

The Gastropoda Imperative

Peter Barns

Published by Boddaert Books at Smashwords

Copyright 2013 Peter Barns

Smashwords Edition, License Notes.

This eBook is licensed for your personal enjoyment only. This eBook may not be re-sold or given away to other people. If you would like to share this book with another person, please purchase an additional copy for each recipient. If you're reading this book and did not purchase it, or it was not purchased for your use only, then please return to Smashwords.com and purchase your own copy. Thank you for respecting the hard work of this author.

This novel is a work of fiction. The names, characters and events portrayed are the work of the author's imagination. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thanks to
Derry and Ana
Marina Bar-Lagos-Portugal
for allowing me the use
of their premises to write
this novel

FIVE YEARS EARLIER

Chapter 1

Conal Mitchell, PA to Dermot Drewsbeck, multi-billionaire and sole owner of Tirolean Enterprises, was tense. He was running out of time and daylight. It was fast getting too dark to fly, and if he didn't land the helicopter pretty soon, he stood a good chance of ending belly-up in the drink.

Giving a small grin of satisfaction, he relaxed. There it was, dead ahead, just off the Sussex coast, exactly where it should be. Flat Rock Island. *Spot-on old son. No probs.*

The island was aptly named, looking as it did, as though a giant with an outsize scimitar had sliced the top clean off. Conal swung out from the coast and headed in over the tear-shaped formation from the thin end, searching in the dimming light for the helipad. It had been a long time since he was last here, and he wasn't too sure how the setup might have changed. He'd have to keep an eye peeled for any obstructions.

The project was situated in a natural indentation at the larger end of the island, or rather, the big slab of concrete that was its roof was. The laboratory itself was buried deep underground.

As Conal approached the helipad, the halogen lights edging the slab burst into life, and for a few precious seconds he was blinded.

"Damn! Bloody idiots. What the hell do they think they're doing?"

Blinking back tears, Conal landed in the centre of the big white circle painted at one end of the slab and turned off the engine. Flicking switches, he sat waiting for the rotors to wind down. Giving his eyes a few seconds to adjust to the dark, he jumped from the chopper and slammed the door, turning towards the entrance. He set off at a brisk pace, going through the bollocking he was going to give the idiot who'd just nearly blinded him.

As he strode across the concrete, a sudden thought struck him, and he shook his head at his own stupidity, giving a wry smile. The outside lights came on automatically at dusk; he'd been unlucky enough to be landing at that particular time. He couldn't make out much of the island through the haze of the lights blazing all round him, just the single, lonely looking structure that was the project's entrance.

Making his way towards the glass box stuck on the far side of the slab, he wiped a hand over his bald head, casting glances right and left as he went.

Conal was stocky, 1.7 metres tall and muscular. He always wore a black leather jacket over a white shirt and red tie, matched with grey slacks and highly polished shoes. His co-workers joked that he'd probably bought a job-lot years ago and hadn't worked his way through them all yet.

Conal had been Dermot Drewsbeck's PA for the last five years. The Old Man - as he referred to him in private - had head-hunted him after he'd left the Special Forces, making an offer so outrageous that he couldn't turn him down. Over the years, he'd earned that money though, saving the Old Man's neck on more than one occasion.

Conal was edgy, and with good reason, because he was near enough now to see into the glass walled entrance building. The big curved desk facing the doors sat empty, as did the glass sided lift shaft. The car was obviously down at the basement level. There was no sign of anybody anywhere, and that worried him.

Reaching the doors, he pushed the entrance button, the harsh buzzer making itself heard through the reinforced glass. He knew a second buzzer would be sounding down in the laboratory below, in case the security guard wasn't at the desk for some reason.

Getting no response, Conal punched the over-ride code into the entry pad, clicking impatient fingers as he waited for the glass doors to slide aside. A shiver touched the back of his neck as he entered. Glancing back over his shoulder, he shook his head at his uneasiness.

Walking around the large desk, Conal sat in the seat, staring down at the bank of CCTV screens set in a semi-circle in front of him. There were five, all showing different views of the rooms below. Nothing moved in any of them.

He sat back in his seat for a moment, a puzzled frown on his face, then sat forward with a jerk as he caught sight of something on Camera 5, the one covering The Pit.

Because that particular room was kept in perpetual darkness, the camera was fitted with an infra-red filter, giving everything on the screen an ethereal glow.

Something white lay on the floor, just at the edge of the picture - something that looked familiar.

Grabbing the control stick, Conal moved the camera to get a better view, zooming in on the image. A long, sibilant hiss escaped his lips and his eyes widened. Zooming in some more, he felt his heart rate increase and a patch of sweat break out between his shoulder blades. Yes, he'd been right. There could be no mistaking what lay waiting for him down in the lab.

Picking up the desk phone, he thumbed in a number available to only a few select people. Holding the phone to his ear, he continued staring at the CCTV screen. When his call was answered he uttered four words, his tone a dull, flat monotone.

"Jizzle. Island. Now. Alone."

Taking a few deep breaths, Conal placed the handset back on its cradle and stood, surprised at how unsteady his legs had become. Making his way over to the lift, he pressed the call-button, tapping his finger-tips against his thigh as the car whirred its slow way up from the bottom of the shaft.

The lift seemed to take forever, but when the doors did finally slide open, Conal hesitated, having to stop them closing

again with an outstretched hand. Rubbing the back of his neck, he stepped inside.

Chapter 2

”Jizzle. Island. Now. Alone.”

When the flat voice spoke in his ear, the adrenaline flowed through Dermot Drewsbeck’s body. The quiet words brought a chill to his heart and a lump to his throat.

Jizzle was his PA’s ‘code word’, used on an open line when security was a concern. It was only employed in a dire emergency. It meant he had to act and act now; take the call extremely seriously, because something bad was going down.

In the five years his PA had worked for him, Conal had never used it before. Drewsbeck pursed his lips as he considered the phone call and its four words.

Jizzle. Island. Now. Alone.

It was pretty obvious that something bad was going down out at Flat Rock Island. Something very bad if Conal had resorted to using the special code word.

Having spent all day with his Finance Director working out which tax haven was the best one to place his company profits in, Drewsbeck was already dogged tired, and he’d promised to take his wife out for the evening. Now here was Conal’s call, doubling the pressure on him.

Heading a global conglomerate whose turnover outstripped many a small country’s national income was bad enough, without all this bloody cloak and dagger stuff. Damn the man.

The call had unsettled Drewsbeck more than he’d have liked to admit, mounting worry on top of stress, on top of tiredness. This was the most exhausted he’d felt in the thirty-five years since he’d begun building his enterprise - an enterprise that spanned thirty-three companies and employed some twenty-two thousand people in thirteen countries. Dermot Drewsbeck sighed loudly, feeling that he was being ground down just a little farther, just a little deeper.

Calling his wife, Drewsbeck waited until she appeared at the lounge door, then gave her his best, disarming smile. “Something’s come up darling. I’m sorry, but I have to go back into the office.”

“But DermDerm,” she said, a pout on her lips. “You promised me that you’d take the night off for once. We’re supposed to be going to that opera I so wanted to see.”

“I know darling. Sorry. I really am, but there’s nothing I can do about it. Something important’s come up.”

“It’s always something important DermDerm. Aren’t I important too?”

Drewsbeck may have been a short man, with a florid face, running to fat and well past the first flush of youth - but his wife was tall, slim, perfectly groomed, and twenty-five years his junior. She also had a temper to match her brilliant red hair and was looking at him now with an expression that said she was about to explode.

“Have to go darling.” Practically running into the hall, Drewsbeck grabbed his coat and headed out the door at a fast pace.

The lift doors slid open and Conal stepped out into a corridor that ran down the length of the building from end to end. Numerous doors led off both sides, all of which were open - even the one the staff had nicknamed, The Pit.

This wasn’t good - not good at all.

The lighting level in the corridor was low, designed to switch to quarter power whenever the door to The Pit was opened. It was less disturbing for the occupants that way, being as they were, mainly nocturnal.

Conal stood outside the lift, listening intently, jumping when the doors suddenly slid closed behind him. Making as little noise as possible, he eased his way down the corridor, pushing each door fully open as he reached it.

Tea room; small laboratory; larger laboratory; Senior Technician; Male toilet - stalls all empty; Female Toilet - ditto; Computer Technician; Canteen; Department of Malacology; Senior Invertebrate Zoologist; Secretary.

All the rooms were ominously quiet and empty. Two to go. Electrical Intake & Ventilation on the left; The Pit on the right.

Conal took the EI&V first, which was also empty. Leaning back against the corridor wall, he wet dry lips and stared at the partially open door in the opposite wall.

He didn’t want to go in there. He knew was waiting inside.

The staff had given the big recycling room the name *The Pit* because that’s what it resembled. It was dominated by a large, two metre deep hole sunk into the middle of the floor with a knee-high wall surrounding it. Even from where he stood, out in the corridor, Conal could feel the suck of the powerful fans in the ceiling extracting the air from the room.

He’d not been in the Recycling Laboratory since it had been put into operation but knew that even with the big extractor fans going flat out, breathing in the putrid atmosphere without an oxygen mask was almost impossible. He wasn’t looking forward to entering it one little bit.

Next to the extract vent in the ceiling was a chute leading up to the surface. It ended in a circular metal cover, caste into the concrete slab alongside the entrance building. It was here, and on a surprisingly regular basis, that the recyclates made their way into The Pit.

Conal pushed the door back on its hinges, switching on the overhead lighting. As the room was bathed in bright white light, he heard a rustling, slopping sound coming from the pit and hesitated on the threshold.

After castigating himself for being so faint-hearted, he took a deep breath and walked over to the pit, staring down at the gunk that filled it. The surface was still rippling from the movements of the creatures that had dived deep into the

glutinous mess when he'd switched the lights on. Turning away in disgust, he grabbed another quick lungful of air from the corridor and squatted down in the corner, sorting through the tangled pile of bones he found there.

"Well that's solved the problem of where the staff have all disappeared to," he muttered, eyes beginning to sting at the stench in the room.

Chapter 3

When Drewsbeck arrived at the quay, he pulled into the car park and quickly killed the engine. Getting out of his silver Mercedes, he looked around, worried about leaving his expensive car in such a deserted place.

"It'll be okay there, guv," a lanky man shouted from the quayside.

The man was dressed in a pair of dirty orange overalls, bright yellow boots, and a rolled up woollen cap. He smiled broadly and Drewsbeck could see that he had no teeth, making his face look as if it had collapsed in on itself.

"Over here," the man called, waving a grubby hand. "Your man there said for me to take you across to him. He was lucky he caught me in. I was just on my way out to the pub and all. Great things these mobiles, ain't they?"

The boatman kept up a steady patter as he helped Drewsbeck step across the gap between the boat and the quayside. Drewsbeck wrinkled his nose at the smell of fish pervading the vessel, surreptitiously wiping his hand down the side of his coat as the boatman let go of it. Making his way to the back of the vessel, he sat on the gunwale and tried to tune out the sound of the seaman's voice.

The boat's engine kicked into life with a cough and a burst of black, foul smelling smoke, before settling down to a steady throb. The engine sounded as though it might blow up at any minute, but at least the noise meant he didn't have to listen to the man's inane chatter.

The boatman guided the chugging vessel out into the sound, his body swaying with the movement of the waves as he turned the wheel back and forth.

"How long is this going to take?" Drewsbeck shouted above the rattle of the diesel engine.

"Bout fifteen minutes or so," the boatman called back over his shoulder, wiping the spittle from his chin with the back of his hand.

Drewsbeck settled down into a contemplative mood, the throbbing engine and gently rolling waves combining to ease the tensions that had built up in his shoulders on the long, one and a half hour drive from his mansion at Newton Abbot. He smiled, contemplating what would be waiting for him when he got home. Maybe he should get his secretary to book a nice restaurant for later. His wife loved it when he took her somewhere that celebrities went. Pulling out his mobile, Drewsbeck frowned.

Damn it. No signal.

The boat rolled in a big trough and Drewsbeck caught a brief glimpse of the island in the distance. He'd first seen it from the air, when he'd surveyed the island with his architect four years earlier. Looking down on it then, he'd seen that the small crater they had chosen as a building plot on the larger end of the island would save the builders a lot of construction work. As his architect had pointed out, the surrounding, higher rocks would also help keep the elements at bay. Instructing the pilot to put down in the centre of the crater, Drewsbeck had climbed out, his architect close behind him, to inspect the island that he hoped would add a big chunk to his already considerable fortune.

"I think we've found it Jimmy," he'd said, all smiles as he swept his thinning white hair back over his head, breathing in the sea air. "Just listen to those waves. Wonderful."

"If you can get whoever owns it to sell it to you," the architect had answered in a dubious tone.

"Money talks better than words," he'd retorted with a chuckle. "Or is that louder? Anyway, you just get yourself back to the office and get a team out here pronto. I'll take care of buying the island. You've got nine months to turn this place into a working laboratory. Think you can do it?"

His architect nodded slowly, as though reluctant to commit himself.

The work had been difficult, given the terrain and location, but money was a wonderful motivator. Equipment and materials were flown in by helicopter, while the builders were lodged out with locals and boated back and forth on a daily basis.

Drewsbeck wanted to keep the real reason for the construction work under wraps, because whoever succeeded in harnessing this particular idea would make themselves a fortune. As usual with his new undertakings, there would be people sniffing around - industrial spies were forever on the prowl - so he spread the rumour that the island was going to be used as a big underground oil storage depot.

"Nearly there, guv."

The boatman's shout brought Drewsbeck out of his revelry and he focused on the pier coming up a few metres away. For all his sloppy looks, the boatman was a good seaman, kissing the boat against the tyres hanging from the pier as gently as a mother kissing her baby.

Holding the vessel against the pier with the engine, the boatman shouted for Drewsbeck to jump off, adding: "Do us a favour mate, and drop this here rope over that there bollard when you get ashore."

Drewsbeck slipped the big loop over a rusty bollard and made his way towards the path leading up to the side of the cliff. Intermittent lampposts cast deep, dark shadows along the pathway and he had to be careful where he stepped. After a ten minute hike, he finally made it to the top and walked out onto the huge concrete slab that was the roof of the laboratory they'd built into the island's rock.

Drewsbeck could see his PA sitting behind the desk in the entrance building, feet up, crossed at the ankles. He was drinking something from a plastic cup. Pulling his coat closer around his body against the wind as he walked towards the building, Drewsbeck glanced at his watch.

Getting on for ten o'clock, and it looked as though there was a storm brewing. He hoped that the weather held until they had got off the island. It was too dark to fly back in the helicopter now and he didn't fancy sailing back through a storm with the toothless boatman at the wheel.

Chapter 4

Conal caught sight of Drewsbeck through the glass and swung his feet off the desk. The Old Man looked tired. Worn out in fact. Pressing the door release to let his boss in, Conal stood up.

“Conal,” Drewsbeck said, nodding a greeting.

“Mr. Drewsbeck.” Conal gave his own nod.

“That a coffee you got there?”

“Sure is. Want me to get you a cup? The machine’s just over there.”

“Just need a slurp of yours. If you don’t mind, that is. That was some walk up from the pier.”

Conal held out his plastic cup, noticing the tremor in the Old Man’s hand as he took it.

“So what’s the emergency then?” Drewsbeck said after taking a sip of the hot liquid.

“There’s been an accident.”

“Is everyone okay?”

Conal shook his head. “They’re dead,” he said quietly.

“All of them? Surely not all of them?”

Conal nodded, taking the coffee out of the Old Man’s hand before he spilt it. “Far as I can tell. Given the circumstances, it’s a bit difficult to be sure really.”

“Jesus. What the hell happened?”

“The boatman came over as usual this afternoon at five, to pick up the staff and take them ashore. When he got here, nobody was waiting. Anyway, he hung around for ten minutes or so, then rang up to security from the intercom down at the pier.” Conal stopped a moment, concern wrinkling his forehead. “Do you want to sit down, Mr Drewsbeck?”

Drewsbeck shook his head in irritation.” Just get on with it.”

“So, after he got no response on the intercom, he traipsed up here to take a look around.”

Conal waited for his boss to finish another sip of coffee before continuing, wishing that the man would sit down before he fell down.

“And?”

“Right. So he couldn’t see anyone at the desk and couldn’t get an answer to his buzzing. It wasn’t dark yet, so the lights weren’t on and the place looked deserted to him. The long and short of it is, he thought we’d closed the project down and not bothered to tell him. Apparently he got straight onto HQ and gave them a right mouthful. They tried contacting the island, but couldn’t raise anyone either, so they got through to Security, who eventually contacted me to find out what might be going on.” Reaching over, Conal took a mouthful of coffee himself, swallowing it carefully before continuing: “I couldn’t raise the desk here, or anybody on the satellite phone. It just seemed odd. How could everyone suddenly be out of contact like that. So I jumped in the ‘copter and headed out here to take a look see.”

“And what did you find?” the Old Man asked, his voice hardening.

Conal moved out from behind the desk so his boss could get to the screens.

“The one on the right. The end one,” he said.

Drewsbeck looked at the CCTV screens, slumping down in the seat with a thump as though the breath had been knocked from him.

“Are those what I think they are,” he asked, voice barely audible.

“Afraid so, Mr Drewsbeck.”

“Take me down. I want to see them for myself.”

“I really don’t think that would be such a good idea, Mr Drewsbeck.”

Drewsbeck’s eyebrows bunched across his nose and he slowly raised his head from studying the CCTV screen. His eyes had turned flinty and Conal could see how suffused with blood his face was, the tiny capillaries standing out.

“I beg your pardon?” he growled.

Conal realised the mistake he’d made and tried to recover. “I just can’t guarantee how safe it will be down there, sir. You’ve seen for yourself what they can do.”

Walking over to the lift, his boss harrumphed. “What’s the damned code!” he snapped.

Walking over to the keypad, Conal punched in the number and stood back as the lift doors opened. Following his boss into the car, he watched him push the ‘Down’ button. His fingers were no longer trembling, in fact, as the minutes ticked by, Drewsbeck was looking more and more like his old self.

“I’ve left the lighting on high,” Conal said as they exited the lift. “To keep the little bastards in The Pit.”

The Old Man just grunted and strode off down the corridor. Conal had to hurry to keep up with him.

Conal opened The Pit door and stood back. “Be careful. There’s glass all over the floor. Looks like some of the shelving has collapsed.”

Drewsbeck carefully picked his way over the mounds of dark soil and glass from a broken breeding tank, walking over to the bones piled in one corner. He squatted down beside them, his knees cracking with the effort. Picking up a large femur, he ran the tip of his finger along it.

“See,” he said quietly, almost as though talking to himself, “it’s been stripped clean. No blood, no tissue, nothing. And look here,” he continued, holding the bone out to Conal, clicking his fingernail along some fine indentations. “Just like a

large rasp had been taken to it.” Dropping the bone, he suddenly dived his hand into the pile, scattering them in all directions, obviously looking for something.

Conal couldn't be sure, but it looked to him as though the Old Man was picking some things out of the pile. His boss had his back to him so he couldn't see what he was doing that well. Getting up, Drewsbeck walked to the pit in the middle of the floor and looked over, staring intently into the mess. Bending over, he held his arm just above the surface and moved it sideways, dropping whatever he'd got in his hand into the pit.

Something shifted just beneath the crusted surface, following his movements. Conal was about to run over and pull his boss away from the danger, but the Old Man turned to face him, a big smile on his face.

“She did it, Conal,” he said, the admiration clear in his voice. “She actually pulled it off. Damn it, she said she would. I never did really believe she would though.”

Conal walked over to all that was left of the project staff and squatted by the bones, just as his boss had. When he'd been down here before on his own, he hadn't wanted to hang about. Now he was curious.

Picking up what looked to him might be a ulna, or maybe a radius - he was having trouble remembering his childhood biology lessons - he saw that the joint at one end was missing. It looked as though it had been attacked by thousands of tiny chisels. Poking through the rest of the skeletons, he saw that the smaller bones were missing. The phalanges was it? Something like that.

The Old Man was on the other side of the pit, looking at some glass tanks along one wall.

Conal felt that coldness on the back of his neck - the sign that something was not as it seemed. It had served him well in the Special Forces, saving his life more than once. Conal rubbed his neck, wondering what was bothering him. He wandered out into the corridor, looking up and down.

“Hey, Mr Drewsbeck,” he called a moment later, “come and look at this.”

Drewsbeck found his PA kneeling on the floor, the overhead lights reflecting from his bald head. His nose almost touched the tiles as he squinted along the corridor. Standing up, he brushed off his trousers and nodded at the floor. “Take a look for yourself,” he said.

Getting to his knees, Drewsbeck took a look. He could just make out the long scuff marks on the tiles, as though something had been dragged along the corridor. He stood up and shrugged, as though saying, “So what?”

“They were all jumbled up together in the corner when I got down here,” Conal said.

Drewsbeck nodded. “You're saying that they were dragged to the one place and eaten. Is that it?”

“No doubt about it. A lot of the bones are missing. If I'd arrived half-an-hour later, I reckon we wouldn't have had found a thing.”

Drewsbeck firmly closed the door to The Pit and nodded. “I think I saw a canteen farther down the corridor. You can make me that cup of coffee now. We need to talk.”

Conal followed the Old Man's bobbing back as he hurried down the corridor. He seemed to have suddenly come alive, all signs of his tiredness now gone. Shaking his head, Conal crossed to the coffee maker and switched it on, grabbing a couple of cups from under the counter.

Coffee steaming gently in front of them, the two men looked at each other. “A right bloody mess,” Drewsbeck said.

Conal just nodded. Words weren't needed.

“Okay Conal, I'll give it to you straight. This could be the end of everything I've built up over the years.” Holding his hand up as Conal started to speak, Drewsbeck shook his head. “No, let me finish.” He took a moment to think. “You've been with me a long time Conal, you know what's involved here, the thousands of jobs that would be lost if this ever gets out. I can't let that happen. I really can't.”

There was a long, drawn out silence as the two men sat and thought about that. Conal's brain was buzzing. Everything he now had, everything he'd become in the past five years, was due to the faith the Old Man had put in him. He'd always admired his boss, amazed at the long hours he put in, and how he managed to come up with new investments and projects to keep the organisation growing year on year. Now all that was threatened. But this was too big a thing to hide.

“I really need your help here Conal,” the Old Man said quietly. “If this terrible accident gets out it'll finish me.” He sat quietly for a moment, then looked at his PA, his eyes drilling into him. “These people knew the dangers of working here on this project. That's the reason I looked for people who didn't have any families when I employed them, and paid them so much money.”

“Even so, you can't cover up six deaths,” Conal said.

“With your help, I think I can. I have an idea,” he said quietly, “but it'll depend on my being able to bribe a senior Civil Servant. I have something on him that we can use to get his help.”

“We?”

Ignoring Conal's comment, Drewsbeck pushed on. “The biggest problem we have here is the six missing staff. How to account for the fact that there are no bodies to bury,” he said.

Conal allowed himself a small smile at the repeated, ‘we’. “Go on,” he said.

“So, here's what we do.”

Conal listened hard. The Old Man seemed to have thought of everything, covered every base. It was almost as though he'd already had it all worked out before they'd entered the laboratories. He had to admire the Old Man's quick mind.

Conal was uncomfortable about covering up the tragedy, but it *was* an accident and nobody would suffer, except his boss if the newspapers ever found out what had gone on here.

Conal finally nodded his agreement, pushing the sudden cold spot on his neck to the back of his mind.

Chapter 5

When Conal and Drewsbeck got back to the boat, the boatman was sitting on a pile of old sacks, snoring fit to bust, his loose upper lip flapping at each exhalation. Conal jumped aboard and helped Drewsbeck over the gunwale. Their thumping entrance woke the boatman from his sleep and he's eyes suddenly shot open.

"Wha—" he mumbled, shaking himself awake before struggling to his feet. "Oh, you're back then," he grumbled. "Thought you were going to be there all bloody night."

Conal and Drewsbeck smiled at each other. Then finding somewhere to sit amongst the crates and lobster pots littering the deck, they made themselves as comfortable as they could. The boat set out for the mainland, its noisy engine belching out more thick black smoke. Conal hoped it would make it all the way to the quayside. The sea was choppier now, the boat rolling alarmingly on the waves, and he didn't like the prospect of being stuck out here waiting for the coastguard to rescue them.

"You never did tell me how it all started?" Conal said, trying to push the picture of them all floundering in the sea from his mind. "The project," he added, nodding back at the island.

Drewsbeck looked over his shoulder for a moment and gave a soft smile, as though his PA's question had brought back fond memories. "Well that's quite a story," he said. "I was approached by a young woman, fresh out of university with her new Ph.D. She'd been working on this environmental idea she'd had since she was thirteen or so. Real dedicated. You know the type?"

Conal nodded. "Met a few," he said.

"She spent weeks trying to get to see me."

Conal shook his head. "Don't recall anyone like that."

"Before your time, Conal. Anyway, she finally gets past Mrs Hamter. She was your predecessor." He chuckled. "A formidable lady indeed. So Mrs H set her up an appointment, and here she is, sitting in front of me, asking for money to develop this crazy scheme of hers. She told me that, because my companies produce so much waste, it was only reasonable that I should find a method of cleaning it up.

"She'd gone to the trouble of preparing a presentation, so I felt I had no option but to sit through it. Thing was, I knew after the first overhead that it would never work, but I let her carry on anyway. Felt a bit sorry for her I suppose, all the years of hard work she'd already put into it."

"You felt sorry for her?" The incredulity in Conal's voice brought a flicker of a smile to Drewsbeck's lips.

"I have got a heart, you know Conal," he said.

"Yeah. Sorry. So what happened?"

"I said I'd look into it. Asked Mrs H to take the young woman's details. Then, after she'd left, dropped her proposal into the drawer marked 'Rejects'. That was that, or so I thought. Hell, how wrong can a man be." Drewsbeck paused, staring out into the night, lost in his own thoughts for a moment.

Conal coughed, raising his eyebrows as Drewsbeck's gaze turned back to him. "So?" he prompted.

Drewsbeck chuckled, shaking his head slightly. "She wasn't about to take no for an answer. She came back, again and again, almost camping out in the office at one point. Drove poor Mrs H to distraction. In the end I had to get the police to kick her out and make sure reception never let her into the building again.

"Then she started showing up at places I went. Restaurants, the theatre, places like that. God knows how she found out where I'd be. Wouldn't surprise me if she hadn't spent a fortune on having me followed. She never said a damned word. Just sat there staring. Do you know how bloody annoying that can be, Conal? Having someone staring at you that way everywhere you go?"

Conal shook his head and smiled to himself. He just couldn't see the Old Man in that situation.

"This went on for . . . oh, perhaps six months. Then she changed tactics."

Conal could see that the Old Man was back in his memories again, but more than that, was wearing a slightly embarrassed expression.

"You can't stop there. What the hell happened?" Conal prompted.

"She dumped three bins full of stinking refuse through the sunroof of my Mercedes. Then stuck a pole in it with a cardboard notice attached, saying: 'If you produce a load of shit and don't clean up after yourself. This is what happens, you bad boy.'"

"Fuck," Conal said, throwing his head back and laughing loudly.

"Fuck indeed," Drewsbeck agreed.

"A nutcase then. What happened? Did she go to jail?"

"Nearly. If my brief hadn't worked so hard, she certainly would have done."

"You kept her out of jail?" Conal couldn't believe what he was hearing. "Hang on a minute. She ruined your Mercedes, stalked you, publicly humiliated you, and you kept her out of jail, then went ahead with her project. Were you and her . . .?" Holding out spread fingers, Conal tipped them back and forth.

Drewsbeck burst into a laugh, which quickly descended into a series of wet coughs in the damp air. "I'm a married man, for God's sake," he said. "And anyway, a young girl like that wouldn't have any romantic leanings towards an old codger like me."

Given how much power the Old Man wielded and the billions he was worth, Conal seriously doubted that. “So why then?” he said.

Drewsbeck shrugged. “Don’t know really. Something about her caught my attention, I suppose. The tenacity and belief she had in her own work. The amount of time she’d invested into trying to get it off the ground. But mostly, the risks she was willing to take.” Drewsbeck sat silently for a moment, then looked up at Conal, the skin around his eyes crinkling. “It reminded me of myself when I was young and full of fresh energy. Knowing I had the answers to all the world’s problems. Damn it Conal, she made me feel young again!”

Conal leant back with a new respect. He chuckled again. “Sounds to me like you’d fallen for her.”

“No, you don’t understand. We never had children you see. The first wife and I. She was more like a daughter to me than anything else.” His face suddenly dropped and he looked at the deck, seeming old again. “And now she’s gone, and I can’t even bury what’s left of her.”

“We have no choice if you want to survive this,” Conal said. “We can’t chance anyone ever finding out what happened there.”

Drewsbeck nodded sadly. “I know.”

Conal bit back his retort that there hadn’t been much of anything left to bury anyway. “We have no choice,” he repeated.

“So anyway, I got together a small team of top scientists,” Drewsbeck carried on, as though his PA hadn’t spoken, “and got them to look at her idea. Most of them agreed it was impossible. A couple said it was a million to one shot.”

“So you bought the island on a million to one shot.”

Drewsbeck nodded, looking back at Flat Rock Island with a sad expression.

The clouds had blackened and the wind risen. Apart from the lights on the boat, it was a dark night. The grey seas were running higher, and as Conal’s eyes followed Drewsbeck stare, it seemed to him to be a scene out of some drama. All that was missing was the flash of lightning and the roll of thunder to add the final touches.

“But damn me, Conal,” the Old Man said quietly. “She did it. She actually went ahead and did it.”

“Get ready gents,” the boatman called, slowing the engine as the boat pulled alongside the quay.

As it banged and bumped against the brickwork, Conal gave Drewsbeck a helping hand up the ladder. As he reached the top and stepped onto the quayside, a small ball of soil that had compacted between the heel and sole of his shoe when he’d been in The Pit, was knocked free. It fell to the ground, breaking apart, the six eggs nestled in its centre thrown clear. The small eggs rolled towards the edge of the quay.

Five eggs fell into the sea, their embryos shrivelling under the attack of the salty water. But one rolled into a narrow crack on the quayside and wedged there.

Chapter 6

After booking in at a local hotel, Conal spent what was left of the night phoning some contacts he knew in London, arranging for a small team of builders to be sent down to the island as soon as possible the next day.

Conal finally got to bed around two o'clock in the morning, tired but satisfied that he'd made a good start. He found sleep evasive and woke in the morning bleary eyed and thick-headed. Looking at the miniatures lined up on the bedside cabinet, he could see why that might be. He hadn't drunk so much in years and the alcohol had gone straight to his head. Cleaning his teeth, he decided that now was not a good time to fall back into old habits.

After a hot shower and breakfast, he spent the rest of the day renting a suitable room near to the quay that he could use as an office, bought some office furniture from a local second hand shop, and met his builders off the train.

During the following six weeks, Conal was hardly off the island, only coming back to the mainland to sleep and make telephone calls, as there was no mobile signal on the island. His builders complained about the lack of facilities and had a few Health and Safety concerns, but a hefty bonus soon took care of that nonsense. All in all, Conal thought that things were going really well.

It was essential that Conal stopped anyone venturing below ground into the laboratory before the work had been completed. He couldn't take the chance of any of his builder's getting too curious. If anyone discovered what they were burying under the tons of concrete being laid, not only Conal's, but thousands of other people's jobs, would be put at risk.

Conal was in two minds about what they were doing. He knew that, if not outright illegal, then what he was doing was certainly flying close to the edge. But it had been a tragic accident, and there was nothing left for the families to bury but a few scattered bones. On the whole, he had to agree with the Old Man's view of what had happened and how to deal with it.

