours for the fog to lift but it was another sunny day after that so I decided to have another go at fishing. It would take my mind off the girl for a while anyway.

Chapter Eleven

This time I decided to try fishing off the rocks at the base of the tower, around on the eastern side. This meant that I didn't have to cast so far and the water closer in was a little deeper. I stayed for a couple of hours and still didn't catch anything although it was certainly more relaxing than from the beach despite the constant spray shooting up as the waves crashed into the rocks and gurgling throatily back out. Behind me the cliff rose almost sheer for fifteen feet or so and the lighthouse towered way above, proud and solid, reassuring yet remote.

Cat hadn't bothered to come with me although a couple of seagulls perched on an outcrop a little further out and watched me carefully, discussing my technique with shrill little cries and squabbling between themselves. I tossed the leftover cheese high in the air and they both launched themselves into the air and caught the pieces seemingly without effort. I hooked the hook under the bottom ring on the rod and tightened the reel so the line didn't dangle and started to clamber my way back around to where the isthmus dropped down to the sea.

The girl was back. She was squatting on a boulder not ten feet from me and peering over the top of the isthmus. She'd found a place where she could watch my cottage without being seen from it. She was perched precariously and was oblivious to the sea and the birds. She hadn't heard me and I recognised her instantly as the girl from the fog despite only seeing her from behind. Not many people in this part of the world had a thick mass of red hair and an old army surplus camouflage jacket.

I stood there for a number of heartbeats, holding onto the rock face and watching her watching my cottage and wondering what to do. The tourists yesterday and this girl twice today. The place was getting crowded.

"Hello," I called, raising my voice a little to be heard over the background noise.

She whirled round and lost her balance and fell the remaining three feet or so onto the rock below her. She tried to get to her feet and

cried out in pain. I climbed over the slippery, seaweed encrusted fallen rocks and leaned my fishing rod against the boulder she'd been perched on and squatted down beside her.

“Are you hurt?” I asked

“My ankle,” she muttered, holding it tightly.

I could see blood dripping from a cut on the side of her forehead and there was a nasty graze on her cheek. I helped her to her feet and pulled one arm around my neck to support her.

“Can you grab my rod?” I asked her. “The tide's coming in and it'll get washed away.”

A wave swirled round our feet and she grabbed the rod with her free hand. She was breathing hard and was clearly a little frightened and in pain.

“We'll go to my cottage,” I said, “just up there. See how much damage there is and get you cleaned up. Have a nice cup of tea too.”

She didn't say anything but her grip around my neck tightened. I felt surprisingly manly and protective as I half carried her and she hopped the remaining way across the rocks and up the steps and across the garden to the cottage.

“Just drop the rod,” I said when we got to the door. She did and we made our way through to the kitchen.

“Let's get that jacket off and see what the damage is,” I said. She nodded and slipped it off, wincing and let it drop to the floor.

“Sit there,” I gestured to a kitchen chair and went to my bedroom to get the first aid kit out of the bottom of the wardrobe. It was an official first aid kit, the size of a small suitcase, supplied by Trinity House and I'd gone through it once, fascinated. By the look of it, in an emergency I'd be able to perform an appendectomy or amputation on myself although so far I had only used a few aspirin when I had toothache and a small elastoplast when I'd cut my finger slicing an

onion.

Apart from the cut on her forehead and the graze on her cheek there was also a nasty graze on her forearm and the edge of her hand and there was a bruise coming up from where her metal bracelet had dug in when she landed on it. The bracelet had several rune-like charms hanging from it.

“Looks like you've lost a couple of charms from your bracelet,” I commented.

She snatched her arm away from me and examined the bracelet, counting the charms. I was counting her charms too, in my own way.

“No,” she said. “I haven't got the full set yet.” She slipped the bracelet over her hand and let me inspect her wrist, forearm and hand. Her nails were dirty and short and looked like she chewed them.

She'd also either twisted or sprained her ankle, I never know what the difference is. There were a number of tears in her jeans and her thick but somewhat threadbare sweater but they looked old and there was no sign of any scrapes or bleeding underneath the tears.

“What's your name?” I asked, running the tap to get some hot water.

“Celestine,” she said quietly.

“I'm Walter, the lighthouse keeper.” She nodded seriously, watching me.

I wetted some cotton wool and started to clean her injuries. There's something about head wounds that makes them look far worse than they actually are. All the blood washed away to reveal a tiny cut barely a quarter of an inch long. I dried the area and put on a strip of elastoplast. After cleaning the graze on her cheek I fetched my shaving mirror from the bathroom and handed her a tube of antiseptic cream and told her to put the cream on the graze while I cleaned her hand and arm and she put cream on those as well.

She had a faint unwashed odour but strangely her hair smelled of

coconut so I figured that she just didn't wash her clothes that often. Not a biggie as I didn't either and probably smelt a bit as well. I gently loosened the lace on her trainer and eased it off and pushed her jeans leg up a bit to inspect her ankle. She didn't shave her legs either I noticed and her ankle looked a little swollen.

"Is your ankle swollen?" I asked. After all, she could just have fat ankles.

She looked down and nodded so I retrieved a roll of crepe bandage from the first aid kit and bound it as neatly as I could.

"Well, I'm no expert," I said when it was done, "but it looks like no real damage has been done. Does it hurt anywhere else?"

"My shoulder aches and my knee is sore but they'll mend," she said in a London accent.

I got her to pull down the shoulder of her sweater and I couldn't see any damage although there was a hint of a bruise coming up where her shoulder had hit the ground. I was reluctant to ask her to drop her jeans so I could look at her knee so I hoped it wasn't too serious.

"I think you'll live," I said with a smile. "Just some scrapes and bruises."

She smiled. "Thank you," she said. "It was just a little fall."

I put the kettle on and while it was heating I glanced through the First Aid Quick Reference booklet in the kit.

"It says here I should give you a tetanus injection," I said. "I guess because there's a risk of infection from the barnacles and bird shit and stuff on the rocks."

I rummaged through the first aid kit and found a selection of pre-loaded syringes, several of which had Tetanus on their labels. I pulled one out and read the instructions on the back of the packet.

"Umm, it says here it should be injected into the buttock, into the

muscle.” I was a little embarrassed by this so I showed it to her in case she thought I was trying to take advantage of her.

She looked a little glum but stood up and winced when she put her weight on her ankle.

“Ahh, there's a hole in your jeans,” I said in relief. “I can put the needle through there.” I could see through the frayed tear that she wasn't wearing any underwear so it was just as well I hadn't insisted on looking at her knee.

I'd watched M*A*S*H quite often on TV in the days when I had a TV and knew how to use a syringe painlessly so I twisted the cap off the needle and pushed it into her bottom through the hole in her jeans and pressed the plunger down hard.

“Owwwwwww,” she cried and started to rub her bottom vigorously. The kettle had boiled so I made tea to distract us both and got some chocolate biscuits out of the cupboard.

“Let's go into the lounge,” I said. “It's more comfortable there and you can put your foot up for a while.”

She hadn't shown any signs of an urgent need to go somewhere else and I was enjoying having a pretty girl in my house. I helped her to her feet and once again acted as her crutch while she hopped down the hall and into the lounge. I settled her on the couch with her foot up and went back for the tea and biscuits. I sat on the floor with my back against the wall. I hadn't bought any easy chairs since I was on my own and hadn't really expected to do a lot of entertaining.

She eyed me a little suspiciously as I sat there quietly, holding my tea. She was quite small and I'd felt her muscles as I was helping her around. I guessed the baggy thickness of her sweater made her look bigger than she actually was. Probably three quarters of her body weight was taken up by hair. It hung down to the small of her back and was thick and, I noticed with a little surprise, half way to becoming dreadlocks. She wore no makeup at all as far as my inexperienced eye could judge and she had a light dusting of freckles across the bridge of her nose and upper cheeks. She was undeniably attractive in

a very natural, healthy way, unlike the manufactured attractiveness of Sian from the BBC.

“I’ve been thinking about it,” I said, as casually as I could, “but I can’t think of a delicate way to ask you something so I’m just going to ask straight out and please don’t be offended or upset.”

She nodded warily.

“Are you a thief?”

Her eyes flashed sudden anger at me, which gave me my answer.

“No,” she said forcefully. “I, er, ...” and she fell silent.

I waited a few moments but she didn’t continue.

“I was only asking,” I said, “because you were in my back garden in the fog then you ran away and then I found you later hiding in the front garden, watching my cottage. Don’t worry, I’m not going to call the police, I’m just curious. I haven’t seen you around before so I don’t know if this is normal for you.”

She didn’t seem to be but I supposed it was always possible she’d escaped from some loony bin and found her way here.

She dropped her eyes and stared at the floor. “You’re really not going to call the police?” she asked quietly.

I nodded to the table beside the couch. “My phone’s there. Hold on to it if you want.”

She glanced at the phone then looked at me, defiantly.

“I was looking for firewood,” she said.

“OK.”

“Me and some friends are camping in the next bay. We got here late last night and it was cold. So we went out looking for firewood early

this morning. I came here because I wanted to see the light better.”

“I’m afraid it’s all electric, I have no firewood,” I said. She nodded.

“So why did you run away? Why not just ask if I had any firewood?”

“You scared me. You loomed out of the fog in your hooded robe with your beard and fierce eyes and I thought you were,, someone else and I panicked and ran away.”

“Is that why you were watching the cottage? To see if I was this someone else?”

She nodded again.

I continued to just look at her, not really knowing what to say.

“You said you were Mug Ruith!” she suddenly exclaimed then bit her lip, clearly wishing she hadn’t said that.

“I’m Wal Ruthe,” I said, “Walter, not Mug. Who’s Mug Ruith?”

She shook her head and drank some tea.

“Have some biscuits,” I said. I’d left them on the couch-side table.

She took a couple but didn’t eat them.

“So, er, who is this Mug Ruith?” I said, “does he live round here?”

She gave me a long look. I got the distinct feeling she was evaluating me in some way.

“He’s Irish,” she said. “A third century druid.”

Druid? Strange coincidence, since I had one living in the tower.

I hadn’t laughed so presumably she felt emboldened.

“He was very powerful and had a chariot that shone in the dark,” she

continued. “as bright as the day. His breath could send storms and he flew in a machine called the roth rámach, the oared wheel. He was a sun god.”

I nodded. A useful technique when you are lost for words.

“I was looking for firewood but the lighthouse drew me here. I could feel something, some power drawing me on and I was thinking about Mug Ruith and how he could turn the night into day and play with storms and then you jumped out at me looking like a druid and said ‘I’m Mug Ruith’ and I freaked and ran away and when the fog lifted I sneaked back to watch you and see if you really were Mug Ruith.”

It was such an absurd story it had to be true. No thief or escaped lunatic would make up a story like that.

“I’m ashamed of myself.” She hung her head and ate a biscuit.

“Being scared is nothing to be ashamed of,” I said gently. “Especially in the fog.”

“I’m ashamed of running away.” She looked me in the eyes. “I’m a druid myself. I should have greeted another druid properly not run away like a small child.”

I laughed. “You’re far too young to be a druid,” I said.

Anger spat from her eyes. “I’m 19,” she said forcefully. “Nearly 20. I’m not a child!”

“I didn’t mean that,” I said hastily. “It’s just that it takes twenty years to train to be a druid and you’re not even twenty so unless you started as a baby ...”

“Ahh, so you know about druids?”

“No, not really,” I said. “It’s just that I was talking to a historian about druids only the other day. He said Anglesey was their, I’ve forgotten the word, their sacred place.”

“Nemeta,” she said. “I ought to be going now.” She sat up and ate the other biscuit and finished her tea.

“Where are you camping?” I asked. “I’ll give you a lift. You really need to rest your ankle and it’ll be getting dark soon.”

“OK,” she said. “Can I have some more biscuits?”

I helped her out to the Toyota and drove her round to the next bay. Nestled in the lee of a hill were two battered old coaches, an even older ambulance, a panel van and a small car parked next to a tent. There were quite a few people there, gathered around a small open wood fire. It all looked rather cheerless.

As I drove up several of them looked up suspiciously and a middle aged man with long hair, going bald on top, and dressed in jeans and a sheepskin jacket came over to meet us as we pulled up. Celestine opened the door.

“It’s all right, he’s with me,” she called out.

The people round the fire relaxed and went back to whatever they were doing. One stood up and came over.

“Tina babe, we missed you,” he said and gave her a hug.

“This is Walter,” she said. “I fell on the rocks and he helped me.” She lifted her foot to show off her bandage.

“We thank you, friend.” said the older man gravely. “My name is Jethro, we welcome you in peace.”

I glanced at Celestine in puzzlement.

“We’re travellers,” she said. “Most people don’t like us.”

“Join us, Walter,” said Jethro. “What is ours is yours.” He beckoned me towards the gathering around the fire. I joined them and someone handed me a mug and poured weak coffee into it. No one offered any sugar. Celestine sat next to me on the ground. The man who had

hugged her sat the other side of her.

“I’m Tim,” he said, “welcome”. We shook hands. Jethro then went round the group introducing me to each. I forgot most of the names instantly.

“Walter is the lighthouse keeper,” said Celestine. “He knows about druids.”

There was a murmur of approval.

“Are you on holiday?” I asked. “Or some sort of work bonding thing?”

There were several laughs.

“We’re travellers,” said Jethro. “We’re here for the Spring Equinox. To be close to mother earth. We are not part of conformist society. We live in nature, not against it.”

There were nods and a couple of right on's.

“Which one do you live in?” I asked Celestine, pointing to the vehicles.

She pointed to one of the coaches. “That one, with Tim and Jessica,” she said. “Jethro and Sacajawea live in the ambulance. Becky, Kev, Stevie, Jen and the kids live in the other coach and Martha and Julio have the van. Clark lives in the tent on his own. He doesn't really like people.”

“How long have you been living in the coach?” I asked her.

“Only a few months,” she said. “Jethro and Sacajawea have been in their ambulance for eighteen years.”

Jethro beamed at me. “We don't believe in ownership,” he said. “Nature is not ours to own. Property is theft and ownership a prison. We are free.”

“Are you all druids?” I asked.

“No, only Celestine, Becky and Kev,” he said. “Martha, Stevie and Jen are Wiccans and Julio is a Baptist,” he laughed. “No one knows what or who Clark believes in, he doesn't talk much.”

“What about Sacajawea?” I stumbled over her name.

“She's an American Indian, a Shoshone princess.”

Which, I have to admit, didn't tell me much. They shared their food with me, which was pretty basic and later brought out some musical instruments. Clark may not have spoken much but he played something that looked like a clarinet that weaved haunting, plaintive melodies that made everyone quiet and reflective. Celestine told me it was a saxophone although it looked like no saxophone I'd ever seen. She sat next to me all evening, the light from the lighthouse giving the camp a curious dignity. It was actually quite a fun evening.

Chapter Twelve

A curious thing happened the next morning. I'd got up as usual and breakfasted as usual and gone up to the control room to check the logs and do my morning meteorological work as usual but when I went in I found a ring binder on the desk, labelled 'Incident Log: Accident and Injury', open at the one and only page inside. It wasn't the log that was strange because it was part of the kit that Trinity House had sent me when I started which contained all the paperwork I needed. It also wasn't strange that there was only one page inside or that it was blank because the only accidents and injuries so far had been my slicing my finger instead of an onion which I didn't feel sufficiently noteworthy to note.

It wasn't even strange that Celestine's accidental fall and subsequent injuries should be noted and the folder had been put out ready for me to fill in the requisite details, or even that I hadn't got the folder out myself. Obviously Mr Polly, in his usual helpful way, had done that for me. What was strange was that Mr Polly knew it needed to be done. Until now I had had no idea that he was able to perceive events and incidents outside the tower. Everything Mr Polly had done or reacted to previously had been within the tower itself.

Now, from a purely logical point of view and given my assumption that he had no knowledge of what went on outside the tower, the obvious explanation was that he had somehow sensed the need for the log book when I came in to the building. I wasn't overly happy with this though as I had completely forgotten about the Incidents Log and it hadn't crossed my mind to put Celestine in it. Perhaps Mr Polly could read my subconscious? If so, that was a rather unnerving thought as it implied he knew me better than I knew myself.

On the other hand, my assumption might well be wrong. Just because there has been no evidence of something it doesn't follow that that something is impossible. After all, there had been no evidence of lighthouses themselves until the first was built. I wasn't wholly comfortable with this either as it implied that if Mr Polly could perceive things outside the tower he may be able to do things outside the tower. Hmmm.

Nagging at the back of my mind was a tiny little thought that I tried to ignore. Celestine had said she'd felt drawn to the lighthouse. Maybe, just maybe, one druid had recognised another and had called to her. Yeah. Best keep that thought in the hidden recesses of my mind. Poltergeists are one thing but communities of druids with mystical powers is another. It didn't help that Cat never went in the tower, not even for a nap.

Still, Mr Polly had thoughtfully provided a pen as well so I wrote up the details putting only 'Celestine' as the subject of the incident since I didn't know her surname and noting only that she had fallen off a rock and sustained minor injuries without any of the details of why she was on the rock in the first place. I wondered what kind of people her parents were to have given their child such an unusual and, frankly, pretentious name. It seemed a little cruel of them to inflict such a name on an innocent baby. Still, I supposed that everyone got used to it in time, as I would.

Whoa, hold that thought! I would get used to it in time? I'd probably never see her again so why would I need to get used to it *in time*? True I hadn't detected any of the irritation at my very existence that Raquel had most of the time nor the extended philosophical (lack of) intimacy paradigm of Su Ling or even the blank non interest of Aashrita but it's a long way from politely accepting a needle in the bum from a stranger to being their girlfriend.

Girlfriend?

"Stop this," I said to myself. "You're just being stupid. You startled her and she fell over and you bandaged her cuts. That's as far as it goes. She's back with her friends," *lovers?*, "and you'll never see her again. You're not her type anyway. Be honest with yourself, she never even hinted about seeing you again."

It was a couple of days though before I stopped looking up at every sound, hoping she was falling back into my life or checking the perimeter of my garden from the window to see if her head was poking up. I didn't have the courage to go round to the encampment as they'd probably all be laughing at me for being a dope. I'd probably overstayed my welcome with all of them anyway. It drizzled solidly so

I stayed snug in my little cottage, safe from anything remotely risky.

I spent some of the time watching “how to” videos on fishing and trying to work out where I was going wrong. As far as I could tell it was the fish that were at fault, not me. For some reason they weren't being as cooperative as they should be about being dragged bodily out of their homes and being gutted and fried.

“If at first you don't succeed, try, try again,” I muttered to myself as a mantra as a new day dawned bright and clear with no more than thirty or forty small, white clouds in the sky and no sign of imminent rain. I grabbed the fishing rod and a wedge of cheese and headed off, a man doing battle with the elements to provide sustenance for his non-existent family.

“I've tried beach fishing and deep rock fishing so I'll try something different this time,” I said to myself as I went down the steps to the drawbridge mid-morning and headed off in the direction of the next bay. There was a sloping flat rock not far away that headed down into the sea so it was sort of a cross between a rock face and a sandy beach. There was a gentle breeze and the patchy sun was mildly warm and the clean air was refreshing.

My casting was no better than it had been and the fish resolutely refused to sacrifice themselves for my better good but it was fairly undemanding so I stood there, like an automaton, gently flailing the sea, lost in my own little world of absurdity.

“If a dog always follows the smell of the previous dog that went along a path,” I speculated to myself, “that means the previous dog was following the smell of the one before, and the one before that and so on. So some time in the long distant past there must have been a dog that travelled the path for the first time and set the pattern for all future dogs.”

Being a lighthouse keeper can get a little lonely.

I saw what looked like an albatross flying towards me and I watched it as it flew, unswerving, over my head, completely ignoring me, and continued inland. I swivelled to watch it go by and to see where it was

heading and nearly fell over in surprise.

“Hello, Mug,” said Celestine. She was sitting on a tussock on the edge of the field not ten yards from me. It took me a moment to realise she wasn't being abusive.

“Hello, Celestine,” I said, please to see her. “Where did you come from?”

“It's stopped raining so I was walking over to see you and I saw you fishing so I sat down to watch.”

“I didn't think I'd see you again,” I said, winding in the line and going over to sit next to her.

“Why not?” she said, faintly puzzled.

“Well, umm, you didn't give any sign you wanted to see me again,” I said, embarrassed at being one of life's failures.