The first thing Conal did was to build a small floating dock just off the quay. This would act as the staging post for his workers to hose themselves down before coming ashore. The whole deception had to be carried out just right. The picture he was painting had to be believable or the locals would see straight through it.

Conal knew that some of the youngsters occasionally came over and partied on the island's only beach at night, even though they risked getting a call from the local police force by doing so. It had been impossible to keep them off the island while the laboratory had been in use, but he needed to find a way of doing so now.

To this end Conal put the story about that his team were clearing up after a chemical spill, hoping that information, along with men in white decontamination suits running all over the island, would keep the party goers off the island for the time being. Once they'd finished covering the evidence with concrete it wouldn't matter so much, but even so he had a plan to keep people away for at least a few years after that.

At first Conal's builders had raised their eyebrows when he'd asked them to work in decontamination suits but, as usual, a hefty raise in their pay soon had them back at work. Conal wondered just how many more reasons they would find to fleece more cash out of the project.

The boatman had unexpectedly found himself with a new contract to ferry the workmen across to the island and back everyday; the local hotel was fully booked; and the small village shop found itself doubling its usual wholesale order. Everybody seemed happy and Conal worked to keep it that way.

After erecting the small floating dock, Conal had his builders dismantle the glass enclosed entrance building, burying the pieces next to the concrete roof. The original contractors had back-filled the space between the concrete box construction and the rocks with gravel to allow for drainage, so it made disposal of the thick glass panes and aluminium frames easier than shipping them ashore or flying them out by helicopter.

All through the dismantling process, Conal kept a careful eye on his men, making sure that nobody slipped below ground. Before anyone had set foot on the building site, he'd taken the precaution of disconnecting the lift controls and turning off the electrical supplies, but he couldn't afford to take the smallest chance that somebody might stumble onto the secret they were concealing below the island. Too much was riding on this for the slightest slip-up.

In the last week of the contract, the builders finally filled in the lift shaft, and Conal could relax. As he watched the last load of concrete being levelled over the big recycling chute cover, he gave a sigh of relief. Nobody was going to know what was buried under the island now. There was no way in or out of the laboratory any longer, and the horrors still living down there would soon run out of food and die.

The locals were fascinated by the men dressed in white suits, regularly seen hosing themselves off after every shift on the island. They were the talk of the pub for weeks on end and it wasn't too long before the most outrageous rumours were circulating in the surrounding villages. But for all the locals imaginings, none of them were prepared for the last stage of Conal's gigantic con.

After enclosing the shore lines of the island with a tall, barbed wire topped fence, Conal had big signs attached to it at three metre intervals. The notices were big and coloured a brilliant red, and raised eyebrows for miles around - reading, as they did, 'Danger. Keep Off. Biological Hazard.'

PRESENT DAY

Chapter 7

Scott eased the car along the narrow lanes, squinting into the darkness.

"I'm sure it's somewhere along here," he said.

"Maybe we should just forget it and go back to the hotel," his companion said, totally fed up with her boss for wasting all this time looking for the perfect view.

"No. No, there it is. That's the road I'm looking for."

Emilia thought the rutted track looked more like a path than a road, but kept quiet, praying that David didn't get the car stuck halfway along it.

"You sure it's up here, Dave?"

"Positive," he said with a quick nod. "Just a little while longer and we'll be there."

David Scott was excited. He'd been chasing his secretary for eighteen months, trying every trick in the book to get into her pants. Emilia was a stunner, the guys in the office followed her every move when she walked by. She had full lips, light brown hair and the most amazing blue eyes. Her figure was straight out of the *Penthouse* magazine, and to top it all, she had the most mischievous smile he'd ever come across.

Tonight was the night, he was sure of it. She hadn't exactly agreed to sleep with him, nothing so upfront as that, but she had agreed to come along to see the view out over the Bristol Channel from the headland off the Hartland cliffs.

When the path suddenly disappeared, Emilia put her hand on the dashboard in alarm. All she could see in front of the car was a long drop to the sea shore below.

David chuckled as he stopped the car, turning off the lights and engine. "We're here," he said.

Emilia looked out across the bay, her breath catching as she took in the view. The night sky was clear, a bright moon throwing a yellow stripe across the sea's smooth surface towards them. She got out of the car and stood by the edge of the cliff looking out across the water.

"I told you it was great, didn't I?" David said, standing with his arm around her waist. "What a view, hey?"

Emilia's hobby was photography and she took it very seriously. When David had first told her about the view from Hartland cliff, she'd thought it was just a come-on to get her up here for a bit of hanky-panky. Not that she objected to that, he was very handsome. He was married of course, but that didn't bother her any. If his wife couldn't keep him at home, that was her tough luck.

"Grab your camera and come over here," David said.

Emilia followed her boss across some tufty grass and watched while he made a small fire from bits and pieces of branches laying about amongst the bushes. He went back to the car and returned with a blanket and a couple of glasses. When she raised her eyebrows, he told her that he'd be back in a second, and he was, clutching a bottle of Champaign.

She gave a delighted laugh and pecked him on the cheek. "Why don't you get things ready while I take a few photos," she said.

Half-an-hour later they were laying in each others arms, enjoying the view and sipping from their glasses.

"David?"

"Uh huh?"

"I hope you don't think I'm one of your easy lays." She saw the frown form on his face. "I've heard all the rumours, you know?"

"But Emi—"

Placing a cool finger on his lips, she smiled. "Just shut up and kiss me."

David rolled onto his back, pulling her on top of him, and as he slipped his tongue into her mouth, she could feel his hardness against her thigh. She kissed him deeply, running her fingers through his hair. He kissed her back, grunting.

He grunted again, then pulled away, levering himself upwards on one arm, tipping her onto the ground. "Shit!" he said. "Something's bitten me. Fuck that hurts." After a short pause, he swore again, slapping at his leg. His voice rose to a shout. "Fuck. What the fuck's that?"

Emilia scrambled to her feet, frightened as she watched her boss thrash about on the ground. She pulled at his arm. "David. David. What is it? What's the matter?"

He began a continuous wailing, flapping his arms, trying to reach behind him. "My back. My back. It's on fire. Jesus, help me Emi. Fuck it hurts!"

Giving a violent lurch, he arched his back, only feet and head touching the ground. Then screaming a last desperate plea for help, he collapsed back onto the blanket and lay silently staring up at her with unfocussed eyes.

Emilia dropped to her knees beside him, shaking his body. "David. What is it? Tell me."

When he didn't respond, she turned him over, her mouth dropping open in horror as she stared at his back. It was then that her own screams echoed across the clifftop, but there was nobody there to hear Emilia's cries of terror.

Covering her face, she screamed again and again, her whole body shuddering as the adrenaline pumped through it. The clothes had gone from David's back, the edges ragged and bloody. Where his skin and muscles should have been was a big bloody hole.

Even his ribs had disappeared. She could see his heart beating feebly, spurting out his life-blood, black under the bright moonlight. But what tipped her mind to the edge of madness was the sight of the wriggling creatures burrowing

their way about deep inside his body.

Emilia felt something bite the inside of her thigh. Then another bite, her ankle this time. Jumping to her feet, she looked about wildly for whatever was attacking her, but could see nothing.

Almost hyperventilating now, she gulped in air, finally managing to pull herself together enough to get her mind into gear. She had to get help. Call an ambulance.

The car. Her bag and mobile were in the car.

Running across the grass, Emilia stumbled as her ankle was bitten again. It burnt, as though someone had dropped acid on her skin. She reached the car, wrenching open the door and tumbling into the driver's seat. Slamming the door shut behind her, she scrambled for her bag, dropping it on the floor.

Help. She needed help.

Emilia's head felt woozy, she was becoming disorientated, almost sleepy. Brushing off the feeling, she started the car, trying to find the clutch with her foot.

"Damn! Damn!"

She pushed and pulled at the gear stick, the gears grinding alarmingly. Then she had it. Slamming her foot on the throttle, she floored it.

It was only when the car had leapt over the edge of the cliff that Emilia realised the terrible mistake she'd made.

The car hit the cliff halfway down, bursting into flames. Bouncing off, it did a slow roll, then hit the sea. By the time the car sank under the waves, Emilia had already burnt to death in the inferno.

Up on the clifftop, there was little left of David Scott, just a metal buckle from his belt, a zipper, and some loose change from his pockets.

Chapter 8

Piers Booth woke screaming in a tangle of sheets, still fighting off the creatures that had been trying to kill him. One big slimy monster had been trying to suck his brains out through his empty eyesocket.

Rolling off the stained mattress, Piers gave a soft groan and stumbled to his feet, glancing around the bothy, searching for the horror from his nightmare. The large single room was cold and silent, just a shaft of moonlight pouring through the small window, picking out the dust specks floating in the air. They had come for him again. In his dreams - as they always did - catching him asleep so he was unprotected.

They came in the dark. Always in the dark.

Staggering to the window, Piers looked out. Dawn was just breaking, splashing the horizon with a hazy red light, the sign of bad weather to come. Licking dry lips, he screwed up his face at the terrible taste in his mouth. Dry. Dry like the empty beer bottles scattered about the floor around his mattress.

Kicking the bottles aside, he pulled on a pair of dirty jeans, and boots that had seen better days. Then making his way over to the chipped butler sink, he turned on the single cold tap and rinsed out his mouth. Filling a battered aluminium kettle, he lit the gas camper stove and set the kettle to boil.

While he waited for the hot water, Piers pulled on the hoodie he'd been wearing for the past week or so, then opened a tin of beans, digging into them with a long handled spoon, wiping away the juice running down his chin with the back of his hand. Finally the kettle boiled and he shaved, washed, and drunk his tea.

Leaving the bothy Piers walked across the dew laden grass to the privy he'd dug amongst the trees, did his business and threw in some earth after it. He felt safer now. The sun was rising and they seldom came in the daylight.

They came in the dark. Always in the dark.

Piers Booth had been born twenty-eight years previously, to a schizophrenic mother and an alcoholic father, not far from where he now lived. Over the years his father - during his many drunken rages - had abused them both, until the day the bitter old man had finally died of a heart attack.

Piers' mother, always a fragile woman and constantly blaming herself for her husband's death, had committed suicide. He had found her body out on the moors after the snows had melted, her face eaten away. A fox they'd said, but Piers knew better. It was no fox that had killed his mother. It was the monsters from his nightmare.

His mother's death had tipped Piers - himself suffering from an undiagnosed long term paranoid personality disorder - over the edge into full blown paranoia. Now people gave the muttering, shambling man a wide berth. Except some of the village youth, who thought it hilarious to get him drunk and listen to his tales of alien life on Flat Rock Island.

At first Piers had coped well on his own, but then he had begun drinking. He'd never had a proper education or occupation, but he did have a knack for finding odd jobs around the village.

Piers liked helping the boatman on his trips over to Flat Rock Island the best. The boatman never paid him much, but he did give Piers lots of second-hand sci-fi books. Something that Piers couldn't get enough of.

The arrangement suited both of them, as the boatman didn't want to spend a lot of money and Piers couldn't afford to buy his own books. He loved losing himself in the wonderful worlds held within the book's pages, imagining that he was the hero who would save the world.

Regularly behind with his rent, Piers' landlord had finally got fed up with him and kicked him out. After sleeping rough in the woods for a couple of weeks, Mrs Proctor had offered him the use of her old bothy in return for helping out with her animals and doing odd jobs around the smallholding. She even came over now and then to tidy up for him, always berating him about the bottles scattered about the place.

Living in the bothy had been the happiest time of Piers' life - except for the aliens that is. Since his mother's death, the aliens had been quiet, only coming to terrorise him in his dreams. But he knew they were out there somewhere, waiting for him. That one day soon now they would come for him, as they had come for his mother.

Piers always felt empty when he thought about his mother and how the aliens had killed her, had taken the only thing that had ever had any meaning in his life. Piers had been frightened at first that he had somehow caused his mother's death, that the aliens might have followed him here from the island and had then taken revenge by killing his mother. It seemed that way in his frequent nightmares.

He knew that they wanted him dead, because of what he had seen on Flat Rock Island and that terrified him. So Piers had slowly laid out his plans. How he would find out where they had their nest and how he would kill them.

Nobody else believed in their existence but Piers knew different. He had seen them on Flat Rock Island. He knew what they were capable of. His plans were near completion now and soon he would be able to stand tall.

"I'll make you proud of me mother. You see if I don't."

Chapter 9

"It's no use sitting there with your bottom lip stuck out like that, young lady."

Lyra Harrison did her best to ignore her mother's taunts, tossing her long auburn hair over her shoulder and looking out of the window.

"I still don't see why I couldn't have stayed at home by myself," she said, folding her arms.

"Because you've only just turned sixteen. Did you really expect me to leave you on your own for five weeks?"

"Why couldn't she have paid someone to look after her stupid animals, that's what I want to know?"

Macey Harrison pulled the car around a big lorry, feeling the slight fluttering in her stomach she always did when she was forced to overtake on a narrow road with a restricted view. Manoeuvre completed, she checked her rear-view mirror and relaxed a little.

Glancing over at her daughter, she chuckled. "You really will step on that bottom lip of yours if you don't stop sulking."

"Oh hardy ha. Very funny, mum."

"Look Lyra. Your aunt didn't ask to get cancer you know. So stop being so selfish. Just think how you'd feel if you had to go into hospital for a double mastectomy."

"Suppose?"

Lyra preferred not to think about her aunt, or the fact that she was having such an horrendous operation. All she knew was, she'd been yanked away from her home in London, to spend the next few weeks on some stupid farm looking after some stupid animals. And right at the beginning of the school holidays as well! She'd planned to spend time with her girlfriend, Karna. *Necture Boys* were playing at the Lyceum, and there were at least four films they wanted to see together. It just wasn't fair.

"It's not so bad, Lyra. You might even get to enjoy it, you know."

"How can being stuck on some muddy farm be, 'not so bad'?" Lyra mimicked air quotes.

Her mother chose to ignore her daughter's sarcasm. "It's not actually a farm. It's a small holding."

"Whatever. It's all the same. Smelly animals in smelly fields."

"Should be a turning up here somewhere," her mother said, "Keep an eye out for a signpost to Hartland, will you?"

"There," Lyra called.

Her mother took the turning and Lyra watched the fields pass by for awhile. "Mum?" she said eventually.

"Uh huh?"

"Why did dad say I couldn't stay with him?"

It was the question Macey had been dreading. Stanley, her ex, had recently moved in with a younger woman. "Woman? Huh, almost a girl!" Macey had thought when she'd first seen her.

When she'd phoned her ex to discuss Lyra staying with him for a few weeks, he'd hummed and hawed so much that she'd finally shouted at him: "What the hell's wrong with you, Stanley? Your daughter wants to come and spend some time with you. Do you have a problem with that?"

"Well, no I don't. No of course I don't."

Macey caught the slight emphasis on the 'I'.

"Oh don't tell me—"

"Well it's a bit awkward," he cut across her.

"Yes I'm sure it is Stanley. But if you can't get your act together with Tara as far as your daughter is concerned—" The line went silent and she could see Stanley in her mind's eye, gazing at the floor with a perplexed expression on his face - something he always did when things got heated and he didn't know how to deal with it. "Oh never mind. Just tell, Tara the tart, that we won't be putting her out!"

Tara the tart, was the name Macey and Lyra used when talking about Stanley's new partner.

Macey cut off the call with a stab of her thumb and leant back in the kitchen chair, taking three deep breaths. As if by magic, her body and mind relaxed, just as Jenny her yoga tutor, had taught her it would.

Unfortunately, deep breathing wasn't going to help her deal with her daughter's question. "Well darling—" she began.

"You didn't ask him, did you?" Lyra responded with a snap in her voice.

Macey hesitated for a fraction of a second, then shook her head slightly. "I can't do this on my own Lyra. I'll need to go to the hospital to visit my sister. It's a very serious operation and she'll need support. Please don't make this any harder than it already is."

Lyra knew, the moment that her mother had called her darling, she hadn't even bothered asking her dad if she could stay with him. She only called her darling when she was feeling guilty about something.

"Take the next right," Lyra snapped in a sulky tone, trying to follow the narrow lanes on the map spread out over her knees. Why her mother couldn't just get a sat-nav like everyone else, she didn't know. Digging out the written instructions her aunt had sent them, she pointed through the windscreen. "Look out for an unmade road, whatever that is. It should be somewhere on the right.."

They soon found out what an unmade road was as Macey turned the car onto a rough track with a strip of grass down the centre.

“Oh great,” Lyra said. “That’s all we need. A bloody tramp camping out at the end of our road while we’re here.”

“Lyra, watch your tongue. What do you mean? What tramp?”

“Didn’t you see him? He was sitting at the end of the track, drinking something from a bottle. Looked like cider to me.” Her mother shot her a glance and Lyra shrugged. “I do go to parties occasionally mum. I do know what a bottle of cider looks like.”

“Oh here we are,” her mother said, pulling the car alongside a dilapidated old wooden garage.

Lyra was surprised when they walked around the end of the garage and saw the cottage they were going to be staying in. It looked like something out of a fairytale - a long, stone building, one-and-a-half stories high. Chimney stacks were built on each end and a line of four small dormer windows spanned the slightly wavy, slate roof. There were two doorways, so it had obviously been two small cottages at one time. One of the original doorways had been turned into a big window, through which Lyra could see a large, flat screened TV. Two trellises had been nailed to the white, rough-cast walls, both covered with a riot of yellow and red roses.

The place looked beautiful.

Lyra followed her mother up the path to the front of the cottage. As they reached it, the door flew open and a portly woman rushed out, squealing with laughter. She flung her arms around Lyra’s mother and they hugged each other. Lyra suddenly found herself enveloped in a pair of fleshy arms and an ample bosom, as she in turn was welcomed.

“My,” her aunt said, holding her back so she could get a good look at her. “I haven’t seen you since you were so high.” She held her hand at waist level, her eyes wrinkling as she chuckled. “Must be, what, twelve years ago?” she asked, turning to her sister for confirmation.

“So nice to see you again, Freda. Lyra, say hello to your aunt.”

“Auntie Freda,” Lyra said.

“Come in, come in. I’ve got a nice cup of tea on the brew. Why don’t we all sit down and have a cuppa and a nice chat? Catch up on old times, hey?”

Lyra groaned quietly and her mother gave her a warning look.

“Why don’t you go and get the stuff out of the car, while Freda and I have our chat,” she said.

“Good idea, Macey. The staircase is just along on the left, through the study, dear,” she called to Lyra, hustling back inside the cottage.

“Okay if I take a look around outside first?” Lyra asked.

“Be careful of the pig, dear. He gets a bit frisky sometimes,” her aunt’s voice called from somewhere inside the cottage.

Lyra looked at her mother with raised eyebrows. “Pig?” she mouthed.

Her mother shrugged, giving her another warning look, this time accompanied by a frown, before disappearing to join her sister.

Lyra turned to look at the front garden. It was a riot of colour, one half laid down to flowers, the other to vegetables. She walked over for a closer look but didn’t recognise anything. Vegetables came in plastic packets as far as she was concerned, so the various green shoots and funny looking plants meant nothing to her.

Walking along the front of the cottage, she came across two large paddocks set across the end. Two sheep and a goat lifted their heads to stare at her as she appeared around the corner. She smiled and walked over to the fence. The goat trotted over, curling its top lip and rolling its head backwards in the most alarming way.

Moving away from the goat, Lyra followed the fence until she came to the back of the cottage. Hearing the sound of running water, she walked in amongst a line of trees to find that a small brook ran along the back of the property. The bank was steep and she almost slipped down as she negotiated it.

Finding herself a little disappointed when she finally reached the bottom to discover it was more of a shallow ditch than a brook, she turned to her right. Following the brook, she came upon three outbuildings, realising that one of them was the back of the garage they’d parked beside, and that she had made a complete circuit of the property.

Walking into the biggest shed, Lyra spotted a wooden stall, its floor covered in deep straw. Inside there was some kind of wooden bench thing at one end. The rest of the shed had long, thick rods fixed on brackets at various heights up the wall. Small, square, open sided boxes, were set out underneath and these too were lined with straw.

She went over for a closer look, just as a chicken poked its head through a small hole cut into the wall. It looked at her and gave what she could only think of as a cluck of utter contempt before disappearing again.

Lyra chuckled, shaking her head as she went to explore the next outbuilding. Its door was split, the top half tied back. Sticking her head over the bottom half, she took a look inside. The floor was straw covered, but other than a big mound of straw piled up in one corner, there was nothing to see. Then she noticed the pile of straw tremble, as though something inside had moved.

“Hello?” she called, feeling a little silly.

Her greeting was answered by a deep grunt and a series of snorts. A pig unexpectedly stuck its head up out of the straw and looked over at her. It wiggled the end of its big wet snout, as though saying a hello back. Lyra was enchanted and clicked her tongue at it.

“Hello piggy,” she called. “And what’s your name?”

The pig suddenly launched itself out of the straw, running across the sty, squealing at the top of its lungs. Alarmed, Lyra stepped back, tripped on something, and sat down on the grass with a hard thump.

The pig banged against the door, so hard that Lyra was frightened it might get out. She scrambled to her feet, doing her best to brush the mud off her brand new jeans as she headed for the house. .

“Stupid bloody pig,” she muttered, “Stupid bloody pig on a stupid bloody farm!”

Chapter 10

Lyra's mother had asked her to go down to the village and pick up some bits of shopping. Being completely bored, she'd readily agreed. Even the half hour walk to the village and back was preferable to clearing smelly wet straw from the pigsty. Ugh, that job was so gross!

Just outside the village Lyra passed a dilapidated bus shelter. The plastic walls were so marked and scratched that she couldn't see who was sitting inside, only their dark shadows.

Hurrying passed, Lyra hunched her shoulders when she heard someone wolf-whistle.

"So much for political correctness and equality of the sexes," she muttered, picking up her pace a little. The whistle was followed by a bout of laughter. "Morons," she called back over her shoulder.

Lyra spent a good half hour in the small supermarket, picking up the items her mother had listed for her. She had sneaked in a couple of bars of dark chocolate that she would stash away when she got back. Chocolate was her one vice.

Having finished the shopping, Lyra loaded up her backpack and picked up the plastic carrier bag that she'd had to buy to pack the rest of the shopping in. It was going to be a long trek back to the cottage.

Reaching the bus shelter, Lyra stopped for a rest, putting the carrier bag down with a sigh. It had become so heavy that she'd begun to wonder if she'd be able to carry it all the way back to the farm. She was contemplating hiding it somewhere, so that her mother could come and pick it up in the car later, when a head suddenly popped around the battered screen.

The head was quickly followed by the rest of the boy. He looked to be about eighteen to her and had the most amazing hazel eyes. Tousled blond hair hung in a lock over his forehead.

"You okay?" he asked.

Lyra nodded. "Yes, just on my way home with some shopping."

"Exciting life you lead," he replied, face breaking into a huge grin.

"Are you waiting for a bus? Is there one that goes from here up passed Sea View Holdings?" Lyra asked.

Another boy and a girl appeared from inside the bus shelter. The girl was slim, with curly dark brown hair. Her thickish eyebrows spoiled an otherwise pretty face. Lyra put her age at somewhere near her own. The newcomers smiled a greeting.

"The buses stopped running along here years ago," the blond boy said, rubbing his hand over his chin, which had a fine blond fuzz covering it.

If his hair had been darker it might have looked okay, but as it was, Lyra thought it looked a bit silly. "Oh, okay. Thanks," she said, picking up the bag again.

"Hang on a sec," the second boy said. "Are you going to walk all the way up to Sea View with that lot?"

His hair was fairly long and a bit straggly, and he wore his grey hoodie and jeans long and loose. Lyra thought he looked a mess.

"Yes," she said, glancing at the girl.

"He's my brother," the girl said, nodding at the gangly youth.

"Older brother," he responded, giving a short wave of his hand. "Name's Fin. This is my little sister, Willow. The big lump with the designer stubble is Troy."

Troy threw his friend a look and Lyra giggled.

"Want a hand with that lot?" Willow asked.

"That would be really great," Lyra said with a smile. "Guess I bought way too much."

"What woman doesn't when she's out shopping?" Fin's comment got him a shove in the back from his sister and they both laughed. He held out his hand and Lyra gave him the carrier bag.

"I'll take the backpack," Troy said.

While handing over the backpack, Lyra's fingers brushed Troy's and she felt a tiny electric shock run through them. Blushing, she looked away.

"So what do we call you," Troy asked.

"The phantom shopper?" Fin suggested.

"It's Lyra."

"That's a nice name," Willow said.

Lyra smiled, her face turning even redder.

"Come on then," Troy said, slinging the backpack over his broad shoulders as he set off along the road.

During the walk back to the cottage, Lyra learnt that Troy was going to University in a few months and that he wanted to be a barrister, like his father. Willow was still at school, like herself, and Fin was at college, taking a course on computer programming.

When Lyra told them that she wanted to go to university and study to become a biologist, they all raised their eyebrows.

"Well good for you," Willow said.

"Hey, did you hear about the accident last night?" Fin said.

"The car that drove off the cliff?" Troy asked.

“What happened. I haven’t seen the news today?” Lyra leant forward as she walked, looking around Troy towards Fin.

“David Scott drove his car straight off the side of the cliff.” Fin slapped his hands together. “Pow! They found his secretary’s body but his must have been swept away by the tide.”

“That’s terrible,” Lyra said.

“Yeah, such a waste. They reckon she was a real good looker.”

Willow slapped her brother on the arm and he jumped up and down shouting, “Stings. Stings,” rubbing his arm, a wounded expression on his face, acting the hurt little boy.

“Serves you right. You can be such a cretin at times,” Willow said.

Arriving at the cottage, Lyra’s new friends were made welcome by her mother. “Can I get you a drink or anything?” she asked them.

“A whisky would go down great just about now,” Fin said, eliciting another slap from his sister.

“Don’t take any notice of him,” Willow said. “He thinks he’s some kind of comedian.”

The group sat around the garden table, chatting and laughing, while Lyra’s mother made them coffee and sandwiches. She even managed to dig out a can of lager for Troy.

Willow kept checking her mobile, and at one point Fin snatched it out of her hand. “Shall I send him a sex text?” he asked, a wicked grin on his face.

“Don’t you dare,” Willow shouted, snatching her phone back.

“Her boyfriend, Robbie,” Troy explained, tilting his head and raising his eyes skywards.

“Here. Look,” Willow said, handing her mobile across to Lyra. “Isn’t he gorgeous?”

Lyra saw a picture of a boy about her own age. His crinkly hair was cut short and his skin looked smooth. He had the most enormous smile on his face. He reminded Lyra of a young Denzel Washington.

“Ooh Robbie,” Fin said, digging his sister in the ribs.

“Will you cut it out!”

Lyra could see that Willow was embarrassed and smiled across at her. “Just ignore the idiot,” she said.

For a moment the group fell silent and she was worried that she might have gone too far, too quickly. But then Fin slapped the table and laughed. The others joined in, and Lyra relaxed.

They spent the next couple of hours enjoying the chat and sunshine.

After they’d left, Lyra’s mother made some lunch and they sat down at the big kitchen table to eat. “They seem like a nice bunch of kids,” her mother said.

“Mum, they’re not kids. And neither am I.”

“You’ll always be my baby, Lyra.”

Swiping her mother’s hand away, Lyra smoothed down her hair where her mother had tousled it.

“And don’t think I didn’t see the way you were looking at that Troy boy, either.” Her mother giggled behind her hand.

“Oh I like that. Troy boy, get it?”

Lyra sighed, trying to ignore her mother’s inane banter.

“He’s far too old for you. You know that, right? Right?” she emphasised when Lyra didn’t answer.

“Mum!”

“I’m just saying.”

Lyra put down her knife and fork. “I’ve only just met him. I don’t even know him, mum. Will you just leave it.”

“Me thinks the girl doth protest too much,” her mother murmured under her breath, clearing the dishes from the table.

Lyra felt herself blush again and stood up. “I’m going out to check on the animals,” she said, grabbing her coat as she walked out.

The day had turned dull and a fine rain was falling. The kind that drenched you without really trying.

Chapter 11

Lyra was fuming.

Picking up the bucket again, she shoved it back under the goat and sat down on the narrow wooden seat, determined that no stupid animal was going to get the better of her today. Cherry looked back along her flank, and Lyra could have sworn that the goat gave a crafty smile.

She'd been here two weeks and still couldn't get the hang of this milking lark. Her aunt had made it quite plain how important milking the goat regularly was, leaving them strict instructions on how and when to do it.

Lyra's mother told her that she had to go back to London for the day, so Lyra would have to step up and do the job. "If we miss two milkings, the poor animal will start to dry up, and we don't want that to happen, do we, darling?"

"Yes we bloody well do," Lyra had muttered under her breath.

Looking down at the milk now staining her jeans, Lyra took a deep breath and tried again.

"Okay Cherry," she said, leaning over and grabbing the goat's teats. "Stand still for me like a good girl."

As soon as Lyra's hand touched the goat's teat, it arched its back and hooked the bucket out from under its udder with a back foot. The bucket bounced across the floor with a loud clang.

"You're going at it all wrong, Missy," a voice said from behind her.

Lyra gave a scream and jumped to her feet, heart beating so wildly she could hear it thumping in her ears.

"Jesus, you stupid sod. You made me jump out of my skin."

The man leaning against the doorframe was thin and tall, with a bony face that cast his deep eye sockets into permanent shadows. His longish black hair was unkempt. It flowed across his shoulders when he shook his head and pursed his lips.

"No need to be so unpleasant," he mumbled. "Was just trying to be helpful." Turning his back, he began walking away.

"No. Hold on," Lyra called out after him. "Do you know how to milk a goat?"

He turned back. Giving quick glances right and left towards the ground as he nodded. "Milk Mrs Proctor's goat all the time," he said.

"Are you Piers Booth?"

Lyra's aunt had told them that a man might turn up looking for work, and that if he did, to give him some chores and she would settle with him when she got out of the hospital. Lyra wasn't expecting it to be the tramp she'd seen drinking at the top of the track the day they arrived though. Although looking at him closer, he didn't seem like such a tramp now, more like someone down on his luck.

The man nodded again. He seemed ill at ease, his eyes flicking here and there, as though continuously on the search for something.

"Jesus, she never told us you were such a—," Lyra spluttered to a stop, embarrassed at what she'd almost said.

Piers looked down at himself, then back up at her. He began to walk away again.

"No, wait," she called. "Sorry, I didn't mean to insult you. It's just—" She left the sentence unfinished, waving a limp hand at him.

He turned and came back. She could see that he was clean shaven and had appeared to have washed himself. It was just his clothes that were dirty. She backed away from the door so he could walk passed her into the shed.

"Here, I'll show you how," he said, sitting down at the milking bench. Readjusting the clamp holding Cherry's head, he patted her on the rump. "Old friends, me and you. Ain't we girl?"

Cherry rolled her head up and back, as though agreeing with him. Slipping his hands under the goat, the man set to work and Lyra heard the splashing of milk into the bucket. After awhile he stopped and turned to her.

"Hold out two fingers," he said. "Like this." Extending his arm, he angled his wrist downwards, pointing his first two fingers at the floor, at the same time folding his thumb and other fingers out-of-the-way.

Lyra did as he asked, a bit uneasy about what he might be up to at first. She jumped slightly when the man grabbed her fingers between his thumb and first finger, squeezing them lightly. His fingers were long and bony.

"See, start at the top. Like this. Nudge the udder before you begin. Then—" Squeezing her fingers tighter, he drew his grip along them. "Like that," he said. "Not too hard. Just hard enough to draw the milk down. You see?"

Lyra nodded her head.

Piers stood and waved at the stool. "Now you," he said.