“What?” she said, openly puzzled. “I said for you to come over to the camp any time you fancied.”

Now that she'd mentioned it, I did seem to remember her saying that after all.

“Ahh,” I said.

She gently punched my shoulder and laughed.

“How's your ankle?”

“It's much better. I can walk on it now so long as I don't go too fast and I found this to use as a walking stick.” She waggled a stout, gnarled oak branch at me. It was fire blackened and I guessed she'd spotted it in their fire.

The bandage was gone from her forehead and the cut was just a thin scab and the graze on her cheek looked a nicely healthy.

“You forehead and cheek look fine,” I said. “How's your hand and arm?”

She pushed up her sleeve and showed me. The graze on her arm was angry looking and seemed a bit pussy.

“Come on over to my place and we'll put some antiseptic on that before it gets nasty,” I said.

“Oh, it's fine,” she said, pushing her sleeve back down. “Don't worry about it,”

“I'd hate for you to lose your hand because its infected,” I said, then added in a desperate act of reckless bravery. “and I can make you some tea as well or maybe lunch.”

“Hope it's not fish,” she said, in what I hoped was an implied 'yes I'd love to have lunch with you', “or we could get very hungry.”

“What do you mean?”

“I was watching you fishing.”

“Oh,” I fell silent. Why is it girls are never impressed by surveying? I used to be pretty good at that. I may not be able to fish but I'm shit hot at calculus and algebra.

“Come on,” she said and got to her feet. She walked out onto the sloping rock, leaning heavily on her oak branch, like a small, flame headed, beardless Gandalf facing up to the Balrog in the Mines of Moria. I hoped she'd say “You. Shall. Not. Pass.” but she didn't.

“Where are we going?” I asked.

“Fishing. Give me the rod.”

I gave her the rod and she swished it round a few times.

“Not a bad rod, not great but not bad. Could be a little longer though. What are you using for bait?”

I gave her some cheese. She ate it.

“Waste of time,” she said. “Cheese is fine for freshwater fish but they can't sense it in salt water. You need something a lot smellier like shellfish or crab or ...ahh, that'll do.” She'd been looking round and had spotted a clump of mussels clinging to a rock. She hobbled over and pulled a clasp knife out of her pocket. Putting the knife on the rock she clasped her hands and bowed her head for a few seconds then picked up the knife and prised a mussel off the rock. Coming back she scooped the pale orange stuff out of the shell and speared it with the fishing hook. I felt a little sick.

“What were you doing before you scraped the mussel off?” I asked.

“Praying for its forgiveness,” she said. “Now, you're casting all wrong. You should do it like this.”

With a delicate flick of her uninjured wrist the hook and mussel flew gracefully out to sea, about four times further than it had in the video I'd watched on technique. I was impressed.

“Where did you learn to do that?” I asked.

“I went fishing with me dad every weekend for years,” she said, gently reeling in the line. “It's also the wrong time of day. Fish are usually out around sunset or dawn. They usually go into hiding around midday. And they like to congregate around food so aim for deepish water around a rock or something. Hold on, I think we've got something.”

The rod was bending and the line was taut and there was clearly something struggling hard at the end of the line. Celestine efficiently reeled it in and dragged it onto the rock out of the water.

“It's a flounder,” she said. “Bit small but not too small. That'll do nicely.” She grabbed it firmly and removed the hook from its mouth as it flapped desperately in her hand.

“What do we do with it?” I asked.

“Kill it,” she said, and bowed her head for a few seconds then hit its

head hard against the rock. It went limp and the light in its eyes faded. She sighed then handed me the rod.

“You try. Have you got any more cheese?”

She ate all the cheese I had with me then took me through the process of casting and made a few corrections until I was fairly proficient then handed me her knife to get another mussel. I bowed my head and silently apologised to the mussel before scraping it off the rock. She gave me a half smile when I turned back to her so I cut open the mussel and scooped it out of the shell. It was quite disgusting and I dry retched. She watched me silently as my hand shook while I put the quivering mussel on the hook. I was embarrassed about being squeamish.

“I'm glad you don't like killing,” she said quietly and put her hand on my arm. I forgot about the mussel.

It took me three attempts, using the same mussel, to catch a fish myself. Celestine took pity on me and killed it herself and we took them both back to the cottage. Her support bandage around her ankle was dirty and soaked right through so I made her sit down and rest her foot in my lap while I got rid of the old bandage, washed her foot and dried it with a towel then wrapped it in a fresh bandage. I confess I took my time doing it but she didn't say anything. Then I washed her arm and put some antiseptic cream on it. I put the radiator on to dry her trainers while we prepared the fish.

I say we. Celestine was the one who slit their bellies open and pulled out their guts and got rid of their fins and scales. I tried to watch and managed to not embarrass myself. She then fried them with some onions and we ate them with toast and tomatoes. Cat gorged herself on the entrails.

“Tell me some more about Mug Ruith,” I said while we were eating at the kitchen table.

“There isn't much known about him to be honest,” said Celestine. “He was reputed to a very large man, physically, but that could simply be a myth to show his power. What's interesting is that he went to Italy to

learn magic from Simon Magus, a great magician who lived for a very long time and is thought by many to have been the executioner who beheaded John the Baptist although some say that was Mug Ruith himself. You've heard of John the Baptist?"

"Yes, but I can't remember why. Didn't he baptise Jesus or something?"

"Yes, and he prophesied Jesus' coming."

"Is that why he was beheaded?" I asked.

"Oh no. He was beheaded because Herod Antipas married the wife of his brother and John told him off for doing that. I've forgotten her name." Celestine whistled a little tune, then continued. "Herodias, that's it. Anyway, later her daughter danced for Herod and he took a fancy to her and promised her anything she wanted and she asked her mother what to ask for and Herodias said 'bring me the head of John the Baptist'. Now it makes no sense to me that Herod would get an Irishman who happened to be in Jordan to execute someone. Simon Magus was at least a Roman and he might have been there as a soldier or something."

"How do you know all this?"

"I read a lot," she said dismissively. "Mug Ruith had a daughter called Tlachtga who went to Italy with him and while Mug was studying magic with Simon, Simon's three sons gang raped Tlachtga and she ended up giving birth to three sons, one from each of them, called Cumma, Doirb and Muach, on top of a hill in Ireland. That hill is called the Hill of Tlachtga and it's in County Meath, just north of Dublin. It's a sacred druid site and I'm hoping to visit it but I don't have a passport yet which is why I'm here."

"I don't understand."

"The Hill of Tlachtga is due west of here, over there," she said, pointing to the north, "so here, at dawn, the sun rises over the nemeta that was here and shines on the Hill of Tlachtga, connecting both sites."

“Really? There was a nemeta here? You mean right here? Where the lighthouse is?”

“Yes,” she said. “That’s why it’s called Pwyntyderwydd Lighthouse. Didn’t you know?”

“Know what?” I was puzzled.

“Pwyntyderwydd means Druid’s Point,” she said. “It was the most sacred of all the sacred places in Anglesey.”

“Jesus,” I said.

“No, Jesus wasn’t a druid,” she laughed, “He was a Jew.”

“I thought he was a Christian?”

“Noooooo, he was a Jew who founded Christianity. There were no Christians before Christ, although there were thousands of druids.”

I was both dumbfounded by all this and also intrigued. I could also now see why Celestine had reacted the way she did when she met me in the fog. She’s a druid, visiting the druid’s most sacred place in Anglesey and in the insipid grey light of the foggy dawn the great Mug Ruith himself, me, jumped out at her. I couldn’t begin to understand the emotional turmoil that would have caused. It would be a bit like a Catholic priest going to the Vatican and having Jesus appear and say hello. No wonder she came back to see if I really was Mug, although I doubted if I would have had the courage.

“So, erm, when you were looking for the firewood a few days ago, was it the lighthouse that attracted you or was it the sacred site that was here?” I asked, remembering Mr Polly.

“Good question.” she said and fell silent. It was as though she’d closed a door and pulled the blinds. She was still there but in a way she wasn’t. Her body was sitting in front of me but her soul, her spirit, her ... being ... was somewhere else. Even her smell seemed to fade away.

Then she came back to life again and her now familiar, comforting

smell returned.

“I felt something was calling me and it was coming from the same place as the light so I guess the light just made it easier to find but it wasn't the light that was calling me. It was the nemeta itself or perhaps a spirit on the nemeta.”

“Is it calling you now?”

“No, but then I'm here aren't I. There's no need to call me.”

“That makes sense.”

“While I'm here, can I see inside the lighthouse?”

“Sure, no problem. Shall we have some coffee first or afterwards?”

“Oh, lets have some coffee. There's no rush.”

Music to my ears! *There's no rush*, awesome.

So I made us both some coffee and we sat on the couch in the lounge, leaning back against the arms so we faced each other. I told her a little of my past and she told me about her parents being an older couple who'd never expected to have children and how she'd come along unexpectedly and how she'd gone to a Catholic school and so on. I told her that I'd gone through a bad period when I'd broken up with my girlfriend and been made redundant which was why I jumped at the keeper's job when they offered it and she told me how she'd rejected Catholicism at an early age and how she'd spent a lot of her teenage years trying to get closer to nature and got involved with Wicca through the parents of a school friend. She never mentioned any boyfriends and I was too scared to ask in case she had one. Then I realised what the time was.

“We ought to be going into the tower,” I said. “You can't go into the beacon room while the light is on, it's too dangerous.”

So we walked slowly over to the tower and I unlocked the door and we went in. She didn't have any particular problem with the stairs

although we took them slowly. She seemed impressed by the control room, in the way that people who aren't experienced with technology are impressed when confronted by it and I let her listen to the ships talking on the shipping channels. I was slightly disappointed that there was nothing on the distress channel but that was unreasonable of me. A couple of times she did her disappearing trick but came back quite quickly and gave an embarrassed little laugh each time when she saw me watching her.

She 'oohed' appropriately at the machinery in the machine room but cogs aren't as mystifying as dials and flashing lights and she loved the view from the balcony. She was fascinated by the lens array and the impressive size of the light bulb.

"It'll be dusk in about ten minutes," I said. "Let's go downstairs to the garden. There's something I want you to hear."

We went back down and sat on the ground near the edge of the cliff and watched the setting sun through a gap in the clouds. As the last of the sun's disk sank below the horizon there was a thwump and a faint beam of light shot out slightly to the north and started to move, growing steadily stronger.

"Wow," breathed Celestine, hugging herself. "Can you feel that energy? That power? That is so unreal. Awesome."

She watched the beam rotating through the darkening sky for quite a long time and walked around the lighthouse in step with it a couple of times then she came up to me and giggled then quickly kissed me on the cheek.

"Thank you so much," she said and started hobbling back to the cottage.

I was glad she'd gone because I desperately wanted to take her in my arms and cover her face with kisses but she had that big oak branch and, to be honest, I'd have been too scared to kiss her anyway even if she hadn't had the branch. "You. Shall. Not. Pass." Scary.

We had another coffee and chatted some more "getting to know you"

chat then she asked if I would drive her back to the camp. A thought kept bouncing round inside my head but I was too scared to vocalise it.

Walking down to the car, she said

“I’ve had the most wonderful day, Mug, it’s been lovely.”

“Oh shit,” I thought, “just do it.”

“Ummm,” I said, my voice trembling a little, “I’m going into Holyhead tomorrow to get supplies and things, would you like to come with me?”

My heart stopped beating while I waited for her to say “No, I’m busy.”

An eternity later she said “I’d love to, pick me up when you go past.”

The world started turning again and I floated down the steps and into the Toyota. We’d just turned off the Holyhead Road onto the dirt track to go down to the bay where the group were camped when she turned to me.

“Did you know there’s a spirit living in your lighthouse?” she said, quite casually, as though it was a cobweb.

The Toyota skidded in the mud as I slammed on the brakes. I didn’t think four wheel drives were supposed to do that.

“I could feel it.”

Chapter Thirteen

“I call it Mr Polly,” I said. “Short for poltergeist and the title of a book by H G Wells although I don't know if it's male or even human.”

“I don't know either,” sad Celestine. “I just sensed a presence, a spirit. I can do that sometimes but that's about it. It didn't feel bad but I'm not sensitive enough to be sure. We need to talk to Sacajawea, she can communicate with spirits.”

“I don't think Mr Polly is bad,” I said and I told her about the various things that had happened.

“Well, it's up to you,” she said. “I won't say anything if you don't want me to.”

I thought about it for a few moments. I didn't really want people to think I was crazy but it would be nice to know.

“Can you talk to Sacajawea without telling anyone else?”

“I can,” she said, “but I can't guarantee Saca won't say anything. She follows her own path and doesn't always understand other people's concerns.”

A sudden thought popped into my head.

“She won't try to get rid of him will she, like exorcise him?”

I'd become quite fond of Mr Polly and didn't want him to come to any harm.

“Oh no,” said Celestine. “She's a pagan and lives with spirits. If one is very evil she might try to persuade it to stop but that's all.”

Maybe Mr Polly would like someone to talk to.

“OK,” I said, “but try not to let anyone else know for now.”

* * *

The next day when I arrived at the camp to collect Celestine she had been watching for me and hobbled over. She'd dressed for the occasion by adding a blue trilby hat to her normal ensemble.

“Hey Mug,” she said happily. “Is it OK if Clark comes too? Only he needs to find a music shop.”

“Sure.”

She beckoned him over and he gave me a smile and said “hey” and got in to the back seat. Unlike the others in the group, Clark dressed fairly conventionally. He wore a clean pair of chinos and a blazer with polished black shoes. That he wasn't wearing a shirt or jumper wasn't immediately obvious since his ebony chest was completely hairless.

“There are a couple of CD stores in town,” I said, trying to be friendly. “Is there one you'd prefer?”

“OK,” he said.

“He needs an instrument shop,” said Celestine. “For his sax.”

“I don't think I've seen one,” I said thoughtfully. I'd half toyed with learning to play a guitar when I moved here and had kept an eye open for a musical instruments shop.

“We can ask around though,” said Celestine. “There's usually one tucked away in a back street or something.”

I wanted to ask if she'd talked to Sacajawea but felt inhibited by Clark's presence so we chatted about the weather.

“How do you guys cope with the rain?” I asked.

“Mostly we just stay inside, or put up with getting wet,” said Celestine. “Although it can get a bit cramped if it rains for a long time. Like there's six in Kev's coach so tensions do build in there after a while.”

“You're with Tim and Jessica in the other coach?” I kind of wanted to know what the sleeping arrangements were.

“Yes.” She gave me a funny look. “It’s not what you think.”

“What do you mean?”

“The group is mostly couples,” she said, a little irritably. “Me and Clark are the only unattached people and he has his tent and I’m in the coach. I know people think we all sleep together in some big free love orgy but it’s just their dirty minds. We live differently so they think we do everything differently. Jethro and Sacajawea are married and so are Becky and Kev and both the kids are theirs but it’s not some giant shag fest. There’s no wife swapping or affairs. Just families that happen to share a living space. It annoys me that people think I’m like that, I’m not.”

“What about money?” I asked.

She sighed.

“People are so obsessed with money. You really don’t need much at all. We just need fuel money and a little for essentials like salt and things. Everything else we make ourselves or find in nature. I make a little money making carved animals and selling them at markets. Clarke sells refurbished laptops and does some busking although most councils now make you get a licence which is expensive. Jethro and Kev are street performers and go juggling and Saca sells her own designs of tarot cards. She dresses up like a gypsy and calls herself Madame Zola.”

“What if you get sick? Really sick?”

“We go to the doctor, just like you do. We’re normal people Mug, we just don’t buy into the same consumerist crap that everyone else does. We don’t focus on making money to buy houses and fancy cars and clothes to impress other people. We just want to be part of nature and enjoy people for who they are, not who they pretend to be. We don’t try to hide behind status or pretend that asset wealth makes us better people or destroy the environment for some more meaningless trinkets.”

She was starting to steam up the windows.

“Hey, calm down,” I said, “I’m not picking on you, I was just curious. When I was sacked it never occurred to me to sell carvings or anything like that. I got really freaked out about it and I only wanted to know how you all coped.”

“Chill, Tina,” said Clark from the back laconically, “he’s one of the good guys OK.”

Celestine smiled and patted me on the knee.

“Sorry,” she said, “I just get defensive sometimes.”

When we got to town Celestine got me to stop when she saw a man carrying a guitar case and asked him if there was a music shop and he gave us directions to one that was, as she had thought, in a back street. Celestine wanted to go to the library so we agreed to all meet up at my normal cafe in the High Street when we’d done our various tasks.

Clark was already there when I arrived, all by himself at a table by the window holding little sticks up to the light and peering intently at them.

Bronwyn came over as soon as she saw me.

“e said you was paying,” she said. “That right?”

“Yes,” I said and ordered my usual. I sat and watched Clark.

“What are you doing?” I asked.

“Checking the reeds,” he said.

“What does that mean?”

He put the last one in a little plastic case and slipped it into a cardboard box.

“Reeds for my sax,” he said, by way of explanation.

I made that gesture with my hands that people do when they're expecting more of an explanation, a sort of half shrug, half beckoning movement.

He considered for a moment then emptied the box of plastic cases onto the table and selected one and took the reed out of the case and handed it to me.

“Hold it up to the light by the thick end,” he said. “You see at the top it's much thinner and paler? Almost translucent?”

“Yes,” I said.

“See where it suddenly changes colour and gets dark?”

“Yes.”

“And the edge of the darkness is more or less straight across?”

“Yes.”

“That means it's not a good reed. Try this one.” He passed me another.

“You see the dark edge is a U shape? Like a horseshoe? That is perfect. That's how they all should be but that one is the only one in the box. The rest are shit.”

“You mean you can't use them?”

“Oh no, they'll play, just won't be so sweet, the sound'll be slightly off. I put the good ones away safely for special occasions.”

He seemed unusually talkative. When I'd spent the evening at the camp he had just grunted or uttered monosyllables when someone had spoken directly to him.

“How long have you been with the group?” I asked.

“November,” he said. It looked like the window of chat had closed.

“What were you doing before that?” I tried.

Bronwyn arrived with my coffee and muffins.

“Can I have one?” asked Clark. I ordered another from Bronwyn and gave Clark the smaller of my two.

“I was doing post doctoral research at Manchester University,” said Clark with his mouth full, “AI, artificial intelligence, my specialism was the application of data mining to expert systems, particularly in finance.”

“Why did you leave?”

“I realised that AI was the suicide ideation of capitalism.”

“What on earth does that mean?”

He laughed heartily.

“Modern capitalism is faced with saturated markets so the emphasis now is on using AI systems to cut costs, mostly in the workforce.”

I nodded. The local supermarket had installed eight self-checkout machines and laid off some of their casual workers.

“The thing is it's a short term solution. People need the jobs to buy the products so if you cut the jobs to reduce costs fewer people can buy the products meaning you need more AI systems to reduce jobs to cut costs further. It's a vicious circle.”

“But surely cutting some jobs with self-checkouts at a supermarket won't make that much difference?” I said.

“It won't,” he agreed. “If that's all it is, but it isn't. AI is getting integrated everywhere but companies are only thinking in terms of their own companies. When every business is doing it, when every job is automated where are people going to get the money to buy the stuff?”

“Surely new jobs will be created for people, jobs that only people can do?”

“Sure,” said Clark, “short term. But people like me will find ways of automating those jobs too. We’re already working on systems that can automate the process of automating so even the technical people won’t have jobs.”

“But surely there are things that can’t be automated?”

“Like what? Hey, I hear people say that robots can’t create symphonies or write books, Well they’re already writing newspaper articles and books aren’t far off. And can you write a symphony? I’m a musician and I can’t.”

I had to admit that I probably couldn’t.

“But think about it man, just suppose everyone can write a symphony. What’s going to happen then? Everyone just sitting round writing symphonies while computers play them? Who’s going to listen to all those symphonies? Who’s going to buy them? What with? Long term, capitalism has created it’s own death. So I quit to find a real life before it all goes to the wall.”

Well, this was certainly something to think about.

“I think he likes you,” said Celestine sitting down. “Hey, look what I found in that book shop just down the road.” She slipped a book from underneath her sweater.

“Understanding Celtic Religion: Revisiting the Pagan Past,” she read out, “by some scholars of Celtic History. Cool yeah?”

I turned it over and noticed the price tag on the back. I was fairly sure she didn’t have £110. She ignored me and asked Bronwyn for some apple juice.

“You paying for that too?” Bronwyn said to me.

“Would you like something to eat?” I asked Celestine. Clark was

looking at the index at the back of the book.

“Have you got anything with no artificial additives?” she asked.

“Doubt it, love,” said Bronwyn, “this 'ere's a caff not a basdun five star restaurant.”

“Just the apple juice, please.”

She turned to Clark. “Did you see the windows? Cool isn't it.”

“Yeah,” he said.

She saw my look of puzzlement.

“Most places we go there's signs in all the windows saying 'No Gypsies No Travellers'. I've only seen a few here.”

“Why do they do that?”

“Maybe they think we scare off the regular customers I guess, I don't really know. I think it's just because we're different.”

“I don't think Bronwyn cares so long as she gets paid,” I commented

Walking back to the Toyota I scanned the shop windows and, sure enough, several had those signs. I'd never noticed before.

“I'll bring Sacajawea over tomorrow or maybe the next day,” said Celestine when I dropped them back at their camp. “She's looking forward to seeing the lighthouse from the inside.” She turned and started to walk towards her coach

“How about you ...” I said then petered out.

“How about what?” she said, coming back and leaning in the Toyota window.

“Oh nothing,” I said, scared she'd rather read her new book than have dinner with me. “See you tomorrow.”

I over-revved the Toyota leaving the camp, frustrated by my own fears.

A couple of days later Celestine came over, bringing Sacajawea and Jethro with her. When you say 'American Indian Princess' you tend to think of someone like Pocahontas. Sacajawea was nothing like Pocahontas. She was barely five feet tall and not slim and her long black hair was streaked with grey. I'd guess she was a similar age to Jethro but she did have the aquiline nose, high cheekbones and piercing eyes of a stereotypical Apache Warrior, even though she was a Shoshone. She was from Glasgow but didn't have much of an accent.

I ushered them into my kitchen and made some coffee. Conversation was a little stilted since it's difficult to think of small talk when someone had come round to inspect your poltergeist.

“How did a Shoshone end up in Glasgow?” I asked her.

“Me dad was Shoshone and was in Vietnam with the 101st Airborne,” she explained. “Me mum was a nurse and he married her and got a job in Glasgow as strike breaker when they were closing the shipyards.”

There wasn't a lot you could say to that so I didn't. We took our coffees over to the tower.

“Definitely something here,” said Sacajawea before I even opened the door.

Inside she wandered around the store room touching things, pausing and looking into nothingness. Every now and then she'd stop and tilt her head as though listening to the neighbours. She seemed withdrawn, concentrating on things that weren't there.

“A lot of things here,” she said after a while, nodding slowly. “Many things, many. Mostly animals, some humans, mmmmm.”

She shivered and came back to this world.

“Is there any one you're wanting to talk to or do you just want an overview?” she said.

“There's one,” I said after glancing at Celestine who was watching Sacajawea intently. “I don't know if it's human but it moves things a lot and is quite helpful.”

“Did it have a name?” she asked.

“I don't know,” I said. “I call it Mr Polly.” I felt a little stupid saying that.

“What has it moved?”

“Pens, binoculars, files, things like that.”

“Where are they?”

“Upstairs.”

We trooped upstairs. Sacajawea sat in the chair in the control room to get her breath back and Jethro sank to the floor. Celestine perched on the edge of the table and rubbed her ankle.

“Give me something that was moved,” said Sacajawea.

I handed her the Incident Log file. She held it up and looked around the room, waiting.

“Yes, I found him. Mr Polly. His living name was Moryn.”

She put the file down.

“How do you want to play this?” she asked. “Do you want to ask questions or do you want me to just find out what I can?”

“Umm, find out what you can,” I said.

“Jeth, give me the bag.”

Jethro passed her a plastic supermarket bag and she pulled out a thermos and some incense cones.

“Are those for communicating with spirits?” I asked, expecting holy water or something like that.

“No, lovie,” said Sacajawea. “This is Chamomile tea for my stomach and the incense is for my sinuses. It’s the damp air, they block up.”

As if to prove her point she sneezed then poured a cup of tea and lit a cone and put it on top of one of the radios.

“Is there any ritual?” I asked. “Do we like, hold hands and chant or something.”

“Gawd no,” she said with a sharp laugh. “That’s just theatre, only do that when I’m telling fortunes. This is real so no props or nothing. Talking to spirits is just like talking to living people.”

“Can you see him?”

“No lovie, I’m not that gifted. Now shut up and let me talk to him. Ready Tine?”

Celestine had pulled a battered notebook out of her pocket and took a pen from the pot on the table.

“Ready when you are,” she said, rifling through the pages to find a blank one.

Sacajawea slurped some tea and looked out the window at the clouds.

“His name’s Moryn, like I said.” She paused.

“His dad was Cleyddon, leader of the Deck Angie, that’s probably a tribe, no idea how you spell it.”

Pause.

“Ma was, what?, Cliona? No, Ciara? Yes, Ciara.”

“He doesn’t know how old he was but he had a son of ten summers.”

“His wife was called Ronat, just the one child.”

She drank some more tea.

“He was a warrior, but didn't like fighting, he wanted to be a bard but hadn't passed a test or something so he'd become a warrior instead.”

“Getting all this, Tine?” she asked, looking over at her.

Celestine nodded. There was quite a long delay during which Sacajawea fiddled with the mike of the radio.

“OK, I'm not quite clear on this but it sounds like his dad had heard from messengers from the sinners, sinners?, no Sinurs, no Silures, I think that's another tribe, that Sue Tonus, well that's what it sounds like, was coming to wipe them all out. I've no idea who Sue Tonus is. Sounds like a great warrior as they were all scared. And this Sue Tonus had a mighty army, well I guess you wouldn't be scared of a small army would you.”

There was another delay during which she laughed two or three times but didn't explain why.

“Right, Cleyddon sent word to the priests and the head priest called a meeting of all the full priests.”

This was rather like listening to a one sided phone conversation.

“The meeting lasted for two days and two nights, there was much arguing, they ate most of the food and some of the warriors had to go out hunting to get more. Seems they drank a lot too.”

“Moryn likes your light,” she said to me. “And he's fascinated by all your things, he got very bored until the light came along but it was fun for a while then everyone went away but he's pleased you're here now. He likes the company.”

She laughed again.

“He likes Celestine too, he misses his wife, I don't understand, ohh he

misses being in bed with her, well, OK. Yeah, no I'm not telling her that."

"Telling me what?" said Celestine.

"Nothing dear"

Celestine glared at her.

"Ahh, the priests decided that they had to sacrifice to Epona who was the protector of all the tribes but they could not agree on who was to be sacrificed but they did agree that the sacrifice had to be more important than someone captured in battle. The importance of the threat meant that the sacrifice had to be someone important, high ranking."

"After another day of arguing the head priest sent for Cleyddon, they'd reached a decision, his son had been chosen. That's Moryn, the oldest and Cleyddon accepted the judgement of the priests."

"OK, interesting, Moryn says he was proud when Cleyddon told him. He wasn't a good fighter and this was his opportunity to achieve greatness and save his tribe, yes, yes, his wife cried, well I can understand that, but his son said he would take his father's name and carry it with pride."

She poured some more tea and lit another cone.

"They had a big ceremony, right on this spot. Five others were sacrificed before him, he doesn't know who they were but they were the normal wicker sacrifices so they were probably prisoners but to save the tribe, Moryn's sacrifice had to be special, so he was bathed and shaved and his hair was trimmed short and after prayers he came out of his house, no, not his house, a hut built especially for his last night beside the head priest's hut and, oh nasty."

"Right, it seems Moryn stood there naked in front of all the priests at sunset, facing out to the west and he is proud he felt no fear and the head priest garrotted him with a strip of leather so he couldn't breathe then cut his throat, yes, Moryn says he could feel his blood gushing

down his chest then he fell and the priest held his head in a bucket of sea water until he was dead, yes, very nasty.”

“He thinks he didn't fall but was hit from behind and knocked down because he felt a rib or two breaking but he doesn't know who hit him.”

“I just asked him why he's still here since he went to the sacrifice willingly, he said it's because it was a waste of time, a waste of his life, Epona deserted them and two nights later Sue Tonus ransacked their town and laid waste to everything.”

“His son was speared in battle and died in great pain the next day, all the priests were killed, many of the tribe also died and many of the women raped, Ronat died by her own hand.”

She fell silent.

“Everyone and everything he once loved has long gone but he is still here. He is lonely. Poor bugger.”

Chapter Fourteen

“Deck Angie is probably the Deceangli,” said Celestine. “They were a Celtic tribe who lived in north Wales.”

I'd driven them back to their camp and Celestine and I were sitting beside her coach, leaning our backs against it, shoulders and hips almost touching but achingly far apart. She was looking through her notes.

“And the Silures were another Celtic tribe who occupied south Wales. I've never heard of Moryn or Cleyddon but Sue Tonus is almost certainly Suetonius, the Roman Commander in Britain rather than Suetonius the Roman historian. So it looks as though the Silures somehow got news of Suetonius' planned attack and warned the Deceangli who sacrificed Moryn to protect them against the attack but it didn't work.”

“What's this about the wicker sacrifices?” I asked, leaning slightly to see her notes and casually letting my shoulder and hip touch hers.

“The druids were shit hot on sacrificing to the gods at every opportunity,” said Celestine, finding the reference in her notes and twisting her notebook to show me, which pressed her shoulder harder against mine.

“Usually they were criminals or prisoners of war if they had any. They normally made small cages from willow or reeds and burnt the sacrificial victim alive inside it. But it sounds like they didn't think that would be powerful enough to stop the Roman Army so they had to beef up the action and sacrifice the son of the chief.”

“I think I'd rather have my throat cut,” I said, “rather than be burnt alive. Do you suppose it's true?”

“No real way of knowing for sure,” she said. “I'm pretty sure Saca really can talk to spirits but it's not one of those areas that can be scientifically tested. If she did make it up, Suetonius and the Deceangli and the Silures are fairly well known so it would be easy enough to weave them into any story. And anyway, the spirit Saca talked to could

be making up the story for its own reasons. Evil spirits lie all the time.”

“I guess we've no way of checking,” I said.

“I can check my books,” said Celestine, “and maybe at the library too. Come on.”

Much to my disappointment she stood up and went inside the coach. I got up and followed.

On the driver's side there was a curtained off area and a small kitchen opposite it. Behind them was a general living area and at the far end was another curtained area the full width of the coach. Celestine flicked a switch near the front of the coach and some lights came on. I could see the wiring for the lights had been duct taped to the roof and lead off through a hole beside one of the rear windows.

“This is where I sleep,” said Celestine as she pulled back the curtain of the front area. “It may not seem much but it's home. Tim and Jess sleep down there.” She tipped her head towards the back of the coach.

Behind the curtain was a homemade wooden bed covered with blankets. There was probably some sort of mattress but the blankets covered everything. She bent down and pulled a large wooden box out from under the bed. It was mostly full of books, the one she'd picked up in town on top. It had a slip of paper between the pages about a third of the way through so I guessed she'd been reading it. She started lifting out books and dumping them on the bed. There were about fifteen of them, mostly about druidism but a couple on history. She rapidly checked their indexes and couldn't find any references to the tribes, nor Cleyddon.

“Oh well, next time you go to town we can look in the library.”

She paused uncertainly for a moment.

“Can I show you some things?” she asked. “Special things. Promise you won't laugh?”

“I promise,” I said gravely. It wasn't like Celestine to be unsure of herself.

She lifted out a cardboard shoe box and undid the ribbon that held its lid on. Inside was a folded up piece of black cloth. She lifted it carefully out of the box and laid it on her bed and unfolded it to reveal some medicine bottles and folded scraps of paper. She picked up an aspirin bottle half full of dirt.

“This is soil from Stenness,” she said reverently and looked at me anxiously.

“Where's that?” I asked.

“On the Isle of Orkney, we went over on the ferry last October. The Stones of Stenness are the oldest sacred place in Britain. You could feel the sacredness there, it was electric, just awesome.”

I could see that the soil had a deep meaning for her but I didn't know what to say so I nodded slowly and looked serious. She seemed relieved and turned back to the bed and laid the aspirin bottle down carefully. I took the opportunity to see how her dreadlocks were progressing while she wasn't looking at me.

She touched some of the other items then lifted a folded piece of paper and showed me the feather it contained.

“This is from an albatross,” she said. “I was meditating on a beach further south a few weeks ago and it fell out of the sky and caught in my hair.”

She went through the items one by one, a small stone, a root that had twisted and turned and tied itself into a knot, some fur from a weasel, a piece of quartz, a piece of driftwood carved into a strange shape, explaining their significance to her. The pine cone, for example, she had found inside a cave beside an old altar and the driftwood carving was of a creature she'd seen in a dream.

“And this,” she held up a small piece of dried moss, “is from a rock pool where I was sitting when the wind talked to me.”

“What did the wind say?” I asked.

Her face went slightly pink and she bit her lower lip before saying resolutely

“To save my virginity for the one who is special,” before looking away and starting to pack the items back in the box.

She carefully folded it back inside its piece of paper.

As usual I didn't know what to say and I was quite, well I don't know, embarrassed I suppose, that she was telling me these things. They seemed very very personal. To hide my confusion I picked up the last item which was wrapped in a piece of what seemed to be toilet paper.

“What's that?” I asked.

“Oh nothing important,” she said, putting things in the box.

I unwrapped the toilet paper and she stiffened then seemed to mentally shrug and relaxed again. Inside were what looked to be some scrapings of soap.

“It's just some soap,” she said, “to remind me of someone important,” and she took the toilet paper off me and wrapped it up again.

I had to admit, although I didn't say this to her, that it seemed to be very ordinary soap. Judging by its faint smell it seemed to be everyday, cheap supermarket soap, much like my own. She swiftly repacked the shoe box and retied the ribbon holding the lid on and replaced it inside her library box. I felt a special moment had come and gone and that I'd somehow failed to connect with it, or her.

She smiled at me and took my hand.

“I just wanted to show you those things,” she said. “You don't need to understand them. Come on let's go outside again.”

We sat down beside the fire where the others were congregating and Stevie was stirring the large pot of vegetable stew that was the group's

communal supper. Jethro came and sat beside me.

“Tomorrow is the Equinox,” he said then fell silent as though to let the significance of his statement grow on me.

I seemed to spend a lot of time nodding and trying to look wise with this group of people.

“We came here to celebrate the Equinox,” he said after a while. “We were going to hold it here,” he waved his arm to indicate the spot they were camped on, “although”.

I could feel he was building up to something so I looked intent and gave a half smile of encouragement.

“We would be honoured if you would join us in our celebration,” he continued without expanding on the 'although'.

I noticed several of the others were following our conversation and I wondered what he was getting at. Then the penny dropped.

“Thank you,” I said, “for your trust in me.” There were a couple of nods. It looked like I wasn't the only one who did that.

“Perhaps the isthmus with the lighthouse would be better, as it is an ancient sacred site,” I said.

There were more nods and a number of smiles and Jethro exhaled deeply. Celestine touched my hand with hers and squeezed it gently.

“We thank you, friend Walter,” he said and touched my forehead with the index finger of his right hand. “The equinox is just before sunset.”

“Do I need anything?” I asked, “any particular clothes or a candle or something?”

“Just the purity of your heart,” said Jethro. “Leave all malice or ill will behind.”

That was cool since I didn't fancy wearing my dressing gown in front

of them all and I had nothing else remotely suitable for use as a druid/wiccan/pagan robe. Then it occurred to me that 'just the purity of your heart' could also mean 'no clothes at all'.

"Umm, you don't do it naked or anything?" I asked cautiously.

"Only if you really want to," said Jethro. "Although it's too damned cold for me and I don't look good naked."

"Sure you do," said Sacajawea and there was a lot of laughter and a few wolf whistles. I was beginning to feel I was a part of the group and stayed, next to Celestine, until quite late.

In the morning I had an idea while Cat and I were having breakfast and I phoned Ysgol Gynradd, the primary school where Gareth Hanesydd worked, to try to find out if there was anything known about Moryn historically. He wasn't there because it was half term but the school secretary had no qualms about giving me his home phone number.

"Delighted to, absolutely delighted to," he boomed down the phone when I rang and asked if I could talk some more Celtic history with him. "It's half term and the wife's at work so come right over. Stay for some lunch. It'll be a pleasure."

Before heading off I checked the time of the equinox, 5:58pm GMT, and sunset, 6:14pm GMT, so I had some idea when I needed to be back. High tide wasn't until after 11pm so that shouldn't interfere with anything.

"Come in, come in," he said when he opened the door of his neat little house in Rhosneigr. It seemed like a perfectly ordinary suburban three bedroomed house until he led me into his 'little den'. There were books and files everywhere, lining the walls from floor to ceiling, piled haphazardly on surfaces and scattered all over the floor. There were even piles of papers obscuring much of the window and making the room quite dark. He had cleared some space and brought in a chair from the lounge for me to sit in.

He sat me down and disappeared to the kitchen then reappeared with

two steaming mugs of coffee and a large fruit cake. He cut me a slice roughly the size of a paving stone and a small sliver for himself.

I'd thought up a clever cover story as to why I was there so that I didn't have to tell him that the lighthouse was haunted. That might excite his curiosity too much and I could hardly get him to sign a non-disclosure agreement.

"I was talking to some tourists the other day about Celtic tribes in Anglesey."

"Oh yes, yes," he said nodding eagerly. "Some of the tourists are very knowledgeable."

"And they were talking about the Deceangli, who lived ..."

"Yes, in north Wales, based around Anglesey, now there've been some very interesting archaeological discoveries about the Deceangli recently, now where did I put it? Oh yes," and he leapt out of his chair and dug through a mound of files and triumphantly pulled one out.

"I was wondering if you've heard of a Deceangli leader called Cleyddon," I asked.

He stopped rummaging through the file.

"Hmmm," he said. "Good Celtic name, means 'strong warrior' but I don't think I've come across that name as a Deceangli leader. Any idea when?"

"Perhaps around the time of Suetonius, although I'm just guessing," I said.

He leapt up again and retrieved his briefcase from the lounge and pulled out an iPad.

"Let me just check my database," he said. "Wonderful things computers," he beamed and started doing things on its screen.

"Nothing for Cleyddon," he muttered. "Let me try Claydon, Clayton,

no can't seem to find anything with that name to do with the Deceangli.”

“How about Moryn?” I asked, “I think they said that was his son's name.”

He busied himself on the screen, “Moryn, no nothing, Morin, Moran, ahh, here's something with Meryn. Cross referenced to Claggon of the Deceangli. Yes, they're mentioned in Cassius Plautius' *Exercitia et Consuetudines in Occidentis Insula* which roughly translated means The Customs and Practices of the Western Isles. I've got copy somewhere. Only fragments, of course. Now where is it?”

He looked thoughtfully around the room.

“I used to have a system,” he said apologetically. “But I got a bit overwhelmed. Much more fun to read the stuff than file it systematically.”

He spent the next ten minutes or so pulling books off shelves and putting them in piles on the floor.

“Ahh, here we are,” he said collapsing into his chair with a thick paperback book with his finger stuck between some pages.

“Cassius Plautius, Roman historian, late second century and early third century. Not much known about him although another writer says he was in Britain for 'duobus aut tribus annis', that's two or three years, as a secretary. To whom we don't know. The *Exercita* is his only known work, most of it missing. Ahh, here it is. 'Claggon lugeret filium suum Meryn in primogenito suo ... tribus autem septentrionalem cambria ... magno proelio ... tum Paulinus Suetonius obtinebat pepulisse Imperii druidae de execratione maledicta congegissit'. That's all I'm afraid.”

“What's that in English?” I asked.

“Oh sorry, forgot you don't speak Latin.” He found the spot again.

“Roughly translated it says 'Claggon in mourning for Meryn, his

firstborn son, ... of the tribe of northern Cambria ... in a great battle ... Suetonius Paulinus rid the Empire of the druid curse'. So that would most likely be AD60 when Suetonius wiped out the druids on Anglesey, Cambria being the Roman name for Wales.”

“Could you give me that reference again?”

I wrote it all down, in Latin and English, so I could tell Celestine. I also noted the details of Gareth's book in case I ever needed to get a copy myself.