Lyra sat down, and after a bit more instruction from the man standing at her shoulder, began to get the hang of it. She was nowhere near as fast as he was, but she wasn't making too bad a job of it, considering.

After Lyra had finished, the man sat in her place and took hold of Cherry's teats again. Lyra was surprised at how much milk was still left in the goat's udder. She thought she'd got it all out, but no.

"The last bit's always a bit tricky at first," he said. "But you did pretty well for a city girl, Missy."

"Lyra," she said.

"How's that?"

"My name. It's Lyra."

"Oh I see."

They stood looking at each other for a moment. Lyra noticed the man's gaze flicking here and there around the shed.

She felt a little uneasy in the silence.

“Do you want me to take care of the others while I’m here? The sheep and pig and chickens, like?”

“I’ve already fed the sheep and let the chickens out,” Lyra said, picking up the bucket of milk. “And I can’t pay you or anything,” she added, edging towards the door.

“That’s okay. The misses will pay me when she gets out of hospital. She told me that her sister and niece were coming down to look after things while she was away. And to help you out, if you needed anything.”

Lyra was outside the shed now and feeling less nervous. She could see that he didn’t seem dangerous or anything. It was just that he acted a bit odd, his eyes always active, as though they couldn’t settle in one place for more than a second.

“Okay then. Thanks for your help. I’ll just take this inside.”

“Make sure you filter it then,” he called after her. “Do you want me to come back this afternoon and do the milking? Put the animals away for you?”

Lyra twirled back to face him, a wide smile on her face. “That would be brilliant,” she shouted back.

Running into the cottage, Lyra filtered the milk, then washed up the dishes from last night’s dinner. Her mother had left early this morning and wouldn’t be back until well after dark tonight. With Piers taking care of the animals, she’d have all day to hang out with her new friends. Great.

Making herself some breakfast, Lyra sat eating it out in the garden. The sun was up now, but last night’s TV had forecast rain for today. After washing up the breakfast things, she piled some dirty clothes into the washing machine and walked through to the shower room.

The cottage had two guest rooms upstairs, with small en-suites. Downstairs was her aunt’s bedroom, a tiny room she called her study, a nice newly renovated shower room, and a kitchen/diner. Leading off the kitchen was an enormous lounge with a log burning fire.

Lyra loved the cottage, in fact all the smallholding. She was even beginning to feel comfortable around the animals. And now that she’d found herself some new friends to hang out with, life in the country didn’t seem so bad after all.

Her face flushed slightly as she took a shower, recalling the way Troy had looked at her the last time they’d been together. After her shower she went up to the bedroom and changed the bed.

As she was searching about in the bottom of the wardrobe for clean bed-sheets, Lyra found an enormous old metal trunk. It was full of women’s clothes. Pulling some out she saw that they were not the sort her aunt would ever wear. Shrugging, Lyra began to put the clothes back, but as she did, something fell from one of the pockets, landing on the wooden floor with a clatter.

Picking the object up she saw it was a USB pen-drive. Turning it over in her hand she spotted something scratched on the surface. It looked like a name. Taking the pen-drive to the window, she angled it against the light.

Lexi.

Crossing back to the box, Lyra dropped the pen-drive on top of the clothes and closed the lid, wondering if perhaps her aunt had a daughter called Lexi. She knew her husband had died a couple of years ago. Yes that must be it.

Chapter 12

Henry and Elliot Conner raced along the beach, shrieking loudly. They were almost out of sight of their mother, but not quite.

She sat back down on the blanket after checking what they were up to and chuckled. "They're fine," she said to herself. "Just playing."

It looked as though the twins were getting ready to dig their way through to Australia. The little devils were always getting up to mischief but she loved them anyway, more than life itself. Smiling, she lay back on the blanket and sighed. It was so nice to be able to spend a day away from the city for a change. She should bring the kids here more often, the poor mites hardly ever got to have a holiday these days. She'd have to ring Don again. The damned man was always falling behind with his maintenance payments. It was really unfair on the twins.

Back along the beach, Henry - the oldest twin by thirty seconds, so always in charge - ordered his brother to get into the deep pit they'd dug in the sand. Elliot jumped in and knelt, closing his eyes as his brother shovelled sand on top off him. Pretty soon Elliot was buried up to his chest and both twins were laughing uproariously.

"I'm going to make a sandcastle out of you," Henry said, jumping up and down in his excitement at having his brother just where he wanted him.

"Henry, Elliot." Their mother's voice floated across the beach to them on the wind. "I'm just going back to the car to get something. Don't go wandering off now. I won't be a minute. We'll go and get some ice-creams when I get back. Okay?"

The twins were too busy having fun to answer her, but she could see they were all right. Shaking her head at the way Henry always seemed to dominate Elliot when they were playing, she walked off, searching along the sand dunes. Maybe she'd need to talk to their teachers about that.

In truth, Janet Conner wasn't headed for her car. She needed to go to the toilet, but could hardly shout that out across the beach. You never knew who might be lurking about taking in the sun. She looked back to check on the twins again one last time, then moved off towards a likely looking private place she had spotted.

Something was moving under Elliot, tickling his knees. He looked up at his brother and giggled, sticking his tongue out. He was buried so deeply in the sand now that he couldn't move and was finding it difficult to breathe - just his head poking out.

Back by the cliffs the sand shifted slightly, the fine particles moving across one another as, first one bulge, then another, then another appeared. Something was pushing upwards from beneath the yellow surface.

Unaware, the brothers continued to play. Henry was now running around his brother's exposed head, holding the small spade he'd used to bury him like a spear, jabbing at the air, whooping war chants. He stopped, bending over to catch his breath, hands on knees, spade forgotten on the sand. Henry suffered from sporadic bouts of asthma, and all the shouting and whooping had made him breathless.

Behind Henry the bulges had now become long runnels. Whatever was making them was moving away from the cliffs and heading straight towards the playing boys.

"Okay. Dig me out now Henry."

Henry was still trying to get his breath back and didn't seem to hear his brother.

"Henry. I'll tell mum if you don't let me out. She'll be angry. You know she will."

Something rose out of the sand behind Henry, hitting him on the back of his calf. He squealed loudly - just one more squeal amongst the many he'd given that day as they played. A second slap on his other thigh sent the small boy stumbling forward.

Eyes unfocused, limbs flailing, Henry swayed on his feet, as though having trouble staying upright. After a few seconds of wavering, his eyes closed and he fell forwards across his brother. As he fell, Henry hit his temple on the sharp edge of the spade, slicing a long piece of flesh from his scalp. He appeared not to feel a thing and just lay where he'd fallen, unmoving.

Under his brother's inert body, Elliot was struggling to breathe. Henry was pushing his face down into the sand and he started to panic. "Stop it Henry. Get off me," he shouted, but the sand filled his mouth, making it difficult to speak. "Let me up. I can't breathe."

Henry didn't answer his twin's plea.

Elliot couldn't see, his face now completely covered with sand, so he didn't know that half his brother's small body had already disappeared. The rest would soon follow.

It was then that Elliot felt the first stinging bite on his calf. He struggled all the harder, but it did him little good. The sand churned beside his leg as more and more creatures moved towards his heat.

Five minutes later, Janet Conner was running along the beach, calling out her boy's names. She stopped by the deep indentation in the sand where they'd been playing.

Where are they?

Whirling around and around, she frantically searched for any sign of them, her feet stirring up the sand.

They were here. Where were they? She'd only been gone for a few minutes. They couldn't have just disappeared. Who had them?

The questions pounded around in her head.

A bump rose in the sand by her heel.

She began to cry, her desperation making her breathe in short sharp gulps, her heart beating wildly.

Another bump joined the first, and more runnels set out from the cliff base towards her. Breaking from her initial panic, Janet Conner dashed off along the beach, screaming out her children's names at the top of her voice.

After she'd gone, the lumps and runnels slowly settled down once more, and the beach was quiet, except for the occasional cry of a woman's voice carried on the gentle sea breeze.

Chapter 13

Lyra checked herself in the mirror, liking what she saw. She hadn't overdone the makeup, just a little pale lipstick and some eyeliner. Her top was one of the latest from *Jennies* in Oxford Street. She'd bought her jeans on the Internet and was really pleased at how they fit. Running her hands over her butt, she turned this way and that in front of the mirror. You never could tell how clothes would look when you couldn't try them on first, but the jeans had been a steal, so she'd taken the chance. Lastly, Lyra pulled on her trainers - white, with yellow flashes and pale green laces. Yup, she looked okay. Finished, she walked down the lane to meet Troy. More like floated really, her mood was so good.

In the two weeks she'd known Troy, Lyra had started to really look forward to seeing him. After today though, she might not get so much freedom to come and go as she pleased. Her aunt was coming home from hospital tomorrow and her mother would probably want Lyra to help out more.

Troy was waiting for her at the bus shelter - along with Fin and Willow - which lowered Lyra's mood a bit, but not for long.

Troy seemed pleased to see her and broke into a big smile. "Hey," he said.

"You look nice," Willow said. "Going somewhere special?"

Lyra stuck out her tongue and laughed. "So what're you lot going to do, just hang out here for the rest of the day?"

"We thought we'd go and give a hand looking for the missing twins," Willow said.

"Missing twins?"

Troy nodded. "Didn't you hear? A couple of kids disappeared off the beach a little while ago. Some people are getting together to look for them."

"No. No I haven't heard about that. I was having a shower after milking the goat." She didn't add that she'd also spent a good hour making herself look nice for Troy.

Fin said something in Troy's ear and they both burst out laughing.

"What?" Lyra said, a little hurt that Fin had obviously made a joke at her expense.

"Oh just ignore them," Willow said, holding on to Lyra's arm as she pulled her along. "Knowing my brother, it was probably something disgusting anyway. Let's go and see what's happening. Perhaps they've found them by now."

A big crowd had gathered by the beach and the police, although reluctant to let people tramp all over the site at first, finally agreed to split them up into teams and set them loose.

Lyra, Troy, Willow and Fin joined a group of people searching along the top of the cliff, though how the police thought that the kids had managed to get up there, Lyra couldn't think.

They were told to break off some branches to use as sticks to poke about in any rough ground they came across. Then their group leader, a tall thin policewoman who seemed to have a constant bad smell under her nose, led them along the path across the cliff.

"Be careful," she ordered. "Don't go too near the edge."

"In case someone is tempted to push you off, Miss Piggy," Fin said, soliciting some muted laughs from the group.

Lyra didn't realise how long they'd been searching until her mobile rang. It was her mother, wondering where she was. She was explaining what was happening when the policewoman called a halt to the search because it was getting too dark to carry on.

"It's okay mum, I'll be home soon and do the animals."

"They're already done. I found the milk outside the door."

"Oh good, Piers did come back then. He said he would. Look mum, I've got to go now. I won't be late home."

Troy walked Lyra back to the cottage. It was getting quite dark when they reached the end of the track. He turned her towards him, his hands resting on her shoulders. She knew what he was about to do, but didn't feel quite ready yet. Putting the tips of her fingers on his lips as he tried to kiss her, she shook her head.

For a moment his eyes hardened, but then he smiled and nodded. "See you tomorrow then?" he asked.

"Yes," she answered back over her shoulder, running up the path to the front door.

Lyra had met up with the gang at the bus shelter. It was late afternoon but she had a couple of hours before she had to be back at the cottage.

"Troy's brought some beers along, so why don't we go down to the dockside and have a drink." Fin said. "Maybe sunbathe for a bit."

Lyra gave Troy a doubtful look and he frowned. "Don't drink then?" he asked.

She laughed. "Course I drink. Just don't think my mum would like it much if I got in smelling of beer."

"Don't worry about that, I've got some menthol gum that'll hide the smell. We got a nice place down at the quay where nobody'll see us."

"You hope," Fin quipped.

Troy gave him a warning look and Fin turned away, picking up a backpack from inside the shelter.

"Onward, mine leader," Fin said, swinging the pack onto his back with a big grin.

Lyra spent a pleasant hour and a half laying out in the sun, talking back and forth with her friends. Willow spent most of the time texting her boyfriend, and in the end Lyra's curiosity got the better of her. "Where is he?" she asked.

“On holiday with his parents, in Switzerland.”

“Nice.”

Fin looked across and nodded. “His dad goes there every year to count his ill gotten gains.”

“Shut up Fin,” Willow said, giving him a slap on the arm.

“Well it’s true,” he said, leaning closer to Lyra. He waved his hand for her to come nearer. “His dad runs this nightclub in Exeter. Makes a packet. It’s probably full of gangsters and whores.”

Willow squealed and jumped on him. Troy and Lyra watched them roll about on the floor in a mock fight, laughing. The pair finally sat back down, out of breath, just as a shadow fell across them.

Willow looked up and groaned a soft, “Oh no. Just what we didn’t need.”

“No, it’s okay. This’ll be a laugh,” Troy said. “Come on over here and have a drink,” he called over to the man standing a little distance away.

Piers moved closer and sat at the edge of the group, his gaze flicking back and forth over their shoulders, never quite meeting their eyes.

“This is Piers,” Troy told Lyra. “He’s the village idiot. A bit of a drunk really,” he added in a low stage whisper.

For some reason, Lyra felt too embarrassed to admit that she already knew Piers, so she just nodded at him, even though she could see the hurt in his eyes at Troy’s taunt. Piers’ hand trembled as he took the can from Troy. Quickly pulling off the tab, he emptied half the can in one long gulp, wiping his mouth on his cuff.

“Hey, take it easy, man,” Troy said. “Don’t gulp it down like that. This is decent stuff, not like the usual shit you drink.”

Lyra was uneasy at the way Troy was talking to Piers, but kept quiet, a slight frown on her face.

“And don’t forget,” Troy continued, “you’ve got to earn it.”

Piers just sat looking at the ground, not saying a word. Troy kicked his foot and he looked up.

“So, the aliens?” Troy prompted.

Piers mumbled something, then went back to looking at the ground.

“What?” Troy said.

“I said, it’s true. I saw them. On the island. They killed everyone. Aliens. They did.”

Lyra could see that Piers was near to tears and went to put a comforting hand on his arm. Troy glanced over at her movement and she dropped her hand back to her side. She could hear the sniggers her friends were making and blushed, feeling sorry for Piers.

Her aunt had told her a little of his background when she’d gone to visit her in hospital - his father’s beatings; his mother’s apparent suicide; how everyone shunned him.

Getting up, Lyra brushed down her jeans. “I’ve got to get going,” she said. “I told my aunt I wouldn’t be too long. And I’ve got the milking to do,” she finished, looking over at Piers. He gave her a shy smile and looked at the ground.

“Yeah, we’d better be getting back too,” Willow said. “Come on Fin. You coming, Troy?”

Troy shook his head. “Nah. Just want a quick word with our friend here. Besides, he’s not finished his drink yet. Be impolite to leave him drinking on his own, wouldn’t it?”

After the others had left, Troy stood up and leant over Piers, grabbing him by the shirt front, dragging him to his feet. “Listen, you fucking turd,” he growled. “If I ever catch you looking at my girl that way again, I’ll shove that can up your arse so far that you’ll be shitting tin for a week. You understand?” Not waiting for an answer, Troy pushed the man away and stormed off.

Piers slowly drank his beer, his eyes darting here and there as he did so. Finished, he walked over to the quayside and dropped the can in the sea, watching it for a long, long time as it got smaller and smaller. Finally the tide had pulled it so far out that he couldn’t see it any more.

Piers turned from the quayside and began the long walk back to his bothy. He had things to do tonight - important things that would eventually lead him to where the aliens were hiding.

Piers was shaking and frightened, but clamped his teeth tight and stayed where he was. He would be safe on top of the big bale, there was no need to panic. He would see them coming from up here. Be able to jump off and run away if they threatened him. The aliens weren’t fast enough to catch a running man.

Piers had known that the aliens would come back, and they had. He was almost ready to put his plan into action. Just one more thing he had to find out. So he waited in the darkness for them, his heart beating fast.

They came in the dark. Always in the dark.

Piers knew he needed to be careful. If they found him before he was ready, they would kill him, just as they had killed his mother and the ones on the island. He sat very still, crossed legged, waiting, his eyes growing tired as he stared into the night.

It had taken him a long time to find their weakness, but after tonight, he would be ready for them.

After tonight he would be able to avenge his mother.

Chapter 14

Clara Jenkins loved walking her Yorkshire terrier along the beach in the late evening light when nobody else was about. The sand was warm on her bare feet, squeezing up between her toes. It made her feel almost young again.

In her seventy-three years, Clara Jenkins had had a good life, marred only by the unexpected death of her husband, George, seven years ago. It had been a lonely time for her, never having had children - they'd always been too busy with the business.

There were friends to fill some of the loneliness of course, but they didn't understand the heartbreak and emptiness she was suffering. After nearly forty-five years of marriage, losing George was like having a limb wrenched off. It left a hole that couldn't be filled. At least not at first. But then Georgie Porgie had come along.

Clara Jenkins had first spotted Georgie in the window of her local pet shop. Such a tiny thing, panting and pawing the glass at everyone who walked passed. She had fallen in love with the little creature, right out there on the pavement, her nose pressed hard against the glass as she looked in at him with adoring eyes.

Rushing into the pet store, Clara Jenkins had bought Georgie Porgie and taken him home, along with a ton of toys, a basket and a big bag of dog food. Finally she had company again, the tiny dog filling the void in her life. Clara Jenkins loved her dog as if it had been the child she never had, treating it far better than she treated herself.

Georgie Porgie gave a yap and ran across the sand, almost entering the sea, but not quite. Instead it grabbed a length of seaweed and shook it, as though it were some dangerous snake about to attack its owner.

"Put it down, Georgie," Clara Jenkins called. The last thing she wanted was her dog stinking of seaweed when they got home. "There's a good boy. Leave it now."

Georgie Porgie dropped the seaweed and looked back at her. Giving a short high-pitched yip, it sped off across the sand again, this time towards the base of the sand dunes. Tufted grass grew here and Georgie Porgie was soon lost amongst the long fronds.

Clara Jenkins wasn't worried. Her darling little Georgie Porgie always came back to her when she called. Let him have his bit of fun. It was a lovely evening and she was enjoying her amble along the beach.

Bending down to examine a shell that had been washed up on the shore, Clara Jenkins heard a series of high pitched barks, followed by a yelp. It took her a few moments to straighten up again. Her back wasn't as flexible as it once had been. It was sometimes difficult to move these days.

"Georgie. Georgie Porgie," she called. The wind whipped her shouts away and she turned towards the dunes. Where had the little devil got too?

Walking over to the base of the dunes, Clara Jenkins tried calling again. Getting no response, she studied the mounds of sand in trepidation. They were fairly big and she could see that she would have a lot of trouble climbing them. "Georgie. Come here. There's a good boy."

Clara Jenkins set out to climb the dunes. It was hard but she stuck at it, finally making it to the top after a very slippery struggle. Stopping for a moment, she heard a growl away to her left. "Georgie? That you boy? Where have you got to?"

Another yelp, muffled this time, led Clara Jenkins over the top of another dune. Then she saw Georgie's back end sticking out of a hole in the sand. "Oh you naughty boy," she chastised the dog as she neared him. "You've been chasing rabbits again, haven't you?"

Struggling to her knees, Clara Jenkins clutched her wayward dog's rear end and pulled. He yapped, trying to struggle free. There was obviously something down the hole that he found very interesting.

"Come on Georgie. Time to go home now." Clipping the lead on Georgie's collar, Clara Jenkins put him back on the sand.

Georgie Porgie was straight down the hole again, his barks muffled as his back legs worked to push him further in. Clara Jenkins pulled at the lead but couldn't shift him. Grabbing him by the back legs she eased him out, slipping over and landing on her bottom in the sand when he popped free. Feeling a little foolish, she held him up, planning on giving him a good telling off, but she noticed something clinging to his collar. Something glistening and yucky looking.

"What's this then, Georgie? What have you got there?"

Clara Jenkins picked the thing off, shaking her hand and shouting when it bit her. The writhing creature landed on her leg and bit her again. Clara Jenkins smacked her hand down on it, wiping away the bloody remains on the sand.

She started to get up, but was suddenly too dizzy and disorientated. Sitting down again, she clasped Georgie Porgie to her chest and looked around in confusion. Something was wrong, she couldn't seem to move her arms and legs properly. Her eyes were watering and her breathing had slowed.

Was she having a heart attack?

Georgie Porgie slipped from her grasp and stood barking at his owner.

Clara Jenkins fell to her side, fingers trembling as she tried to reach out for her Georgie - or was it Porgie? No, it was her George, come back for her after all these years. There he was. What did he want? She couldn't think properly, her mind was all woozy.

Georgie Porgie backed away, head low, growling protectively as his owner collapsed and died in front of him. He ran back and forth yapping, too frightened to go near the creatures that were suddenly swarming out of the sand.

Ten minutes later, the old woman's body was gone, even the clothes and shoes she'd been wearing, consumed. Only a

pair of glasses, some coins and a set of door keys, marked the spot where the old woman had fallen.

Georgie Porgie whimpered, confused, then ran up and down the beach, until after awhile it headed home. Soon the incoming tide had covered the remnants of the old woman's possessions with sand.

Chapter 15

Piers hadn't shown up for the evening milking, so Lyra got on with the job. She'd been doing it off and on for three weeks now, and with Piers' help, had become quite proficient.

Finished with the milking, she gathered up the chickens and shooed them into the shed. Then, picking up a bucket of pig nuts, she went to the sty and shook a line of food into the trough. The sound of nuts hitting the steel feeder brought a loud grunt from the straw pile in the corner, and Lyra had to skip aside pretty smartly as Nettie trotted over and got stuck in.

While the pig hoovered up every nut in sight, Lyra scratched its back. Its skin was wrinkled and hairy, not soft, as she'd expected when she'd first touched it. Just look at her now, she thought. Tickling a pig. Wow, who'd have imagined it!

Even though her aunt was now home from hospital, she still couldn't do any heavy work, so until she was well enough to get back in the saddle, Lyra and her mother would have to cope. Lyra giggled to herself. She was even thinking like a country girl now. Back in the saddle, indeed. Picking up the milking bucket, she made her way back to the cottage, checking on the sheep as she went.

"Everything okay?" her aunt called from the lounge as Lyra plonked the bucket in the kitchen sink, getting ready to filter it.

"Yes. Everything's fine, auntie. They're all shut up for the night. Do you want a cup of tea?"

"Please dear. That'd be nice."

Lyra took two cups of tea through to the lounge, setting one of them on the wide arm of her aunt's chair.

"Thank you, dear." Taking a sip, her aunt sighed appreciatively. "Your mother will be back soon. Then I'll get us all something to eat."

"You sure you're up to that, auntie? I could do it."

"Tush dear. I'm not that old. Not yet."

Glancing at her aunt, Lyra kept her thoughts to herself. Her aunt looked at least ten years older than when she'd gone into hospital a few weeks ago. She seemed to have shrunk into herself. Before going out, her mother had asked Lyra to keep an eye on her aunt while she was away for the day, and she could see why.

"No Piers today then?" her aunt asked. Lyra shook her head. "He's a nice boy really, you know. People just don't understand what he's been through. They don't give him a chance."

Lyra smiled at the thought of Piers being called a boy. But then, Lyra supposed, he certainly acted like one at times.

"I feel so guilty that I've neglected him all this time," her aunt said, almost to herself.

"Neglected?"

"Yes, dear. I go over to the bothy once a month you see, and clear up for him. He's so useless at that sort of thing. But since—" She touched her chest, a sad expression on her face. "Well I expect it's in a right mess by now."

"What's all this about aliens on the island?" Lyra asked.

Her aunt nodded slightly and looked across at her, the skin around her eyes crinkling as she gave a soft smile. "You've heard the stories then? Yes, of course you have." Replacing her cup in the saucer, she settled into her chair.

More comfortable, she smiled again, but this time Lyra could see the sadness in her eyes. Then it struck her. When she'd asked her mother if her aunt had ever had any children, she'd told her no. It all began to make sense. Piers was the child her aunt never had.

"Well dear," her aunt continued, "he used to help the boatman take people over to the island. He told me one day that he had sneaked into the labs to take a look, because he was convinced they were working on something to do with aliens. He came back terrified, babbling about Area 51, or some such rubbish, telling anybody who'd listen that he'd seen an alien there. All nonsense of course, they were working on a recycling project. But you know how cruel young people can be. Now they taunt Piers mercilessly about it whenever they get the chance.

"And while it's true that some of the people on the island did die, it had nothing to do with aliens. It was an accident. They'd been using some toxins or other in their work - I think that's what they call them, toxins - anyway, they spilt some. Poor Lexi," she finished, shaking her head and tutting.

"Lexi?"

"Yes dear. She worked on the project. A scientist of some sort. Such a shame, she was not that much older than you really and such a nice girl. Such a tragedy to die like that. She lodged here with me while she was working on the island. You know, I really do feel so bad about not tidying up the bothy."

It took Lyra a moment to realise that her aunt had changed direction with her conversation again. Finishing her tea, her aunt got up and came across to Lyra's chair, picking up her empty cup. Walking towards the door, she stopped for a moment, then turned back. "I don't suppose you'd—"

"Clean up the bothy for you?" Lyra finished, knowing exactly what was on her aunt's mind.

"Yes dear."

"Okay then," Lyra agreed. It would go some way towards assuaging the guilt she was feeling about how she'd snubbed Piers when Troy had introduced him earlier in the day.

"You really are a good girl, dear."

"Make sure you tell that my mum," Lyra said, heading for the door. "I shouldn't be too long."

Piers grunted and opened his eyes in alarm. For one terrifying moment he thought he was falling - falling into that big, jagged maw. Catching hold of the straw either side of him, he steadied himself, taking deep, shuddering breaths.

He'd fallen asleep. In his drunken state, he'd sat out here in the middle of the night on top of the bale, and had fallen asleep, putting himself and all his plans in danger. Shaking his head, he did his best to push the dream from his mind.

But had it been a dream?

Piers looked about uneasily. No, it wasn't a dream. He was here, sitting on the straw bale. Something had woken him. The cry of an animal in distress.

The cow. Where was the cow?

He couldn't see her. Staring hard into the night, Piers looked for the shape in the blackness but could see nothing. Was he too late? Had they already taken her and gone?

Hearing a soft noise, like a flatulent, under-inflated bladder farting out the last of its air, Piers strained his eyes to their limit. He had staked the cow out over by the tree in the corner of the field, but now he couldn't see her anywhere.

Then he spotted it - a dark form laying on the lighter ground. The clouds had covered the moon again, but there was just enough light for him to see by. He stayed sat on his perch unmoving, watching intently as the big animal seemed to ooze its way into the ground. There was an occasional movement as something rose from the ground before disappearing into the carcass again, but apart from that, no sign of them. Was one of the aliens testing the air, checking to see if he was somewhere nearby, warning the others, like he'd seen the Meer cats do on a recent documentary?

Within ten minutes the cow had completely disappeared and Piers knew that they had satiated themselves. Now his job was to follow them back to their lair.

Piers slipped off the bale, the flattened and reshaped bean cans covering his shoes and lower legs softly tapping as he picked his way across the field.

It was beginning to get dark, so Lyra used the big torch her aunt always left hanging by the front door to light her way along the lane. It was heavy, but then it did have a trillion candle power, or some such rubbish. Whatever, it lit the way fine, which made her a little more comfortable.

Piers' stories about aliens on the island had got to her more than she liked to admit. Coming from a big city, she wasn't used to walking about in near total darkness, so she was jumping at every little sound.

Following the small track that led off across the back of the fields just before the bus shelter, Lyra picked her way over the rough ground. On an impulse, she turned off the torch and stood looking up at the sky. A few clouds hung low, but mainly her view was unrestricted - and it took her breath away.

The night sky was a mass of bright stars. Lyra had never seen the night sky without it being washed out with background light before. All she'd been able to see in London was the odd bright object in the sky, and the moon when it wasn't covered in cloud.

But this view was beautiful, amazing. She stood for a full five minutes, just staring upwards, hardly breathing, unaware that all around her the ground was moving. Then somewhere in the distance a cow bellowed, as though in distress, and Lyra snapped on the torch again, shuddering at the pain in the animal's calls.

Chapter 16

Reaching the spot where he'd staked out the cow, Piers carefully opened the small box he was carrying and took out the stainless steel contact rods, screwing them together into one long probe. Next he attached the amplifier and display screen to one end, and fitted the set of stereo headphones over his ears. The fact that he was wearing a pair of butcher's chain-mail gloves made the operation all the harder, but he kept at it until he was satisfied.

Pushing the end of his probe into the ground, Piers checked the reading on the meter. Then he moved to a new position and took another reading, nodding his approval. Yes, it was working. He could hear the aliens moving through the ground. The difference between the two readings told him which way they were moving: softer - away from him, louder - towards him. The little aliens had fed, so he should be safe following them, but any noise might attract them so he needed to be very careful if he wasn't going to end up like the cow.

Piers moved with a stealthy determination. When he found out where their nest was, he'd come back and leave some poisoned chicken carcasses to kill them all. He smiled as he crept along, probing the ground at regular intervals. He would watch them as they all died in agony, just as his mother had.

Lyra finished tidying and cleaning the bothy, stuffing the dirty laundry into a black bin liner to take back to the cottage for her aunt to wash in the machine. She was fascinated by the science fiction novels stacked up along one wall, wondering if Piers had actually read them all. Frowning, she picked a few up, flicking through the pages. She never realised that there were so many different ones. There must be at least a couple of hundred here.

Picking up the bin liner, Lyra turned to leave, but before she reached the door it banged open and Piers came in. He was holding a yellow plastic box, which he carefully placed on the floor beside his mattress.

"Hello, Piers," Lyra said, doing her best not to stare too hard at the tin cans Piers had wired to his boots and legs. "My aunt asked me to come over and clean up for you."

Piers hadn't seen Lyra standing across the room from him and jumped when she spoke. "Oh," he said, his face turning red.

Lyra thought he looked a little frightened and held out a placating hand. "Sorry. I didn't mean to startle you."

Piers looked around the room and nodded. "Thank you for tidying up."

"You've got a lot of books. Have you read them all?" Piers nodded and looked at the floor. "Are they all sci-fi?" Lyra asked, trying to keep the conversation going.

"Yes. Yes they are. I like science fiction books. They . . . they sort of take me away. Away from here to a safer, better place." Piers' statement was followed by a long, uncomfortable silence.

"What's in the box?" Lyra asked.

Piers looked shifty for a moment. Then, after a short pause, he walked over and opened it for her. She saw he was wearing some kind of metal gloves.

Lyra looked inside. It was an instrument of some sort. "What's it for? What does it do?"

"It tells me where the little aliens are." Piers went to the window and looked out. "It helped me to find their nest. Now I can kill them."

Momentarily nonplussed, Lyra couldn't hold the question back any longer. "Piers, what on earth have you got tin cans on your feet for?"

Piers' face flushed red, but he chose to ignore her question. "It listens underground and tells me which way they are going."

Now she was totally confused. "So where did you get it?"

"I borrowed it from a van some men had. They were digging a hole in the road. To find a water leak, I think. I took it when they weren't looking. But I'll put it back when I've finished."

Lyra knew she probably should have felt alarmed at being stuck in a bothy in the middle of nowhere with a man dressed up like the tin-man out of the Wizard of Oz, but somehow she didn't feel in the least bit frightened. There was something about Piers' naivety and honest directness that made him seem vulnerable. It brought out an unexpected protectiveness in her.

Piers turned from the window and looked at her, a worried frown on his face. "It's dark," he said. "You shouldn't be out in the fields in the dark. They can hurt you. You have to stay on the road, on the hard ground when you go home." Moving across to the mattress, he sat cross-legged, searching for something.

"I threw it away," Lyra said, guessing that he was looking for the bottle she had found when she'd been cleaning up. "There wasn't much left. You shouldn't drink so much, Piers. It's bad for you."

Lyra gave a tight smile. Christ she was beginning to sound more and more like her mother every day! Piers' eyes flashed anger for a moment, but then quickly calmed as he looked across at her.

Lyra sat down on an old orange box that Piers used as a bedside table. "Please Piers, promise me you'll try not to drink so much. My dad drinks a lot. It's why him and my mum split up."

Piers nodded, pulling off his strange gloves and attacking the wires holding the tin cans on his feet. She'd seen the comedy films where people wore tinfoil on their heads to stop aliens invading their minds and wondered if Piers had covered himself completely with baked bean cans, or only his legs and feet.

“Why have you dressed yourself in tin? And don’t think you can put me off by ignoring me this time.” Lyra was both troubled and curious about the world that Piers had built for himself.

Piers frowned, looking at the floor again. He seemed to be having an internal struggle. Lyra stayed silent. Finally he looked up at her. “If I tell you, you must promise not to laugh at me. Like the others do.”

“Like Troy and his friends you mean?”

Piers nodded, hunching his shoulders, making himself as small as he could. Lyra could see the shame in his eyes as his gaze flicked around the room from point to point. It was as though he was searching for a safe place to hide.

“Of course I won’t laugh at you Piers,” Lyra said, getting off the box and sitting crossed legged on the mattress in front of him.

He looked across at her, a soft, tentative movement on his lips that was almost a smile. When she smiled back and took his hands in hers, he looked down at his feet, face colouring slightly.

“So?” she said. “The tin cans?”

”The police took me away today. To the police station.”

Lyra dropped Piers’ hand at his bald statement and sat back a little. He seemed not to notice the uneasiness his words had caused her.

“I told them about the aliens, that it was probably them that had taken the children, but they just wanted to know where I’d put them. They wouldn’t believe me.”

Lyra leant forward, the tip of her tongue wetting her lips. “The children? You mean the twins that disappeared on the beach?”

Piers nodded. “Yes, they kept asking me what I’d done to them, over and over. They wouldn’t stop.”

This was the first that Lyra had heard about Piers being a suspect in the disappearance of the twin boys. She wondered if she should just get up right now and leave. Piers seemed to pick up on her feelings and looked at her, his grey eyes searching hers.

“I didn’t do anything to them. I swear. I was doing a job for Mr Gerome when they disappeared. They checked that and let me go.”

Lyra relaxed a little, her heart settling down again. For a moment there she’d thought— Well, she didn’t know what she’d thought, but it wasn’t pleasant. Piers’ voice was sulky as he carried on. Like a small child after being told off. “They didn’t want to come and see the nest I found. They said I was being silly. Told me to go. But I’m not being silly, Lyra. I’ve been watching the aliens for a long, long time now.”

Lyra realised that this was the first time that Piers had used her name and somehow it made her feel good. She seemed to be gaining his trust.

Pulling the last of the tins from around his legs, Piers suddenly pushed them across the mattress at her. “You have to go now,” he said. “Put these on.”

Lyra could see that he’d become very agitated. “It’s okay. I can stay a little longer if you want me to.”

“Troy said I mustn’t talk to you.”

“What?”

“Troy told me not to talk to you. So you must go now. Before he finds out.”

Lyra couldn’t believe that Troy would have said such a thing. But then why would Piers say he had, if he hadn’t? “Did Troy threaten you Piers?”

Piers looked at the floor, then pushed the cans across at her again. They rattled liked castanets.

“I can’t walk around in those.”

“You have too. They’ll protect you from the aliens. You *must!*”

Piers almost spat the last word at her and Lyra jumped to her feet, worried now that he might be going to hurt her. She headed for the door but he was there before she was halfway across the room, his face red and blotchy, his breathing ragged.

“Put them on.”

His tone frightened Lyra and she backed across the room, one hand feeling behind her for the cans, too frightened to take her eyes off the him. She sat on the mattress and tied the cans around her feet and legs as fast as she could. The wires were thick and she had trouble twisting them together.

Piers was at her side in a moment when he saw the trouble she was having, pliers in hand, tying the cans tightly so that no spaces were left. He was gentle, trying not to touch her skin, muttering to himself that he had to keep her safe.

Lyra finally grabbed the washing bag and ran from the bothy, heart beating rapidly in her chest. Stopping a little way from the building, she turned back to make sure that he wasn’t following her. He was standing at the open bothy door, the camper light in the room behind him casting his long shadow across the ground towards her.

“Don’t forget. Keep on the hard ground,” he shouted.

Shuddering, Lyra half-ran all the way back to the cottage.

Chapter 17

Lyra heard the sound of crying as she entered the cottage and made her way through to the kitchen. Her mother was standing behind her aunt, rubbing her back.

“Oh hello Lyra. Your—” Her mother’s greeting stumbled to a confused halt when she saw what her daughter was wearing on her feet and legs.

Her aunt’s sobs turned to choked half-laugh when she spotted her niece. “You’ve been to the bothy then I see,” she said. “I’ve got a pair of shoes and socks just like those out in the shed that Piers made me wear the last time I had to come home from there in the dark.”

“What on earth’s going on?” her mother asked.

“Why were you crying auntie? Has something gone wrong with your operation?” Lyra felt a flutter in her stomach as she asked the question, not sure whether she wanted to hear the answer or not.

“No, nothing like that, Lyra,” her mother said. “It’s the chickens.”

“Something has taken them all,” her aunt said. “We didn’t find any bodies, so I expect it’s a family of foxes. Sorry to be such an idiot and cry like this, but I really did love those chickens. To know that they’re probably all dead by now. Well—”

Lyra walked over and hugged her aunt, kissing her cheek. “I’m so sorry auntie.”

Her aunt hugged her back, sniffing the last of her tears away. “Never mind dear. We’ll go and get some more tomorrow. Will you help me choose them?”

Lyra nodded and smiled. “Of course I will,” she said, struggling with the wires as she tried to pull the first of the cans from her leg.

“There’s a pair of pliers in the kitchen drawer over there,” her aunt said.

Lyra giggled as she opened the drawer and snapped the pliers in front of her face. “I know who’s nuts I’d like to be cracking with these right now,” she said.

“Lyra!” her aunt and mother exclaimed in unison, trying not to laugh.

“So tell me,” her mother said, “why have you come home looking like someone tried to make you into a tin of beans? It’s a bit late for a fancy dress party, isn’t it?”

Lyra waved to her mother and aunt as they drove up the track. They’d asked her if she wanted to go shopping with them, but she’d grabbed at her chance and told them she had a headache and would sit in the garden for a bit.

“Well don’t get yourself sunburnt,” her mother warned. “You know how easily you catch the sun.”

As soon as the car had gone, Lyra ran up to the bedroom and opened the trunk again. And there it was, sitting right where she’d left it - the pen drive with the name Lexi scratched on the side. Now maybe she’d get some answers as to why poor Piers was so convinced there had been aliens on the island and dressed in tin cans. Even he wouldn’t just make a story like that up. Something must have kicked it off in his mind.

Opening the bedside cabinet drawer, Lyra took out her phone charger and detaching the cable, tried to plug it into the pen drive. It wouldn’t fit.

Damn.

Then she remembered that her aunt had an old PC in her bedroom that she used to keep in touch with her Facebook friends. She’d need to be quick, she didn’t know how long they’d be out.

Feeling a little guilty to be using her aunt’s computer without permission, Lyra tapped her fingers against the keyboard as she waited for the computer to boot up, willing it to load quicker.

Finally the Desktop appeared and she pushed the pen drive into the USB slot. Her face dropped in disappointment when a Password window appeared. After trying a collection of random words, including all the different combinations of *Lexi* she could think of, she gave up.

What she needed was someone who could hack computers, and she thought she knew just the person. Picking up her mobile, she tapped out a number.

Lyra sat swinging her legs and chewing her bottom lip. Where the hell was he? It had been at least half-an-hour since she’d phoned him.

“So what’s the emergency then?” Fin said as he stuck his head into the bus shelter.

“Oh hi Fin. Thanks for coming,” Lyra walked out of the bus shelter and saw that Troy and Willow were there as well.

“Called the whole gang as back-up,” Fin said. “You sounded as though you were stuck in some trashy thriller novel from the way you were talking.”

“Yeah,” Troy said, winking at his friend, “what’s all this about secret passwords and derring-do out on Flat Rock Island then?”

Lyra felt her face flush and wished with all her heart that Fin didn’t have such a big mouth at times. How much should she tell them? It all seemed a bit silly now that she thought back on it. Giving Troy a quick glance, she wondered if he had in fact threatened Piers to keep away from her. If he had, she knew that he’d have done it for the best of reasons.

“So?” Troy prompted.

Deciding to play safe, Lyra explained about the scientist that had worked on Flat Rock Island and how she’d found the

pen drive in the clothes trunk.

“Yes, I remember her,” Willow said. “I saw her shopping in the supermarket a few times. She died in the accident, didn’t she?”

“That’s what my aunt said,” Lyra replied.

“Always thought there was something funny about that,” Fin said. “I mean, why didn’t they find some way of bringing the bodies out instead of burying them all under hundred of tons of concrete the way they did?”

“Not hundreds Fin. The lab’s still there according to the boatman. He said that they only filled in the lift shaft. It would have been too difficult trying to fill the whole place with concrete.”

Lyra was getting a bit impatient. “Look Fin,” she cut across them, “do you know about computers or not?”

“Course he does,” Troy said. “He’s hacked into the school files and given us some good grades, haven’t you Fin?”

“Fin!” Willow’s voice was full of scorn.

Fin slapped his hand against his forehead and groaned, kicking out at Troy, who adroitly sidestepped and laughed.

“Got cha,” Troy laughed, pointing at Willow.

“Will you two be serious for a minute,” Lyra said. “If you can’t do it Fin, it’s okay.”

Fin allowed an expression of shock and disappointment to flood his face. Then he raised his eyebrows and held out his hand. “Give it here girl, never let it be said that I don’t rise to a challenge. I’ll have it ready for you by tonight, no problemo.”

They all agreed to meet back at the shelter the next day, as Troy had to go somewhere with his dad, and Willow was off to see her boyfriend.

Chapter 18

”Yeah?”

“Hey Grant, it’s Fin.”

“Yeah?”

“Look, I’ve been trying to crack a password for a mate of mine who’s forgotten what she used on her flash drive.”

“Yeah?”

“So can you help me?”

“Yeah.”

“I’ll bring it over then shall I?”

“Yeah.”

The call went dead and Fin turned off his mobile, shaking his head. His friend Grant may have been short on words but he was the best hacker in the country. If anyone could get into the files on the flash drive it would be him.

Grabbing a coat, Fin told his mother that he was going out for awhile. Jumping on his bike, he cycled down the road to the other end of the village. The moon was high, lighting the road as Fin rode out into the countryside.

Arriving at the large house where Grant lived, Fin rang the bell and waited. Footsteps sounded from inside and the door was swung open. Fin stepped into the hall and followed Grant up to his bedroom. The house was huge, the stairs swinging in a sweep up to the large landing. The pile on the carpet was so deep that Fin felt like he was floating rather than walking. Fin wasn’t a close friend of Grant’s, he just knew him from school, and this was the first time he’d been in his house. He was impressed.

Arriving at his bedroom, Grant pulled Fin in and closed the door. Fin just stood there, mouth open as he looked at all the equipment. Along with the flat screen TV and large monitor PC, were numerous other pieces of hardware that he had no idea what they might be for. A projector was whirring away on a low table and Fin could see that Grant had been playing an on-line shooter game, but instead of the usual hand-held paddles, Grant had an electronic rifle connected to the system. The projected image took up all of one wall and was so life-like that it was almost as if he were in the game itself.

“Shit!” Fin whispered, walking over to the rifle and picking it off its tripod. “This is awesome.”

“Signing off,” Grant said. “Back later.”

Fin glanced at him and saw that he was wearing a mike and small earphones. After switching off the game, Grant walked over to his computer desk and sat down. Fin was still engrossed in the rifle and jumped when Grant called to him.

“Where is it then?”

Fin put the rifle down and walked over to the desk. He handed the flash drive to Grant and pulled another chair over to sit beside him. Grant slid the flash drive into a USB port on his wireless keyboard and sat back while it loaded. An oblong box appeared on the screen and he grunted. A long column of characters were running down the left-hand side of the screen. Grant rattled the keyboard and another monitor lit up. Moving it nearer to the main monitor, he jabbed a key and the characters appeared on the second screen. They were moving too fast to read, but didn’t make any sense to Fin anyway. If they’d been coloured green, he’d have thought he was watching the film, Matrix, one of his all time favourite movies.

Grant tapped another key and the characters slowed on the monitor. Another tap and they stopped completely. Then a succession of taps and they slid down a screen at a time. Fin watched for the next half hour as Grant studied screen after screen of characters. He seemed to be looking for something in particular.

Finally Grant sat back with a sigh and tugged the flash drive free, tossing it in his hand and shaking his head.

“What, you can’t crack the password?” Fin said.

“Oh I reckon I can do that okay Fin. It’s just that I don’t think I want to.”

Fin looked down at the flash drive that Grant was holding between his fingers, not understanding what his friend was telling him. He shrugged, raising his eyebrows.

“Look mate.” Grant leant forward and tapped the computer screen, where the characters were still displayed. “What do you know about encryption?”

Fin laughed. “The usual. But this hasn’t been encrypted, it’s just shielded by a password.”

“Not quite,” Grant said, shaking his head. “There’s something behind the code there that’s encrypted. Something that would take years of high powered computer power to break.”

Fin felt the disappointment flood through him. “So the password is encrypted then?”

Grant spoke to Fin as though to a child. “No Fin. The password is not encrypted.”

“So what’s the problem then?”

“The problem is going to be what happens when you trigger the code behind the password and the cops suddenly show up banging on your front door,” Grant said. He pointed at the screen again. “This is stuff I’ve never come across before Fin. Government level stuff. You know what I mean? No ordinary hacker wrote this. It’s some sort of tracker code. I’m sure of it.”

Fin laughed. “Christ, you sound like someone out of a bloody movie, Grant. When does this code stuff kick in?”

Grant shrugged.

“There’s only the one file?”

Grant nodded.

“So if you crack the password for me, I can take it home and use a series of VPNs to hide behind. No one can get through those, not if I use enough of them.”

“You could.”

“So?” Fin was intrigued, wondering why such a sophisticated code had been used on a flash drive. What the hell was in this file?

“What’s worrying me mate is that this code wasn’t written on the flash drive. It was written to sit in the background on the original computer, only operating if files were copied from it.” He held up his hand when Fin went to interrupt. “Plus this bit of code here,” he pointed at the screen, “wipes the files if you use the incorrect password more than three times in a row.”

“Shit!” Fin slumped back in his chair defeated.

“I take it you’ve tried more than that then?”

Fin nodded.

“Tough luck mate,” Grant said, tossing the flash drive at Fin.

Fin caught the flash drive and stuck it in his pocket.

“Well thanks for trying anyway Grant.”

Grant got up and switched his shooter game on. “Back on line,” he growled into his mike.”

“I’ll see myself out then, shall I?”

Later that night Fin was surprised to get a text from Grant.

Couldn’t let the damn thing beat me. Here’s the password.

Fin made a new file on the pen drive and saved the password in it. Finished, he tossed the drive on his desk. It wouldn’t be fair to open it without Lyra being there as well, but half an hour later he was back at his computer typing in the password. Ready, Fin hesitated a moment, then taking a deep breath, he tapped the Enter key.

Fin sat back in disappointment when the file opened. It was just a jumble of unintelligible characters. The file had obviously been overwritten and was now useless.

Chapter 19

Drewsbeck looked up from the report he'd been reading and frowned. "You just found out about this?" he asked.

"Well, first thing this morning," Conal said, worried at how the Old Man's face had suddenly turned so pale. It looked as if every drop of blood had drained from it. "You okay Mr Drewsbeck?" he asked.

Drewsbeck ignored the question and stabbed the report with a manicured finger. "Take me through it," he said. "Everything. Leave out nothing." Drewsbeck settled more comfortably into his high backed chair and closed his eyes.

Conal sat back in his own seat, allowing his mind to mentally run through the pages he'd typed up earlier. "Well," he said, "someone tried to access a—"

"No!" Drewsbeck shouted across the desk at him. "From the beginning. Who told you about the breach?"

Conal watched his boss close his eyes again and took a deep breath, wondering what had gotten into the Old Man today. He wasn't usually like this.

"Georgi Zhukov, the head of computer security called me late last night. He said he'd had a red flag from one of the old redundant computer systems. I told him to write it up and I'd see to it in the morning."

Drewsbeck opened his eyes and stared at his PA. "And you didn't think this sufficiently important to act on last night?"

"At that point nobody knew where the red flag had originated."

"Go on."

"This morning I went down to see Georgi. He told me that it had come from the computer system on Flat Rock Island. As you might imagine, I was more than a little surprised. I made him check everything again and he came back with the same result - Flat Rock Island. Of course I knew it was impossible that anyone could have been accessing the system on the island, I'd been there all through the shut-down process."

"So?"

"So we were left with the problem of who had managed to do the impossible."

Drewsbeck opened his eyes and smiled at his PA. "Conal," he said quietly, "why did it take you so long to come up with the obvious answer?"

Conal bit back the reply that first popped into mind. "Well, in retrospect it might seem obvious now, but it took a lot of thought and imagination to work out what must have happened."

"So you think one of the people working on the island managed to find a way of downloading a file from a computer that had been protected by the latest software without tripping any alarms?"

"It certainly looks that way."

"Okay. Thank you Conal. Leave it with me."

"Is there anything you want me to follow up on sir?"

"It says in your report that the computer was also protected with a wiping code. So I presume whoever tried to open the file would have automatically wiped it? If it was working that is"

Conal didn't miss the sarcasm in the Old Man's tone. "That's correct sir, yes. And it was working because the software sent a red flag. That only happens after it's wiped a file."

"Then there's no point taking this any further. Whatever was in the file has been destroyed. End of problem."

"You said when we were on the island that the accident could have been avoided. What did you mean by that?"

"Well if the door to The Pit hadn't been left open, the Syclers wouldn't have got out, would they?"

"Yes, that's what's been niggling away at me for a long time now, Mr Drewsbeck. Even if the Syclers did get out, and had managed to kill all the staff, how on earth did they manage to drag the bodies back to the Pit? I mean, they're no bigger than large rats."

"Well I suppose that'll have to remain a mystery Conal. So let's leave it at that shall we? And now, if you don't mind, I have work to do. Is that all?"

Drewsbeck watched his PA leave. The man still had a troubled frown on his face and Drewsbeck sensed that he wasn't fully convinced. Picking up the phone he punched out a number, tapping the report his PA had left.

"Hello, it's me," Drewsbeck said when his call connected. "Listen Brodie, I have got a job for you. A very delicate job. Do you still have your team over here?" Drewsbeck listened a moment, then smiled. "Good. Okay, get over to my office in the Barbican tomorrow at seven a.m. I'll let door security know you're coming." There was a short pause while he listened, then: "Yes I can. It's about that other matter you took care of for me about five years ago . . . Yes, that's right. On Flat Rock Island."

Conal was at the office early the next morning. He needed to talk to Georgi Zhukov again and knew the computer specialist got bogged down with work as soon as he walked through the door.

As Conal got out on the twentieth floor, a man stepped passed him into the lift. Conal paused a moment, head half turned as the lift doors closed. He had the feeling that he knew the man from somewhere. Shrugging he walked down the corridor to his office, rubbing the cold spot that had appeared on the back of his neck.

As he neared his office, Conal spotted a light glowing from Drewsbeck's office farther along the corridor and wandered along, wondering what the Old Man was doing in so early. Knocking on the door, he pushed it open and stuck

his head through. Drewsbeck waved him in but didn't invite him to sit.

"Do for you Conal?"

Conal stood awkwardly, feeling a coldness descend on the office. He paused a moment wondering exactly why it was that he'd come to see Drewsbeck.

"I was thinking . . . about what we discussed yesterday?" Conal paused again when Drewsbeck's expression hardened and the skin around his eyes tautened slightly. "I could go and check out where that computer was used if you'd like. I've got some free time today."

Drewsbeck sighed and leant forward on his desk, palms flat. He slapped them against the expensive wood as he talked, emphasising what he said. "I told you yesterday that it was finished with. Now leave it alone Conal. If that's all, I got a lot of work to get through before I leave."

Conal turned to go, then turned back. "Leave?"

"Yes, I'm going to Japan for a few days. There's some business there I have to take care of."

Well thanks for letting me know, Conal thought, closing the big office door quietly behind him - although he felt like slamming it.

After checking his emails, Conal decided to go down to the eighth floor to see Georgi. As he entered the lift it came to him - the man that had got into the lift earlier as he was getting out. He hadn't recognised him as somebody he'd known, he'd recognised the type. Ex-Special Forces if ever he'd seen one, and he'd been coming from the direction of the Old Man's office.

Georgi Zhukov was sitting at his desk, surrounded by piles of paper.

"Christ I thought computers were supposed to make for paperless offices," Conal said, clearing off a chair and sitting down.

"Tell me about it," Georgi said in a surprisingly cockney voice, easing his large bulk nearer to the desk. "So what can I do for you today?"

"It's about what you told me yesterday, Georgi. The red flag. Is there any way of finding out where it originated from? Not the computer system on the island, but the computer used to try to access the file the day before yesterday?"

Georgi took a bite out of his large sandwich and nodded, crumbs tumbling down his shirt. "Funny that," he mumbled around a mouthful of bread. He tapped the computer screen in front of him.

Conal looked at it and saw a map of the world. As he watched a thin red line was slowly snaking its way across the continents. Conal turned and looked at Georgi. The big man had a smug look on his face.

"What? Conal said.

"Already underway."

Conal sat back and watched the screen for a moment. "How long will it take?" he asked. "I can get someone else to take over your work if you need to spend more time on it."

"The boss has already done that."

"The boss?"

"Mr Drewsbeck." Georgi laughed at Conal's expression. "He was in here waiting for me when I came in this morning. Couldn't believe my eyes. Do you know, that's only the second time I've ever seen him since I started working here?"

"Mr Drewsbeck asked you to trace where the red flag had originated?"

"In person, my man. In person. How about that?"

How about that indeed, Conal thought.

"Listen Georgi, I need your help."

"How's that?"

"Well me and the Old Man, sorry Mr Drewsbeck—"

"You call him the Old Man?"

"Not to his face, no."

Georgi chortled around the rest of the sandwich he'd just stuffed into his capacious mouth, shaking an extended forefinger at Conal.

"So I've got this bet on with the Old Man that I can get my hands on the computer that raised the red flag before he does." Conal said. "It's worth a lot of money to me." Pulling out his wallet, he laid four twenty pound notes on the desk. "How about you give me a couple of hours head-start before you tell him?"

Brushing the crumbs from his trousers, Georgi picked up the notes, rubbing them between thumb and forefinger as he wriggled his eyebrows. Conal dropped two more notes on the table. Georgi smiled and nodded.

The sheep thundered across the field, eyes wide in terror. Reaching the barbed wire fence at the far side, they milled about, the ones nearest the fence getting caught on the barbs, tearing lumps of fleece from their coats. They moved constantly, the ones on the outer edge seeking safety within the mass of bodies.

Back on the far side of the field, a small group of eight sheep stood in a corner, their bleats loud as they desperately tried to join the rest of the flock. One broke free, but had taken only a few steps when it went down, screaming as it writhed on the ground, where it screams quickly stopped. Two other sheep broke free, both falling to the ground, thrashing around as their struggles slowed and stopped, until they just lay panting.

The five remaining sheep pushed against the fence, one tearing a long gash down its face. In its panic another jumped onto its companion's back, leaping over the fence into the road. Landing awkwardly, it broke a leg, but quickly scrambled

to its feet, running off down the tarmac at top speed, broken leg dangling uselessly.

Two more sheep went down, all screaming piteously as they were eaten alive. The last three spread out along the fence, turning this way and that, panting hard in their fear.

Then, as the sky began to lighten and the first rays of sun broke above the horizon, the sheep quietened and stopped their milling. Cautiously leaving the safety of the fences they roamed out across the lush grass again, heads down as they grazed.

Later that day, farmer, Rhys Cooper, shot the sheep with the broken leg. It had ended up on the far side of the village in a small garden. After arranging to dispose of the body, he went to check on the rest of his flock. They were spread across the field in small groups, eating peaceably. Everything seemed to be normal, except that five of the sheep were missing.

Reporting the theft to the local police, Rhys Cooper rang around the other farmers in the district, warning them to be on the lookout for rustlers, who seemed to be getting more prevalent in the present financial downturn.

Chapter 20

Troy was excited. It had taken him most of the day to organise the trip and he was really looking forward to it. Especially if things went well and he and Lyra got it together, as he was planning.

It had taken a lot of persuasion but Lyra had finally agreed to go to the party with him. He hadn't exactly lied to her when he'd let her assume that it was being held at Fin and Willow's house, but if he'd told her where it *was* being held, there was no way she'd have agreed to come.

Willow had been primed to take the call if Lyra's mother checked that it was all right for Lyra to spend the night at their house. She could do a surprising good impersonation of her mother's voice when she had to, as her school had found out on more than one occasion. In fact Willow and Fin's parents were going out to their own party in Exeter and wouldn't be home until at least two in the morning. Plenty of time for them to have a bit of fun.

Bringing his mind back to the present, Troy went over the arrangements in his mind. Yes, he'd thought of everything - beer, music, transport, even a blow-up lilo for him and Lyra to use on the beach.

As she kissed her mother and aunt goodbye, Lyra felt a little guilty. She didn't usually lie, but she so wanted to go to this party with Troy. And where was the harm? They'd be back at Willow and Fin's by one a.m. at the latest.

Lyra rushed down the lane towards the small quay outside the village. The sun was low in the sky and it was beginning to darken. Checking her mobile she saw it was almost a quarter past eight. Damn, she was late. Her mother's fault for insisting that Lyra couldn't leave until she'd checked with Willow's mother first. Willow had come through trumps and her mum had finally given her the go ahead.

Hurrying onto the old wooden boards of the quay, Lyra looked around for the others, heart sinking when she saw that nobody was waiting for her. Surely they hadn't left for the party without her? Feeling her whole body slump, Lyra looked down at the ground, the first stinging tears glistening in her eyes.

Then she heard a low laugh coming from somewhere to her left. Walking over to the edge of the quay, she looked down. Troy sat looking up at her in the back of a large dingy.

He waved. "Hi Lyra," he called. "Come on down the ladder and we can get going."

Frowning, Lyra squatted down so she could hear him better. "Get going where? I thought we were supposed to be going to a party."

"We are," Troy called back up to her. "It's a surprise. Come on, I'll explain all about it on the way there."

Lyra made her way down the seaweed covered rusty ladder bolted into the concrete quay, praying that she wouldn't slip and end up in the water. Stepping into the dingy, she was steadied by Troy's arm around her waist. There were four other people sitting in the dingy and Lyra found it difficult getting to her seat at the stern without treading on feet, constantly having to apologise as she went.

Finally settling herself down, she looked over at Fin, who was sitting alongside a slim girl with cropped black hair. She had the most dazzling smile Lyra had ever seen.

This is my girlfriend, Kirsti," Fin said.

"Oh hi," Lyra nodded a greeting.

"The guy trying to start the motor is Lee, and the way he's going about it, he's going to end up the late Lee if he doesn't get his finger out." Lee looked over his shoulder and smiled before going back to fiddling with the outboard motor. "And that's Betts."

Betts waved her fingers and Lyra waved back.

At that moment Lee, who'd been pulling at the starter cord as hard as he could, gave a shout. "That's it guys. Untie the painter and let's get going."

"Don't see no van Gough around here," Fin shouted back, bending his ear so it looked as if it was missing.

"Will you stop messing about and untie the rope you moron," Troy shouted at him.

With a muttered, "Ooh get you!" Fin cast the rope off.

Lee twisted the throttle and the outboard roared. He guided the dingy out to sea and pretty soon they were cresting the waves, the spray splatting Lyra as she held on to the side of the boat. The noisy engine made it difficult to talk, so she settled down, leaning into Troy's shoulder. He slipped his arm further around her waist, pulling her into his side.

Wherever they were going didn't matter now because Lyra was quite happy just sitting in Troy's arms, her hand trailing in the water.

Conal had found himself in a dilemma after Georgi Zhukov's phone call earlier in the evening. The man had finally worked out the location of the computer that had been used to try to access the file. It was on the main land, opposite the island - a small cottage called Sea View Holdings. Conal had looked up the co-ordinates on Google Maps and printed a copy out. He'd sat in his lounge for quite some time, wondering whether he should chase it up or not. After all, the Old Man had more or less told him to butt out.

After his meeting with Drewsbeck, Conal had spent some time digging around and asking questions about the project on Flat Rock Island, trying to lay to rest the uneasiness he was feeling. What he discovered had worried him.

According to Security, they had contacted Drewsbeck about the trouble the boatman was having raising the staff on

the island before getting in touch with Conal. Yet the Old Man had acted as though the whole thing had been a big surprise to him when he had arrived on the island.

The spot on the back of Conal's neck flashed ice cold and he glanced over at the car's window, checking that he hadn't accidentally opened it.

Thinking back to his meeting with Drewsbeck yesterday at the office, Conal had to admit that he'd seemed more than a bit evasive, and had cut all Conal's attempts at any follow up dead.

Georgi had told Conal on the phone that he was meeting with Drewsbeck in two hours, so if he wanted to get to the computer first, he'd better shift himself. Conal had fuffed about for a further half hour before making up his mind.

It was getting late and the roads were quiet, making the trip from London quicker than Conal had feared it might be. Turning off the M5 motorway, he'd pushed the BMW as hard as he could, and could now see the Bristol Channel glinting under the moonlight away on his right. Glancing at the dashboard clock, he frowned - should be there in about twenty minutes.

Conal pushed on, praying that he hadn't just driven three hundred and eighty odd kilometres on a wild goose chase.

Macey hummed to herself as she got the bags out of the car. Opening the boot, she pulled out the five litre can of petrol, picked up the rest of the bags and staggered to the front door.

It opened as she reached it. "Here, let me help you with those," her sister said. "Leave the petrol by the door, I'll put it in the shed later."

"You sure you can manage all those?" Macey said, eyeing her sister critically.

"I've got to get back in the saddle sometime Macey. Stop fussing. I'm perfectly able to carry a few bags of shopping. In fact I was thinking its perhaps time you and Lyra went back to London." Freda groaned as she lifted one of the bags onto the kitchen table. "Well, perhaps a couple more days," she said with a smile.

Macey made the tea and brought a cup over to her sister, who was sitting with her right hand under her left arm, rubbing her armpit.

Macey sat down and frowned at her. "You okay?"

"Of course I am."

Macey wasn't so sure. It was one thing for her sister to say she was well enough to cope on her own, but quite another when she sat there like a woman twice her age. Macey drank her tea, watching her sister. Perhaps she should ring the hospital tomorrow and make an appointment to see her sister's consultant.

Chapter 21

Stanley Brentford eased the ache in his shoulders, rubbing his neck as he stretched it. He'd been driving for hours and he ached all over. "Going to have to stop for the night soon babes," he said to his wife.

Betty looked down at the map spread out across her knees and tutted, trying to follow the wiggly lines running across it in the dim light, with the tip of her finger. "Looks like there's a sort of track that runs up on to the cliff top farther ahead. It'd be nice if we stayed there overnight and woke up to the sound of the sea in the morning."

"A sort of track." Stan chuckled. "You want me to take a ton of RV up a sort of track."