“Did the druids only sacrifice people by burning them in wicker cages?” I asked.

“That was their usual method yes but sometimes they poisoned them. But there was a very interesting discovery a few years ago in a bog, let me think. Ummm, what was it called, Lin something, oh yes, Lindow Man, that was it. I've got a book somewhere ...”

We went through the routine again although this time it was a little quicker as the book was called 'The Life And Death Of A Druid Prince' and the spines could be easily read. Just holding the book in his hand seemed to be sufficient to revive his memory.

“Yes, now a body was found in Lindow Moss, which is near Manchester of course, of a young man, thought to possibly be a druid, who had been strangled, his throat cut and drowned, seemingly all at the same time. What was interesting is that he was naked and no weapons or armour were found so it seems likely that it was a sacrifice. Tests suggest this all happened around 2000 years ago which would be around the time of your Claggon and Manchester isn't all that far away, perhaps a hundred miles and there is some evidence of a druid stronghold in that area.”

No lunch appeared but having managed to eat my way through my slice of fruitcake I doubted I'd be hungry again for several days. I stayed until the mid afternoon, fascinated by Gareth's wealth of knowledge. He was wasted in a primary school.

I couldn't wait to tell Celestine.

The camp was deserted when I arrived so I continued on to the lighthouse. Several of them, including Jethro and Celestine were building a fire in the middle of my front garden and I could see the rest scattered over the surrounding countryside, looking for wood.

“I hope you don't mind about the fire,” Celestine said when I arrived. She looked worried. “I told Jethro we should ask first but he insisted.”

Judging by the amount of wood they'd found and how relatively treeless the land was I didn't think the fire would be much bigger than their normal campfires and with the amount of rain the area gets the grass would soon regrow and hide the spot so I reassured her and she looked relieved.

I took her to one side and explained what Gareth had told me. She was excited by the news.

“So it looks like Sacajawea was right,” I said. “Should we tell her?”

“Absolutely not,” said Celestine. “She knows she's right and will only be annoyed that we doubted her.”

Sacajawea returned with a handful of twigs and gave them to Jethro then came over to me.

“Can you let me in to the lighthouse?” she asked. “I need to explain to Moryn what's happening. I don't want him to get scared and think he's going to be sacrificed again or that we are trying to get rid of him.”

We went up to the control room, for some reason I felt very protective about the equipment and didn't want anyone being in there without me, and watched as Sacajawea sat silently for a couple of minutes then smiled.

“He understands,” she said, “and he'll be watching from up here. He thinks its all very exciting.”

When we got back down we found the fire had been lit and Stevie was baking a pan of homemade barley bread, hanging from a metal tripod over the fire.

“What's going to happen?” I asked Celestine.

“Jethro is a druid priest,” she said. “We'll all sit in a circle around the fire and he'll hand around the bread and lead us in prayer to Awen then we'll eat the bread and meditate and that's basically it. The Equinox is a minor celebration. The most important one is Beltane on the first of May.”

“So no orgy then,” I said teasingly.

“No,” she said seriously. “Only Satanists do that. Sorry to disappoint you.”

“I was teasing you,” I said, uncomfortably. As usual my little joke had backfired. One day I'll learn.

“Never joke about evil,” said Celestine, with a frown. “It's as real as anything else.”

We took our places around the fire. Fortunately it wasn't raining although it was quite overcast and the sun wasn't directly visible. At about quarter to six Jethro got up and took off his jacket and woolly hat and pulled a white sheet over his head. There was a hole in the middle for his head. He went over to the bread pan which was cooling to one side of the fire and picked up the flat, round loaf and slowly went round the group, giving each of us a hunk of bread.

Following Celestine's lead, I said “I thank nature for its bounty” when he handed me my piece.

I put it on the ground in front of me the way Celestine did. Then he stood close to the fire, facing the west and the, hidden, setting sun.

“We thank the sun for the bringing of life and the bounteous beauty of nature.”

“Awen,” we all responded.

He moved around to face the north.

“We thank Awen for the art and poetry that she bestows upon our

lives.”

“Awen,” we all responded.

He moved around to face the east.

“We thank our ancestors for their lives and welcoming us into their families.”

“Awen,” we all responded.

He moved around to face the south.

“We thank Awen for the gift of love and for the joy of life.”

“Awen,” we all responded.

He moved back to face the west. Cat appeared and investigated the empty bread pan and stalked off in contempt. She wasn't a fan of barley.

“Awen,” he called in a strong, clear voice, his arms outstretched.

“Awen,” we all responded and started to eat our bread. There was a thwump as the lighthouse came to life and its beam began to probe the darkening sky. We all sat quietly, our hands in our laps. I don't know what the others thought about but I thought it had been a very nice ceremony. Simple and unpretentious, giving thanks for our blessings, not the least of which was Celestine sitting quietly beside me, her leg touching mine.

“I could get to like this lifestyle,” I thought.

Gradually people quietly got up as they each ended their quiet meditation as the fire died down. They gathered into groups and talked quietly to each other then faded into the night to return to their camp. Celestine sat with me at the edge of the garden, looking out over the sea and we simply enjoyed each other's company. A peace had settled on me and I felt contented with the world. In time I walked slowly back around the fields with her to their camp and she

kissed me before I walked all the way back and waded through the water over the drawbridge as the tide had come in.

I felt as though I was walking on the water, not through it. It had been a good day.

Chapter Fifteen

I slept superbly that night. There's something about a first kiss that is special, not that I'm experienced in these things. Come to think of it, my first kiss with Su Ling had been fairly academic, as though she was analysing its philosophical implications while it was in progress and she'd tasted of pineapple and olives as we'd been eating pizza at the time. My first kiss with Raquel had been better, although she'd tasted of beer since we were in a nightclub and she'd wiped her lips with a tissue immediately afterwards, to fix her lipstick presumably. So I guess it would be fair to say that it was Celestine that made our first kiss special, rather than the other way around. She'd tasted fresh, like moonlight or a mountain stream and, if she'd felt the need to wash afterwards, had at least waited until I'd left.

After the late morning tide had subsided I headed off into town to do my weekly shopping run and stopped off at the camp to see if Celestine wanted to come with me. She seemed pleased to see me, as if she hadn't spent the night regretting her impulsiveness. The camp was in disarray with all their belongings in heaps all over the place.

"I'd love to but we're having a cleanup," she said.

"I make everyone do this," said Jethro, who happened to be passing. "The first dry day after every celebration I make them empty their vans or whatever and give everything a scrub down and airing. I was born in a camper van in the seventies and I've lived in them all my life. Seen too many live in squalor and lose their health."

"We celebrate the solstices and the equinoxes and the mid points like Imbolc and Beltane so we clean out every six weeks or so," added Celestine. "It's a pain but we're all healthy and there's no lice or mould or anything."

Judging by the intensity and the laughter it looked like they'd made the cleaning part of the celebration itself. There was a joyousness that people doing chores rarely have. I helped for a few hours then went into town on my own.

I got my usual supplies at the supermarket together with a fifty six

pound sack of potatoes and a few packets of herbs for the group since I'd eaten a fair amount of their food and wanted to repay them. I nearly got some cider or beer for them as well but remembered that I hadn't seen any of them drink anything alcoholic. Come to think of it there'd been no evidence of any drugs either although Beccy and Kev did share a cigar in the evenings.

I was pushing open the door to Bronwyn's cafe when I noticed a photocopied sign in the window.

“Public Meeting To Discuss The Travellers, 6,30pm, Community Centre”

Bronwyn didn't know anything about it and wasn't much interested so I ordered my coffee and muffins. As it was late in the day, the cafe was almost deserted and Daffyd had long gone. I was mildly curious about the meeting so I lingered until the cafe closed and took a meat pie with me to eat on the library steps while waiting.

When I reached the Community Centre there were already quite a few people there including, to my surprise, Daffyd, who was sitting near the back at the end of a row of wooden folding chairs. I went and joined him.

“So what's this all about, Daffyd?” I asked.

“Some people's got their knickers in a twist I reckon,” said Daffyd. “ticularly the Council what has to pay the clean up bill but don't get no rates from them travellers. Allus a bit o' fun these meetings. 'ave em most years.”

Looking around I could see a number of familiar faces of local shopkeepers and a few less familiar faces of local farmers. Bronwyn, as she had said, wasn't there.

On the stage there was a trestle table and three men in suits together with one in a policeman's uniform. Gareth came up to me and squeezed my shoulder but declined my invitation to sit with us as he was sitting with some of the other teachers.

At about 6:35, one of the men on the stage stood up and tapped the microphone. The chatter died away as he gesticulated to someone off-stage who came on stage and flicked a little switch on the microphone.

“Good evening, Ladies and Gentlemen,” he boomed throughout the hall. Everyone settled down and he introduced himself as Bryn Jones, the Chairman of the North Wales Farmers Association. He then introduced the Mayor of Holyhead Council, a lawyer who advised the council on legal matters and the local Chief Constable.

“We’ve called this meeting because a number of the Association’s members are worried about the Travellers who are camping illegally on their land and on public land.”

There were a couple of shouts in Welsh and an English “fucking parasites” from the audience.

“As of three days ago there were fifteen, I say again fifteen separate groups of Travellers camping in various places around the area. Many have come here to partake of some quasi religious practice to do with the Spring equinox but that was two days ago and **THEY ARE STILL HERE!**”

There was a round of applause and a few more shouts in Welsh and English.

“Actually it was yesterday evening,” I muttered to Daffyd.

“We say enough is enough! We have tolerated them and let them carry out their nonsense but they need to go! We, the North Wales Farmers Association, call on the Mayor of Holyhead to take steps to remove these nuisances from the area.”

There was a louder round of applause.

The Mayor stood up and was passed the microphone. He beamed genially around the room and gave a short speech which said very little but was quite vocal about the prosperity of the area and the need for everyone to be tolerant and leave things to the authorities. Then

he called on the lawyer to give a legal dimension to the situation. The lawyer was clearly nervous.

“Umm, errm, can I say firstly that everyone has rights under the law.”

There was a murmur of disapproval at this. I got the distinct feeling that shopkeepers and farmers didn't like other people having rights.

“As with any and all ethnic groups, gypsies and travellers are protected from discrimination by the Race Relations (Amendment) Act 2000 and the Human Rights Act 1998 and the Council has no legal jurisdiction to take any action against such people who are illegally encamped on private land.”

A red faced man near the front jumped up at this point, clearly very angry.

“I've been here 26 years,” he shouted, waving an arm angrily at the lawyer on stage. “I've invested all me money in me farm. I work 16 hrs a day every day and these scum come in here and take it away from me and you say I've got no rights!”

Daffyd nudged me in the ribs, winked then climbed nonchalantly to his feet.

“I'm not saying you ...” started the lawyer.

“Ain't no one takin' nothin' away from you Gwyn Davies,” Daffyd called. “Ain't no travellers on your land, they'n got more sense what with you and yer bloody shotgun! An' you wouldn't 'ave to work so bloody 'ard if you opened your wallet an' paid a labourer to 'elp you by Christ, yer tight bastard!”

He sat down happily and Gwyn Davies' red face turned purple.

“I'm a warning you Daffyd Ffermwr,” he shouted, waving a fist at Daffyd who leapt up again.

“Oh shut yer bloody face yer stupid old bugger,” shouted back Daffyd and he laughed and pretended to turn his back on Gwyn Davies in

contempt.

Gwyn Davies tried to run at Daffyd but several people pulled him back. The Chief Constable banged his truncheon on the table and told everyone that if they didn't keep their tempers that arrests would be made "in this very hall!"

"Ee, I do love these meetings," Daffy said to me quietly. "Bit o' fun like."

"As I was saying," said the lawyer when things had quietened down, "landowners have rights too but the Council cannot take action on their behalf. Each landowner needs to take private action ..."

"I'll set me fucking dogs on 'em" called out someone else, presumably a farmer.

"... umm, that would be illegal," said the lawyer. "You'll be open to prosecution for any illegal acts perpetrated against a third party."

"Only be 'aving one party," shouted someone from the back. "An' that's when they's gorn, won't be needin' three parties, man."

There was general laughter at this. The Chief Constable looked a little bored.

"Them's bastards fucking stink an' they'm takin' drugs," shouted a beefy man who was sitting alone on the other side of the room.

Daffyd leapt to his feet again.

"Aye, you'd know all 'bout stinking, Rhys Morgan," he called out. "Could've washed afore you left that 'ole pig farm a'yours."

There was more laughter. Quite a few people seemed to be enjoying the entertainment.

One of the shopkeepers raised her hand and the lawyer sighed and let her speak.

“What about the shopkeepers?” she said, looking around for support. “All this talk about landowners but it's us what's having things stolen and honest customers scared away.”

There was some applause to this. The lawyer was about to reply when someone else shouted

“Why don't the fucking police do their fucking job and get rid of this scum!”

The Chief Constable got to his feet and stared around the room, daring people to confront him personally. The hubbub died down and he waited for silence.

“It is the duty of the police to maintain the peace and prevent crime,” he said calmly. “Trespass is not a crime, but assault on a person or property with shotguns or dogs or in any other manner is.”

“Warrabout stealing?” called out the lady shopkeeper.

“Theft is a crime and the police will do everything in our power to apprehend and prosecute anyone caught stealing or attempting to steal. So is drug abuse. But ...”

His 6 foot and over twenty stone frame stood solidly like a rock face as the waves crashed against it. He waited for silence.

“But,” he continued. “in this country we do not evict or exile anyone for theft or for taking drugs.”

The meeting continued in this way for some time and broke up with no clear outcome, one way or another. I got the impression that the authorities didn't really want to get involved in what seemed to them to be a fairly minor matter.

“I remember back in the eighties,” said Daffyd as the meeting petered to an end. “Farmers layin' in wait for travellers wi' their shotguns and barricading the roads. Cops sending in riot squads to smash up the vans and arrest everyone. Travellers fighting back with sticks and rocks. Lots of people got injured. Like bloody warfare it was. I

'member back in, ohhh '85, it were, fifteen hundred riot police tried to kick out a group of Travellers down in Dorset. On their way to Stonehenge they was so they was going to move anyways. Cops set fire to their vans, beat a load of 'em up so much they had to be 'ospitalised, pregnant women too. Seem to remember one or two died. Battle of the Beanfield it was called. Don't make no damned sense to me. Treat 'em right and they's treat you right is allus been my motto. That Gwyn Davies sets out to find trouble. He ain't go no problem wif trespassers but to 'ear 'im talk they's all camped in 'is front room."

He sucked his teeth reflectively.

"I don't unnerstand it, like. We gets the Travellers every year and every year we gets the same old bloody meeting. S'pose people just likes to bluster and shout but it makes no bloody sense to me. See yer boy."

I drove back home quietly, thinking about the meeting. On the one hand I could see that a large group of people suddenly turning up and camping on your land could be worrisome but if you got to know them, as I had, they weren't a problem. Maybe it's just fear of what they might do rather than what they do do. Maybe it's just a fear of a different lifestyle and the implicit criticism of your own that goes along with it. I could also sympathise with the shopkeepers. They needed their profits on the sale of things to feed their families and so on but, let's face it, the Travellers rarely came into town and when they did most shop keepers watched them closely so they couldn't get away with much and thefts from shops went on all year round, not just when the Travellers were here. Locals stole a lot more than the Travellers but I suppose as they were part of the community there was no outcry. Strangers are always easy to attack as they had few supporters. The big surprise had been Daffyd. He didn't seem to be the type who'd support so called dropouts although Jethro had told me he'd given them permission to be on his land indefinitely so long as they didn't kill his cattle.

It was getting late and the tide would be in soon, blocking my drawbridge, so I decided not to stop at the camp on the way home and let them know about the meeting. They tended to go to bed early and get up early so they'd probably all be asleep now anyway. Even if

the authorities did anything, which seemed very unlikely, they wouldn't organise it overnight.

I got up nice and early as usual, after a mildly troubled sleep which I put down to the unaccustomed additives in a mass produced meat pie. I did my chores up in the control room and checked my emails. There were two, one from the Meteorological Office letting me know that a new piece of equipment they wanted me to monitor had been shipped and the other from Coyote Road Runners letting me know that the equipment had arrived at their Bangor office and was ready for me to collect. I decided to get over there straight away to beat the tide. That way I could get back early and spend the rest of the day with Celestine if she wasn't busy. Maybe we could go fishing again.

After collecting the package from Coyote Road Runners I wandered round the town for a while. I had an urge to buy a gift for Celestine, something to show that I liked and appreciated her. I came across a decent looking bookshop and looked through some books but wasn't quite sure what her taste was. Judging by the books she already had she preferred the more scholarly tomes to the mass market lightweight stuff and what little scholarly stuff there was was awfully expensive. Much too expensive to risk her not liking it. Maybe for her birthday she'd come with me and choose an expensive one herself. I didn't know when her birthday was but she'd told me she was a Taurus and I'd looked up the dates for Taurus and her 20th was coming up fairly soon. They were planning to be at Avebury for Beltane, which was the 1st of May but that was five weeks away yet.

I looked through some clothes as well but decided against them. Celestine always seemed to wear the same jumper and jeans and might well resent me buying her something, especially if she thought I might be trying change her in some way, make her conform to some conventional standard she didn't agree with. Maybe a new camouflage jacket? I didn't know what size she was. And since she never wore makeup that was out too.

I was walking along Beach Road when I came across one of those pop-up shops that was selling new age type stuff, dream catchers and dragons and the like. Wandering round I found a locked display cabinet with jewellery in it and my eye fell on a pair of earrings. OK I

didn't know if Celestine even had pierced ears but earrings don't have to go only in ears. They can be hung up anywhere, including on the string that holds the cloth separating your bedroom from the kitchen. Anyway, this pair of earrings had an intricate pattern of silver wires woven into a Celtic style design with five small green gems of some sort dangling from the wires and three green feathers. They looked sort of druid-like to me and the feathers seemed appropriate to nature and the green would be set off nicely against her red hair and Awen, the goddess we'd preyed to at the Equinox, was the goddess of Art and these seemed to be artistic. I bought them. OK they were expensive but I was sure she'd like them and my gut told me that they'd be more appreciated than some esoteric academic study of ancient religions.

Driving back I got a warm feeling thinking about how Celestine's face would light up when I gave her the earrings and how she'd draw her hair back for me to put them in her ears and she'd give me a big kiss and a hug and then I remembered I had left the sack of potatoes and the herbs I'd got for the group at home. For some reason I'd unpacked everything from the car the night before. So rather than go straight to their camp and go home for the potatoes later I decided to go home first and get the potatoes and then go round to the camp.

Of course, after I'd passed the turn off it occurred to me that I could have gone to the camp and told them about the potatoes and maybe Celestine would have come with me to get them and I could have given her the earrings at my place and done the kissing and hugging bit a little more privately and that might have lead to more but I was almost home and it's easy to over complicate things. The kiss and hug were what was important, not the where.

Carrying the meteorological package up the steps to the cottage I noticed that my garbage bin had been ransacked. This was very strange. I'd been there some months and no animals had bothered with my bin before. There was rubbish all around it. Still, it would only take a few moments to clean it up.

Then I saw my front door step. Someone or something had dumped some rubbish on it. I put down the package and stared at it. This was very strange. After a couple of moments I began to realise that the

food scraps weren't just dumped, they had been laid out. Standing square on to the door step it looked as though the food scraps spelled out GOODBYE.

“Don't be absurd,” I said out loud. “Who would write goodbye on your door step using food scraps? It's just your imagination.”

But, staring at the scraps, they definitely seemed to spell out something and that something definitely seemed to be GOODBYE.

Who would say goodbye to me anyway? Why couldn't they just text or email me?

Oh

Fucking

Shit

I ran to the Toyota, blindly kicking over the meteorological package and raced to the next bay. There was only one person who would say goodbye who didn't have a phone and couldn't text me.

The camp was deserted.

The fire was out and looked like it had had water thrown over it. Clark's tent was gone and only flattened grass showed where it had been. There were wheel marks in the grass and a few piles of rubbish. Apart from that all that remained was a single blanket caught in a tree and flapping gently in the breeze, and Jethro's woolly hat, crumpled forlornly where his coach used to be.

I jumped out of the car and ran over in disbelief. How could they have just up and gone without saying goodbye? Without at least letting me know how to stay in contact? I fell to my knees beside the dead fire and hugged myself. She'd gone. Vanished. I may even have howled but if I did only the seagulls heard and they took no notice.

How could she have just gone? Didn't I mean anything to her? I really thought we'd had some kind of connection, a bond. I could not accept

it was completely one sided but she'd gone. This wasn't like Raquel telling me she didn't want to see me anymore. This was Celestine. Telling me she didn't want to see me anymore. The pain was worse, far worse. The welcoming smile, the teasing Mug, the intense joy of life, all gone, in an instant.

I was still there, two or three hours later when Daffyd turned up in his pickup truck. He was angry.

"Fucking Council evicted them," he said bluntly. "Turned up at 8 o'clock with an order and a couple of cops to serve it."

"I thought they had your permission to be on your land?" I said, numbly.

"Aye," he said. "So they did. But that young black lad wi' the tent ..."

"Clark,"

"... had 'is car in Coastal Path car park. Thought 'e was doing the right thing, all neat and tidy like. Eviction order said that meant the 'ole group was an illegal encampment on Council property."

"Couldn't he just move the car?" I asked.

"e said that. They said if he did they'd prosecute me for running a camping site without a licence or proper facilities. Children's health at risk, cop said, 'ave to quarantine the 'ole farm, like, just in case. Those buggers got you every which way. Just got back from seeing me lawyer in town. We've lodged a protest but won't get anywhere."

"So they just left?"

"Yep. That ol' Jethro said conflict ain't worth it so they's just packed everything up and left. Police escorted them out the district."

"Any idea where they've gone?"

"No lad, they just threw everything in their vans and went. Wouldn't even let me talk to them."

I helped him put the rubbish in the back of his pickup and drove slowly home. The lighthouse light may have been working but the light in my heart had gone out.

Chapter Sixteen

Fortunately the Meteorological Office's device hadn't been damaged when I kicked it but other than bring it inside in case it rained I didn't touch it over the weekend. In fact I did very little. I felt empty and apathetic. Those little routine chores which I'd scrupulously done every day and took pleasure in doing now seemed fairly empty and meaningless. It was two or three days before I even brought in the blanket and hat that had been left at the camp site and which I'd brought back in the car. Why I kept them I have no idea but as I'm fairly tidy by nature I folded the hat neatly inside the blanket and dumped it at the back of the hall cupboard.

A lot of the time I stayed in bed or lay on the couch. I went up to the control room, of course, to check the logs and make sure everything was working properly. After all, it would be a disaster if a ship was lost because I had the sads but things rarely went wrong and nothing went wrong now either. Even Mr Polly's little games had lost their charm. He'd taken to leaving a small scale map on the control desk like he wanted to play the children's game 'Where's Wally?' to maybe try and cheer me up but I wasn't in a cheerupable mood.

The only bright spot, and as bright spots go it wasn't that bright, was that Celestine had made some attempt to contact me before they left. It was not until the day after they'd gone that I suddenly realised that when the police came round to evict them and Jethro decided they'd leave that she must have run to my cottage and found I wasn't there. The cottage and lighthouse were both securely locked so she hadn't been able to get in and find a pen and paper so she'd used her lateral thinking and got chicken bones and potato peelings and other scraps from the rubbish bin to say goodbye. She couldn't have had much time either as Daffyd had said the whole thing from the arrival of the police to the departure of the convoy had taken no more than ninety minutes or so.

Anyway, yes it was a consolation that she had tried to say goodbye but, frankly not much of one. Goodbye is a very final word and carried all sorts of implications of never meeting again. OK, I appreciate she probably didn't have the time or the food scraps to say "I'll write to you in the next few days" or "this is my parent's address

and phone number, get in touch with them to find me” – and the door step wasn't big enough either – but 'au revoir' is only one letter longer than 'goodbye' and carries a message of hope for the future.

I left the scraps on the door step. I didn't have the heart to clean them up and over the weekend the wind and the birds obliterated even that last sign of her. Maybe if I'd been thinking straight I could have done something to preserve it – I don't know, maybe melted some candles and sealed the message with wax or something – but I wasn't thinking straight and in all honesty I don't think I wanted to keep her final goodbye for posterity.

The best thing to do would be to forget her.

Of course the human brain is one of the most perverted things known to humanity. When it is crucial that you remember something important, whatever it is disappears forever in a matter of moments leaving you to face the consequences but when you want to forget something, that twisted, sick, grey lump of depravity conjures up the memory time and time again, replaying it in immense detail from every angle and stopping frequently for slow motion replays and instant expert analysis.

And, of course, like a vastly experienced torturer trained by the Spanish Inquisition, when the replays start to fade and the exquisite rawness begins to go numb, that brain, supposedly responsible for survival, contrives to reopen the wound and massage the nerve endings by serving up fresh reminders. Like on Tuesday morning when I slipped on my jacket to escape the rain and put my hand in its pocket and found the earrings. Those friggin earrings. If I hadn't wasted time shopping for them I'd probably have been back before the group finally departed. Been back in time to find out if Celestine was sad or happy to go, maybe even make some arrangement to stay in contact or at the very least said goodbye in person.

I'd stared for a few moments at the cute little presentation case in my hand, fat chance of them ever being presented now, then leaned into the lounge and chucked it into the corner behind the couch. I then spent the rest of the day stomping and scaring Cat into finding new hiding places. I'd even thrown Mr Polly's stupid map down the stairs

in irritation. Where's Wally? In oblivion of course, where else would I be?

Underlying it all, of course, was the knowledge that it was my own fault. I knew Celestine was a free spirit and was focused on taking her vows to become a druid and I knew that she was a traveller and that they would at some point move on. It was my own fault for not bringing up the subject of staying in contact while she was still around. My only excuse was that I was afraid that doing that might have brought the goodbye closer. Once again my own insecurities had got in the way.

Logically, if you like a girl and you think she likes you then it should be a simple matter to bring it out into the open.

“Let's discuss our feelings for each other,” you could say.

“Yes let's,” she might say in reply, “but before we do here are fifty three ways we can stay in contact just in case one or other of us has to go away unexpectedly.”

But that perverted human brain ignores logic and says

“Oh dear, she might say she doesn't like me, best pretend there's nothing happening, to be safe. Please don't hurt me.”

Pah.

Anyway, life goes on regardless.

I went, as usual, into town to get supplies and, as usual, to get my coffee and muffins afterwards. Daffyd was in the cafe, as usual.

“Did your lawyer's protest get anywhere?” I asked.

He laughed. “Don't be daft lad, it's been scheduled to be heard in seven months. Told you t'would be a waste of time.”

“Did he think it was even legal?”

“That business of the 'hole camp being on public land 'cos of the car? Nah. 'e reckons it would have been thrown out of court if it had ever got there. But the Council knows no Travellers ever gonna take it to court an' if they do that bliddy Council'll just use me rates to stall till they runs out'a money.”

He was probably right. Money seems to talk when it comes to fights between the weak and the powerful.

“Could they have quarantined your farm?”

“Oh aye, that's the truth of it. That there Jethro knowed it too which is why 'e went. Didn't wanna cause me no trouble. Council sets the rules for campsites and controls the licences. Even though they knowed there be no diseases they can keep me shut down 'till I runs out'a money. Insurance money ain't no good neither if all me stock gets put down. Take years to rebuild the herds.”

We both pondered the iniquities of life.

I'd half eaten a muffin when I remembered something I'd wanted to ask him.

“If you don't mind me asking, Daffyd, why did you take the Travellers side? Was it just because you don't like Gwyn Davies?”

“Oh aye, we's got a 'istory, no denying it,” he said and drank some of his milkshake. He always had strawberry milkshake, whatever the weather. We fell silent again. He obviously had no plans to enlighten me on their 'istory.

“ow old you think I am?” he said suddenly.

“Seventy five?” I said, knocking a few years off what I actually thought.

“Not far off,” he said. “I'm seventy two, seventy three come September.”

He had another mouthful.

“Trouble with you young 'uns,” he continued, “is you thinks us oldies was allus old. Born old and wrinkled an' cussing at life. Well, we ain't. We was young once too.”

I nodded. Logically I suppose it was true although I couldn't really imagine Daffyd as a 14 year old, wagging off school, if they had schools in those days, or kicking a football around or even with a full head of hair.

“Me da came back from the war and took over the farm, married a nurse from the Rhondda Valley, down south and settled in to farming cattle,” he said. “Dull life but after excitement of the war that's what 'e wanted, see. Quiet life, no one shooting at 'im. Just fresh air and solitude and a wife. I came along in '47.”

He gazed at the rain slashing the cafe window.

“I were 13 when me da got a radio, 1960 like and when I got 'ome from school and da was tending the beasts me and me mam would listen to radio. Elvis Presley she loved, and Everleys an' that there Adam Faith. She taught me to dance, like, in the kitchen.”

He smiled fondly at the old memories.

“She got me a guitar for me 15th and I taught meself, picking up tunes from radio. Bit 'o Rock and Roll. Reckoned meself North Wales answer to Marty Wilde. Hah! I were 17 when I first heard Dylan. You won't 'ave 'eard of 'im, Bob Dylan but he blew me away.”

Hearing old Daffyd say “blew me away” was almost like a slap in the face it was so incongruous. That's what young people like me say, not old people like Daffyd.

“Aye, that there protest music got me thinking and I started to read newspapers, like. Vietnam War, civil rights, aye, all a bit much for a young Welsh farm boy. Went to me head like.”

“What did you do?” I asked. I was intrigued. Surely Daffyd hadn't gone protesting about the Vietnam War?

“I took me guitar and sayed goodbye to me ma and da. Went up to London. 1964, aye that were a grand ole year that was. Got the bus to Cardiff then hitchhiked to London. Met up wi’ this girl in Reading. Oh beautiful she was. Can still see ‘er. Long blonde hair and a dress that went all the way to the ground and daffodils in ‘er ‘air. Oh t’was love at first sight boy, smitten I was, smitten.”

“Was that Mrs Ffermwr?” I asked.

“Oh no boy, she weren’t interested in no Welsh country boy like me. Hay behind me ears an’ an accent no one could understand. But she introduced me to others, see. Joined a commune, so I did. Started going on protest marches to Downing Street, outside the Prime Minister’s house. Oh aye, imagine that, little Daffyd a-knockin’ on the Prime Minister’s door.”

He laughed and shook his head.

“You ever ‘eard of Barbeque 67, lad?”

I shook my head.

“T’were first ever rock festival. Three weeks afore that there festival in Monterey in ‘merica and two years afore Woodstock. I were there, lad, I were there, makin’ ‘istory, though we didn’t know it at the time. Don’ look like it now but I were a hippy in the Summer of Love in 1967. Still gorra picher of me somewhere, all long hair and beads and skinny as a stick o’ wheat. Cream wus there, Hendrix, Pink Floyd, ‘eard of any ‘o them?”

I confessed I’d heard of all of them.

“Da da de da da deh da dah, da da de da da deh da dah, it’s getting near dawn, when lights close their tired eyes”

Daffyd, at the age of 72, in the middle of a cafe in a sleepy Welsh town on a rainy afternoon, was air playing guitar and singing *The Sunshine Of Your Love* and grooving the mood. I wondered if he was going to light up a joint and get us arrested.

“I’ve been waiting so long, to be where I’m going, in the sunshine of your loo-oo-ve.”

Bronwyn had put down her tray and joined in the chorus, singing into a tomato sauce bottle microphone.

“She’s a witch of trouble in electric blue, in her own mad mind she’s in love with you, with you”

They finished *The Sunshine Of Your Love* and launched into *Strange Brew* and didn’t get very far before grinding to a halt because they were laughing so much. There was a round of applause from the handful of customers.

“Give us some Tom Jones,” called out a plump, spectacled lady of about eighty and started to giggle.

“Ohh get orn with you,” said Bronwyn and picked up her tray.

Daffyd was still laughing and trying to get his breath when he collapsed back into his seat.

“Oh aye, those were the days,” he spluttered.

“So, did you, like, take drugs and stuff?” I asked.

“Smoked grass like there was no tomorrow, boy,” he said, beaming, “LSD too sometimes, that were expensive mind, didn’t ‘ave no money like. Aye, grand days they was.”

“Was it really all free love?”

“Oh aye, boy, paradise on earth it were, dif’rnt girl every night,” he grinned. “Don’t tell wife, like, t’were a long time ago.”

He fell silent for a few moments then turned serious.

“See lad, I were one o’ them. OK different ideals but we were up against the establishment, fighting for the end to war, the end to discrimination, a new world. We ‘ad the same problems. Commune I

was with got evicted, we went somewhere else, got evicted, gradually broke up. Went to rock festivals, slept in the mud, running fights wi' police at protests. Back then they call it the hippie counterculture, now it's the new age movement. That's why I support 'em like, why I let 'em use my land, I were one o' them one time, aye."

"So what happened? How did you get back to farming?"

"Me da died, back in '71. Ran 'is van over edge of field into sea, like. I 'ad to come back an' take over farm, look after me mam. Guitar's still in attic, ain't touched it since. Been farmin' now, ohhh nigh on fifty year. Bliddy hated every bliddy minute. Every time travellers stay on my land I bliddy want to go wi' em. Can't o'course, too bliddy old now, aye."

He sat there, staring out at the rain.

"Still remember 'er like."

"Who?"

"Jennifer, that blonde bit in Reading. Prob'ly dead now, or old fart like me. Or in a bliddy 'ome for old folks. Aye, beautiful she were."

He pulled out a dirty handkerchief and blew his nose loudly.

"Right," he said loudly, "back to work. See you's Bron."

He quietly got up and left, the door swinging shut behind him. A disillusioned old farmer with his distant memories of a Summer of Love and freedom. I had a sudden vision of myself in fifty years.

I drove home, ill at ease. Would I, one day, end up sitting in a cafe reminiscing about Celestine? Beautiful she were, not interested in me though.

I kept a case of cider in the control room as most evenings, if the weather wasn't too bad, I'd sit out on the balcony of the lighthouse and drink a bottle. They were small bottles, smaller than a can of coke, but as I wasn't a drinker one bottle was enough for me. After

checking the logs and the weather updates I went up to the balcony and stared out over the sea, thinking negative thoughts about my past and my future. I think melancholic is the word although depressive is probably just as true.

Anyway, I finished my cider and thought “what the hell” and went and got another. After all, Daffyd was still going strong after his years as a drug hazed hippie so a couple of ciders shouldn't be a problem. Or three, as it turned out.

I wasn't drunk, but I wasn't stone cold sober either when I decided to go to bed and see if the world looked any better in the morning. It probably wouldn't but hey, you never know. I dumped my empties in the control room and headed down the steps and slipped.

Now ordinarily, slipping on a staircase wouldn't necessarily be a problem but I was in a lighthouse and the steps from the control room went down eighty feet to a solid limestone floor. There was an iron handrail bolted to the wall and some metal posts on the other side of the steps through which an old rope was threaded as a simple safety barrier. As luck would have it, it was my right leg that slipped so I naturally lurched to the right, away from the wall. I missed the handrail when I grabbed for it and landed heavily on the old rope the other side. The rope gave way and I lost my balance and teetered for a few breathless moments, then toppled gracelessly over the edge into nothingness. I fell, head first, arms and legs flailing, around seventy five feet. Onto a nice, smooth, solid, limestone floor. And landed as gently as a feather on my feet.

I sobered up very quickly and stood there shaking for quite some time. There's no point in making a big deal out of it. It was obvious one of two things had happened. Either I'd drunk so much that I simply imagined I had fallen all that way or Mr Polly had caught me and gently deposited me on the ground. Just to be sure I walked all the way back up when I'd stopped shaking and checked the empties. There were definitely only three of them. Maybe I was drunk but I was still legally under the limit for driving.

I sat in the control room, on the floor with my back against a leg of the radio table, reliving my ... trip ... downstairs. I hadn't actually felt

anything, like hands, but I definitely hadn't felt the wind whistling past as it would have done if I'd been in free fall.

“Thank you, Mr Polly,” I said out loud after a while. “Thank you very much. I owe you one.”

There was no response, beyond the rain on the control room windows. I dozed off after a while and woke up some hours later, very cold and very stiff. Groaning I shambled over to the rudimentary toilet just off the control room and got rid of most of the cider. More than anything I wanted coffee. Actually that's not true. More than anything I wanted the full use of my joints again so I could go and make coffee without creaking and aching. I managed to get as far as the control room kettle and turned it on and reached over to the table for my mug and saw that Mr Polly had put out the map yet again.

“Jesus,” I thought to myself. “Persistent bugger.”

Pouring hot water onto the coffee granules, it occurred to me that Mr Polly didn't actually play games. He did a lot of things, admittedly, like catching me when I fell down the stairs, but they were all helping things, not game playing things.

I added a couple of sugars to the mix.

“So what are you trying to help me with Mr P?” I said out loud. No answer as usual.

Stirring the coffee I went and actually looked at the map. It was a map of Wiltshire, with bits of the surrounding counties. And, for some reason, there was a pen on it.

“Why've you given me a map of Wiltshire?” I asked, “and a pen?” No answer as usual.

If you read fantasy books you'll no doubt come across magic potions. As a child I'd read comic books about Asterix The Gaul and the druid Getafix who had a magic potion that gave superhuman strength to whoever drank it which Asterix always had to do in order to win his various escapades against the Romans. In my humble opinion there is

no more magical potion than the first coffee of the day. It dissolves that fog that seeps through the neurons and improves clarity of thought.

Sipping slowly, because it was hot, I wondered why Mr P would give me a pen but no paper to write on. Clearly the pen wasn't there for writing. What else would you use a pen for? Well, pointing is another use. I pointed with a pen at the computer screens quite often. Leaning over the map I could see that it was pointing, assuming the writing end was the pointer, to the little village of Avebury.

That rang a bell. Avebury. Celestine had said something about Avebury. Sip, sip. She was going to take her vows there. Sip. On Beltane. I couldn't remember when Beltane was but the second most important invention in the history of the universe, after coffee, would know. Beltane was on 1st May, according to Google. In just over four weeks time.

So Celestine was going to be in Avebury on the 1st May.

“Bugger me,” I said. The penny had finally dropped.

Celestine was going to be in Avebury on the 1st May. In Avebury. At the stone circle. Around the Red Lion Pub. On the Beckhampton Road. On the first day of May. Celestine.

Chapter Seventeen

Of course, once I'd finally figured out, after a week or so, what Mr Polly had been trying to tell me I wanted to leave immediately. According to the map Avebury was two hundred and fifty miles or thereabouts and I could do that in less than five hours so I could be there by early afternoon, perhaps a late lunch. There was just one tiny problem. Celestine wouldn't be there for another four weeks or so.

Well, I could use those four weeks wisely. After all, there were a lot of preparations that needed to be done before I left. I had to email Mr Rolls to let him know I'd be away for a couple of days, fill the Toyota with diesel and make some sandwiches for the trip. If I was slow and methodical that would take perhaps half an hour. Call it forty five minutes if I put out some extra food for Cat. Then again, I could get the fuel on the way so make it half an hour again. That left over six hundred and seventy hours to fill before I could reasonably depart. My brain, that treacherous, evil parasite that occupies my body like some body snatcher from outer space had great plans in store for those six hundred and seventy hours.

Doubts.

The first came along within minutes. Before I'd even decided to email Mr Rolls.

“So you're saying I should go to Avebury?” I said to Mr Polly. “To find Celestine?”

It didn't help that he never answered. I started to devise ways of enabling a two way flow of communication that would allow him to explain why I should go and me to explain why I shouldn't. None were particularly practicable. Of course, Sacajawea could talk to him so maybe I should go to Avebury to bring Sacajawea back here to ask Mr Polly if I should go back to Avebury again to try to find Celestine? Or maybe I should just stop being an idiot?

“Perhaps it's a misunderstanding?” I thought. “Maybe he is playing a game or maybe he's just trying to cheer me up. Maybe the pen just fell on Avebury by chance and its all an unfortunate coincidence. He

might even be saying I shouldn't go to Avebury.”

“How would Mr Polly know anyway?” came along not long afterwards.

I'd composed the email to Mr Rolls, but not sent it, when it occurred to me that Celestine might not even be in Avebury for Beltane.

“How do you know she'll be there?” I asked Mr Polly.