"It's just up ahead on the left. We could at least take a look."

Five minutes later Stanley turned the big RV onto what looked to him to be nothing more than a footpath. "Hang on a sec," he said, stopping the RV and holding his hand out.

His wife passed him the map and lowered the window as he studied it. "I can smell the sea," she said, knowing how useless he was at map reading.

Stanley grunted, handing the map back and grinding his teeth. As if in sympathy, the RV's gears also ground when Stan drove off again. "Sorry babes, must be more tired than I thought."

The sound of grinding gears sparked off a memory for Betty. A memory of early childhood and the old wreck of a van that her father used to drive - the gear box so worn that it couldn't be moved without making that self same racket.

Sort 'em out mate, they're all in one box.

Betty smiled to herself, hearing her father's words as though he were sitting right beside her. She still missed her dad, even though he'd died ten years ago, just after she'd turned eighteen. Now here she was with a family of her own.

The big vehicle thumped down into a rut and out again, shaking everything inside. She heard Jason give a muted cry from behind her and turned to look around the back of her seat. He was tucked up in his carrycot, firmly strapped to the back of the seat. She could see his perfect little face screwing up as he got ready to cry, and wondered how much further they had to drive.

"Here we go," Stan said, turning off the engine. He opened the door. "Just going for a quick piss. Won't be a sec."

"Stanley, use the toilet. That's what it's for."

"Just have to empty the bloody thing later," he grumbled as he stalked off into the night, his torch lighting up the grass in front of him.

"Be careful."

"Okay babes."

Stanley didn't particularly want a pee, he just wanted a bit of time on his own. Ever since their son was born, it had been Jason this and Jason that. Hell, he hadn't realised how many different kinds of bloody nappies there were. He'd be glad to get back to work. Maternity leave might be good, but too much of a good thing could drive you bloody crazy.

Stan stood looking out across the moon dappled sea. He'd never been one for the countryside, having spent all his life in London, but even he had to grudgingly admit that the view was something special. Digging out his pouch, he rolled himself a cigarette, sighing contentedly as he sucked the tobacco smoke deep into his lungs.

Stanley took another puff on his cigarette, unaware of the small mound rising out of the ground about eight metres behind him. It stopped rising and broke open at the top, then something wriggled its way out of it onto the grass.

"Stan."

His wife's call broke across Stanley's thoughts and he dropped the half-smoked cigarette, twisting the remains into the ground with the toe of his shoe. As he walked back across to the RV, the smoking remnants were examined by the creature that had wriggled out of the hole. It spent some seconds at the site, then followed the bigger prey, sending out a high pitched signal - too high for human ears to hear - that it had found food.

"Oh there you are," Betty said as Stanley closed the door behind him. "Everything okay? I've just finished feeding Jason so he should be okay for a couple of hours. Do you want something to eat?"

"To be honest babes, I'm so damned tired that I'd probably fall asleep halfway through it. Do you mind if we just turn in?"

Ten minutes later the RV was filled with Stanley's soft snoring. Betty turned off the overhead light and snuggled down beside him, soon dropping off to sleep herself. It had been a long drive and she was looking forward to arriving at the camp site tomorrow.

Outside the RV lots of creatures had gathered. They appeared excited, weaving their orange tinted bodies in and out and around one another in a kind of dance. One took a bite of another, starting a flurry of activity, but they soon settled down again, their eye stalks turning towards the prey they could sense ahead of them.

Inside the RV, Stanley snorted himself awake and lay looking up at the overhead skylight. It must have turned cloudy because the moonlight that had been streaming through the plastic earlier, making it difficult for him to get to sleep, had been replaced by a dense blackness. Stanley turned his head slightly, forehead furrowing as he studied the skylight. No, not a dense blackness, because here and there were small points of light. But they shifted constantly, as though the perspex skylight was covered with countless small fat worms wriggling across its surface.

Then Stanley heard the noise - a constant crunching that reminded him of coffee being ground, but softly, very, very softly. He sat up in bed, careful not to wake Betty. She was tired and would probably have to get up and see to Jason before

too long.

Stretching out his hand, Stanley touched the tip of his finger to the perspex cover. His breath caught as his finger passed straight through the plastic, as though the cover were made of soft jelly. Something clamped on to his finger, biting him. Shouting, Stanley dragged his finger back through and sat looking at the big, slug like creature attached to the end. It dropped into the bed and he backed up, scrabbling around, trying to find it.

Hearing a sudden snap from above, Stanley looked up, his mouth opening in shock as the skylight collapsed inwards and hundreds of wriggling creatures rained down on top of him, some dropping straight into his mouth.

As Stanley and Betty's bodies were quickly stripped of flesh and muscle, the couple's screams rebounded out of the broken skylight, but nobody came to help them. Once the anaesthetic injected by the creature's bites took full effect, their screams faltered, then died away altogether, replaced by the sound of hundreds of tiny files rasping at bone.

When the first creature ventured into Jason's carry cot and bit him, the baby woke with a gurgle and flap of his arms, as though not quite comprehending what was happening.

The creature had eaten Jason's small toe right down to the joint before his screams stopped and he collapsed back, drugged into unconsciousness. Pretty quickly other creatures joined the first one in the cot, feeding on the small body, their frenzy mounting.

The sun would rise soon and they needed to get back to their nest.

Chapter 22

Lyra sat forward, looking out over the waves. "It looks like we're headed for the island," she shouted into Troy's ear." He nodded. "But isn't that dangerous?"

Troy shook his head and leant down so he could make himself heard. His breath tickled her ear as he talked. "No, that was years ago. Anyway, they concreted over the whole place."

They were close enough to the island now that Lyra could make out the high wire fence, even in the dimming light. "But the signs say—"

"They're just to keep people off the island. Don't worry, I wouldn't bring you anywhere dangerous. It's going to be great. You'll see."

Trying to take Lyra's mind off where they were going, Fin leant over and held out his hand. "Here you go Lyra."

Lyra looked at the pen drive Fin dropped into her hand. "But I thought you couldn't find out what the password was?"

Fin winked at her. "Where there's a will there's a way, as the bishop said to the actress."

Every one groaned and Fin took a bow. "Trouble is," he said, "the folder on it has been wiped. It's just a jumble of random characters now. No way to recover what was in it."

Lyra nodded, her excitement at learning that Fin had cracked the password dying to disappointment. "Oh well. Thanks for trying anyway Fin."

Lyra held her hand over the side of the boat, ready to drop the pen drive into the sea. But she hesitated.

No, I'll bury it on the island. That would be much better. I'll bury it where Lexi worked. I think she'd have liked that.

Having made up her mind, Lyra slipped the pen drive into her jeans pocket and snuggled back into Troy's arms. They were almost at the island now and despite her earlier concerns, she found herself looking forward to the party.

Lee ran the dingy straight up onto the sandy beach and they all laughed as they fell into a big heap in the bottom of the boat. Untangling themselves, the boys jumped over the sides into the shallow water and pulled the boat farther onto the beach. Taking Troy's hand, Lyra hopped down, her bare feet sinking into the sand. Tucking her sandals into the top of her jeans she wriggled her toes.

"So what now?" she said. The boys were getting things from the dingy and nobody answered, so she walked farther up the beach.

"First things first, we need to get the barbecue going," Fin called, handing the big CD player he was carrying to Kirsti. "Give us a hand with this stuff and then we'll get some food on. We can collect some drift wood later so we can build a fire, in case it gets chilly."

The last of the sun's rays were lighting the top of the rocks above their heads, throwing the beach into dark shadows. Troy and Fin carried a small barbecue across the sand, while Lee set out three battery operated camping lights on the rocks.

Pretty soon they were sitting around on the beach, listening to fat sizzle on the hot coals as burgers and sausages cooked. The CD player belted out the latest hits and Lyra swung her hips in time to the beat as she turned the meat over. "Should have brought some marshmallows to cook over the fire later," she said, popping a burger into a roll and handing it to Troy.

He laughed, taking a big bite, then fanning his hand in front of his mouth when it burnt his tongue. Taking a deep pull on the can of beer he was holding, he nodded. "Yeah, while we tell one another ghost stories."

"You want a hot-dog or a burger?" Lyra called to Kirsti.

Kirsti came over and looked at the cooking meat. "Don't suppose you bought any salad with you, did you guys?" she asked. "Figures," she said when she was answered with a chorus of laughs. "Okay then. Let's have a hot-dog. Just the one dog though."

Fin grabbed her around the waist from behind and gave her a squeeze. "One hot-dog coming up," he said, grinding his hips into her butt.

She laughed and pulled away, pushing her hog-dog into his mouth. "If you think I'd let that thing anywhere near me, you've got another think coming."

They all laughed and made cat calls. Fin took the teasing in good faith and munched on his meal as he made his way back to his rock-seat, shaking his head.

Piers wrinkled his nose as he pushed the last chicken into the plastic sack and tied a knot in it. He was sorry that he'd had to kill them as the misses had always been kind to him, letting him live in her bothy and all, but he needed meat, a lot of meat.

Piers had followed the aliens back to their lair last night and had been surprised when they'd led him to a big hole beside the brook right behind Sea View Cottage. It was a wonder the misses hadn't been attacked yet, but then she seldom went out at night anymore.

Piers was worried because he'd seen Lyra getting into a boat with Troy and some others down at the quay. She'd probably come back home in the dark tonight.

They came in the dark. Always in the dark.

They'd become more active lately, spending more time hunting, sometimes even during the day. Lyra didn't realise the danger she was in, living so close to their lair. None of them did. He knew he'd have to do something to protect her. He'd tried to warn her but she'd turned her head away. She hadn't laughed at him like the others did when he tried to warn them, but he could tell that she didn't really believe him and was just being nice.

After finding their lair, Piers had watched the aliens come and go, following them when he could with the instrument he'd stolen from the van. He'd watched them kill the sheep, and tonight the people in the camper van.

That had been very bad. They'd screamed and shouted, thumping off the sides of the vehicle as they tried to fight off the aliens. Fortunately the screams hadn't lasted long, they never did. Piers wiped the tears from his eyes as he wondered whether his mother had died such a terrible death. The aliens had to be stopped and he was going to do it. Right now.

Grabbing the plastic sack, Piers hurried from the bothy, the tins strapped around his legs and feet making muted chinking sounds as he walked.

Chapter 23

Piers eased the cramp in his leg, trying to make as little noise as possible. He'd been stuck up the tree for at least an hour, wishing he'd brought a couple of cans of beer along. He'd promised Lyra that he wouldn't drink any more, but was finding that promise more and more difficult to keep.

The moon was high, the clouds scattered, so Piers had a good view of the trap he'd laid for the aliens. Tonight he would kill them all and it would be over. Then he would laugh in the faces of Troy and his friends. His mother would be proud of him, so proud.

Piers had spent many hours tracking and studying the creatures that had killed his mother, and had learnt lots of things about them - that they loved beer for instance, just as he did. That strange discovery brought him closer to them, and had even helped him capture some. He'd laid out half-filled beer cans to attract the aliens, placing small pieces of broken slate over the cans after they slid inside.

Piers took his prizes back to the bothy and kept them in an old fish tank he'd found in the village dump, fascinated by their dark orange colouring, and how they wriggled their bodies through the earth. When they moved across the surface of anything, they left a slight slime trail, like a snail does. Their eye stalks pulled back into their bodies when Piers touched them with the end of his knife, reminding him of slugs. But these creatures were much bigger than slugs, about the size of a fat rat. They were able to elongate their bodies to get into small spaces, and seemed to take some kind of comfort in twisting themselves around one another when not hunting.

Two days later, when Piers checked the tank, there was only one alien left inside. He panicked, searching the bothy for the missing ones, but they were nowhere to be found. The remaining alien lay unmoving, buried beneath the soil, pressed up against the glass. It looked dead to him.

Piers collected some more aliens and dropped them in to the tank. This time he would be more careful and not let them escape. But one disappeared soon after he'd put them in. Piers knew it couldn't have got out this time, he'd covered the top of the tank with a large piece of glass. So he sat by the tank for hours, watching and waiting, until he finally had the answer. The aliens, who had been quiet up until that point, suddenly turned on one of their own, attacking the creature with such ferocity that it only took a few seconds for its body to be consumed.

Then the aliens settled down again, but a short time later attacked another one of their own that was out on the edge of the group. This happened over and over, until only one alien was left. The last one then wriggled into the soil and disappeared. Piers carefully picked up the tank and studied the bottom. The alien was laying against the glass, for all the world dead. But Piers knew different, the alien wasn't dead. It was waiting - waiting for its next meal.

Piers experimented with small insects and other creatures, such as mice and rats he caught. He killed the rodents before putting them into the tank after the first one he dropped in screamed as it was devoured. Piers' nightmares increased after that incident and he wasn't able to go near the tank for days.

The last experiment he did was to let one of the aliens bite him. Piers had noticed that the rats stopped struggling shortly after being bitten and wondered if the aliens somehow injected something into their prey that knocked them out.

Heart beating wildly, Piers sat on his mattress crossed legged, holding an alien in his metal gloved hand, feeling the creature wriggling in his grasp. It kept trying to bite the chain mesh of the glove, but it was too fine to let the creature reach his skin. Clamping his teeth together, Piers put the alien on the back of his other hand and held it there. He felt a sharp tug as the alien bit him, at least three times in quick succession. Crushing it between thumb and forefinger, he threw its mangled body across the bothy, then looked at his hand.

Three, white edged, wounds had been opened up in his skin. The bites hurt worse than the time he'd been stung by a wasp, the searing pains shooting up his arm. He looked closer, trying to make out why the edges of the bites were wavering back and forth.

Piers shook his head, glancing around the room, discovering that it wasn't just the wounds that were wavering. The whole room seemed to be on the move, the edges of the windows and door frames shimmering in the dim light.

Piers regained consciousness about an hour and a half later, still light-headed, but able to sit up and take in his surroundings. He'd discovered how the aliens managed to bring down their fast moving prey - a few bites and they'd quickly succumb. What frightened Piers more however, was the fact that whatever concoction it was that brought down their prey, it didn't seem to dull the pain he'd felt when he'd banged his head on the floor as he'd passed out.

It was then that he promised himself that he would kill every last one of them. He couldn't allow himself to think of the pain his mother must have suffered when she died alone that night out in the snow.

Piers spent hours with the aliens, trying out various poisons and liquids, accidentally hitting on the right combination of rat poison, table salt and insect dust. A few seconds after eating meat laced with the substance, the aliens curled up and died.

Piers left the poisoned chickens he'd taken from his landlady by the alien's lair and climbed into a nearby tree to wait for them.

Tonight he would have his revenge. Tonight he would triumph, just as the people in his sci-fi novels always triumphed. Tonight was Piers' turn to play the hero, and he was determined to be a good one.

Chapter 24

Lyra snuggled down into Troy's arms and stared up at the sky. The stars wheeled overhead, a myriad pinpricks of sparkling light. The moon was full, its white face washing the rocks with its touch. It was a perfect night.

"Troy?"

"Uh huh?" Lyra felt his breath on the top of her head as he looked down at her.

"Why don't you like Piers?" she asked.

The question seemed to catch Troy unawares and he was quiet for a long time. "It's just that he's strange, you know? Kind of not all there. I mean, look at the way he walks around at night with all those tin cans tied to his legs, talking about aliens all the time."

"Is that why you told him to keep away from me? Did you think he might harm me in some way?"

"Did he tell you that?"

"He did, yes." Lyra shifted position so she could look up into Troy's eyes, but they were shaded and she could only see a blackness there. "He's been through a lot Troy. His mother committed suicide and his father beat him."

"Yeah I know. Look—" Troy tilted her face and brushed some loose strands of hair from her forehead. She could see his eyes now. They looked hard in the moonlight, his face serious. "You've only known him a few weeks, Lyra. There's something not right about him."

"I don't think he'd hurt me Troy. I really don't."

"Even so."

They both fell silent, lost to their thoughts as the clouds drifted over the moon again. Lyra shivered and Troy pulled his coat around her shoulders.

"Should go and collect some firewood," he said.

"In a minute," she replied, burying her cheek against his chest.

Fin climbed the old steps until he reached the top. A large flat concrete slab lay in front of him, so big that his torch didn't illuminate the far side. Tall, rusty lamp standards were strung out around the edge. The big spot lights on the tops were dark, the glass dirty and spotted. They had obviously been out of use for years.

Fin walked out onto the concrete and spun around in a circle. The place reminded him of somewhere he'd seen before, but he couldn't quite recall where it was. It would come back to him if he left it simmering, it always did. Crossing to the far side, he crunched his way across a gravel infill and found some rocks. Just what he was looking for.

Fin might have been a joker, with a mouth the size of the Eurotunnel, but he was also extremely shy - something only his closest friends were aware of. He'd told Kirsti that he was going for a quick piss, but in fact he wanted a shit, and he didn't want to take the chance of anyone stumbling across him while he was doing his thing.

Finding a suitable place amongst the rocks, Fin dropped his jeans and pants and got down to work. The stars made a brilliant display in the sky and for a moment he forgot where he was. Wiping off with the tissues he'd taken out of Kirsti's backpack, he pulled up his pants and stared up at the sky again.

The smell of human excrement worked its way into the tiny crevices of the rocks, wafting downwards through the loose gravel infill between the rock and concrete.

Fin continued to watch the sky, mesmerised by the view, leaning his head far back, unaware of the movements in the gravel a short distance away.

Brodie King brought the small helicopter in over the Bristol Channel. Not having lodged a flight plan, he needed to be very careful. He couldn't chance a slip-up at this late stage.

His orders had been specific. Fly out to the island, retrieve a hard drive from the lab's computer and destroy the laboratory. Then go to the co-ordinates he'd been given to track down whoever had been tampering with files they shouldn't have. A little accident would take care of that side of things. A simple house fire, or perhaps a drowning, as they were so near the sea.

The last part of the job was the bit King was really looking forward to though. Getting rid of Conal bloody Mitchell! King still felt incensed at Drewsbeck's decision five years ago to give Mitchell that PA job. After all the dirty work he'd carried out for Drewsbeck over the years, that job should have rightfully been his.

"Check the radios Jack, we're coming in over the coast now."

A short, thickset man sitting beside King in the tight perspex cockpit grunted. King heard him checking the small two-way radios. Another, taller man, sitting directly behind King held out his hand and Jack Payne slapped a radio into his palm. King tucked his own radio into his trouser pocket.

The three men were dressed in black clothing and they all wore high laced, black boots. Payne wore an additional dark navy wool hat - not because it was cold out, but to cover his bald head. There was a high moon tonight, and although it was cloud covered at present, it could break through at any moment. Nothing stood out more than a bald head under the moon on a dark night.

The helicopter flew in low over a wood, then hovered above a large field. Payne jumped the five feet to the ground, rolling over to absorb the impact. Before he'd even landed the helicopter was on its way again.

Digging a small tablet from his pocket, Payne checked his position. Five clicks from the co-ordinates he'd been given. Not too bad. About an hours hike, perhaps seventy minutes if he kept off the main roads. King's orders had been simple. Find the cottage, cut the land line, destroy any mobile phones, computers or tablets he found, secure the house and wait. Simple.

Even though Payne was just securing the house for his group leader, his old Search and Attack Patrol training took over, and he hunkered down for a few minutes, familiarising himself with his surroundings. Finally satisfied, he spoke a few soft words into his radio and set out.

Chapter 25

Piers wasn't sure how he felt. He was sitting on the quayside staring out at the island where it had all started, thinking hard. The aliens were dead at last, he had killed them all. But instead of exhilaration, he felt somehow empty.

Piers had sat in the tree, watching as the aliens came out of the ground, worried that the twenty chickens he'd left wouldn't be enough. And he'd been right to worry, because it was only the fact that the aliens left alive had gone on to eat the dead ones, that had made his plan a success.

But on the island, perhaps not?

Piers feared that the aliens on the island were still alive.

"I need a boat."

The voice caught Piers off guard and he jumped. Looking back over his shoulder, he saw a man standing behind him. The man's face was hidden by a long shadow but the moonlight glinted off his bald head. Piers stood up and faced him. The man glanced down at Piers' legs when the tin cans rattled. He said nothing, just stood quietly, waiting. There was something about the man - a hidden strength and confidence that caused Piers to smile.

The man smiled back, raising his eyebrows in an unasked question, then nodded towards the island.

"You want to go to the island?"

"Yes, I do."

"The aliens might still be there."

"I know."

Piers frowned. The man hadn't questioned or laughed at his statement. "You'll need a metal boat if you want to go to Flat Rock Island."

The man shrugged and raised his eyebrows again.

"I'll take you," Piers said, surprised by his own unexpected impetuosity.

The man held out his hand. "I'm Conal," he said.

Piers shook the man's hand and turned away. "There's a metal boat farther down the quay," he said. "I know where they keep the key."

The man followed him, his footsteps light and sure.

Conal listened in fascination as Piers talked about the aliens. It never ceased to amaze him how people twisted facts to fit their own understanding of the world and what was taking place around them. The man obviously had some mental problems, which might account for the way he'd worked out his own theory of Flat Rock Island's legacy. He seemed convinced that it was some government facility that was in contact with an alien civilisation. According to him, the aliens had killed all the scientists on the island and escaped onto the mainland, where they had killed his mother and various other people.

As the small craft bounced its way over the waves, Conal tried to push the shock of learning that the Syclers might have somehow reached the mainland from his mind - something he didn't doubt must have taken place, after listening to Piers' description of the creatures he'd poisoned.

But Conal had enough on his plate at the moment, looking for the girl, Lyra Harrison. She was the one who held the answer as to who had tried accessing the computer file, and maybe, with a bit of luck, what was in it.

Conal had turned up at Sea View Holdings an hour ago, being received by Mrs Harrison and her sister with a certain amount of suspicion. Not that he blamed them for that, when a stranger turned up on their doorstep at eleven o'clock at night asking about their computer and what they knew about a hacked file.

His Tirolean Enterprises security identity card seemed to ease the tension a little, and when he made it plain that he was only trying to find out who had accessed the file so they wouldn't get themselves into trouble with the police, he was invited in.

"I'm here unofficially at the moment," he said, spotting the worry in the younger woman's eyes. "Just to find out what happened, so that Mr Drewsbeck doesn't feel he has to take this to the police. I'm sure there must be a simple explanation as to what went on."

"Will you excuse me for a moment," the older woman said, disappearing through the lounge door. She was back in a few minutes, a serious look on her face. Sitting down on the arm of the younger woman's chair, she took her hand. "Yes," she said, "it's as I thought. Lyra must have found Lexi's trunk in the cupboard. There was one of those thingamajigs you stick into the front of the computer and keep pictures on. I found it in the bedside cabinet after she died and put it in with her clothes for safe keeping, just in case any of her family showed up. It's gone now. I do hope Lyra's done nothing silly."

When Conal heard the name Lexi, his interest sharpened. Lexi Mills had been the Invertebrate Zoologist at the project. The scientist who had dreamed up the whole proposition in the first place. Interesting.

"So I'm guessing that Lexi lodged here with you while she was working over on the island?" Conal said.

"Yes. The whole three years. She was such a lovely young girl. Always so full of energy. Such a shame she died in an accident the way she did."

"Look, I know this is a real imposition," Conal said, "and don't feel that you have to say yes, if you're in any way concerned. But is it possible for me to have a quick look at your computer? You can watch what I do. I just want to check

and make sure that I'm in the right place.”

The two women looked at each other and the younger one shrugged.

Conal was ushered upstairs to a low ceilinged bedroom decorated in bright yellow. Ducking, to avoid hitting his head on the coombed ceiling he walked over to where an old PC tower sat on the floor beside a small desk.

After checking that it was okay with the two women, Conal sat down and switched the computer on, waiting impatiently while the hard drive wound itself up to working speed. Once the familiar green desktop screen flickered into life, it didn't take him long to access the Window's log files and discover that this was indeed the computer that had been used to try to access the file.

Shutting the computer down, he swung around in the office chair and nodded. “Yes, there's no doubt that this was the computer used. So I'm guessing that Lyra must have found the pen drive as you said, and tried to read what was on it.”

The younger woman's hand shot to her mouth, her forehead creasing into a worried frown. “Has she done something illegal? Oh I do hope she hasn't got herself into any sort of trouble with the police. She can be such an impetuous girl at times.”

“No Mrs Harrison, don't worry. Your daughter is not in trouble at the moment. In fact she might have done me a big favour. Do you know where she is? I really need to talk to her about this right away?”

Relaxing somewhat, Mrs Harrison let out the breath she'd been holding. It was obvious to Conal, that since his appearance, the poor woman had been worrying herself sick that her daughter had been doing something that might lead to a court appearance.

“She's spending the night at a friends house. I'll ring them and you can speak to her,” she said.

They all trooped back downstairs to the lounge, and while Conal sat drinking a lukewarm cup of coffee, Mrs Harrison went to phone her daughter. She reappeared with a frown on her face.

“She's not there at the moment but I talked to Willow - she's the daughter of the woman whose house Lyra is staying at? She said that Lyra had gone over to the island for a beach party with Troy, but shouldn't be too long now.” Mrs Harrison smiled, raising her eyebrows and rolling her eyes. “I think Lyra and him are seeing each other at the moment.”

“So why the puzzled look when you first came in Macey?” her sister asked.

“Oh nothing. I suppose I'm just being a bit silly. It's just that Willow and her mother sound exactly like each other.”

Conal nodded and stood up. “Has Lyra got a mobile on her?”

“Oh of course. How silly of me.” Walking to a chair by the door, she picked up her handbag and rummaged around inside. Taking out an old shell type mobile, she flicked it open and dialled a number. Smiling across at Conal, she held the phone to her ear. Her smile faded to a frown. She closed the mobile. “Sorry, the number is unobtainable at the moment.”

“Yes,” Conal,” said. “If they're on the island, it's quite possible that they won't be picking up a signal there. Look, I've taken up enough of your time already, Mrs Harrison. Why don't you tell me where I can find Willow and I'll go and wait for Lyra there.”

Conal's visit to Willow Palmer's house had soon confirmed his suspicion that Mrs Harrison hadn't been talking to Willow's mother at all when she'd called the first time. Willow was obviously covering for her friend.

Lyra and Troy were off at a party on Flat Rock Island, which was the last thing Conal wanted to hear. From the little Conal knew about the Syclers that had escaped to the mainland, there was no doubt that they presented a real danger, but there was nothing he could do about that right now, it would have to wait until morning when he could get through to the Old Man in Japan. Anyway, from what Piers had said, they were hopefully all poisoned and dead by now. The ones on the island were probably dead too - having run out of food years ago.

Conal watched the island growing in size as it got nearer, not knowing why he was driving himself to find the girl the way he was. He had no explanation, other than the cold spot that had now permanently settled itself on the back of his neck.

As Piers steered the boat across the choppy sea, he hummed to himself, feeling happy for the first time in years. Not only had he killed all the aliens and avenged his mother, he'd also met someone who believed in their existence. Even if the man did insist that the Syclers - as he called them - had been bred by scientists on the island and were not aliens, at least he believed Piers had seen them.

Piers smiled to himself, thinking about their destination. It was obvious to anyone what had been happening on Flat Rock Island. The aliens hadn't been bred there - as Conal believed - nothing was further from the truth. Piers had read the book and seen the film. Nobody could mistake the concrete pad with its big lights spread around the perimeter as anything other than the landing strip featured in *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*.

Flat Rock Island and Devil's Tower were one and the same.

The aliens had landed and somehow managed to escape on to the mainland. After that the government had panicked and killed the ones on the island, along with the scientists. It was obvious.

Piers had tried to warn people about the danger they were in, but nobody had listened. They all thought he was mad, especially Troy and his friends. Well never mind that, he'd be able to show them all now. He'd have the last laugh.

Piers' thoughts drifted to the last time he had visited Flat Rock Island, five years ago. Perhaps he should tell Conal what he'd seen in the labs that night. It might change the man's mind about where the aliens came from.

No, Piers wasn't convinced that he could trust the man that far yet. He'd learnt the hard way how people suddenly turned on you for no apparent reason. He'd keep it to himself for now and see what happened.

Conal turned to look back at him and Piers saw the big smile on the man's face. Piers nodded and smiled back.

Somewhere in the darkness above his head, a seagull screeched.
Piers hoped that it wasn't a bad premonition.

Chapter 26

The odour was overpowering for a Sycler. The creatures had been bred to consume all organic materials - they could even ingest plastics - but the scent of faeces and flesh drove them into a frenzy.

Since their food source had been cut off five years earlier, the Syclers had survived by eating every living creature and plant on the island, including themselves in the end. Their Queen had grown thin, her egg sack drying up. Using the last of her reserves, she had left her breeding chamber in The Pit and ventured out to find somewhere more suitable for her survival. She needed soil, soil containing the microscopic plant life that her skin could absorb.

It had taken the Sycler many weeks to move from deep in the laboratory beneath Flat Rock Island, out onto the rocky heights surrounding the big concrete slab. But she had persevered, driven by an urge she had no understanding of - an urge even the scientists who had bred her had no knowledge of. Here she found the soil she needed, rich in nutrients that would sustain her through her long torpid state of suspended animation.

The odour reached her and the Sycler moved, eye stalks elongating, like thin party balloons blown erect by a red nosed clown. At the tips, black eyes moved in search of a prey. Two smaller tentacles below the eye stalks quivered, scenting the air.

Turning, the Sycler eased her way out of the soil that had been her resting place for three years, body - although thin and emaciated - stretching to its full two metres.

Light shone ahead, something the Sycler usually shunned. But tonight she was driven forward, spurred on by a consuming hunger that overrode any fear of light.

Fin shook his head and set off across the concrete. As his feet crunched across the gravel on the far side of the slab, something caught his attention; a shooting star flashing across the night sky. He stared at it as he walked.

Tripping on a protruding stone, Fin stumbled, slamming his foot down between two rocks. A sharp pain drove the breath from his body as the rough edges peeled back the skin on his ankle. Crouching down on one knee, he wriggled his foot, trying to pull it free from the rocks, but managed nothing more than to tear some more cuts in his flesh.

Easing up his jeans, Fin slid his hand down his shin, encountering something wet. Pulling his hand back, he spotted blood on his fingers. He held his hand nearer to the dim light for a better view.

Suddenly realising what was happening, Fin plucked the lamp off the ground and shook it. Yes, it was definitely getting dimmer by the moment. Swearing, he pulled at his leg, praying that he could somehow work it free before the lamp failed altogether, but his foot wouldn't budge.

"Don't be so stupid, you prick," he muttered. "When you don't come back, they'll come and find you. There's no need to panic."

But panic he did.

Fin tried to slow his breathing, feeling the sweat forming between his shoulder blades. Gritting his teeth, he tried to free his foot one last time. The pain was excruciating and he had to stop, tears rolling down his cheeks.

Looking towards the top of the steps, he cupped his hands around his mouth and shouted. "Hey! Hey, up here. I'm stuck!"

He listened hard, but could only hear the subdued sound of music from the distant beach far below.

The idiots had the CD player on full blast!

"Kirsti, I'm bloody stuck up here!" Fin shouted at the top of his voice. He tried his foot again, pulling his leg back and forth, almost fainting from the pain before he stopped.

What was that? Had he heard something?

Fin took a few deep breaths, trying to calm himself. It wasn't like he was in some horror movie and a raving lunatic was about to jump out at him and lop off his head with a big, blood dripping axe.

Just as that thought had popped into his head, the lantern finally died, plunging him into darkness. Fin grabbed the lantern, tapping its side. It flickered back to life for a moment, then blinked out again. Prising the bottom off with trembling fingers, Fin pulled the two batteries clear of the compartment, dropping one in his haste.

The battery rolled away from him.