Well, I didn't need Mr Polly to answer that one. Celestine was going to be inducted into the druidhood in a ceremony at Avebury and it was important to her so I was sure she'd be there if it was at all humanly possible. She'd told me that Avebury was the most important sacred site, at least for druids, in Britain and that Beltane was by far the most important time of the year so it seemed very likely that she'd be there.

I had an attack of nerves and decided the whole thing was futile and deleted the email and went down to the cottage for some lunch.

“Stupid idea, isn't it,” I told Cat. Since Cat was only interested in sleeping and eating she meowed her agreement. Going to Avebury wasn't her idea of fun, even though she wasn't going. If I went I wouldn't be here to feed her or warm her bed.

When I went up to the control room for my evening check, the map and pen were out again.

“Yeah, yeah,” I said to Mr Polly. “It's a stupid idea and I'm not going to go.”

Just in case, I typed out another email to Mr Rolls and sent it this time.

“You know, it's not such a bad idea after all,” I told the moon as I was sitting on the balcony having my (one) bottle of evening cider. “If nothing else, it'll be like a little holiday for me, a change of scenery. It'll be fun. I wonder how many druids will be there?”

“She'll think I'm stalking her,” I told Cat the next morning. “She was only being polite saying goodbye. She certainly didn't mean for me to

go chasing all over the country after her. I mean, she hasn't even sent me a postcard."

"No reply from Mr Rolls," I told Mr Polly that sunset. "Obviously there's a problem giving me time off and he's going to say no. Four weeks isn't really much notice after all."

"She probably doesn't know my address," I told the moon, obscured by clouds, over my cider bottle. "Which is why she hasn't sent a postcard. Or she sent one addressed to The Lighthouse at Holyhead and its gone to the South Stack Lighthouse or the Breakwater Lighthouse. Might even get sent on to Trinity House and they'll forward it to me, which could take weeks. Or the post office knows they're not manned and has binned it."

"Who are you trying to kid?" I asked the fish early the following morning. Celestine had said that it was best to go fishing early in the day. "I can't just go chasing around the country every time I meet a pretty girl."

"Still no reply from Mr Rolls," I told Mr Polly, later in the day. "He's probably trying to figure out how to sack me."

"She'll be pleased to see me, won't she?" I asked the horizon when I was having my nightly cider. "I'm really looking forward to seeing her again."

"No problem. If you want more than a couple of days let me know and I'll organise a relief keeper," said Mr Rolls in his email which arrived after the weekend. "Have a happy Easter."

"He's laughing at me," I told Mr Polly.

It's strange how the mind shifts as the day progresses. Morning negativity gives way to evening positivity which gives way to negativity by the next morning. Every day followed the same pattern. In the morning I'd have endless reasons why it was a stupid idea and shouldn't go and by bedtime I'd be bursting with enthusiasm and ready to set off at first light. What was worrying was that Celestine's face was beginning to lose its sharpness in my memory.

Around the middle of April I'd more or less reconciled myself to the stupidity of going to Avebury and my vengeful brain began to seek new ways to torment me.

"So what are you going to say when she sees you and says 'What the hell are you doing here?'"

"I heard there was a good pub here," didn't seem like a good reply.

"What if she doesn't smile when she sees you?" Ummm.

"What if she doesn't recognise you?" Ummm.

"What if she's seeing someone else?" Ummm.

All good questions. I hate my brain sometimes.

And the real knockout question that came following on a little later.

"OK, so she's pleased to see you. What happens next?"

Oh boy.

"Well," I told Cat at breakfast, "I don't expect she'd be willing to give up her lifestyle for me. Why would she want to be trapped in some lonely old lighthouse with a loser when she can roam free and live a life of excitement?"

"Maybe she's getting sick of living hand to mouth in an old coach and would really like to live in a lighthouse on a sacred site," I told my evening cider.

"Maybe she expects me to give up security and be unemployed and homeless again to go on the road with her. I don't know that I can handle that," I told the morning meteorological reports.

"I suppose I could learn to carve wooden animals or juggle. There must be something I could sell at markets and make a living. Maybe people would like their plans for a loft extension reviewed before committing themselves or help with their maths homework?" I told a

large moth that crashed into the beacon glass, trying to get to the light.

On the Monday before Beltane I was sitting in the control room having a cup of coffee and watching the rain falling. It was still a little early to do my sunset chores. I inspected the bandage on my hand and there was no sign of any more blood seeping through. I'd cut it trying to carve a twisted piece of driftwood into a seahorse shape, well it was kind of an S, almost, and the knife had slipped. It didn't hurt much.

"I suppose I'll just end up living here with you for the rest of my life, alone and unloved," I said to Mr Polly, sadly. I had finally decided going to Avebury was pointless and was psyching myself up to email Mr Rolls and tell him I was cancelling my leave.

I sensed a buildup of something in the room, as though there was going to be a lightening strike. I put my coffee on the table and went to look out the window more closely. My coffee mug smashed into the window frame beside me and I was spattered with hot coffee. I ducked and leapt back instinctively, then whirled around. There was no one there of course. Turning back I could see the broken china on the floor in a puddle of coffee. I got the distinct impression Mr Polly had lost his temper with me.

"OK, OK," I held my hands up in defeat. "I'll go to Avebury, calm down." The electrical tension subsided and I made another cup of coffee using my visitors' mug. Whatever happened with Celestine, I didn't want to live with an angry poltergeist.

I set off the next morning, seeing as how Beltane was on Wednesday. I made some cheese sandwiches and wrapped the remains of a roast chicken in tin foil to take with me. I figured I'd be able to get food in Avebury as they probably had shops there. Even if they didn't, there was still the Red Lion Pub in the middle of the stone circle who had probably laid in extra supplies for the druids and whoever else would be there. There might even be as many as a hundred extra people, so the Pub would be quite busy.

I also planned to sleep Tuesday night in the car and had my trusty sleeping bag with me. Wednesday night, of course, would depend on

how Celestine reacted. Either I'd be driving back to Wales or camping with her. I debated whether or not to leave Cat locked in the cottage or to kick her out and compromised on leaving her inside with a window open just enough to let her through and left enough food to last for three days. She didn't bother to even open an eye to wish me luck.

Despite the overcast weather the drive past Snowdonia National Park was a pleasant change in scenery and the hours passed fairly happily. Now that things were beginning to happen my brain settled down and stopped speculating on possible, largely negative, outcomes. It was a bit like when I was doing my finals at uni. In the weeks leading up to the exams I'd panicked every time I thought of a question they might ask that I couldn't possibly answer but when it came down to the actual exams I did quite well. I'm sure someone has said this before but it really is the waiting that's the killer, although it probably wasn't a soldier that said it.

I also drove through Gloucester on the way, not that there's anything special about Gloucester except that it's where I was born and grew up and I hadn't been back since my mum died. It hadn't changed much. Anyway, Avebury, which I'd never been to before, is a strange place. Google had told me that the stone circle there was the biggest in Europe but intriguingly there is a cross road cutting right through it with the Red Lion Pub in the centre. There are also a few houses but the town, or village I suppose as it didn't look big enough to be a town, is just outside the circle. I wondered what it feels like to live inside a neolithic stone circle.

Still, I'd arrived. I parked in the pub car park and wondered what to do next. There were quite a few hippy looking people wandering round the undulating grassland inside the stones. I don't mean that in any derogatory way. As my last haircut had been almost a year before and my last shave only a few months short of that I was a hippy type as well. It's just that 'hippy type' is a simple shorthand that distinguishes a certain ... approach ... to personal appearance that is distinct from say, business person or farmer.

“Excuse me,” I said to a hippy type walking through the car park. “Is there a campsite round here?”

“Sure,” he answered with a smile. “The universe is a campsite. We are all travellers passing through.”

Oh goody.

“Umm, where should I go?”

“Wherever the spirit takes you, my friend,” he said helpfully. “Feel the flow and follow your path.”

Perhaps it would be more productive if I got to the real point.

“Do you know Celestine?” I asked, since he seemed to be type of person who might know her. “Or Jethro, Sacajawea?”

“Celestine?” His eyes lit up and veered over towards the pub. “You mean that chick with the celestial body? Unreal.”

I looked where he was looking and she wasn't Celestine, despite her many and ill concealed charms. I couldn't be certain because of all the hair around his lower face but I think he was drooling slightly. I gave up and went for a walk around the circle.

I kept my eyes open for anyone looking female-ish, as exact gender determinations weren't always that easy, and red haired. Several fit that broad description but none were Celestine and I stopped frequently to ask if people knew Celestine, Jethro or Sacajawea. Celestine because, obviously, she was the person I was looking for, Jethro because he had some standing as a druid and group leader and Sacajawea because her name was distinctive. No one seemed to. When I'd gone full circuit and was back at the road I headed off into the village.

It was a really nice village! Full of old grey stone houses and thatched roofs. There were a few people around but they had the look and purposefulness of local residents although further along I could see there was some sort of booth set up at the edge of a field and a couple of policemen. Thinking it might be some sort of information centre, or even possibly a missing person reporting/meeting place, I headed for it. It wasn't.

The gazebo had a banner reading “Unite The Right!” and was manned by two burly middle aged men in chinos and bomber jackets standing behind some piles of literature. Behind the gazebo was a group of skinheads with swastika arm bands, looking very bored and drinking beer out of cans while pushing each other in a friendly way. The two policemen stayed beside their car and chatted quietly, presumably keeping a paternal eye on 'the lads'. No point in asking if any of these knew a druid or an American Indian Spiritualist.

I wandered slowly back to the Red Lion and bought a lemonade which I drank beside the car while dining on some cold chicken and a cheese sandwich. More hippy types had arrived at the circle and many had blankets and food and showed every sign of spending the night on the grass. I figured I might as well join them after my dinner.

A middle aged man of the hunting and fishing type with a labrador on a leash stopped beside the Toyota on his way to the pub. He stared at the side of it, moving his mouth, then glanced at me.

“How do you pronounce Punty der wided?” he asked.

“Pwyntyderwydd,” I said with a smile. It had taken me a fair amount of practice to get my tongue round it myself.

“Punty der wided lighthouse,” he mused. “That in France?”

“No, it's in Wales,” I answered. “If it were in France it would be Pwyntyderwydd Phare, which is French for lighthouse.” His dog was sniffing the car tyre, probably unfamiliar with Welsh smells.

“I suppose so,” he said and thought it over. “Then why doesn't it say the Welsh for lighthouse, rather than the English?”

“Because it's run by the English,” I said.

“Ohhhh,” he said and thought it over. “What does Punty der wided mean in English?”

“Druid's Point,” I said. “It's on Anglesey.”

“Ohhhh,” he said and thought it over. “So you’re here for the druid ceremony then?”

“Yes,” I saw no reason to explain that I was looking for a dream. He might get the wrong idea and tell the police I was trying to buy drugs.

“Don’t leave your car here overnight. Could get damaged.”

I was a little startled. Avebury seemed a sleepy little town and didn’t seem the sort of place to suffer from vandalism.

“Some right wing extremists are supposed to be holding a rally,” he continued, looking down the road. “Down there. Seems to have fizzled but you never know. I’ve got my lads on standby just in case.”

“Your lads?” I asked.

“Superintendent Angus Dermott,” he said, holding out his hand. “Wiltshire Police.”

“Walter Ruthe,” I said, automatically wondering if I was in trouble. “Lighthouse keeper.” We shook hands.

“Might be an idea to park your car somewhere out of sight over night,” he said quietly. “Nice car like this, attracts attention. Anyway, enjoy the ceremony. Come on Sherlock.”

He gave the leash a gentle pull. Sherlock quickly relieved himself on my tyre and genially followed Superintendent Angus Dermott into the pub.

My personality is the type that tends to do what the police tell me to do so I started the car and drove slowly away from the stone circle and Avebury looking for somewhere to leave the Toyota. Three or four hundred yards down the road I found a turnoff to a couple of houses with a semi concealed turnoff from that into a small, grassy field. I parked the Toyota in the field, hidden from the road by a line of trees and sat there for a couple of minutes. No irate farmer or householder came to see what I was up to and since it was fairly dark by this stage I figured no one would see it.

I stuffed my sandwiches and cold chicken inside my jacket pockets and grabbed my water bottle and sleeping bag and walked back to the stone circle. The moon was a silver sickle in the sky and there were some bright stars between the clouds. It looked like it was going to be a pleasant night, if a little chilly. Quite a few more people had arrived. I got back to work. Perhaps I should have asked Superintendent Angus Dermott for some tips on locating missing persons. Clearly I wasn't any good at it as no one knew anything about them. I went back to the road and found somewhere to sit so I could keep an eye on new arrivals.

"Yeah, I know Jethro and Sacajawea," one of the assembled druids sitting near me said. "I haven't seen them around but they should be here as they're with the ADUB."

"ADUB?" I asked.

He frowned. Obviously this was an abbreviation I should be familiar with.

"An Druidh Uileach Braithreachas," he said.

"Oh yes, I'd forgotten." I tried to bluff my way.

"Which order are you with? You're obviously not OBOD."

"I'm with the Lighthouse of Trinity Order," I said, improvising. "We're based in North Wales."

He seemed satisfied with this and I remembered Celestine telling me that there was no formal druidic system, just a number of groups of varying sizes and influence.

"How do you know Jethro?" he asked after a while.

"We met up at Anglesey at the Spring Solstice," I said.

"Spring Equinox you mean?"

I figured I'd better not try to improvise too much as I clearly wasn't

very good at it.

“So, errm, when does the ceremony begin?”

He stared at me.

“What kind of druid are you?” he asked.

“Umm, we light the night,” I said. Obviously I was expected to know what time of day Beltane was celebrated.

It seemed that Celestine was right. There must be a lot of variation in group practices because this answer seemed to mollify him.

“Right,” he said, nodding. “Midnight people. Cool. Here it's at dawn. So what's your trinity?”

Good question. Me, Cat and a poltergeist didn't seem to be a good answer.

“Umm, Awen, Ruith and Moryn.”

“Mug Ruith, cool. You're near Ireland aren't you. Never heard of Moryn though.”

“He was the last druid killed by the Romans on Anglesey,” I said, distorting the truth a little.

“Unreal. Hey Serena,” he turned to get the attention of a bespectacled, intense looking young woman sitting not far away. “You know who the last druid killed on Anglesey by the Romans was?”

“No idea,” she said, leaning towards him. Her woolly hat had a circle on the front with three dots and three lop sided triangles.

“Moryn, this guy says,” he jerked a thumb at me.

“Far out.” She shifted over to sit with us. “How do you know?”

“The Roman historian Cassius Plautius wrote about him in the second

century,” I replied, praying to the god Gareth Hanesydd for deliverance.

“Serena's our historian, I'm Marcus.” said Marcus.

“I'm not familiar with Cassius Plautius,” said Serena, “tell me more.”

I groaned internally. It was going to be a very long night.

Chapter Eighteen

Serena, it turned out, was a third generation druid and the subject of her doctoral thesis at London University had been “Aspects of Celtic Druidry In The Context Of Pre-Modern Confucianism.” No doubt an engrossing subject but one which enabled her to highlight the deficiencies in my theoretical grounding remarkably quickly. She shifted back to her original sitting place and Marcus edged further away from me. My constant questioning of every new arrival probably didn't help much either. Still, I wasn't there to make friends or network.

In the early hours of the morning I heard a saxophone playing and went off in search of the player but it wasn't Clark. It was a girl playing a clarinet beside a small fire while a few people passed around a small pipe and generally relaxed, enjoying the lyrical sound weaving soulfully in the night. None of them looked up when I asked if they knew Celestine.

Perhaps an hour before dawn drums started banging and people started to move towards the point where the central road came into the circle on the west side. A large group of people, perhaps twenty, mainly in white robes lit rush torches and the rest of us, dressed in civvies, formed up loosely behind. Led by the torch bearing druids and the drummers the procession slowly wormed its way around the entire circle. The robed druids then gathered in the dawn shadow of a line of stones roughly in the centre of the southern half of the circle, behind Avebury Chapel, and the rest of us arranged ourselves in a semi circle around them.

A cauldron of flowers appeared and a druid wearing a pure white robe with a red cord around his waist stepped forward. He had long white hair and a long white beard and looked suspiciously like Gandalf was his role model although his belly overhanging the red cord marred the illusion. I confess I had been expecting a solemn, formal, church style celebration but he introduced himself as the Arch Druid of Avebury and welcomed us all amid cheers and laughter. He then turned and welcomed a lady by the name of Morgana, with long black hair and dressed in a thin, almost lacy robe with a deep purple shawl. Between them they performed a ceremony similar to the one I'd

taken part in at the Spring Equinox, Morgana chanting to the east, then the south, the west and the north with the large crowd repeating the chants and Gandalf calling for peace in the east, or south and so on, before turning to the next point of the compass.

However, here the ceremony did not end with meditation. Gandalf then called on us all to sing the Druid Mantra which we all did, “IIIIIIIIIAAAAAAAAAA OOOOOOOOOO”, a long drawn out changing vowel, three times, then Morgana got us all to kneel and gave an Invocation to the Earth and then we all stood again for the Blessing of the Flowers where Gandalf held the cauldron of flowers high in the air.

The arch druid then called for those who were to take their vows to come forward and several people in green robes stepped up. I scanned them anxiously as this, surely, would be the one part of the ceremony that Celestine would not miss but she was not among them. I felt empty and more than a little crushed. They took their vows and then there were a couple of druidic weddings with the happy couples leaping over the cauldron of flowers after they'd been united but I could not share the general happiness, or the hand holding and singing of the crowd as the sun rose in the sky, unhindered by the scattered fluffy white clouds.

I had come to Avebury to find Celestine and she wasn't there. I slunk away, my own little black cloud of misery following me every step of the way.

The Toyota, waiting patiently in the field behind the trees, was unscathed. Whatever trouble the police had been expecting hadn't eventuated. I drove home with a heavy heart.

In the night I reached for Celestine. She sighed happily and rolled over. The thin face of Svetlana, the one-legged Russian sister of Tony Soprano's mistress, gazed mournfully at me, her short blonde hair in disarray, a cigarette dangling from her lips.

“That's the trouble with you Americans,” she said in her guttural English. “You expect nothing bad ever to happen when the rest of the world expect only bad to happen, and they are not disappointed.”

I woke with a start. I wasn't even American. Just to be sure, I checked beside the bed and there was no sign of a prosthetic leg. It was only a dream.

“Why am I dreaming about The Sopranos?” I pondered, lying in bed. “Do I subconsciously identify with an Italian American gangster or am I telling myself I need to see a psychiatrist?”

“Only bad things happen,” echoed in my head in the morning. I hadn't found Celestine, it doesn't get much badder than that. Cat didn't care and life went on. The only too brief disturbance of my life had caused no ripples in the fabric of maritime shipping.

A week or so later there was a thick fog which lasted most of the day. Even from the control room visibility was down to maybe thirty yards. It made the lighthouse feel very lonely and isolated, adrift from the mainland. Echoing how I felt.

I was making a sandwich for lunch when the lighthouse phone rang. There was an extension down to the cottage so I answered it.

“Hey Wal,” said Julie. She was the current officer on duty at Holyhead coastguard station. We chatted quite frequently on the phone although we'd never met. She sounded nice enough although she was fairly brusque at times and undoubtedly married.

“Julie, how's it going?”

“We've got a Beechcraft Bonanza flying in the fog near you,” she said briskly. “We have it on radar and we are in radio contact but the pilot is inexperienced and is not trusting his GPS. He is flying low trying to make out reference points on the ground. We need you to listen out for him and give a visual signal to confirm his position. Can you do that?”

“Sure,” I said. “I can fire off a flare or two or do you want me to start up the light?” Not even a thousand watt lighthouse light can do much in thick fog, especially as a white light in white fog doesn't give much of a glow.

“Flares will do,” said Julie. “I estimate he’ll be in your vicinity in approximately four minutes, height three hundred feet, slightly to your south, heading for Manchester. He’s too unsure of himself to gain altitude until he knows where he is.”

I made it to the control room in a tad under two minutes, I was fit enough now to run most of the way. If the pilot was flying as low as three hundred feet there was a tiny possibility that he might fly straight into the lighthouse. For sure, if he was to the south he stood a better than even chance of flying into the mountains of Snowdonia. Snowdon itself is about 3500 feet.

I pulled the box of flares and the Very pistol out of the cupboard and ran up to the balcony, loading a flare into the gun. The air was clammy and greyish white and I couldn't see the ground. Disorientating to say the least and a long way from being on cloud nine.