Reaching out for it, Fin swore when his fingertips slid over the slippery cylinder, knocking it even further away.

"Fuck, fuck, fuck!"

Stretching his arm out again, clamping his teeth against the pain in his foot, Fin strained as hard as he could.

His fingers slipped over the top of the battery and he was able to hook it towards him. He was gulping air into his lungs now, muscles trembling, hardly able to pick up the battery, imagining all sorts of terrible creatures moving towards him in the darkness.

Slipping the batteries into his armpit, Fin clamped his arm against his body, knowing that warming them sometimes gave a few more minutes of power.

Fin waited, eyes squeezed tightly shut, not wanting to see what might be prowling about in the surrounding darkness. He sat frozen, like the rocks grasping his foot, his ragged breaths wheezing between dry lips.

It seemed to him that he'd sat there for hours until, holding his breath, he slapped the batteries back in the lantern and twisted on the base.

Fin gave a shuddering sigh when the bulb gave out a weak glow. Holding the lantern above his head, he open his mouth to shout for help again.

That was when he saw what was making its way across the concrete towards him, and the first scream of terror tore from his throat.

”Come on, over here,” Betts laughed, pulling Lee across the sand. “No one will see us over here.”

Lee threw a blanket onto the sand and they sat down.

“Look at that sky,” Betts said. “Isn’t it the most wonderful thing you’ve ever seen?”

“Doesn’t hold a patch on you,” Lee said, pulling Betts down beside him.

She wriggled, trying to free herself as she giggled. Lee kept tickling her ribs, staring down into her eyes, an impish expression on his face.

“Stop it!”

Suddenly Lee leant in and kissed her lips. Betts stopped wriggling and slipped her hand around the back of Lee’s head, spreading her fingers through his hair. It was a long kiss and she was a little breathless when they came up for air.

“My,” she said, “good, but not quite as good as the view!”

Lee slipped his hand under her top and tickled her ribs again. Betts screamed and slapped at his arms, trying to breathe around the laughs that burst from her mouth.

“No don’t . . . stop. Stop . . . I can’t breathe.”

Back along the beach Troy and Lyra smiled at each other as they listened to Lee and Betts laughs reach them on the gentle breeze. Lyra shivered.

“Cold?” Troy asked.

“A little.”

“Perhaps I should go and collect some wood for that fire I was going to make.”

“No. It’s okay. Do it in a minute.”

Farther along the beach, Kirsti looked back over her shoulder. Fin had been gone a long time and she was getting worried. She knew what a joker he was and wondered if perhaps he was hiding somewhere, waiting for her to come looking for him, so he could jump out and frighten her. It was just the sort of thing he would do. Well she wasn’t going to give him the satisfaction.

The scream cut through the night air like a jet fighter and they all jumped to their feet, hearts pounding as another scream came. The pure pain and terror it conveyed shocked everyone.

“What the fuck—” Troy looked along the beach. Lee and Betts were running towards him. He could see Kirsti over by the barbecue.

“That sounded like Fin,” Lyra said, her voice trembling as she clutched at Troy.

“Kirsti, is Fin with you?” Troy shouted.

Before Kirsti could reply, another scream ripped through the darkness, ending in a wail that made them all shiver.

“It’s coming from up there. Come on. That’s Fin. He’s in some kind of trouble.”

“No wait,” Lee panted as he reached Troy, “Let’s all stick together. Grab one of those lanterns.”

They ran across the sand to the long flight of concrete steps, already panting for breath by the time they got there.

“Fin. Fin. Are you alright? What’s happened?” Troy’s voice echoed off into the distant ridges. He tried again, his voice desperate. “Fuck—” he muttered when he got no reply. Somehow the deep silence frightened Troy far more than the screams had.

Chapter 27

The creature reared up over him and Fin cringed as its tongue flicked in and out of its mouth - like a miniature arm, covered with row upon row of chitinous teeth. He scabbled away as far as he could, his trapped foot feeling as though it had been plunged into a pan of boiling water as he pulled at it. The smell from the creature's pouting maw was making him dizzy and Fin turned his head aside, gaze still locked on the wicked looking tongue.

The creature was a deep orange colour, elongated, with what appeared to be a hard surface along its back. Its mouth was set beneath a big, muscular foot that oozed a thick slime which glistened in the moonlight. Two black eyes studied him from the top of long eye stalks.

It looked like some kind of slug, but far far bigger than should have been possible. The creature weaved its body back and forth in front of him, as though searching for the best place to strike. Its tongue scraped along his cheek and it felt as though he'd been touched with a red hot poker.

Fin screamed again, loud and long.

Bending over, the creature inspected his damaged foot, its long tongue rasping at his torn skin.

God that hurts! That hurts!

Fin gulped in shallow, rapid breaths, heart pumping furiously, his whole body tingling, alive with adrenaline.

This couldn't be happening. Please God. No!

The creature raised itself up again and Fin saw something white hanging from its maw.

Is that a bone? Please don't let that be a bone!

Fin screamed again, scrabbling around on the ground.

Then his foot moved between the rocks and his heart leapt into his mouth. He was getting free.

Ya, you big ugly fucker. I'm going to tear your fucking—

Fin's thoughts were cut short when the creature slapped its mouth against his, the tooth covered tongue pushing its way down his throat with a rasping noise that vibrated throughout his head. The stink was overpowering and Fin felt his bile rising.

Something pumped from the end of the creature's tongue, filling his throat and Fin had no option but to swallow it, the lumpy liquid burning its way down his throat into his stomach.

Fin fought for breath, his eyes growing round and wide, bulging from his head. He slapped at the creature's sides, grappling for the eye-stalks, but when he touched them, they just rolled back into themselves, out of his reach.

Finished with its task, the creature pulled back. Its own toothed tongue, having fixed into Fin's with its backwards facing teeth, tore Fin's tongue from his mouth. The creature lower itself to the ground, laying quietly for a moment, as though recovering its energy.

Fin could see the creature's strong muscles rippling under its scaly skin. His mouth was full of blood and he could no longer scream - not that he had the energy anymore. He felt woozy and was losing the use of his limbs.

Rolling on to his side, he watched the creature move away across the concrete pad, the muscles of its flexible foot moving in synchronised waves from front to back, powering it across the ground faster than he would have expected.

Fin heard voices calling in the distance, but couldn't move - couldn't even blink. It felt as though his whole body had been wrapped in cotton wool. It was peaceful. After all the pain and terror, it was like being cradled in his mother's arms as a youngster - safe and warm.

Then Fin felt something move inside him - deep down inside him - in his stomach. The pain returned ten-fold - a thousand-fold. He tried to scream but he could make no sound, not so much as a click of his throat.

What frightened Fin the most - what took his mind to the edges of insanity - was the knowledge that, whatever was happening inside his body, there was nothing he could do about it. He could only lay helplessly while the pain and terror wracked him - body and mind.

Fin had seen the documentaries about insects laying their eggs inside other creatures, and how the hatchlings then ate their way out of the living incubator.

He knew what was happening inside him!

Fin might not have been able to scream physically, but mentally he could, and did - over and over. He screamed and prayed that God would kill him before the creatures inside hatched and set about their work of eating him alive.

The Sycler slithered away into the darkness on her specially adapted foot, moving at quite a speed for such a big creature. The thin trail of slime she left behind sparkled in the moonlight. She turned aside, seeking the nesting site, her sensitive tentacles guiding her in the darkness. Reaching the edge of the rocks, she waited for a moment, sensing that more prey were coming near, but she'd already laid her eggs and had no more.

The prey the Sycler had chosen to raise her first batch of eggs was perfect. Her offspring would grow quickly - quick growth meant survival for these first Syclers. They differed from those she would lay later. Those would be bigger, good hunters, better suited to bringing her food. The first hatchlings would keep the prey alive as long as possible, the anaesthetic oozing from their skins causing selected muscle paralysis. The prey would live, unable to move, so the hatchlings could feed until they were satiated. Then they would leave to gather at the nesting site, food for the Sycler.

Once fed, the Sycler would lay her next batch of eggs and the cycle would restart - but first she would need to find the

nest.

Kirsti was nearest to the stairs and had a head start on the others as she took them two at a time. She heard Troy calling for her to wait, that they should go together. She ignored him, piling on her speed.

Kirsti was a good athlete and a great sprinter. Troy cursed silently as she disappeared up the steps, her lantern bobbing in her hand. There was no way he could catch her up, she had too much of a lead. He pushed himself harder, scared that somebody was waiting at the top of the steps to kill her. What else could be the cause of those terrifying screams?

Kirsti ran straight passed Fin and out onto the concrete pad, not seeing his crumpled body laying in the rocks. She turned in a circle, eyes tearing as she searched for him. "Fin. Fin," she screamed as loudly as she could.

"Over here Kirsti."

Troy's breathless voice caught her attention and she ran back to him, seeing the sprawled body at his feet.

Close Encounters of the Third Kind! Fin knew it would come back to him. That's what the big concrete slab reminded him of.

The memory faded and Fin heard someone sobbing. He was walking alongside a sparkling lake under brilliant sunshine. Ignoring the sobs, he picked up a stick and threw it in the lake. His dog bounded in after it, splashing him with water. It felt good.

Somewhere, far far away, in the distance, like a whisper on the wind, he heard his name being called. He resisted. He didn't want to go back. He was happy here.

More water dropped on his face and he realised that they were tears. Someone was leaning over him. He could just see the outline of their head against the star filled sky.

"Fin, oh Fin. Speak to me. Please." The cool touch of a hand on his forehead. "Don't die Fin. We'll get you to a hospital and everything will be okay."

Fin could hear Kirsti's sobs now and tried to reach out to her, but his hand didn't move. He felt empty, floating. The pain had stopped but now it felt as though his brain was detached from his body, floating in space. He could feel, he could hear, he could see. But he still couldn't move.

Then he felt a quiver in his leg and he ordered his leg to bend. Using every atom of mind control he could muster, Fin sent the command to his leg.

Bend! Bend!

It jerked.

Fin's hopes soared.

He was getting the use of his leg back.

Troy knelt beside Fin, turning his head towards the light. Fin's face was pale, drained of blood, eyes staring straight ahead, unmoving. Troy felt a jolt of panic and snatched his hand away.

Jesus, Fin was dead!

Troy took a shuddering breath as he felt Kirsti kneel beside him. She was repeating, "Oh my God! Oh my God!" over and over in an undertone, like a mantra.

Blood covered the lower half of Fin's face, bubbling out through a hole in his cheek.

Bubbling?

Troy looked closer, then ripped Fin's T-shirt upwards, putting his ear against his friend's chest. He could hear a slow, erratic heartbeat.

"Is he dead?" Kirsti whispered, touching Fin's white cheek with the tips of her fingers.

"No," Troy said. "Quick we have to get him to a hospital."

"What's happened. Christ, what's all that blood on his face?" Lee asked, bending over Troy's shoulder.

"I think he's bitten off his tongue," Troy said. "He must have had some kind of fit. Don't people bite off their tongues when they have fits?"

"But there's a big hole in his cheek," Lee said.

"Well, he must have bitten his bloody cheek as well then," Troy shouted, loosing it altogether. Holding up his hand, he gulped in a deep breath and shook his head. "Sorry. Sorry Lee."

Troy leant over and closed Fin's eyes. Their steady, unblinking stare had begun to unnerve him.

No Troy. No. I can't see now. Please. Open my eyes again. Don't leave me in the dark. Why are you doing this to me?

Lyra and Betts appeared at Troy's side, both gasping at what they saw. Betts turned aside and was sick.

Troy got to his feet. "Give me a hand Lee. Help me get him up. We have to get him back to the boat."

They soon found that Fin's foot was stuck between the rocks and it took them a lot a tugging and wrenching to free it. All the time Lee was screaming inside his head, the pain worse than anything he'd ever known. Worse even than the time - as a small child - that he had shut the end of his finger in the hinge side of his mother's car door. Unable to reach the handle, he could only stand there screaming until his mother heard his shouts and had rushed from the house to free him.

Please God. Please God, stop this. I'll come to church every Sunday. I promise.

Fin felt his friends hands as they lifted him. Troy and Lee made a fireman's chair with their arms and the girls helped them get Fin settled on it, his arms around the boy's shoulders. As they lifted him, Fin's head brushed against the side of Lee's neck, opening one of his eyelids.

Oh thank you. Thank you so much Lee.

Being able to see, even in such a restricted manner, made the pain somehow more bearable.

Taking their time, Troy and Lee, negotiated the steep steps down to the beach with their heavy load, finally placing Fin on the sand at the base of the cliffs.

Fin's one open eye looked up at the sky, and as he lay there, he wondered if there really was a heaven - and if there was, whether he would soon see it.

Chapter 28

Troy and Lee laid Fin on the sand. Kirsti and Betts knelt by his side.

“Lyra, can you give me and Lee a hand getting the boat into the water. Then we’ll get Fin aboard and get the hell out of here.”

“What about the barbecue and stuff?” Betts asked.

Ignoring Betts’ question, Lyra walked over to where Troy was standing, glancing back as she heard Kirsti sobbing quietly.

Troy pointed over the boat. “Okay, stand on the other side with Lee, and when I say push, push as hard as you can. Okay?”

On the count of three, they all shoved, moving the heavy wooden dingy backwards perhaps a metre.

“Okay, again,” Troy shouted. “And this time, push really hard.”

This time they pushed the boat off the beach into the water, but instead of floating, it sank, the waves splashing over the stern board.

“What the—” Troy ran around to the far side of the boat, staring at the big hole in the wooden planks. “Give me one of those lamps,” he called to Lee.

Lee brought the lamp over and they all clustered around the dingy.

“Looks like something’s eaten a ruddy great hole in it. Look at the edges. Like they’ve been filed with a heavy rasp.” Lee picked at some splinters.

“Now what the fuck do we do?” Troy said, standing up and kicking the useless dingy.

“Shall I bring over the barbecue yet?” Betts called.

“Will you shut the fuck up about the barbecue, you silly prat!”

Lyra laid her hand on Troy’s arm, feeling the tenseness in his muscles. “She didn’t mean anything by it Troy. She’s just frightened, that’s all. Christ, we’re all frightened.

Troy nodded, wiping the sweat from his forehead with the sleeve of his hoodie.

“One of us will have to swim ashore and get help,” Lyra said.

“That’ll take at least an hour. Fin will probably be dead by then.”

Kirsti heard Troy’s words and burst into a fresh round of sobbing.

“I’ll go back up top and see if I can get a signal on my mobile.”

“No good Troy. I tried that when we were up there earlier. No signal at all.” Lyra’s voice broke slightly as she spoke.

Troy put his arm around her shoulders, giving her a gentle squeeze. “Who’s the strongest swimmer,” he asked.

“Be quiet. Listen.” Betts’ voice cut across them. “I can hear something coming.”

Fin heard excited voices talking, cursing the fact that he couldn’t move his eye and see what was happening. He concentrated on his leg, urging it to move. He felt a flutter in his chest, then an itch on the side of his neck.

Someone was shouting something about the boat. Fin couldn’t hear what, but Troy’s voice was loud. A shadow flicked across his eye and for a moment Kirsti’s face appeared, then disappeared just as fast. She looked haggard, her cheeks tear-stained.

Fin could hear a steady noise coming from the direction of the sea. Something he’d heard before. Yes, he had it now. It was the faint sounds of an outboard motor. The others didn’t seem to be reacting to it, Troy still shouting about pushing something.

Lee knew he was going to die, but it didn’t frighten him now - just gave him a deep feeling of sadness for all the things he’d miss doing and seeing. He’d taken life as it came, not paying much attention to it, just living for the day. Would it have been any different if he’d studied harder at school, like his parents were always telling him to do? He doubted it.

What was that?

Something was happening. Something that brought a new fear to his already terrified mind.

He could feel things moving around inside his body!

The pain hit him again, from every part of his body at once.

Fin imagined being lowered into a vat of sulphuric acid - slowly, slowly, a millimetre at a time, then added what it must feel like to be skinned alive. But that was still a long way from the level of pain ripping through his body right now.

He couldn’t move; couldn’t cry out; couldn’t lick his blood covered lips. All he could do was lay impotent and endure. It felt as if he was being eaten alive.

That final thought drove Fin down into the depths of madness, where his long dead dog waited for him, bouncing and yapping as it had done as a pup.

“Hello boy,” he said, patting his dog on the head. “Can’t take you for a walk at the moment. I seem to have something in my eye.”

The dog barked at his master. Always the comic.

Piers ran the boat up onto the beach next to the half-sunken dingy. Turning off the outboard motor, he followed Conal ashore, hanging back when he saw Troy.

Lyra ran over and gave him a hug. "Oh thank God you've come," she said. "It's been terrible."

Troy flashed Piers a hard look and walked over to Conal. "I'm Troy," he said. "One of my friends has had an accident. I think he's bitten off his tongue. He's been bleeding pretty badly. We need to get him to a hospital."

Conal could see that the boy was close to losing his grip. "Show me," he said.

Kneeling beside the body on the beach, Conal gently moved Kirsti aside. Pushing the tips of his fingers into the boy's throat, Conal sought the carotid artery. He couldn't find it. He tried again at the femoral artery with the same result.

"I'm afraid he's dead," Conal said, shaking his head.

"No. No he's not. He can't be. Look, I saw him move," Kirsti said through her sobs. "Look, look at his nose."

Conal saw a large drop of blood ooze from the boy's nostril. It ran down his philtrum, following the edge of his lip before it eased down his chin into his clothes. Another drop appeared.

Conal's buttocks tensed and his breath caught in his throat when he saw movement, but it wasn't the boy that was moving.

Something was easing its way out of the boy's nose!

Chapter 29

Troy pulled Lyra into his arms, trying to subdue the trembling that shook her whole body. "Shush, it's okay. It's alright. Everything's going to be fine."

"No it's not," Lyra snapped back, shaking her head in despair. Her hair whipped across Troy's face. "Fin's dead. You heard Conal. How's that okay, Troy?"

He could see the tears on her cheeks, hear the panic in her voice. He had to be strong for her. "No. Shush. Kirsti said she saw him move. We'll get him to hospital and he'll be okay. You'll see."

"You promise?" The look in Lyra's eyes pulled at something deep inside him and Troy nodded. "I promise," he said.

Troy liked the way Lyra felt in his arms and laid his cheek on the top of her head, breathing in her scent. Lyra looked up at him and their lips brushed. He felt a jolt rush through his chest. Looking down at her, he wondered just what she was feeling.

"You should stay away from Piers," he whispered, realising it was the wrong thing to say as soon as he'd uttered the words.

Lyra's eyes clouded over and she gave a sort of quiet hiccup, pushing him away. Walking over to Betts, she linked arms with her.

Troy turned his gaze on Piers, his body smouldering with tension.

"See, look there," Kirsti said, pointing at Fin's face. "I told you he was alive. His eyelids are moving."

Fin gave a shudder and his body arched off the sand before he landed back down with a thump, throwing Kirsti off balance. She landed on her butt, hands digging deeply into the sand either side of her legs. The whites of her eyes were large, glowing in the moonlight.

As Conal watched, a small Sycler slowly eased itself from Fin's nostril. Conal gasped, unable to stop himself backing away from the boy. He quickly swallowed back his lunch and moved closer again, both compelled and disgusted by what he saw.

The Sycler popped from the boy's nose like a cock from a bottle, scooted down his chin and dropped onto the sand. Conal leaped aside. Kirsti set up a wail that brought the others rushing over.

Another Sycler appeared and Conal heard a muted gasp from behind him. Fin's eyelid bulged upwards. Something was pushing at it from underneath. It rose higher, slowly rolling upwards as Fin's eyeball dropped from the socket. Two Syclers pushed their way out, leaving slimy, bloody trails as they followed the first Sycler out onto the sand.

They were all on their feet now, backing away from Fin's body. Conal reached forward, grabbing Kirstie's arm, forcing the hysterical girl away from Fin. Then suddenly the Syclers were everywhere, erupting from Fin's mouth; his ears; even through the hole in his cheek.

Kirsti was screaming uncontrollably, tossing her head backwards and forwards as she wailed, her cries so loud they hurt Conal's ears. He heard someone heaving behind him and the spatter of vomit on the sand.

Conal backed further away, one hand stretched out behind him, but still unable to tear his gaze away from the shaking, trembling body on the beach.

The boy's face looked as though it was melting into the sand.

"Quick, over here. Quick. Get on these rocks." Piers' voice brought all heads turning in his direction. "Get off the sand."

Not stopping to argue, wonder, or even think, they all ran across the beach and jumped up onto the rocks alongside Piers, Conal almost having to carry Kirsti.

"Keep close. Hold all your lanterns together. The aliens don't like the light. They've eaten, so we're safe for awhile. If we keep off the sand that is."

"And what make you the fucking expert all of a sudden?" Troy growled.

"Listen to what he's saying." Conal's voice carried a hard edge.

Sensing the animosity Troy felt towards Piers, Conal let go of Kirsti's hand and stepped between them, a warning on his face as he stared at Troy. The last thing they needed right now was a fight.

"Oh bloody great," Troy muttered when Kirsti broke away and ran back across the sand towards Fin.

"Oh my God, what's that? What are they doing?" Betts shouted, pointing across the beach at the boats.

An enormous ball of orange creatures sat in front of the boats, wriggling around and through one another - a mound of slimy, writhing bodies that sucked and slurped like a mischievous child drinking the last drops of milkshake through a straw. There seemed to be hundreds of them.

"What are they doing?" Lyra whispered, afraid she might attract their attention if she talked any louder.

"I've seen them do this before," Piers said. "They do a sort of dance before they attack, but I don't know why."

"Not so intelligent after all then," Troy muttered.

Lee put his hand on Troy's shoulder and whispered in his ear. "Cool it Troy. This isn't the time." Lee's hand was trembling, as was his voice.

"I can carry you to the boat," Piers said. "I have my protection on."

Jumping down from the rocks, Piers set off across the sand towards the boats.

“No!” Lyra’s voice was tinged with panic. “Please Piers, come back here. You can’t carry us all. And anyway the guys are too heavy.”

“The cave then,” Piers said, pointing along the beach.

“What’s the point in trapping us all in a cave, you bloody moron,” Troy shouted.

“No. We can get inside. Away from the aliens.”

“Inside? Inside where?” Conal almost stepped off the rocks in his excitement at hearing there might still be a way into the underground lab. Was this how the computer file had been accessed? “You mean, into the lab?”

“Yes, the lab. Come on, before they finish their dance.”

Conal jumped down onto the sand, running over and grabbing Kirsti’s hand, pulling her along beside him as he ran after Piers. She didn’t resist, just complied like a small child. Betts and Lyra quickly followed them.

“You going to let that idiot tell you what to do too?” Troy said, the scorn in his voice unmistakable.

“Well I ain’t going to stay here and get eaten by those bleeding things,” Lee shouted, running along the beach after the others.

Troy looked at the big, heavy, glistening mound of orange for a moment, licking his lips. He glanced along the sand, watching the bobbing lamps disappear into the darkness, then back at the writhing ball. One of the creatures peeled itself away, stretching itself out onto the sand, its tentacles waving in his direction.

Troy finally broke and ran, arms pumping at his sides.

Chapter 30

Conal saw Piers duck into a large cave and splashed his way through the shallow water after him. Kirsti ran at his side. She hadn't spoken a word on the long run along the beach and Conal could see that her eyes were blank, her face carrying no expression at all.

Piers was waiting by a big circular metal grid, its bars set close enough to exclude entry. As Conal drew level, Piers smiled at him, as though seeking his approval, pulling at one edge of the metal grid. It swung open on rusty hinges, squealing so loudly that Conal flinched, the awful noise rebounding back at them from the cave.

Conal felt Kirsti's grip tighten. Then she cried out, pulling her hand free, backing away from the gate. "No, not in there. Not in there," she whispered,

Then she was gone, running back along the cave, straight passed Betts and Lee, who had just entered. They grabbed at her, trying to stop the girl as she rushed passed them, but Kirsti wrenched herself free, disappearing into the night.

Conal swore and turned to Piers. "Get the others inside," he shouted, taking off after Kirsti, his feet splashing water up around his waist.

Running out of the cave, Conal spotted a lamp bobbing up the beach towards him, realising that it must be Troy. "Stop her Troy," he shouted into the darkness.

The lamp broke away from the edge of the cliff, moving out towards the water's edge. It wavered for a second or two, then moved back a few metres. Then it disappeared and reappeared, as though somebody had walked in front of it. Finally it came straight up the beach towards him. Conal was out of breath by the time he drew level with Troy. The boy shrugged, pointing down the beach.

"I couldn't stop her," he said. "She was moving too damned fast."

"Doesn't matter," Conal called over his shoulder. "Go join the others. I'll fetch her."

Conal sped down the beach taking deep breaths as his lungs struggled to get enough air. Holding up his lamp, he shook it. He could see the battery was nearing the end of its life and wouldn't last much longer.

He found Kirsti on her hands and knees, scrabbling about in the sand where Fin had died. There was no sign of him now, not even a blood stain.

"Come on Kirsti," he said. "There's nothing for you here now," Conal tried to pull the distraught girl to her feet but she shrugged him off, the tears falling freely down her face as she returned to her desperate hunt, throwing sand in all directions.

Conal tried again and this time she lashed out at him, catching him across the nose. His eyes flooded with tears, and he felt the warmth of blood on his upper lip.

"Get away from me," she screamed, fending him off with outstretched hands. "I want to be with Fin. I want my Fin."

Kirsti backed away, her mouth working over words she couldn't form.

Conal's eyes widened and his heart rate soared.

Bloody hell, she was backing straight into the dancing ball of Syclers!

Conal stepped forward, grabbing her wrist, but before he could so much as blink, the hatchlings broke apart and swarmed up over her body.

One second Kirsti was there, the next she'd been replaced by a seething mass of orange Syclers!

Throwing her head back, the young girl gave the most soul wrenching scream Conal had ever heard. It was primeval, from a world that existed long before man had walked the earth. Collapsing to the ground, she thrashed about, slapping at her body, tearing the creatures free, lumps of her skin coming away with their bodies as she threw them aside.

Conal stood transfixed, unable to move as he watched the girl systematically consumed. He'd seen footage of army ants attacking a mouse, and piranhas attacking a carcass in a river, but nothing as horrific as this.

In her final throws, the dying girl batted a Sycler away. It flew into the air, landing on Conal's bald head and before he could move, it had sunk its toothed tongue deep into his scalp.

When Piers swung the grid aside, it had revealed a two metre circular ducting, three quarters filled with what looked like big filters. There was enough room to squeeze down the side of the filters, which Piers did. The others followed, coughing at the dust they dislodged from the metal.

A short way into the ducting, Lyra saw Piers' lamp blink out and had a moment of panic - but it quickly reappeared and she could see that it was illuminating an exit in the side of the ducting. He had just stepped out through the hatch for a moment and was now lighting the way for them. Lyra pushed her way passed another set of filters, wondering how Piers knew about the existence of such a place.

Tumbling out of the ducting through the inspection hatch, they all crowded together in a small room, holding the two remaining lanterns high while Piers locked the hatch back in place.

Breathing a sigh of relief, Lyra looked around. But then her eyes widened and she grabbed Troy's arm. "Where's that Conal guy and Kirsti?" she asked.

"Last time I saw him, he was chasing down the beach after her," Troy said. Although he tried to hide the tremble in his voice, it crept in. They looked at one another, knowing that one of them would have to go back out and look for them, but all unwilling to step forward.

"I'll go and get them," Piers said, unlocking the hatch. "I've got my armour on."

"Yeah Piers, that's right. You've got your armour on, so you can be the big brave knight riding to the damsel in distress. You go and get them." Troy's attempt at humour fell flat.

Lyra walked over to Piers and held on to his arm. "Please be careful Piers. Promise me that you won't do anything silly."

Piers nodded quickly, then turned away. None of them missed the red flush on his cheeks.

Once Piers had disappeared through the hatch, Troy slammed the cover back in place, throwing the catches with far more force than was necessary.

"What now?" Betts asked, worrying at her bottom lip with her teeth.

"Guess we wait," Lee said.

Conal reacted instinctively when the Sycler landed on his head, moving faster than he'd ever done before, ripping the creature from his skin before it could wriggle its way underneath his scalp.

Tossing it to the ground, he stamped on it and gave a shudder of revulsion. Then he turned and ran along the beach as fast as his legs would carry him, all thought of trying to help Kirsti gone from his mind because she was far beyond his help now. Conal wasn't one to panic but he ran as though the very hounds of hell were on his heels - and in a sense they were.

Having finished recycling Kirsti, the Syclers were heading back to their nest, which was situated in the room called The Pit.

Chapter 31

Payne checked his co-ordinates against the map displayed on his tablet and grunted in satisfaction. The cottage should be on the other side of the field he was skirting. Using one of the fence post as an aid, he climbed over the wires, careful not to get his clothes snagged on the wicked looking barbs.

Crossing the field in a crouch, Payne ran across the deep furrows and clambered over the far fence. He stood listening for few minutes, studying the scene, his training taking over again.

The cottage was laid out over two floors, the top one low ceilinged. Payne had stayed in a similar one as a child up in Scotland, so he had a rough layout in his mind. A car was parked on a grass strip alongside the track that led up to the cottage off the main road. A narrow concrete footpath cut through the garden to the front door. Leaning against the cottage wall was a grass rake, and a plastic bucket half-filled with dead leaves. By the door stood a red plastic container, with the word 'mower' written across it in thick black marker pen.

Payne moved across the garden to his left, keeping away from the right-hand window, which was glowing with light. Attached to the wall by the corner of the cottage, he spotted what he was looking for. Pinching the thin grey cable between finger and thumb, he pulled it away from the wall. A series of small plastic cable clips broke away from their fixing pins, leaving a loop of wire hanging down. Grasping the loop, he tugged it sharply. The telephone cable parted from the connection box with a sharp snapping sound.

Payne stood like a statue, tense, listening. A dog barked somewhere in the distance and he licked his lips watching the shadows being cast across the garden from inside the brightly lit room. From the shadows he could see that there were at least two people in the cottage.

Working his way around the perimeter of the building, Payne found a door at the rear. It was unlocked. Easing the small pistol from its ankle holster, Payne pushed open the door and stepped into the cottage.

Conal knew the cave was up ahead somewhere, but with no lamp to light his way, he was worried he might run straight passed it. Gaining control over his panic, he slowed to a fast walk, recovering his breath. The creatures couldn't keep up with a fast walking man. He had nothing to worry about,

Conal licked his lips, his mouth had suddenly turned very dry. He took a deep breath, rubbing the back of one hand across his eyes. His hand banged against his nose, but it didn't hurt. He was thankful, because it had been throbbing like hell earlier. He was sweating badly now.

Conal shouted as he plunged into the sea, gulping for breath as the cold water had him standing on his toes. He'd lost all sense of direction. Surely he'd been walking along the edge of the rocks, not the shoreline?

Stopping for a moment to look around, Conal frowned, rubbing his temples. Nothing seemed familiar anymore - except the buzzing in his ears that had suddenly started. It reminded him of the fly trap used in his local café, the type that killed with a loud sizzling zap and a stink of burning bodies.

A sudden shadow appeared against the sea on his left and he froze, hunkering down on the beach. He stared into the dark but could see nothing. Walking towards where he'd seen the shadow, he looked down at the sand.

Footprints, heading back towards the boats.

Conal smiled, looking skyward. Then his eyes turned up into his head and he collapsed onto his back on the sand.

Farther back along the beach, hundreds of orange Sycylers finished the last of the blood and bones that had been a young, bubbly girl at the beginning of her life, and turned as one towards the cave and the man laying on the sand waiting for them.