It should have been exciting as I'd been desperately keen to play with the Very pistol ever since I became the keeper. I wanted to do it like they do in the movies, run out and fire the pistol and then, as the red flare descended illuminating the sky, I would stand rigidly, saluting whatever it was that the light was illuminating. Now that the opportunity had arrived it wasn't that big a deal after all. OK, there was a plane in potential distress but the idea of firing the pistol had lost its charm. Life just wasn't quite as interesting as it had been.

Still, the plane was in some sort of distress and I stood there, holding the balcony rail to avoid becoming disorientated myself for a couple of minutes. There was virtually no sound at all, even the noise of the waves on the rocks below me was damped to a faint hiss by the enveloping fog. I began to wonder if the plane was too far away or maybe had even crashed into the sea already.

Another minute and my straining ears picked up a faint droning buzz which got quickly louder. I couldn't tell from which direction it was coming then it faded and came back again. I held my arm up above my head and pulled the trigger. There was a sharp crack and moments later the flare burst high in the sky and the fog glowed eerily red for forty five seconds or so then faded. I wondered whether I

should fire a second and decided I might as well. Better safe than sorry.

The phone was ringing when I got back to the control room. It was Julie confirming the pilot had seen the flares and now believed what his GPS was telling him and was rapidly climbing to a safe height. I never did see the plane. Not even the smell of cordite on my fingers cheered me up or made me pretend I was a Wyatt Erp, ridding Pwyntyderwydd of desperadoes.

My life settled back into a routine. The late spring weather started to bring increasing numbers of tourists and day walkers and most days now I had a visitor or two, wanting to talk about the lighthouse and exclaiming at the view from the balcony. Usually the company was nice, if a bit superficial, but occasionally I wouldn't be in the mood and if I saw someone coming along the coastal path I'd disappear with my fishing rod until I thought they'd gone. I wasn't out to catch fish, the rod was just an excuse for not being there if I was spotted. I did catch the occasional fish as well though. The way Celestine had taught me.

When I went into town for my weekly expedition in the middle of June I saw a battered old Ford Escort heading down the dirt track to the next bay. With a beating heart I followed it and came upon some vans and tents camped where Celestine and Jethro and the others had camped but it wasn't them, just eight or ten pagans come for the Summer Solstice and some partying. We chatted for a while but I wasn't that interested and they showed no sign of wanting me to join them. Not that I would have anyway, I was becoming quite solitary.

After taking my leave I continued into town. I'd forgotten about the Summer solstice and wondered if I should go to Stonehenge. Celestine had said that they would be there for the Solstice but I didn't see a lot of point. She hadn't been at Avebury which made it less likely that she'd be at Stonehenge and, with Stonehenge being so famous, I'd heard that thousands of people usually turned up so it would be very difficult to find her. As I'd heard nothing, I was pretty sure she didn't want me to find her. And Glastonbury, a week or so after the solstice, was completely out. Something like a quarter of a million people usually turned up for the festival. Finding Celestine would be like

finding a needle in thousands of haystacks. No, she was out of my life forever. I just had to accept that.

In early July, I was gutting some fish in the kitchen when I heard a car horn. I ignored it but it sounded again, then again. Irritably I left the fish guts in Cat's dish and went outside. There was a new looking Ford Mustang sports car on the far side of the drawbridge. It couldn't cross because its ground clearance was too low.

Standing next to it was Gerry, my friend from university. We hadn't spoken since I'd left his house after his wife Susan had made it clear I wasn't welcome there any more. She didn't appear to be with him which was a bit of good news.

When he saw me he waved and shouted and walked across the drawbridge. I guess I was pleased to see him and took him into the cottage.

"Jesus, what's that stink?" he asked, screwing up his face.

"Oh it's just some fish I'm gutting," I said, surprised. Cat and I didn't notice the smell.

"You're taking this life too seriously," he laughed and went back outside.

I took out a couple of kitchen chairs while the kettle was heating for coffee.

"What are you doing here?" I asked.

"Susan and I are on our way to the Lake District for a holiday, before the tourist season really gets under way," he explained. "Hey, she's pregnant at last! Only two months so far but it's looking good."

I got the impression he saw her earlier inability to conceive as an insult to his manhood but I gave him my congratulations.

"I left Unwin Clarkson," he continued. "I'm a Senior Financial Adviser with Merrily Adkins now, with my own team. Biiiiiig money." He rubbed his thumb against his forefinger to emphasise the point. He

seemed quite proud of himself.

He gazed around at the sea and the lighthouse with an expression of mild distaste.

“So how's life with you?” he asked. “Did you see my new car?” he continued without giving me a chance to reply. “Comes with the job, forty grand it cost, sweet huh.”

“Yes, very nice,” I said. “I like my life here.”

“Susan stayed in town, doing some shopping,” he continued, ignoring me. “I've got to get back in a hour or so. We're so looking forward to the Lakes. All that scenery and nature and stuff.”

I suspected he wouldn't like the Lakes. They weren't that much different to my little isthmus.

“So what do you do all day?”

I was flummoxed by that. My days were fairly full but I couldn't begin to itemise what I did and even if I did it would all be incredibly boring to someone who could only think in terms of deals and commissions. I began to wonder how Gerry and I had ever become friends. Had I once even remotely shared his outlook and values? It had only been nine or ten months since we'd last spoken but we had absolutely nothing in common now, not even the English language as I found it hard to follow some of his jargon and catchphrases. I was fairly sure when he said he was “crushing it” he didn't mean it literally but I was clueless about what he really did mean. Going by the context I think “moving the needle” meant changing some sort of performance target but “open the kimono” was simply incomprehensible. Maybe Merrily Adkins was a Japanese owned company. I didn't dare mention Beltane to him.

He left after a while, promising to keep in touch. I rather hoped that was one of his little jokes. As I watched him pilot his fancy sports car back to a world I was no longer a part of, I felt very alone. Which is why, when I was in town getting my supplies, I decided to go to a dance.

I saw the poster in Bronwyn's window. There was an August fair and dance at the community centre that Saturday with the proceeds going to Ty Hafan, a Welsh charity for children with life limiting illnesses. I didn't take much notice at first but as I ate my muffins I slowly realised that it was an opportunity.

"I ought to get out a bit," I thought. "I need to meet people, girls, otherwise I really will die alone and spend the rest of eternity with Mr Polly."

Nice enough though he seemed to be I didn't think I wanted to interrelate on a spirit to spirit level with him.

"I suppose I ought to get a haircut. Maybe even some new clothes."

I found that thought rather depressing. I never liked getting haircuts as the hairdressers always wanted to chat about things I knew nothing about and buying clothes would be a chore since my body shape had changed. The outdoor life and running up and down stairs had made me leaner and more muscular so I didn't think my old sizes would fit anymore.

"I daresay most of the people there will be farmers and they're not famous for their sartorial elegance," I thought to myself. "Sod it, it's not like I've anything better to do. I don't have to talk to anyone and there might be some pretty girls to look at."

I went to the local department store and bought myself a new shirt. It was easier than ironing my old ones since I didn't have an iron. Just in case I did find someone to talk to I spent Saturday morning washing my hair, sewing up a small tear in my best jeans and scraping the mud off my boots.

"7 'till 11" the poster had said so it wasn't going to be like the London nightclub where I'd met Raquel. Nothing much happened there before 11 and it closed its doors at 6am. Round here people had to start the milking and mucking out before that. At 7.30 I parked a little way down the street and checked my reflection in the rear view mirror. And sighed.

I handed over my £5 to the elderly lady sitting by the door and walked in. The place wasn't exactly jumping and smelt a little of floor polish. What sounded like Ke\$ha's Take It Off, which had been a hit when I was around fifteen, was playing tinnily over some under powered speakers and half the lights were turned off to make it seem more intimate. It was still too bright. All along the far side of the hall was a row of chairs, all occupied by girls chatting amongst themselves or checking their makeup and tapping their feet. All along this side of the hall was another row of chairs, two thirds filled with dour looking lads with pinkly scrubbed faces and dirty fingernails. Mostly they stared uncomfortably at the cans in the hands and ignored the girls. At the far end was a makeshift bar of trestle tables loaded with cans and surrounded by more youngish lads. I bought a can of lemonade and found a seat on the boys' side, at the far end, away from the bar. I was probably the oldest person there, apart from the lady on the door.

Looking at the girls, which was easy since the space between the two rows of chairs was devoid of any life, I could see that quite a few were pretty although there was no sign of Aashrita. No doubt she was home doing whatever loving wives and mothers do with their husbands and children on a Saturday evening.

At least an hour went by before the local playboy decided to make his move and approached a girl. All the lads watched him carefully, marvelling at his bravery and estimating their own chances. The lucky girl seemed quite surprised and her friends either side tittered behind their hands and hoped their chance of romance would come soon. The couple danced very self consciously, alone in the spotlight. Still, it did succeed in opening the floodgates and slowly, one by one the boys approached the girls until by nine thirtyish a fair number of them were bopping their hearts out, trying to impress their chosen ladies with their dance moves.

“Wanna buy a girl a drink?”

She slid gently into the vacant seat beside me. I'd finished my third lemonade and was contemplating seeing if they had any cider so I said “Sure, what would you like” instinctively.

“Oh anything will do,” she said helpfully.

I walked to the bar, disappearing into the toilets briefly on the way, and asked the girl behind the bar what the girls were drinking.

“Bacardi and cola mostly,” she said, indicating a large stack of them.

“OK, I take one,” I said, “do you have any cider?”

She produced a dusty can of dry cider, which I dislike, and I paid her and took them back to my seat. To my surprise the girl was still there.

“Me name's Erin, thanks” she said, taking her Bacardi and Cola and popping the ring pull expertly. “What's yours?”

“Walter,” I said, “do you live round here?” I was glad to see I hadn't lost any of my smooth talking skills.

We chatted for a little while. This was the first dance I'd ever been to where the conversation drowned out the music. She was a nice looking girl although she didn't have long, red dreadlocks or a torn jumper or even a camouflage jacket. Still, no one is perfect. She told me she was 22 and she quickly established that I wasn't married, had a job and a car and she seemed quite impressed that I wasn't a farmer. As if to make herself heard over the music she kept leaning in towards me and touched my arm frequently. I have to confess she was a very pleasant change to Cat and dead fish. She smelt nice too.

“Ooooh I love this” she cried, her face lighting up, when Turn Up The Music by Chris Brown started playing. I was seventeen or eighteen when it came out and had learnt some fancy dance moves to go along with it, not dissimilar to Chris Brown's own gyrations, although not so energetic.

“C'mon, dance with me.”

She dumped her second Bacardi and Cola on the floor and dragged me out to mingle with the gyrating dancers. I quickly found I had forgotten my hard learned fancy dance moves and she thought that was funny but I survived to the end and we went back to our chairs. She was bright and vivacious and my mood was changing. We danced again a little later, I don't remember what the song was, and she

danced quite close to me, smiling and looking into my eyes.

Around a quarter to eleven someone turned out the lights and the hall plunged into almost darkness, with just a couple of emergency lights and the EXIT sign staying on. A muted cheer went up and quickly died away as couples slid onto the dance floor, entwined with each other. Erin looked at me and I looked at Erin. We both stood simultaneously and bumped heads and laughed. I followed her to the dance floor and she melted into my arms.

It was nice to hold a girl in my arms and sway to the music with her head on my shoulder and her body pressed against mine. She stroked my hair with one hand and after a while looked up at me with searching eyes and willing lips. I kissed her, she kissed me back and, not to be outdone, I kissed her again.

I offered her a lift home and she readily agreed and I wondered if she would invite me in for coffee. As we got near the car she stopped and pulled me close and kissed me again then stepped back and let go of my hand. I got my car keys out and unlocked the doors with the remote and we went around to the passenger side.

“So who was she?” asked Erin.

“Who was who?” I said, opening the passenger door for her. She pushed it shut with her hip and leaned back against it, looking out across the dimly lit road.

“The girl who broke your heart,” she said quietly.

I got quite huffy after that and drove her home in silence. She didn't invite me in for coffee or give me her phone number and I didn't ask for it. Why would she think anyone had broken my heart?

Chapter Nineteen

I heard a diesel engine rattle up and looked out of the window. Daffyd had come to visit. He'd never been round before so I went out to greet him.

“How be doing, man?” he called as he got out of his pickup and watched me coming down the steps to the drawbridge.

“What brings you here?” I asked. There was someone in the passenger seat but I couldn't see who it was.

“Got summat here,” he jerked a thumb at the pickup. “Found her in one of me cowsheds. Says she's looking for you. Didn't know if you'd want her, like, as she's a god awful mess but I reckoned I'd bring 'er 'ere anyways. Let you decide afore I dumps 'er on the police, like.”

He opened the passenger door. It was Celestine, curled up and sound asleep or unconscious. She was, as Daffyd said, a mess. I just stared at her, emotions welling up and leaving me unable to move. She'd abandoned me, run away and yet here she was. Asleep in Dafydd's pickup. She stank, she was filthy, her hair was matted and muddied and her clothes were torn, damp and indescribably filthy. The sole of one of her trainers was half hanging off and the other had a large hole in it and both were thick with mud and manure.

She stirred and opened her eyes. She saw me and smiled, her gaunt, grimy face lighting up.

“Hello Mug,” she said weakly. “I've come home.”

“Looks like she's delirious as well,” I said out loud.

She tried to get out of the pickup and collapsed on the ground in a faint. I bent to pick her up and she was as light as a feather.

“She'll be fine,” I said to Daffyd. “All she needs is some rest and a decent meal.”

“Knows 'er then do yus?” asked Daffyd. I nodded.

“Best put 'er through me sheep dip first then lad, disinfect 'er like.”

For some reason I had a desperate urge to look after Celestine all by myself. I didn't want Daffyd around, I didn't even want a doctor although if she turned out to be seriously ill I'd take her to the hospital myself. I thanked Daffyd and he drove away, muttering about the mess she'd made of his passenger seat.

I carried her into the cottage and stood in the hallway for a few moments wondering whether to put her in my bed, and get all the bedding filthy, or the bath, which could be easily cleaned. Finally I decided to take her to my bedroom. She was gaunt and thin. Never a big girl at the best of times she probably now weighed only seventy pounds or so. She hadn't woken up but she muttered a little, sighed a few times and occasionally smiled.

I got her jacket and trainers off and put her in the bed and covered her with the blankets and tucked her in and stood there wondering what to do next. My mind said to clean her but my instinct said to feed her. In the end my mind agreed. It didn't actually matter if she stayed dirty for a few more hours but food would help her fight any infections she might have and reduce the chance of getting any more. She was obviously very weak.

I went into the kitchen and warmed some milk and added a tablespoon of honey. I'd read somewhere that you have to be careful feeding a starving person as too much food quickly can kill them. That meant a roast dinner was out of the question but a few sips of protein, fat and sugar should do the trick to start with. I took it into the bedroom with a teaspoon then went back for a bowl of warm water and a dishcloth.

She'd curled up into a foetal position while I was in the kitchen so I gently eased her onto her back and used my dressing gown as another pillow to lift her head. She didn't resist. I cleaned her lips and around her mouth with the dishcloth then dribbled a few drops of warm milk onto her lips which she responded to and soon I was able to feed her an entire spoonful. I gave her five spoonfuls then decided to wait a while so I took the opportunity to wash her face. Her forehead was warm so I dug out the first aid kit and found a thermometer.

According to the Quick Guide, 37.7° C was high but not in the serious fever range and now that her face was tolerably clean, although my mother would have still called it dirty, I could see that her skin was a decent colour. Also, and this was encouraging, her expression was relaxed. Not the expression of someone suffering a nasty disease or injury or, I had to admit the possibility, someone mentally deranged.

I sat on the bed, watching her. Her breathing was shallow and a bit wheezy but why was she here and why was she such a mess?

“Well, I daresay I’ll find out soon enough,” I thought to myself.

OK, I now had an ethical dilemma. Do I or don’t I undress her? Lots of considerations ran through my mind, not the least of which was how she might react if she woke to find me taking her clothes off. I speculated on taking a photograph or two of her with my phone to show the condition she was in then it occurred to me that that might make things worse. What if she found the photos somehow and thought I was planning to take pictures of her naked? You can overthink things sometimes.

She solved the problem for me by being sick down the front of her jumper and the bedclothes. The good news was that it was milky and there were no signs of blood but clearly I could not leave her lying in her own vomit. I managed to get her jumper off, as well as the two t-shirts she had underneath and undid her jeans and, without ceremony, dragged them off her. She wore no underwear. She had a number of cuts or scratches on her arms and lower legs and many of them looked to be pussy and inflamed and there were a number of bruises in varying colours but no signs of serious injury.

Well, to cut a long story short I fed her some more milk then gave her a bed bath which removed some but not all of the grime and daubed antiseptic on her cuts. She woke up while I was doing that so I guess it stung a bit so I fed her some more warm milk and honey and let her sleep some more. I sat in a chair, keeping an eye on her and doing a lot of thinking, mostly going in circles around the central question of ‘why here?’.

I supposed it was faintly possible that she’d made it this way by

chance or come to see Daffyd. It was more likely that she'd been drawn back by the lighthouse's sacred site. I refused to let myself hope she'd come back to see me. Erin had cut too close with her insight and I wasn't going to let it happen again.

Celestine woke in the night and called out in panic and I soothed her and she seemed comforted by the sound of my voice and I fed her some more milk. I squashed hope again and decided to burn her clothes since they were disgusting and, frankly, I didn't think my secondhand washing machine would cope. I'd buy her some new ones. I emptied all her pockets into an empty ice cream container and left it beside the bed. I burnt the clothes on the spot where the group had had their fire at the Spring Equinox. It had grassed up quite well but still showed some signs of a fire.

I couldn't tell if she slept or was drifting in and out of consciousness but every now and then she would wake up and I'd feed her some more. Each time she recognised me and seemed pleased to see me but said very little and drifted off again quite quickly. Her temperature slowly dropped. Cat dropped by and after having a good sniff around decided Celestine was no threat and curled up at the foot of the bed to sleep. I periodically dozed off in my chair and woke abruptly every time I heard her stir. During the night I defrosted a chicken and made some chicken soup. I figured sooner or later she'd come off the milk and honey and I wanted to have something gentle yet nourishing readily available.

It was late the next day when I heard her call my name and woke, thinking I had dreamt it. I hadn't. She was lying in bed, with Cat again at the foot of it, and looking fairly alert.

"I need to pee, Mug" she said when she saw I was awake. "I'm about to burst but I can't get out of bed."

"Ahhh," I said, "you're still feeling too weak? I'll help you." I stood up and started to stretch to relieve my aches.

"Umm, no," she said, looking embarrassed. "I can probably manage but I've, umm, got nothing on."

I laughed. Probably a bit callously, but I was relieved she was able to worry about such things.

“So you, umm, ...” She waved one hand along her body length.

I nodded and she looked thoughtful.

“Your clothes were filthy and disgusting,” I said. “Too bad to even wash so I burnt them. Don't worry I'll get you some new clothes.”

“Oh, well it was going to happen sooner or later,” she said then practical matters took over. “I won't worry about it now. I absolutely have to pee or you'll need to burn the bed too.”

I retrieved my dressing gown and held it up for her. She looked at me then with a visible shrug that said “well, you've seen it all now anyway” she slid from under the covers and weakly stood up while I wrapped the dressing gown around her. It went around two and a half times and dragged a little on the ground. She managed to walk to the toilet while I hovered like an old hen then she got back into bed.

“Are you feeling up to anything stronger than milk yet?” I asked. “I made some chicken soup and it just needs nuking for a minute or two.”

She agreed to try some soup so I heated some and fed it to her and she went back to sleep.

“What on earth did she mean by 'it was going to happen sooner or later'?” Hope reared its ugly head again and I squashed it like a summer fly on a window pane. It was safer to assume that she'd meant her clothes were going to be burnt sooner or later rather than that I'd see her naked sooner or later.

She slept for another seven hours then peed again and sat up in bed while she fed herself a bowl of chicken soup. It was time to talk.

“I suppose you wondered why we left so quickly?” she asked.

“Daffyd told me you'd been evicted,” I said “but I would have thought

someone like Jethro would have made some sort of protest or appeal.”

“Have you heard of the Battle of the Beanfield?”