Piers ran from the cave onto the beach. He had no lantern, so when the clouds chose that moment to cover the moon, what little light there was disappeared. Not stopping for his eyes to adjust to the darkness, he ran along the beach searching for Conal, calling the man's name over and over.

In the short time he'd known Conal, Piers had come to like and trust him. He couldn't leave him out here in the night to die alone. It was enough that the aliens had taken his mother. They would not have his new friend.

Suddenly the beach beneath Piers's feet seemed to boil. He'd got his night vision back now and could just make out the orange bodies erupting from the sand all around him. They had already covered his feet and begun slithering their way up his legs. Heart hammering in his chest, he turned and rushed for the sea. It was the only thing he could think of that might save his life. If he could get there before the aliens had worked their way up to the top of his tin can protection, he might be able to wash them off.

Diving into the sea, Piers rolled over and over, splashing and swirling his legs in the cold water. Looking down he saw that he'd been successful and breathed a long sigh of relief.

Standing up, he watched the orange bodies being tossed about in the waves, and for a moment felt a lightness in his heart. Then he turned towards the shore to continue his search. He had to find Conal, and quickly. The aliens were much nearer to the cave than he had expected.

But before he'd taken his first step, Piers felt a bite on the back of his leg. Reaching down, he tugged the fat, slimy creature from his skin and dropped it in the sea. Blood stained his hand black in the moonlight and he felt tears of frustration fill his eyes as another bite stung his other leg. Turning this way and that, Piers desperately looked for the alien

but he was too late, it had already eaten its way into the muscle of his leg.

Feeling the anaesthetic beginning to take effect, Piers stumbled along the shore towards the cave, his pounding heart pumping more and more of the venom through his veins.

Chapter 32

Lyra, Troy and Betts were sitting around a table in the canteen talking, their last working lantern set between them.

“What are we going to do when the light goes?” Lee asked in a quiet voice.

That question had been foremost in all their minds, but Troy didn't appreciate it being brought out into the open. “Guess we have to make a run for the boat. We can't stay here in the dark. We can't stay here anyway. We'll starve to death.” He sighed, sitting back in his chair and crossing his arms. “What a stupid idea, getting caught in here like this. We should have stayed outside and gone for the boat.”

“Where's Lee?” Betts asked.

“Think he went to find the toilets,” Troy said.

“The water's working? Well that's good isn't it?”

“Guess it comes over from the mainland or something.”

Lyra gave a startled cry when the overhead lights suddenly came on and somewhere along the corridor, a large fan started up. The door to the canteen swung open and Lee came in with a big smile on his face.

“Who's the daddy then?” he said, standing with his arms spread wide, wiggling his eyebrows.

“You did that?” Betts asked, a note of doubt in her voice.

“Of course.”

“My hero!” Betts jumped up and ran across, giving him a big hug.

Lee leant down and kissed her.

“Okay. Enough with the kissing,” Lyra laughed, getting up. Crossing to the sink, she filled the kettle and switched it on. Then rummaging around in the cupboards, she came up with a large jar of instant coffee. Unscrewing the lid, she sniffed the contents looking at the label. Shrugging, she turned to the others. “Says here that its five years old, but it should still be okay. Shall we try it?”

Five minutes later they were all back around the table, clutching hot cups of black coffee. Instant had never tasted so good to Lyra before and she savoured every mouthful.

“They've been out there a long time,” Betts said.

“Yes, I was just thinking the same thing,” Lee agreed.

They all looked around - at the ceiling; the table; their fingers; anywhere but at one another. Lee finally put his cup down, turning it slowly on the table. He coughed quietly and licked his lips. Looking up, he took a deep breath, as though he was about to say something he might regret for the rest of his life. “I'm going out to look for them,” he said.

Betts' hand slapped down on his arm. “No.”

“Conal knows this place. He'll know how to get in touch with the outside world from down here.” Holding up his hand when Betts began to protest again, he nodded. “Look, I know I found out how to switch on the power, but I'm only an electrician, not someone who knows the systems here. We need him.”

“Then I'm going too,” Betts said.

“No, I'll go with him,” Troy said. “If we need to carry Conal back, then it'll be faster with us two doing it.”

“Betts shook her head violently. “I'm going with Lee,” she insisted.

“And if you think I'm staying here on my own, you've got another think coming,” Lyra said. “So I guess we all go.”

A few minutes later they were crowded around the hatch. Troy thumped the palm of his hand against the latches, turning them free. He took a moment before he opened the hatch, glancing across at the others, his fingers opening and closing on the handles.

Lyra put a hand on his shoulder and squeezed.

Taking a deep breath Troy pulled the hatch aside and stuck his head into the ducting.

The beach was still, just the crashing of waves against the shore disturbing the night. The clouds had cleared, lighting the sand with a wash of pale yellow.

“Look, over there. At the base of the cliff,” Troy shouted, breaking into a run.

The others followed him and they were soon crowded around Conal. He was lying on the beach on his side, his face sandy where he'd fallen. Lyra carefully brushed it off.

“He's breathing,” Lee said. “Let's get him back inside quick. We don't know how close those damned things are.” His remark set them all looking about nervously.

“What about Piers? We can't leave him out here on his own.” Lyra said, standing up and looking about for him.

Troy got to his feet and held her shoulders, looking down into her eyes. “Lyra, you help Lee and Betts get Conal back inside. I'll go and look for Piers. He can't be far away. I don't like you being out here like this. It's too dangerous.”

“But—”

“Please, listen to me Lyra. Go back inside with the others.”

Troy watched them struggle up the beach with the unconscious Conal for a moment, then looked back along the sand towards the boats. He had no lantern, the others had taken that, but thankfully he didn't need one now as the moon gave enough light to see by.

Troy decided that he'd give himself five minutes to search along the beach, then he'd go back inside and tell the others

that he couldn't find Piers. The bloody idiot had probably gotten himself eaten anyway. What the hell protection he thought his stupid tin cans were, Troy had no idea.

It took Troy just three minutes to discover the Sycylers coming up the beach towards him. He stopped, squinting, trying to make out what was disturbing the sand. Then he backed away from the runnels curving back and forth beneath the surface.

How the hell could they move that fast?

Troy turned and began a fast walk back the way he'd come, casting glances over his shoulder as he went. He was almost at the cave when he heard a sound over to his left. He stopped and listened, just making out a weak voice above the waves now pounding the shore.

Moving towards the shoreline, Troy saw an arm waving. Piers was in the water, every wave dragging him farther out to sea. Without thinking, Troy ran across the sand and dived into the sea, swimming out to the floundering man with strong strokes.

Grabbing Piers around the chest from the rear, Troy back-stroked with one arm, pulling the almost unconscious Piers towards the beach. Dragging him up onto the sand, Troy collapsed, coughing seawater from his mouth. Piers grabbed his shoulder and tried to speak, but all that came out was an almost indistinguishable: "Thanks," before he collapsed.

Troy pulled Piers into a sitting position and looked across at the cave. The others had disappeared and he had no time to go and get help before the things reached them. Troy had no option but to try to drag Piers back to the cave on his own.

Standing behind Piers, Troy grabbed him under the arms, pulling him across the sand in a half crouch. It was hard work and Troy's back was soon aching with the effort.

Halfway to the cave Troy had to stop. Looking back along the two furrows that Piers' heels had left in the sand, he could see some movement farther down the beach and knew it was going to be a close call. Should he just leave Piers here and go?

Bending over, Troy grabbed Piers again and pulled, then dropped him and wiped his forehead with his arm. Taking another look along the beach he swore softly, mouthing a soft, "Sod it," then turned and began jogging towards the cave.

Chapter 33

Voices were coming from behind the door. Payne listened, his hand gripping the handle. Two women as far as he could make out, but it paid to take nothing for granted. Turning the handle he opened the door and walked into the room.

One of the women caught the movement from the corner of her eye and turned to face him, her hand going to her mouth. The other woman had her back to him. There was nobody else in the room.

As he crossed the floor, the woman who had been sitting down stood up, her chair crashing to the floor as she faced him. Payne could see that she was the younger of the two. There seemed to be some family resemblance. Not mother and daughter though, the ages were too near. Sisters then.

No one had said a word yet, but the women followed the movement of his gun as he pointed it at them. "Who else is in the house," he said. "Don't lie, because if I find out you have, I will kill them. Do you believe me?"

The older woman sat into a chair with a thump. The younger one held herself upright by the kitchen table, but Payne could see that she was about to collapse at any moment. He picked up the chair and pushed it towards her, motioning with his gun that she should sit down.

"What do you want? We have no money. Well a little. Take that and go."

Payne could hear the fright in her voice, but also a steely edge. He'd need to watch her. "I asked who else is in the house."

"We're on our own" The older woman's voice trembled, but her eyes never left his. Payne moved behind her. Placing his pistol back in its holster, he quickly tied the woman's hands together behind her back with cable ties. "Now you," he said, moving across to the other woman.

"If you scream I'll gag you. If you stay quiet and do as I tell you to, then you'll be okay. Do you believe me?" The women nodded. "I'm going to search the house now. I suggest you sit quietly while I do so. I don't want to have to hurt you, but I will if you give me any cause. I'm going to lock the doors and will hear if you try to get out. Do you believe me?" The women nodded again.

After locking the front and back doors with a set of keys he'd found hanging on a hook in the hall, Payne did a quick but thorough search upstairs. Ten minutes later he came down, a computer hard drive and a laptop in his hands. Leaving them on the kitchen table, he searched the rest of the cottage.

When he'd finished he had added two mobiles to his finds. "Are there any more phones, computers or other electronic devices that I've missed?" he asked.

The women shook their heads, staring at him with wide eyes. He had spoken in a soft voice but he knew that they were taking him seriously, he could see it in the way they watched his every move. They weren't lying.

"Are there any tools in the house? A hammer or axe?"

Neither of the women answered but Payne caught the flicker of the older woman's eyes towards the kitchen range. Walking over, he spotted a large basket of logs with a small axe balanced on top. Picking up the axe he returned to the table and systematically destroyed all the equipment he'd found.

"Please. What is it that you want?"

Ignoring the question, Payne crossed to the sink and filled the kettle. He didn't bother with gloves because he would be burning the cottage down after he'd finished here. Making himself a cup of coffee, he grabbed a chair, turned off the light, and sat staring out the window into the night.

Behind him he could hear the women's ragged breathing. The older one reminded him a little of his mother and Payne was a little sorry that he would have to kill her.

As Troy reached the entrance to the cave, he collided with Lee. The lantern flew out of Lee's hand, crashing against the rocks and going out.

Picking it up, Lee rattled it, then threw it down again. "Nice one Troy," he said.

"Quick, I was just coming to get you. I need help. I couldn't get Piers here by myself."

They ran back to where Piers was laying, grabbing an arm each, pulling him upright until just his heels were dragging along the sand. Stumbling towards the cave as fast as they could, they dragged him along between them. Catching movement from the corner of his eye, Lee stopped and looked back along the beach.

Troy was almost thrown off his feet. "What are you doing?" he shouted. "Keep going."

Seeing how near the creatures were, Lee grabbed Piers' arm again and ran as fast as he could. They finally pulled Piers into the cave, splashing through the water to the big gate.

Lyra was waiting by the end of the ducting and pretty soon they had got the unconscious man passed the filters and through the hatch. Troy slammed it shut, then leant against it, breathing heavily.

"Christ that was close," Lee said.

Lyra rushed into Troy's arms and gave him a hug.

"Thought I'd had it there for a moment," he said, hugging her back. "Where's Conal?"

"He's back in the canteen recovering. He's still quite woozy but we gave him some strong coffee. It seemed to help."

"Go get me a knife. One with a sharp point," Troy said.

Lyra leant back in his arms, looking up at his face with a puzzled frown.

Troy nodded down at Piers. "He said he'd been bitten when I was dragging him out of the sea. If it's true, that . . . thing . . . may still be in there. We have to get it out."

Lyra ran off and was soon back with a knife and a bottle of vinegar. "I haven't been able to find the First Aid stuff yet, but this might help stop any infection."

"If it doesn't kill him first," Lee said.

After a quick search, Troy found a wound in Piers' leg just above the tin cans. "Guess the armour stuff works after all," he said, pulling the edges of the wound apart. "I think I can see something moving around in there. Hold his leg still for me, will you Lyra?"

Troy dug around in Piers' leg with the end of the knife, finally pulling out a piece of orange coloured gunge. It wriggled weakly on the end of the blade. Troy dropped it on the floor and stamped on it.

"There's more in here," he said, poking about with the knife again. "Damn it, I can't get the rest out." He fiddled about for a few more minutes, but ended up making such a mess of Piers' leg that he gave up. "Guess cutting it in bits is good enough. The hospital can take care of the rest when we get back home."

Troy soaked the wound in vinegar, then tore a strip of material from Piers' trousers and tied it around his leg as a make-shift bandage. Sending the girls into the canteen, Troy and Lee stripped Piers of his clothes to see if he had any more wounds. Finding none they dressed him again and joined the girls in the canteen.

"How is he?" Lyra asked as soon as Troy and Lee walked into the room.

"Yeah, he's okay I think. We locked him in the Intake Room."

"What did you do that for? That's a horrid thing to do." Lyra got to her feet and rushed to the door.

"No wait Lyra," Troy called. "We don't know what we're dealing with here. Who knows how that thing might effect him until he comes round. Best leave him there for the present."

Lyra walked back to the table. She didn't seem convinced but sat down, her gaze flicking back and forth between Troy and the door.

Chapter 34

King brought the helicopter down lower over the sea. He was taking a risk doing so but it was important he wasn't spotted on the coastguard's radar. He'd flown out to sea, waiting for confirmation that Payne had secured the house. If that part of the operation had gone wrong, he wouldn't have had time to carry out phase two before the authorities arrived. Checking his position, King saw that it would take about fifteen minutes to get to the island. Looping around the headland, he headed along the coast.

Watts, his second in command, had moved from the back of the helicopter, and now sat beside him, staring stoically through the windscreen into the night. His 2IC hadn't spoken a word since Payne had jumped into the drop zone an hour ago, and King wondered if the man had any feelings at all. He'd seen Watts kill many men when they'd been out in Iraq, and knew he did it without a thought for the consequences it might have on the young men's families.

Pushing such memories from his mind, King trimmed the helicopter and brought it nearer to the coast. The island should be somewhere dead ahead.

Conal finished his coffee and pushed the cup across the table.

Lyra smiled at him. "Feeling better?"

"Much," he said, sitting back and wiping his face with his hands. "Jesus, I'm so so sorry about Kirsti. There was nothing I could do. They got to her before I could pull her away."

Conal looked at the girl sitting opposite him. She seemed composed, considering what they'd all been through. But then perhaps she was just feeling dead inside, like he was. Troy and Lee came into the room carrying some stuff in their arms. Dropping it on the table, they sat down.

"What's all this?" Conal asked, picking up a can and looking at the label. "Hair spray?"

"Thought we'd better see if there was anything that might be useful, but it's just a load of junk really. Makeup stuff mainly. Found it in a small office off the big lab down the corridor. Everything else seems to have been removed or destroyed. There're bits of metal and pieces of equipment laying about everywhere, but nothing that would help us, I reckon." Troy picked up a nail-file, then dropped it back on the table, his face showing the tension he was under.

"Hmm." Conal frowned. "Yes, I was afraid of that." The others looked at him but he didn't elaborate.

Betts came into the room and shook her head. "Nothing. There's not even any toilet paper left in the place."

Lyra got up and ran to the cupboard above the stainless steel sink unit, opening the door with a flourish. "There you go," she said, tossing a roll of toilet paper at Betts. "Found them earlier when I was looking around."

"Was there a First Aid pack in there by any chance?" Troy asked.

"Nope. Not much else really. Just some loo rolls, a couple of jars of coffee, three bars of yucky gone-off chocolate, five tins of beans and two tins of spaghetti rings."

"What about the fridge?"

Lyra shook her head. "What with the electricity being turned off, every thing in there has gone bad. It stunk the place out when I opened it. I was nearly sick."

"What did you mean, that you were afraid of that, when Troy said about the bit's of metal lying about," Lyra asked Conal.

Conal realised the mistake he'd made and backpedalled as fast as he could. "I don't know exactly what was going on down here," he said, "but I do know it had something to do with breeding animals to produce protein for food, and feeding those same animals on waste material. The perfect recycling machines. A neat trick if you can pull it off."

"How do you know that?" Troy's tone was hard and they all turned to look at him.

Conal pulled a face, slightly raising his shoulders in a shrug. "Because I work for the company that was funding the project."

"And did they succeed?" Troy asked, leaning forward, arms crossed on the table.

Conal raised his eyebrows, pursing his lips as if considering whether to answer or not. "I didn't think so, no. But now, I have to admit that I'm not so sure." Picking up a leather case from the table, he slid out a pair of women's glasses. Sighing he quickly pushed them back again. "You said that you found this stuff in a small office?" he asked, wagging the glasses case at Troy. "Was there a computer in there?"

"Yes there was. The office had a metal fire door. Funnily enough, unlike all the others, it was closed. Every other one in the place seems to have been left open."

"Fire doors close automatically," Conal said.

Troy sat back, tapping his fingers on the table, studying Conal. "So what was all that crap five years ago about then? When they said there'd been a dangerous chemical spill over here?"

"Yes I'd like to know about that too," Betts said.

"Me as well," Lee joined in.

Conal knew they were waiting for an answer, but he couldn't tell them the truth. "Was the computer working?" he asked instead.

Troy shrugged. "Didn't try it."

Conal got to his feet and strode towards the door.

“Hey wait a minute. Where are you going?” Troy shouted after him.

Conal stopped, turning back to the table. “Didn’t it occur to you that if the computer is working and plugged into the Internet, we could get a message out to somebody?”

Chairs scraped back as they all jumped to their feet, following Conal down the corridor towards the lab.

The equipment in the lab was covered with dust and Conal could see that a lot of it had been partly destroyed. He stopped, wondering what had happened. It had all been in working order when he’d been here last. Picking up a section of blue plastic that had obviously been a piece of cover for something or other, he examined it. Small rasp like marks dotted the edge. He’d seen such marks before - five years ago - on a femur in The Pit.

Dropping the plastic back down amongst the other mess on the counter, Conal walked through to the office at the back of the laboratory and sat at the desk.

Examining the computer, he felt a surge of hope when he spotted a small yellow indicator LED glowing on the bottom corner of the screen’s frame. Reaching underneath the desk, he pushed the button on the front of the PC tower, breathing a sigh of relief when the yellow LED turned green. “Here we go,” he muttered.

The others had crowded into the small office behind him and he could hear their clothes rustling as they all held their breaths, waiting for the machine to boot up.

After a couple of messages, a dark blue background appeared on the screen, causing Conal a moment of panic, until he realised that it wasn’t the dreaded, ‘Blue Screen Of Death’, so hated by Windows users. It blinked out, then back again, but this time there was a white box displayed in its centre.

Conal sat back in dismay as the big white words blinked at him. *Enter Password:*

“Damn,” he said softly.

“Guess that’s it then. We’re all well and truly screwed,” Lee said, expressing what they were all thinking.

Chapter 35

Behind the cottage, a large hole on the bank of the shallow brook widened, the earth falling aside as an enormous Sycler pushed her way out of the chamber that had been her nest for the last five years. Two metres in length, and as fat as a large truck's tyre, she worked her way free from the soil, driven by a hunger that she could not assuage; a hunger that had been her constant companion since she had grown from an egg dropped from the heel of a man's shoe on the quayside.

Her scaly skin was a dull orange, rippling with muscles as she moved across the ground. She stopped now and then, inspecting the twisted bodies of her offspring, but her tentacles sprang back from the poison she could taste in them.

Gliding up the bank, her eye-stalks moved independently, searching, searching. She felt tremors in the soil and turned towards them, sensitive tentacles picking up the fine particles in the air.

Prey.

Macey Harrison stared at the back of the man who had invaded their life with hatred and fear.

Why was he just sitting there like that? What was he waiting for? Did it have something to do with the man who had shown up earlier asking about some computer file?

She looked over at her sister again, checking that she was okay. Freda looked a little pale and Macey could tell that having her hands tied behind her back the way they were was causing her a lot of pain.

"I need to go to the toilet," Macey said, surprised at how weak her own voice sounded. Wetting her lips, she tried again. "I really need to use the toilet." Louder this time. The man didn't move. He just continued staring out of the window. "I'll go on the floor if you don't let me go upstairs right now," she said.

The man sat silently, unmoving. He could easily have been dead for all the notice her was taking of her. But Macey could see that his shoulders were moving as he breathed.

Perhaps he was asleep then?

She pushed her feet on the floor and her chair moved backwards across the tiles a few millimetres, making a noise.

"Be still. There's a good woman. I *will* hurt you, you know that."

Not asleep then.

Look," Macey said, "my sister has just come out of hospital after having a double mastectomy. She can't take having her arms stretched behind her back the way they are. Haven't you any heart at all, you selfish bastard. Can't you just retie her hands in front of her." The man sat quietly, but Macey could see that he had turned his head slightly towards Freda as she talked. "I just hope nobody treats your sister or mother the way you're treating us," she said, putting as much emotion into her voice as she could. "Do you have a sister? A daughter perhaps? How would you like it if she was treated the way you're treating my sister after her operation. Trussing her up like some chicken, ready for the oven. Shame on you."

The man breathed out a long sigh and stood up. Macey held her breath, terrified that she might have gone too far. He turned, pulling a wicked looking knife from a sheath on his belt. Crossing over the room in a couple of long strides, he passed so closely to Macey that she flinched, already feeling the cold blade sinking into her stomach. But instead of ending her life in some grisly fashion, the man reached down and cut her sister's hands free, retying them in front of her.

Finished he went and sat back down again. The whole thing had taken no more than a few seconds. Macey had to check that he really had done what she'd asked before she really believed that he had.

"Oh thank you," she said in a quiet voice, her heart still beating wildly from the fright she'd had.

The man didn't respond, just sat looking out of the window like a stuffed dummy. Macey wondered what it was he saw out there. She settled back in her seat and continued to stare at his neck, working at her own bonds. She knew both her and Freda were in a helpless position, but at least trying to get free gave her some hope.

"Well it was a long shot anyway." Conal went to shut the computer down but Lyra placed a hand on his shoulder. Then with a dramatic: "Ta da," she produced the pen-drive.

"Is that what I think it is?" Conal asked.

"Sure is."

"But we don't know the password. And anyway, according to our computer guy, the file on there has been wiped."

"No, that's not why I'm giving it to you. Fin gave it to me before . . ." Lyra's eyes teared up and she angrily brushed them away - there would be time for that later. "Its got the password on it."

"He cracked the password?" Conal asked in a doubtful tone.

"Not him, someone he knew."

Conal took the pen-drive and slipped it into the USB port on the front of the tower. The password box was replaced with a smaller window. Conal clicked the 'Open File' option, then scrabbling around in the desk drawer, he dug out a ballpoint pen and scrap of paper. Writing down the password he found in the file, he asked Lyra to check him, then shut the file and pulled out the pen-drive. The Password window reappeared.

Licking his lips, Conal carefully typed in the long combination of numbers and letters while Lyra and the others checked his every keyboard strike. They would only get the one try at this and he didn't want to chance messing it up.

Looking at the others in turn, he waited for each to nod their agreement, then struck the Enter key.

King grinned, taking the helicopter up over the rocks forming the larger part of the tear-shaped island. Swinging the aircraft round, he dropped it exactly in the centre of the faded white circle painted on the concrete beneath them.

“Still got the old touch then,” a voice said.

King’s eyebrows rose at the words. Praise from his 2IC was rare indeed. Switching off the nose flood light that had picked out the landing spot, King closed the engine down, unbuckled himself and had a good stretch.

“Okay Watts, go get the stuff unloaded while I have a look around.”

King jumped down onto the concrete and reached into the back of the helicopter, digging out a powerful torch. He set off to check out the area. There was no reason for anybody to be on the island but you never could be too careful.

Walking the perimeter of the concrete slab he found nothing to raise any concerns. A hole had been cut in the fence at the top of the old steps, but he could see that had been done a long time ago. Probably by kids having some fun on the island.

Satisfied, he went in search of the hatch they would need to blow if they were going to get access to the laboratories below. It would take Watts at least twenty minutes or so to get all the explosives unloaded and checked. Once he’d located the hatch, he’d come back and give him a hand. They’d need to drill a series of holes to plant the explosives.

Everything was going to plan and King couldn’t wait to get off the island. He was looking forward to having some fun with Conal when he got back to London.

Chapter 36

Macey jumped when a piercing scream cut through the night air. The man jerked to his feet and ran to the window, his chair crashing to the floor. Keeping to one side, he looked out, his face reflected in the glass.

Another scream followed the first - this one louder.

"What the hell's that?" Crossing to the other side of the window, the man checked that side too. He had his gun in his hand now.

"That's my pig. Something's attacking my pig. Can't you hear it squealing? It's in agony. Don't just stand there, do something." Tears were pouring down Freda's face.

Three more squeals followed in quick succession, and now that Freda had pointed it out, they could all recognise that it was indeed a pig squealing in terror.

"My God," sobbed Freda. "What are they doing to it?"

"Who? What are who doing to it?" The man had turned from the window and they could see the worry in his eyes. Pulling a small box from his belt, he held it up to his lips, hesitated, then clipped it back. "I'm going out to check on what's happening. Stay put. If you go outside, you'll likely end up getting shot." Grabbing the keys, the man unlocked the front door and disappeared into the night.

Rhys Green hummed along with the CD player, the headlights of his van highlighting the narrow lane he was driving along. Nearing the turning he was searching for, he switched off the headlights and turned on to the track. Making his way up the ruts, he eased the van over the bumps, driving as quietly as the old vehicle would let him. He'd last been here six months ago, banging on doors for scrap metal, and as usual, he'd taken the chance to scope the place out.

Rhys Green made his living from a combination of selling scrap metal - mostly stolen - raiding sheds to relieve owners of small garden tools, and the odd animal rustling. Tonight he was on his way to collect a very nice looking porker.

The old woman living here would be in bed snoring her head off by now. He'd just back his van up alongside the pigsty, whip the porker into the back of his van and leg it. Job done. No hassle.

Reaching the big sheds on the side of the track, Rhys Green reversed his van into position, opened the back and pulled the ramp into position. Then he walked around to the pigsty, a plastic bucket of pig food and apples swinging from one grubby hand.

All went well at first. The pig snuffled when he opened the door and shook the bucket, poking its head out of its pile of straw. He threw it an apple, which disappeared in one greedy gulp. Then he shook the bucket and the pig came over, slavering down his leg as it tried to get its head in the bucket.

Halfway back to the van the pig stopped, head up, ears pricked, as though it had heard or sensed something nearby. Rhys Green shook the bucket again but the pig ignored it, tensing, ready to run. Dropping the bucket he grabbed the pigs back legs and began dragging it backwards towards the ramp. The pig struggled, squealing like someone was trying to gut it alive.

Just another couple of metres and he'd have it in the van. The pig squealed again, kicking out. Rhys Green's hands slipped on the animals legs and it shot across the garden, disappearing into the night with a final squeal.

It was then that Rhys Green felt something slide around his neck.

As soon as the door had closed behind the man, Freda was on her feet. She ran across the kitchen and grabbed a knife from the block beside the hob. Running back she freed Macey's hands. Then Macey cut Freda's bonds and they both ran to the window, looking out. The night was dark and they couldn't really see anything.

"What do you think's happening?" Macey asked, her heart pounding.

"I don't know, but don't worry Macey, the pig isn't being attacked by an animal. Nettie always makes a hell of a racket when anything she doesn't like goes near her. It could be a fox or something. Lucky for us that man doesn't know anything about pigs. Let's get out of here while we have the chance."

"We can't. He took the keys to the back door with him and if we open the front door he'll see us and he has a gun."

"He won't shoot us."

"You want to take that chance?" Macey was beginning to panic. "Are there any more phones in the house?"

"No, he smashed them all."

A gun shot sounded and they looked at each other, eyes widening. They waited, holding their breaths. It had gone quiet again outside and Macey just knew that the man would walk back through the door at any moment. They had to get out the back door and run.

"Wait here. Call me if you see him coming," Freda said, disappearing upstairs.

Macey went to the window and looked out again. The moon was casting deep shadows, making it difficult to see anything. She stared hard, squinting up her eyes. Was there something out there? Was that a deeper shadow moving around out by the shed? Damn, she couldn't see properly, her breath was misting the glass. Wiping the window with the side of her hand, she looked out again.

Another loud scream made her jump, leaving her feeling light headed and sick. This time it had been a man screaming, and it sounded as though he had been in a lot of pain.

Yes, she could definitely see something moving on the path by the side of the cottage. Macey felt her stomach tighten into a knot and her body began to tremble uncontrollably. She went from hot to cold and back again.

Backing away from the window, she called to her sister. "Freda—" It came out as a squeak and swallowing, Macey took a breath and tried again. "FREDA!"

"I'm here Macey. I'm here. It's okay. What's happening?"

"I saw something moving on the path. I think he must be coming back for us. We have to go Freda. We have to—" Macey turned, her eyes widening in surprise. Her sister was standing at the bottom of the stairs, an enormous double-barrelled shotgun clasped in her hands. It was so big that it made her look small, like the older sister that had once accompanied her to school all those years ago. Macey was finding it hard not to burst into hysterical laughter as she looked at Freda. Pulling herself back from the edge, she swallowed hard.

"It was Peter's gun," Freda said. "Never did get around to selling it after he died."

"Is it loaded?" Macey whispered.

"And ready to use if that man ever sets one foot back in my cottage again."

At that moment something smacked up against the window and both women turned, screaming in unison as a man's bloody face flattened against the glass, before slowly sliding downwards. The face disappeared for a moment, but then reappeared once more.

It might have been the man who had held them prisoner in the kitchen, but it was hard to be certain. One of his eyes was missing and his nose hung from his face by the barest strip of skin. Teeth glistened through a bloody gap where his cheek should have been, and as he pawed at the window with fingerless hands, he left runnels of blood running down the glass.

Macey whimpered like a puppy in distress, her gaze glued to the bloody window, even though she wanted so desperately to look away. Backing across the room from the terrible sight, they finally ended up with their backs pressed against the far wall and could go no further. They were both gulping in shallow breaths and Macey felt a sudden warmth running down the inside of her legs.

The man's face was unexpectedly whipped away from the window in an upwards direction, as though some giant hand had plucked him away. Then they heard the sound of his body thumping against the stone wall - the squelching, slapping sounds bringing bile to their throats. Freda gulped and threw up on the floor, the gun still gripped tightly in her whitened fingers.

After that, all was quiet, and there was no sound other than the soft sobbing of two terrified women, both convinced that they were about to die.

Chapter 37

As Conal tapped the Enter key, the password screen disappeared to be replaced by a long list of files. Conal saw the smile form on Lyra's face as she leant forwards and studied the screen.

"See anything you recognise?" he asked.

Lyra shook her head. "I only got as far as the password screen before," she said. "After I tried a few different words I gave it to Fin."

"Shouldn't we be sending an email or something," Betts said.

Conal tapped the bottom of the screen with a fingertip. "No Internet icon is showing on the Task Bar, so I guess this computer's not connected to the outside world. More of the Old Man's security paranoia."

"The Old Man?" Lee said.

"Oh nothing. I'll tell you about it later. What it means is that we can't use the computer system to get in touch with people on the main land."

"Great," Troy said. "Now what?"

Conal swung round in his seat to face him. "Look, I went and saw Willow before I came over to the island." That information had them all raising their eyebrows and glancing at one another. "I was trying to track down Lyra to find out which computer she had used to access the file. Willow told me that you had come over to the island for a party. The point is, that when Fin and Lyra don't show up, she'll raise the alarm."