“Actually yes, Daffyd told me about it.”

“Jethro was there. He was ten or eleven and the police set fire to his parents' caravan and broke his collar bone dragging him away and his dad was in prison for two or three weeks. Now he's responsible for his own groups he avoids conflict like the plague. The first sign of trouble we up and leave. Anyway as soon as I heard we were being evicted I ran over here but you were away somewhere.”

“I had to go to Bangor,” I said. “I didn't find out what happened until I got back and you'd all gone. If I'd been here I would have lodged a protest myself or got you all to come here. They can't shut down a lighthouse, diseases or not.”

“Well I ran all over the place looking for you but I couldn't find you and I couldn't get in to leave you a note and I had to get back before they went without me. Did you get my messages?”

“I found the 'Goodbye' on the doorstep, yes. I was upset when I saw it.”

“Goodbye?” she was horrified. “I didn't say goodbye, I said 'Avebury'. I was trying to tell you to come to Avebury. I would never have said goodbye.”

“Jesus! The birds and wind must have disturbed it.” My mind was in shock. She hadn't said goodbye after all!!

“I thought that might happen which is why I shouted through the door to Moryn to tell you to go to Avebury for Beltane but I never thought you'd read it as goodbye.”

“He did tell me but I was too stupid to understand for a long time.” I told her about his repeated attempts to show me that map and that I didn't realise what he was saying until I'd fallen down the steps and he'd caught me.

“How far did you fall?” she asked.

“From the Control Room.”

She was horrified again and stared at me with wide eyes, her hands over her mouth.

“You could have been killed!”

“I would have been. It's a solid stone floor. That's when I started to take him seriously. He saved my life. Anyway, I did go to Avebury and I couldn't find you.”

She looked simultaneously relieved and guilty.

“We didn't go,” she said. “Jethro knows a lot of people and he heard there was going to be a right wing rally there and that they were planning trouble so we didn't go.”

“Yes the police heard that too but hardly anyone turned up, just a few skinheads.”

I told her about my adventures there and she found the Lighthouse of Trinity Order very funny. It was good to hear her laugh again.

“I've met Serena. She's very, umm, ...”

“Intense?”

“Yes,” said Celestine. “She's too intense to be a druid. She tries too hard and thinks too much.”

“Which reminds me, what happened to your vows?”

“We went to The Longstone on the Isle of Wight instead. I took my vows there.”

She stopped for a few seconds then said shyly

“I'm not a druid anymore.”

This surprised me. She had been totally focused on becoming a druid.

“Wow, Celestine,” I said. “How come? I thought it was all you wanted.”

“Don't call me Celestine anymore, that was my druidic name.”

“What should I call you?” I knew what I wanted to call her but I needed more information before I would dare to call her 'my love'. A lot more information. The dead flies of hope were building up.

She closed her eyes and leaned her head back against the wall.

“Elsie,” she said, distastefully, “Elsie Whipple. Isn't that just gross?”

I had to admit it wasn't anywhere near as nice as Celestine but I didn't say so.

“Can I have some more soup?”

I nuked her another bowlful.

“I worried that you'd go to Avebury and be angry with me for not being there,” she said, dribbling a little soup from the corner of her mouth. I wiped it away with a fresh dishcloth.

“I wasn't angry,” I said. “Just bitterly disappointed. I kind of expected you not to be there since you'd said goodbye but I'd got my hopes up.”

“I didn't say goodbye,” she said forcefully then relaxed. “But I can understand how you felt. Anyway, Saca sent some more messages for you to Moryn. Didn't you get them?”

“No, or if he did he didn't pass them on or I was too stupid to understand.”

“He probably didn't get them. Saca said she didn't feel the messenger was trustworthy. Seems she was right.”

“What was the message?”

“To go to Stonehenge for the equinox.”

“Couldn't you have sent a postcard or something?”

“I didn't know your address. The Lighthouse, North Anglesey didn't seem enough.”

I felt she could have tried a little harder but then again, living in a coach and having signs in shops telling you not to come in probably has an impact on your outlook. Communicating through spirits probably makes more sense after a while. When it works.

“Anyway, I didn't get to Stonehenge either in the end. We were going but we met up with some guys who said they were druids near Stonehenge and I did a very silly thing.”

I was surprised again. Celestine, I mean Elsie, didn't seem the silly type.

“What did you do?”

“I believed them.”

“What do you mean?”

“We were a couple of miles from Stonehenge and we got talking and they said they were all arch druids and that if I wanted they could perform a special ceremony at the Henge the next night, before the solstice, to initiate me as a priestess. And I was stupid and naive and believed them.”

She looked on the verge of tears. My blood had gone cold. If they'd hurt her I'd, well, I'd do something nasty to them.

I sat on the bed next to her and cuddled her. She hugged me back. I scraped a dead hope fly or two off the window pane of life.

“I walked over to the Henge the next night, like they said and met them there.” She had her head against my chest and her voice was a little muffled.

“And they told me to take all my clothes off as I had to be naked. And that I'd, I'd, ..." she started to cry then, "... that I'd have to have sex with all three of them. They said it was part of the ceremony. Every priestess has to, they said. And I got angry with them and with myself for being an idiot, a naive little idiot and setting myself up for a gangbang.”

“Did they, umm, you, umm, ..." I didn't know how to ask but I desperately needed to know.

“No.” She blew her nose on my t shirt.

“When I refused they started to grab at me and one of them managed to get my arms and they were groping me and I was struggling and trying to fight back and then I managed to kick one of them in the balls and broke free of the one holding my arms and I ran as fast as I could and I could hear them chasing after me but I was faster than they were and when I got back to our camp I found the others had gone somewhere and I was sobbing and terrified they'd come and find me and I hid in some bushes but they didn't turn up so after a while I crept over to Tim and Jessica's coach and it wasn't locked and I sneaked in and left them a message saying I was leaving and I grabbed my box and just ran away.”

I was still hugging her tightly. I tried to imagine how scared she must have been with three men chasing after her in the dark, intent on rape. I couldn't really imagine what it must have been like.

“What about your books?” I asked after a while.

“They're just books,” she said. “They can be replaced but the things in my box can't be.”

She seemed content to let me cuddle her and she seemed very relaxed.

“What happened to the things in my pockets?” she said suddenly and pulled away from me. “Did you burn them with my clothes?”

“I emptied the pockets and put everything in that ice cream container,” I said, pointing to it.

She breathed a sigh of relief and picked up the container and checked what was in there then left it sitting on her lap.

“I walked through the night for a long time, scared to death they'd come after me in a car and I found some haystacks in a field and hid in one until it was daylight.”

She looked at me intently. I stayed silent, feeling guilty. If I'd gone to Stonehenge I might have been able to help her but I'd been too far up my own backside to go.

“Anyway,” she said, “I had a realisation in that haystack, an epiphany. I'd already figured out that they weren't druids and that I'd been stupid enough to believe them but I realised the fault was really my own.”

“What do you mean?” I hoped she wasn't going to start victim blaming herself.

“It was my own ambition,” she said quietly. “I'd taken my vows as a druid only a few weeks before and I was so ambitious to become a priestess that I'd fallen for empty promises. More than that, I realised that I had been stupid to even want to be a priestess. I have my beliefs and I've made my vows, I am what I am and calling myself something fancy doesn't make me a better person or a better druid. After all, it's what's in the heart that matters, not the ritual or the prayer.”

“I don't get you,” I said.

“You can recite every prayer word for word and carry out every ritual step by step but if your heart isn't true then its all meaningless junk, just empty words and actions. But if your heart is true you don't need special prayers and rituals. Any words and actions are right because they come from the truth of the heart.”

OK, I could see what she meant now. A lot of bad things have been done in the name of God by people with evil in their hearts reciting empty prayers. And a lot of good by people who don't pray.

“So that's why I renounced druidism. I know the truth in my heart and

I now understand I don't need some fancy sounding system as a framework. I can stand by myself, as myself. I am Elsie and any other name is not being truthful to me.”

It didn't seem the right time to argue philosophy with her and in all honesty I agreed with her thinking.

“Mug, I mean Walter,” she said hesitantly, looking down at her things in the container.

“Mmmm?” I said. I leaned back on the bed with my arm over her legs.

“I realised something else,” she continued, focused on the box. “I, err, made another huge mistake.”

“What was that?” I could feel an electrical tension in the room, kind of like when Mr Polly lost his temper with me only I was sure he couldn't reach as far as the cottage.

“I, umm, should have left the group in Anglesey,” she said quietly. “When we were evicted and I found you weren't there I should have waited for you to come back rather than run back to the group. I felt we had a connection. I should have stayed and sorted things out with you.”

“What do you mean?” I said stupidly.

She closed her eyes and took a deep breath then pulled a small, circular tobacco tin out of the ice cream container and opened it to show me the moss.

“You remember I told you about this?”

I nodded. The hope fly had become far too big to swat and was pressing down, squashing me. I had difficulty breathing and adrenaline was coursing through my veins. Cat, as usual, didn't give a damn and snored gently in her sleep, the tip of her tail twitching.

“The wind told me to wait for that special someone. And I think that someone is you.”

Chapter Twenty

Well, that was a bit of a shock.

I was about to tell her about Erin and that she'd thought Celestine, Elsie, had broken my heart then realised it probably wasn't the best thing to say under the circumstances, which is unusual for me. I can generally be counted on to say the wrong thing. So I said another wrong thing, which turned out to be the right thing.

"I love you," I said, sitting bolt upright and going red in the face. I'd not consciously thought it before but I knew it now as truth.

She studied my face intently, no doubt wondering if I had a congenital heart disease or something, then smiled and relaxed and settled herself back comfortably against the pillows. She put the lid back on the tobacco tin and returned it to the ice cream container and pulled out a dirty old matchbox.

"Remember I wouldn't tell you what this was?" She shook out a screwed up piece of toilet paper and unfolded it. I nodded.

"Some sort of soap, isn't it?"

"Your soap," she said, holding it under my nose to smell. "I scraped some off your bar of soap with your toothbrush handle, the first time I was here, remember, when I fell off the rock?"

I remembered her falling off the rock but not, obviously, her scraping my soap since I hadn't been in the toilet when she did it, as I am a gentleman and let people use the toilet in private.

I didn't quite know what to say. I wanted to kiss her but as she was lying back against the pillows it would require a little gymnastics and I'm not the most elegant of people. She'd probably change her mind after seeing my ineptness.

"What happened to the box you kept it all in?" I asked, partly out of curiosity but mostly because things had suddenly got a little too intense for me. One minute she was about to be raped and the next

minute I'm her special person. It was a lot to take in.

"It fell apart when I was walking here," she said, "so I put everything in my pockets."

"Walking here?" I jerked my head back and Cat flicked an ear at the sudden movement. "Walking from where?"

"Well, in the night in the haystack I realised that I had to go back to you and find out your truth about me," she said, "so I hitched a lift with a guy who said he'd take me all the way to Liverpool."

"So you walked all the way from Liverpool?" I was shocked. "That's like a hundred miles!"

"No, I walked from Bristol."

I jumped off the bed. "Bristol? That's like three hundred miles! Jesus, why didn't he take you all the way to Liverpool?"

"He started touching my legs," she said quietly. "And making dirty suggestions. And he said he was staying the night in Bristol and if I stayed with him he'd give me some money, a lot of money, and take me all the way to Anglesey. So when we got to the motel in Bristol I ran away from him as well. So I walked all the way from Bristol."

"Couldn't you have got a train? Or a lift from someone else?"

"I didn't have any money. And I didn't trust anyone."

She looked at me with a sickly smile.

"You see I'd never been alone before. I lived with my mum and dad until last year then I joined Jethro and the others. I've always had someone around, someone to count on. But suddenly I was all on my own and I got scared and I stopped trusting people. Especially men. So I walked."

"Hold on," I said and stopped pacing the room in agitation to look at her. "This happened back at the Summer solstice? Like June 21st?"

She nodded unhappily.

“And it's now August 7th, so you were walking for ...” I did a rapid calculation, just as well I'm good at maths, “... nearly seven weeks?”

She nodded again.

“But you had no money so what did you eat? Where did you sleep?”

“I didn't eat much,” she admitted. “I found some things in rubbish bins and when I got into the countryside I took some veggies out of fields and cowsheds and I slept in haystacks and ditches and things.”

I did another calculation.

“Jesus that's, like, six or seven miles a day every day for two months without a break.”

“I started off doing more than that,” she said. “I was doing fine, then I started to get weak because I wasn't eating enough and then I got sick after drinking some water from a ditch and I couldn't walk at all for a couple of days. And then when I finally got here I didn't quite know what I was doing and ended up at the wrong lighthouse. There was no one there.”

“Daffyd said he found you in one of his cowsheds.”

She nodded. “I think I remember that. I was so tired and so weak I just crawled in somewhere that smelt bad and curled up in a corner and went to sleep. When I woke up you were here and I was naked in your bed.”

She laughed. “Ironic, really. At least I kept my clothes on with the other guys.”

“But why didn't you ring me?” I asked, aghast that all the time I'd been farting round and dancing with girls Celestine had been walking into a state of exhaustion to find me.

“I didn't know your phone number, and anyway I didn't have any

money at all.”

I stood there spluttering unconstructively. Being a fairly typical male I was trying to find a solution to a problem that was already past.

“We were going to come back here after the Solstice,” she said after watching me being an idiot for a while. “The eviction order was for three months so we were going to come back after that. If I hadn't run away from the group after Stonehenge I'd have been here weeks ago.”

“So why didn't you go back to them after your night in the haystack?”

She thought about it for a few moments.

“I had to come back and find your truth,” she said. “It filled my mind and I couldn't really think of anything else.”

There wasn't a lot I could say to that. I felt humbled, guilty, loved, embarrassed, stupid and unworthy all at the same time. Numb too. So I did what was probably the most sensible thing I've ever done in my life. I sat on the bed and kissed her. More than once. She wouldn't let me get in the bed with her though. She needed more time she said. Turned out to be not that much more time, just a couple of days, several large meals, an hour in the bath twice and an afternoon with a bottle of shampoo and two bottles of hair conditioner. Seven weeks of sleeping in ditches doesn't do much for your hair.

I got her some new clothes too. Just some basic things so she could go into town with me and get some more things. When I was clearing out a cupboard to make room for her clothes I found the blanket and hat Jethro had left behind.

“Oh cool,” she said. “Jethro loved that hat.”

“What should I do with them?” I asked.

“Keep them. He'll turn up here again one day.”

“I found something else too.” I gave her the earrings I'd bought in Bangor. I'd retrieved them from behind the couch and put them with

the blanket and hat.

“Oh wow, awesome! They’re lovely.” She gave me a big kiss and a hug then went to look in the bathroom mirror to see what they looked like against her hair.

“Can you drive me into town this afternoon?” she asked when she came back.

“Sure,” I said. “What do we need?”

“I need to get my ears pierced, mum would never let me.”

So we went into town that afternoon and got her ears pieced. And we played at being a couple until Jethro arrived.

* * *

They all arrived actually, three days before the Autumn equinox and camped back in the same place. The first we knew was when Jethro and Saca knocked on the door. They both broke into beaming smiles when they saw Elsie.

“We were hoping you’d make it back here,” said Saca. “I asked around but no one seemed to know.”

Jethro was delighted to have his hat back although the blanket wasn’t theirs. It belonged to one of the others.

Elsie made them some tea and we sat in the front garden in the cool Autumn sun and chatted for a while.

“Are you here for the Equinox?” I asked.

“Yes and no,” said Jethro. This was fairly typical of Jethro. He never liked to give a straight answer.

He looked at Elsie.

“Are we needed here?” he asked.

“I think so,” she said, “but it's up to Walter.”

“What's up to me?” I said, puzzled, as I so often am when confronted by druids.

“You remember I said we were coming back here after Stonehenge but then I ran away?”

“Yes.”

She turned and gazed out to sea, looking embarrassed.

“What's going on?” I asked.

Saca snorted.

“She wanted Jethro to officiate at your wedding,” she said.

“What??” I turned to look at Elsie and found she'd stopped looking out to sea and was watching me intently.

“You mean you planned to marry me back in June?” I asked.

“Actually she asked me while we were still here in March,” said Jethro. “But it looks like she never bothered to tell you.”

I was absolutely stunned. They were all watching me and I was feeling very self conscious.

“Well?” said Jethro, gently.

“Yes please,” I said. “Can we do it this afternoon?”

They all laughed and Elsie seemed a little relieved.

“No,” said Jethro. “We'll do it on Monday, on the equinox.”

“Will it be legal?” I asked.

“No,” said Jethro. “The government doesn't recognise druidic

weddings.”

“Actually it will be,” said Elsie. We all looked at her and she became self conscious.

“Umm, I found a celebrant in Holyhead who'll do all the legal twaddle and doesn't object to the druid stuff as he's done some pagan weddings before. I've already booked him for Monday morning and he's happy to do the paperwork afterwards. I got my mum to send me my birth certificate.”

She had been a busy girl, when I wasn't watching, which didn't give her much time as I liked watching her and did it a lot.

Later that afternoon I had an idea and mentioned it to Saca and Jethro while Elsie was phoning the celebrant to confirm the arrangements.

“Technically druidic weddings don't have a best man,” said Jethro, “that's a Christian thing but there's no reason why you can't have friends and well wishers and if you want a kindred spirit with you that's fine by me. I just hope the celebrant is very broadminded.”

When Elsie came back I told her my idea and she thought it was 'awesomely excellent' so we all trooped up to the control room of the lighthouse to ask Mr Polly to be my best man.

“After all,” pointed out Saca, “the celebrant won't even know he's here.”

Mr Polly was delighted and scattered the pot of pens in his excitement. Saca stayed up there for a while to discuss another idea I had had with him. He'd saved my life and I wanted to know how, if possible, I could repay him.

She came back down looking very thoughtful.

“All he wants is to finish dying and join his wife and family,” she reported back to us. “But he can't. As his sacrifice failed he's doomed to stay on this spot until a druid releases him but they were all killed

by the Romans so he's here forever.”

“Surely not,” I said. “We've got an arch druid right here and a druid who's still a druid even though she thinks she has renounced it and another two in the next bay. Surely they can come up with a release for him?”

“We're not the original druids,” said Elsie. “All their lore was lost. We'd have no idea what ceremony to perform to release a trapped spirit.”

“But didn't you tell me it wasn't the prayers and rituals that mattered?” I said. “Isn't it the truth in your heart that makes the words work?”

She and Jethro stared at me for so long I went and hid in the kitchen, pretending to make some food. When I came back out they were sitting in a huddle, if it's possible for two people to make a huddle, deep in discussion. Then abruptly they all left, saying they needed to talk to Becky and Kev, the other two druids in the group.

On Monday a sleepy looking celebrant arrived half an hour before dawn and we helped him up the stairs to the balcony of the lighthouse. It was quite crowded there as all thirteen of the travellers were there as well as myself and the celebrant. Jethro looked resplendent in his white robe and Saca wore her traditional Shoshone outfit of deerskin embroidered with porcupine quills and a rabbit fur headdress. Clark played a beautiful eerie tune of his own composition that wound like a snake around the lighthouse as the sun appeared above the horizon and the beacon went out.

“Walter, do you take Elsie to your hand and your heart at the rising of the sun and the sinking of the stars?” said Jethro.

“Yes, I do,” I said, looking at Elsie.

“Elsie, do you take Walter to your hand and your heart at the rising of the sun and the sinking of the stars?” said Jethro.

“Yes, I do,” Elsie said, looking at me.

“I declare you one, united upon the Earth and under the Sky, protected by the blessings of Awen,” said Jethro.

Together we jumped over a cauldron of flowers and I nearly lost Elsie over the edge of the balcony. Fortunately the rail was made of sterner stuff than the staircase rope and Mr Polly was there as backup and she stayed with me. Mr Polly raised the cauldron of flowers and handed one to each of us. The celebrant pretended not to notice.

The rest of us trooped down to the garden while Jethro, Elsie, Becky, Kev and Saca stayed in the lighthouse. A few minutes later there was a thwump as the lighthouse light came on and did three full circuits before going off again.

“He's gone to where he belongs,” Saca told me when they came back down. “Moryn asked me to give you his thanks and that he will welcome you as a friend when your time comes.”

The travellers left a few days later but Elsie remained with me. Once a druid, now a lighthouse keeper's wife. The magic stayed the same.