"But that might not be until tomorrow morning," Lee said.

"Well, we'll just have to sit it out and wait. Somebody will come in the end."

Lee nodded slowly and looked at Troy. "Suppose that makes sense."

"I've been meaning to ask you. What's happened to Piers? He got back alright didn't he?" Conal felt a bit guilty that he'd only just noticed that Piers was missing, but he still felt a bit light-headed and was finding it hard to think properly.

Troy pushed himself away from the wall. "He's locked in the Electrical Intake room."

"Locked?" Conal raised his eyebrows.

Troy glanced down at the floor for a moment, then raised his head.

"Troy had to cut one of those things out of his leg," Lyra said, coming to Troy's rescue. "He was unconscious. We were scared that he might have more inside him somewhere. You saw what happened to Fin. We were frightened to bring him in here with us."

Conal nodded his understanding and stood up, putting a hand on Troy's shoulder. "That was brave of you going out there like that Troy." Looking at the other's he broke into a big smile. "It was brave of you all. I guess Piers and I owe you our lives."

Lyra was trying to make up her mind what file to open next, when Conal came into the room and sat down beside her.

"Is Piers okay?" she asked.

"I think so. I made him as comfortable as I could." Conal rubbed a hand over his bald head, sucking in his breath when he touched the wound. "I left him locked in there. I don't think he's any threat, but—" He shrugged.

Lyra opened another file and ran her eyes down the contents. It seemed to be full of formulae which meant nothing to her. "What are the others doing?" she asked.

"Trying to make something to eat with the beans and spaghetti. Going to be a real cordon bleu surprise," Conal laughed. "If they don't poison us all that is."

Lyra stopped scanning the file and closed it, wiping her eyes with her knuckles. She'd been at it for half-an-hour and was getting tired of reading page after page.

"Find anything?" Conal asked.

Lyra turned to face him. It was the first time she'd actually really looked at the man. He had quiet a handsome sort of face really, but he was a bit short and stocky for her taste.

What are you thinking of, girl. He's old enough to be your dad.

Pushing the embarrassing picture from her mind, she looked at him with a serious expression. "Look, the others may take you at face value, but from the few things you've let slip, I think you know far more about what's going on here than you're saying."

Conal sat back in his chair and nodded, his lips twitching in a wry smile. "No fooling you is there?" Lyra just kept staring at him. "Okay. I don't know much, just that the scientist in charge of the project here—"

"Lexi?"

"Yes, Lexi Mills. She was convinced that she could breed protein for the third world, based on some kind of slug. Apart from the fact that something went terribly wrong and they all got killed, I'm in the dark as much as you are."

"You were part of the cover up here on the island, weren't you?"

"You were going to tell me what you found out," Conal said, ignoring the question.

Lyra turned to the computer and opened a file. "This file outlines what Lexi was trying to do. It's a mixture of ideas, notes, scribbles and personal thoughts." Lyra scrolled the screen down until she found what she was looking for. "Take a look at this newspaper report. I think this was her starting point."

Conal read the headline and first paragraph.

MILLIONS OF 'KILLER SLUGS' SET TO TAKE OVER GARDENS.

After the worst year on record for slugs, things are about to get even worse with millions of a new species of 'killer slug' expected to take over gardens this spring. It is thought the new species came into the UK via imports of salad leaves. The monster slugs, from Spain, that can grow up to five inches long, have been found eating dead mice, dog mess and even each other.'

"You're right in what you said." Lyra spoke firmly, almost lecturing Conal as she explained what she'd discovered. "It's incredible anyone would even try to do this, even with all the advances there have been in genetic engineering over the years." Scrolling down the screen again, she found another section and pointed at it. "Seems she managed to breed them to grow a lot bigger and have a quick generational turnaround."

Conal leant closer to the screen and pointed. "What's all this?"

"That's where it gets interesting," Lyra said. "She wanted to engineer two more abilities into the Syclers - as she named them. One was for them to be able to digest plastics—"

Conal laughed. "As if," he said.

"No wait," Lyra put a hand on his arm. "Look at this." Opening another window, she clicked on a file. "See there?"

Conal's forehead crinkled into a frown as he read.

WHITE-ROT FUNGI DEMONSTRATES FIRST BIODEGRADABILITY OF PHENOLIC RESIN.

*Phenolic resins, phenol-formaldehyde polymers previously thought to be non biodegradable, are produced at an annual rate of 2.2 million metric tons in the United States for many industrial and commercial applications. Three independent lines of evidence established their biodegradability with the white-rot fungus *Phanerochaete chrysosporium*.'*

"Jesus, she genetically engineered a slug that could eat plastic using a fungus?"

Lyra nodded. "With the help of this Panerocy whatever stuff. But then she hit a problem."

"Just the one?" Conal joked.

Lyra threw him a look, then continued with her lecture. She was really enjoying herself now. "The Syclers were doing well, growing to about 260 millimetres, they ate everything that was organic, including plastics, and the protein produced was a viable food source. Lexi was ticking all the boxes as they say. Trouble was, the Syclers ate one another as well. That's where this guy comes into the picture." Lyra clicked another file and a smiling face appeared on the screen. "Meet Brian Goldhand, he's a leading entomologist." Lyra glanced at Conal and saw from his expression that he hadn't made the connection. "His speciality is the study of termites"

Conal shrugged. "Well," Lyra said, getting well into it now. "Not only are termites meat eaters, handy for the recycling, but they are also eusocial, which means—"

"They have a socially organised hierarchy," Conal cut across her.

She nodded. "Trouble is, that led to a couple of unforeseen consequences. The Syclers might have stopped eating one another, except in exceptional circumstances, but the eggs Lexi developed produced a Queen and it was this Queen that laid the eggs that killed Fin on the beach. She's out there somewhere." Lyra held up her hand as Conal went to speak. "Not only that," she said, "but the Syclers went on to develop the ability to use the formic acid termites defend themselves with into a powerful anaesthetic that enables them to knockout their prey. They can move pretty fast, but are no match for most animals. This gave them the advantage they needed to catch their prey."

"Bloody hell," Conal breathed, do you realise what she had here?"

Lyra nodded. "Yes, she'd done just what she'd set out to do."

Conal looked at Lyra. He'd forgotten for a moment that she was just a young girl, albeit a very intelligent one. "No, I mean the consequences if these things ever got over to the mainland and bred."

Lyra nodded, looking serious. "Yes, they could kill people easily enough. We've already seen that."

"No, not just that, serious though that is. I'm thinking more about their ability to digest plastic. Look around this place. What's missing? It didn't strike me until now. All these pieces of metal and the half destroyed instruments. They're all missing plastic. Think how many things are made of plastic these days. Christ if these things mutated any more, maybe into something smaller that we couldn't spot so easily, they could destroy the world as we know it."

"So that's why—" Lyra turned back to the computer and began tapping the keyboard.

"What?" Conal said.

"Look, it's a report to someone called Dermot Drewsbeck saying that she's closing the project down."

Conal looked at the screen, noticing a link at the bottom. Taking the mouse from Lyra he clicked on it. It led to a file containing a series of emails between Lexi and Drewsbeck.

Lexi wanted the project closed immediately, Drewsbeck wanted her to carry on, telling her that he would send all the experts she needed to get around the problems. The argument went back and forth, until she had finally threatened to take the whole thing to the press.

Drewsbeck had agreed to meet her on the island that afternoon to discuss it, telling her that he wanted all the staff present so he could get everyone's views.

Conal looked at the date, his eyes widening. It was the same day that he'd been called to the island by the boatman. The Old Man had set them up.

It hadn't been the accident Drewsbeck had pretended it was. He'd had them killed!

Chapter 38

King checked the radio again. It was still silent. There were a number of reasons that Payne could be off air, none of them good. He'd need to get a move on.

They'd found the big metal cover of the refuse chute with the aid of a metal detector. It was under a few millimetres of concrete but it had taken the best part of an hour to drill the holes and set up the charges.

King checked with his ZIC once more and they both ran back to the rocks, trailing a wire behind them, Hunkering down, King nodded and Watts turned the handle on the detonator.

Macey was crying quietly, hands covering her mouth.

"Sh, what's that?" her sister said.

Gulping back her tears, Macey listened, straining her ears to hear the smallest sound. She was terrified, could hardly move. The warm liquid that had run down her legs had turned cold now. She shivered slightly.

"Help . . . me."

Macey could hardly hear the muted call. Shaking her head, she tried to ignore it. She didn't want to help. She just wanted to collapse into the corner, as she used to do as a child when the girls at school made her cry.

"Please . . ." the voice said.

Freda took a hesitant step away from the wall.

"What are you doing?" Macey almost screamed at her sister.

"We can't just leave him out there."

"We can Freda. Please. After what he did to us—" Macey burst into tears again.

Freda leant the gun against the wall and went to Macey, cuddling her, rubbing her back as her sister's shoulders shook.

"Please Freda. Please don't leave me here alone. I can't stand it."

"I'll just take a quick peek. I'll be quick. I promise I'll be careful."

Freda picked up her gun and walked across the kitchen. Macey clung to her arm, more frightened of being left alone than of the terror that might be waiting outside.

Freda pressed her ear against the door. She could feel Macey trembling beside her, face buried into her side. Reaching out, Freda placed her hand on the door knob.

Macey whimpered.

Turning the knob, Freda released the latch. The door burst open, pushing both women backwards. Macey ended up sitting on the bottom step of the stairs, while Freda was pushed sideways against the wall.

A man fell into the hall, his legs still outside. A torn stump pumped blood from where his arm should have been. His clothes had been ripped from his back, as had most of the skin, and from where she stood by the door, Freda could see his ribs protruding through the torn muscles.

The man moaned and Freda clasped her hand to her mouth as he was slowly dragged away from the doorstep by something unseen in the garden. Freda was almost hysterical, swearing at the top of her voice - something she never did. She had been seized by an overwhelming surge of anger at what she and her sister had been put through, and she would take no more.

Stepping into the doorway, Freda shouldered the gun and pulled the trigger.

The night was lit by a bright flash and Freda's ears stung from the loud explosion the gun made. It thumped back into her shoulder, making her gasp, but she didn't have time to worry about the pain. Something was looming out of the night at her - something tall and terrifying.

Something from the worst nightmare she could ever have imagined.

They had just sat down around the table to eat beans and spaghetti, when an explosion slammed the canteen door shut. Dust fell from the ceiling, covering them all in a fine layer. Conal was on his feet in a flash, heading for the door. Opening it, he waved a hand in front of his face at the smoke billowing down the corridor.

Conal didn't think, he just reacted, all his old training flooding back to him. Running back into the canteen, he practically threw Troy from his chair. He could see that the boy was in shock. Taking him by the shoulders, he looked into the his eyes.

"Troy." Shaking him, Conal tried again. "Troy!"

The boy seemed to come out of his shock, his gaze settling on Conal's. "Wha—?"

"I've got no time to argue. So just do as I say. Troy, are you listening for Christ's sake?" Troy nodded. "Get the others out of here right now. Take them to the boat. Get it off shore. Wait for me around the side of the island. I'll swim out to you. You'll have to carry Pier's."

"But the Syc things?"

"You can outrun them. Even with Piers. Get out into the surf. They won't be able to follow you in the water. Now get moving."

Conal ran from the room, hoping that Troy would do as he'd been told, because he didn't have time to make sure.

Damn Drewsbeck. Damn him to hell.

Conal ran for the computer room. He needed that hard drive if he was going to bring Drewsbeck to justice. The Old Man had conned him into covering up at least six murders, and from the sounds of what was happening in The Pit, he had probably ordered a few more.

Hearing the others running passed the lab, Conal quickly pulled the PC tower from under the desk. Screwing out the knurled knobs holding the covers in place, he wrenched the sides off and located the hard drive.

“Shit!”

It was fixed onto the chassis by two small screws and he didn't have a screwdriver. Conal contemplated taking the whole tower for a moment, then dismissed the idea as impracticable. Running back to the canteen, he rummaged through the stuff Troy and Lee had collected earlier.

There it was, the metal nail file.

As Conal turned to go back to the computer room, Troy barged into the canteen. “The Syclers are in the ducting. I only just got the hatch closed in time.”

Conal could see that the boy was only just holding it together. He was panting and had a tremor in his voice.

“Do you have any matches on you?” Conal said. Troy nodded, bringing a lighter from his pocket. “Good. Here's what you do.”

Chapter 39

Macey couldn't scream. She had tried, but her throat seized up. She was beyond fear now, her whole body shaking so much she couldn't stand. Sitting on the stairs, peeking between spread fingers, she tried to deny what was happening in front of her. She closed her eyes - they were dry, like her mouth. Her whole body felt as though she had been dumped in a desert for a week.

One minute Freda had been there, standing in the doorway, swearing like a trouper, firing the gun at goodness knew what. The next, something had flown at her out of the darkness. Something long and fat and orange. Something that had gulped her sister's head into its mouth and had then flung her from side to side, like a rag doll tossed about by an angry child.

Macey had sat unmoving, watching the gun fly from her sister's lifeless fingers and bounce along the garden path.

Macey's eyes were so wide that they hurt, but even so, she couldn't blink them. To blink would be to miss the creature when it came for her - and that it would, she had no doubt.

What finally broke Macey from the panic that had kept her immobile on the stairs, was the sight of her sisters' body falling to the ground.

The monster had bitten Freda's head clean off!

Macey jumped to her feet and bounded up the stairs. Slamming the bedroom door closed behind her, she pushed the metal framed bed across the floor in front of the door.

No, that wasn't anywhere near enough.

Looking around, Macey ran across the room and heaved her shoulder against the heavy wardrobe. It moved slowly. In desperation she threw herself against it over and over again, making it squeak its slow way across the linoleum, millimetre by millimetre.

Having done all she could, Macey backed away and slid down the wall, clasping her hands around her legs, hugging her knees to her chest.

When she heard the first slithering on the stairs, she began to rock, a soft wailing coming from somewhere deep inside.

King peeked over the rock he was sheltering behind, squinting through the settling dust. As usual, he'd placed the charges just right. The explosives had blown the big cover upwards, flipping it over onto the concrete, which left the recycling shoot leading down into the laboratory clear for their descent.

Running from the rocks, King picked up a knotted rope. "Here you go," he said, tossing one end to Watts. "Tie that off to one of the lamp standards. I'll get the rest of the charges packed up and ready for you."

As his 2IC hurried off with the rope, King stuffed a large selection of explosives into a backpack. It should take about half-an-hour for them to set up the charges, then they'd be out of here.

Watts ran back, dropping the end of the rope down the chute. Donning the backpack he waited as King tried to contact Payne again.

No luck.

"Okay," Lee said, trying to hide the tremor in his voice, "when I say, open the hatch and get out-of-the-way."

Looking over his shoulder, Lee checked that Betts and Lyra were ready. They stared back at him and he could see the fear in their eyes. He hoped that his own wasn't so evident. He wiped the sweat from his hands again, then gripped the can tightly, thumb resting on the nozzle.

"Go," Lee said.

As Troy crashed the hatch aside, Lee flicked his lighter. The hair-spray whooshed out of the can in a long flame. Directing the miniature flamethrower at the Sycylers slithering their way towards him, Lee prayed that there would be enough spray in the can to get them out of the cave.

Dropping the lighter into Troy's hand, Lee pushed his way into the ducting. The girls crowded in tight behind him. Troy held back because, although Conal had told him to wait for him in the boat, there would be far too many Sycylers left for Conal to get through with no flamethrower.

Watching Lee and the girls make their way through the ducting, Troy spotted more Sycylers wriggling their way out from behind the safety of the filters after they had passed.

Where the hell was Conal? What was he doing?

Troy turned back to the inspection hatch, clutching his can. He wasn't going to wait any longer. The thought of going through the ducting on his own, surrounded by Sycylers, terrified him, but he'd have to do it.

Grabbing the half-conscious Piers by an arm, Troy dragged him upright and stepped into the duct, pulling Piers with him. Holding his lighter aloft, Troy flicked the wheel to ignite it.

The lighter shot from his sweaty hand like a bar of wet soap and clattered to the floor.

King knelt, taking the backpack that Watts was thrusting up out of the hole at him. King hadn't taken into account how tight the chute was and Watts had almost got himself stuck in it. His 2IC's white face looked up at him from the hole.

He didn't say anything. He didn't need to, his expression said it all.

"Okay, okay," King placated him. "I'll pull the rope back up after you're in there, then I'll lower the stuff down to you. Give me a pull on the rope when you're down there."

Watts nodded and disappeared.

While he waited for Watts to descend the rope, King tried the radio again. He was worried. Something must have gone really wrong for Payne to be out of radio contact for so long. King switched channels but got the same result. Nada.

Feeling a tug on the rope, King swiftly pulled it to the surface and tied on the backpack. He fed the explosives down to Watts, wondering whether to try the radio one last time, knowing that once underground the radio wouldn't work.

Shaking his head, King turned his back to the hole and grabbed the knotted rope. Easing his way down into the chute, King braced his back against the concrete. Wrapping the rope around his ankle, he clamped his other foot on top and began the long descent.

As King's head disappeared into the chute, the creature moved out from the rocks where it had been feeding on the faeces it had found earlier. The big Sycler could sense its nest somewhere nearby. Speeding up, it began slithering towards the dark opening.

Chapter 40

A thump on the bedroom door brought Macey to her feet, her head moving back and forth in a desperate search for escape.

There wasn't any.

Macey didn't want to die like this. She wanted to see her daughter marry; wanted to see her grandchildren; wanted to live to an old age; to sit by the window, watching the clouds pass by on a bright summer's day.

The door thumped again, louder this time, moving the bed and wardrobe a couple of millimetres into the room. Macey stifled a scream, tearing at her hair in her fear of what was to come.

A shaft of light unexpectedly lit the bedroom ceiling, moving across the coombes - the headlights of a car passing by on the nearby main road.

The window!

Macey ran to the skylight set into the roof. She pushed at it, but it wouldn't move. It was fitted with some kind of burglar-proof lock and she didn't have the key. Pulling at the bar again, she broke off a fingernail, her blood leaving a long smear down the yellow paintwork.

Grabbing a small stool from in front of the dressing table, Macey swung it at the window. The glass cracked, but the stool fell to pieces in her hands.

Behind her the bedroom door thumped again, opening another few millimetres.

"It's okay Troy, I've got it," Conal said, scooping the lighter from the floor as he pushed his way past the boy into the ducting. He grabbed the can from Troy's hand. "You concentrate on getting Piers out."

Troy grabbed Piers around his waist. Piers moaned, shaking his head, trying to get to his feet. Conal sprayed the can and lit it. The Syclers moved away from the flame, some dropping onto the floor as Conal crisped them. Up ahead he could just make out the other three, their flame swinging back and forth as Lee worked his way towards the exit.

"Christ, there right behind me," Troy said, pushing into Conal's back in his panic.

Conal tripped, almost falling to the floor, but managed to recover. "For Christ's sake Troy, back off and give me some room, will you? You'll get us both killed."

Swapping the can to his other hand when the heat began to burn his thumb, Conal pushed forward as quickly as he dared, picking off the Syclers as they came at him. He was beginning to worry they might not make it. The can already felt more than half empty, and the Syclers still loomed ahead for as far as he could see.

Macey fell to the floor on her knees. Folding her hands together, she began to pray. She'd never been a religious person, only attending church once a year for the New Year carols, but tonight she put all her heart in it, praying as she used to as a child when Christmas neared: *"Please God, I've been good all year. Just like mummy said I must. Please send Santa with that doll."*

Macey felt something under her knee and looked down. It was a dress. There were more clothes piled high all around her. Looking over her shoulder, she spotted the open cupboard door, and standing inside, the big metal trunk.

The biggest thump yet sounded, drawing Macey's gaze back to the bedroom door. It was almost half open now and as she watched, a long shadow began entering the room.

Jumping to her feet, Macey threw the remaining clothes from the trunk, jumped inside, pulled the cupboard door closed, and knelt in the trunk. She heard more noises from the bedroom, furniture moving, sucky, slithery sounds. Whimpering, Macey lay on her side and pulled the lid down.

It was completely black inside the trunk. She couldn't see a thing, even with her eyes open. The deep blackness frightened her, but not as much as the creature that was making all that noise on the other side of the thin cupboard door.

Macey closed her eyes and began hyperventilating.

"Stay in the water as much as you can. Keep off the sand." Conal's shouts rebounded off the rocks as they raced down the centre of the cave, dragging Piers between them.

Sensing the prey below, the Syclers above began dropping off the roof of the cave. Conal batted a couple from Piers' shoulders, pulling his coat over his own head as protection.

Running out onto the beach, they headed towards the boat, heaving Piers over the side. Then gathering around the bow, they joined the others in pushing the boat into the water, desperate to get it moving. Scrambling through the water as the boat finally left the sand, they threw themselves over the sides into the bottom, gasping and spluttering on seawater.

"There coming," Betts screamed. "Quick Troy, get the boat started."

Troy span around, grabbing the starter cord, pulling it three times. The engine spluttered but didn't start.

"The key," Lee shouted.

Troy turned the ignition key and tried again. The outboard roared into life and Troy gunned it, pulling the boat around in a tight circle away from the shore. The boat tilted, almost throwing Betts over the side. She screamed, already halfway over when she felt a strong hand grip her wrist and pull her back again. She tumbled on top of Piers. He looked up at her with a big smile on his face.

A wave crashed over the side of the boat, soaking them all.

“It’s okay, I’ve got it now,” Troy shouted, straightening the boat so it was headed for the mainland.

Conal leant forward in the bouncing boat, head in hands, hoping against hope that they would get back to the mainland before whoever was on the island discovered that they had been there.

King stopped, swaying slightly as his 2IC pulled on the rope below him.

That was the sound of an outboard motor. Somebody had been on the island. Shit, he had to stop them.

“Watts, I think we’ve got someone leaving the island. You carry on and set the charges, and don’t forget the hard drive. I’ll take care of the intruders.”

A loud, “Okay,” echoed up to him as King climbed his way out of the chute. Running across the concrete, King jumped into the helicopter and started it up. Within minutes the helicopter was airborne and King was heading out over the sea.

Chapter 41

Watts swung himself back and forth on the end of the rope until he could step off onto the wall that had been built around the deep pit in the floor. Jumping down, he tugged on the rope and waited for King to lower the explosives.

The place Watts found himself in was littered with glass and soil, obviously caused when some of the shelving secured to the walls had collapsed for some reason. Crunching his way through the mess into the corridor, he was more than a little surprised to find that the lights were working.

King had told him that nobody had been on the island for at least five years, so how was this possible? He shrugged. *Must be a direct connection to the mainland or something. Just made his job all the easier.*

Watts did a quick search of the building, finding only one computer situated in a small office behind the main laboratory. It was laying on the floor, its covers off to one side. Picking it up, he looked inside the chassis. The hard drive had been taken out.

He stood quietly for a moment, going over everything he'd seen since he'd entered the building in his mind, then walked back to the canteen. Four plates were set out on the table with what looked to be spaghetti. Moving over to them, wiping an extended finger over one of the plates. Examining his finger, he licked it.

Bean juice. Still wet. Somebody had been here just a short time ago.

Radioing in his findings, King told him to set up the charges, blow the building and meet him at the end of the island. Unloading the heavy backpack, Watts got to work.

King swung the helicopter back towards the island, trying to guess which direction the boat was headed.

The radio sounded in his headphones and King acknowledged the incoming call. "Hard drive's been taken and somebody has been here recently. Very recently," his 2IC said.

"Okay, continue setting the charges. As soon as you're ready, blow the place. I'll pick you up on the rocks at the narrow end of the island."

"Right."

King turned his head, searching the sea below. Something had caught his eye. Yes, there it was, a long line of white cutting through the waves. A boat had passed this way just a few minutes ago.

Turning the helicopter, King pulled out his pistol, placed it on the seat beside him, and turned the helicopter parallel with the wake.

Conal lifted his head and listened hard. A light glimmered over to their left. Hell, this was exactly what he'd been fearing might happen. Whoever was on the island had heard them.

"Hey, there's a 'copter," Troy called above the noise of the engine, slowing the boat down.

"No don't stop," Conal shouted.

"But they can help us," Lee said, pointing at the helicopter now headed straight towards them.

Conal watched the bright beam of light pointing down from beneath the aircraft like an accusing finger, his mouth drying as he realised what was about to happen.

"Get down all of you and stay down. Here, let me have the controls," he shouted, pushing Troy to one side.

"What is it? What's the matter," Betts said, hanging on to the side of the boat as Conal set it into a series of turns designed to evade the oncoming helicopter.

"I don't know," Lee said. "He's gone bloody mad. Stay here and Troy and I'll sort him out."

Lee grabbed Troy's shoulder, shouting in his ear. Troy nodded then shouted something back. Lyra couldn't make out what they were saying to each other, but sat up straighter when they both unexpectedly lunged at Conal, pulling him away from the controls. The boat jerked, then began turning in a large circle.

Troy was behind Conal, his arm around the man's throat. Lee was in front, pulling him to his knees by his lapels. Conal was trying to speak, pulling desperately at Troy's arm.

"Quick Betts. Stop the boat or that 'copter's going to miss us," Troy shouted.

Betts scrambled across the boat, losing her footing as she was hit by the struggling men. Landing on her knees, she grabbed the throttle grip and twisted it. The boat slowed down and began rocking in the waves. Lyra squinted and shaded her eyes against the helicopter's bright light as it flew directly overhead.

Blinking back the tears, she watched the aircraft turn back, just a couple of metres off the sea now, twisting sideways so the pilot could see them. He held up his hand and Lyra waved back at him.

"No!" Conal screamed, throwing off Troy and Lee so he could launch himself at Lyra.

Lyra fell, Conal on top of her. Betts was thrown backwards, her arms spread wide, a large bullet hole in the centre of her forehead. She turned slowly and collapsed into the sea.

They were all immobilised with shock, unable to think - except Conal, who grabbed the throttle, twisting it wide, weaving the boat away from the helicopter.

"Get down in the bottom of the boat," he yelled as the aircraft headed their way again.

Huddling down into the bottom of the boat, they could do little else, but watch the helicopter fly over. They heard the

shots this time, the bullets hitting the surrounding waves with small spurts of water. Conal swung the boat in a different direction, knowing that he would never be able to outrun the helicopter but still trying.

Lee suddenly seemed to realise that Betts had disappeared and lunged to the side of the boat, screaming out her name. He stood up, searching the dark waves for her. Conal saw the blood and cloth splat away from his arm as the boy was hit. He managed to catch Lee's arm, but the boy twisted out of his grip, grabbing at Conal's jacket, hooking his fingers into his pocket as he fell.

Conal found himself dragged along the boat as Lee went over the side. With nobody at the controls, the boat turned into a tight circle, swamping everyone with water. Conal went for Lee's wrist again, trying to pull the boy back over the side. The boat hit a wave, throwing him sideways and he lost his grip.

As the boat pounded down into the trough of the next wave, Conal felt his pocket rip away. Lee's white face disappeared under the waves for a moment, then reappeared a little way from the boat. Conal reached out for him, but the boat changed direction, passing straight over the top of the boy. Conal heard the sickening crunch and saw the fountain of blood - black in the moonlight - as the top of Lee's head was torn to pieces by the propeller.

Troy mouthed a soft, "Shit," and was sick over the side of the boat.

Before Conal could work his way back to the controls, the helicopter came in low over the water at them again.

King was really enjoying himself picking off the people in the boat one at a time. He'd leave Conal to last, maybe shoot him in the arms and legs before killing him. But if he was going to do that, he'd need to disable the outboard motor.

Coming in fast, King swung the helicopter towards the stern of the boat, steadying his gun against the helicopter's doorframe. Taking the shot, he smiled when the boat's engine exploded.

The boat almost upended, throwing the occupants into the water. King laughed. Now they were easy targets, ready to be taken down at his leisure. He took the helicopter higher to get a better overall view.

King never saw the small engine bolt flying through the air towards him - it was far too small. Smashing through the perspex canopy, it hit him in the temple, ripping a chunk of bone from his eye-socket. King's world went dim and grey, and it felt as though he was spinning on an axis. He knew he was dying, he could see his brain matter splattered across the cockpit controls.

Hang on man, just a few seconds longer.

As his last deed, King positioned the helicopter, just so, over the people in the sea below him. Then tilting the nose of the machine downwards, he throttled it up to full speed.

Chapter 42

Hearing the scream of the engine, Conal looked up, and for a moment couldn't make any sense of what he was seeing. The helicopter was heading straight for them! Surely the pilot would pull it up in a moment. But then Conal saw the pilot's face flattened against the canopy and knew that he wasn't about to do any such thing.

"Dive!" he screamed to the others. "Get under the water."

Conal swam as deep as he could, but even so, the pressure of the helicopter slamming into the sea above tumbled him about so much that he didn't know which way was up or down. A shadow passed close beside him and he reached out, pulling Lyra to his side. Kicking out, he swam upwards, dragging Lyra with him, coughing water from his lungs when his head broke the surface.

A few seconds later, Piers and Troy bobbed into view. He swam across to them, pulling Lyra behind him, supporting her chin in his hand. She seemed to be unconscious and had a long cut down the side of her face. He could see that Piers had a bad burn on his head and a large patch of hair was missing, but he didn't seem aware of it.

Piers gulped a deep breath. "We need to get back to the island," he said.

"No, we can't take the chance," Conal answered. "There might have been more than one of them."

"Then we'll have to swim to the mainland," Troy said.

Conal turned to look at the faint lights shed by the houses along the distant shore, knowing that there was no way they could make such a perilous swim with an unconscious girl in tow.

The Sycler hesitated when it reached the edge of the hole, its tentacles flicking back and forth across the rope. It could smell its nest somewhere below, but also a strong scent of prey. The Sycler was hungry - hunger was all it knew - all it had ever known.

Moving onto the rope, the Sycler twisted its body around the fibres, but not to eat them as it was driven to do, but to descend, because for the moment a higher drive was motivating it - the drive to reach the nesting site far below and lay more eggs.

A cloud passed in front of the moon, casting a long, thin shadow that raced across the concrete. As the Sycler made its way into the chute and down the rope, the passing shadow darkened its body from orange to black.

Watts stood up and eased his back. He'd been setting charges for at least thirty-five minutes and had just one area left - the Electrical Intake Room. Once that had been taken care of, he could set the detonator timer and get the hell out of there.

Backing out of the toilet, Watts paid out the detonator wire, heading towards the last room. He stopped, turning his head to the left, his eyes narrowing. Something had moved down at the end of the building, he was sure of it. Listening hard, he heard no sounds and shrugged. Giving a quiet laugh he got back to work.

He was getting jittery and imagining things. Too much time on my own in this creepy bloody place.

Watts soon had everything connected up and ready. After taking the time to give his work one last check, he set the timer to seven minutes. That would give him plenty of time to get back up top and make his way down the pick-up point.

Jumping up onto the wall surrounding the pit, Watts grabbed the rope, then flinched, looking at his hands. Something slimy covered his palms. Wiping his hands on his trousers, he examined the rope. The whole thing was covered in the slime. It would make climbing it difficult, but not impossible. Raising his hands, he grabbed the rope and started for the surface.

Watts had climbed about a metre when he caught a movement from the corner of his eye again. This time when he swung his head and looked over his shoulder, his heart froze.

What looked like a giant slug was standing upright behind him, swaying back and forth, as though trying to hypnotise him. Not taking his eyes from the horrendous sight, Watts powered himself up the rope, slipping on the slime a couple of times in his haste, but he gritted his teeth and kept going.

Watts almost made it, but at the last second the Sycler stretched to its full extent and grabbed his foot. Watts screamed as the creature's tongue started rasping its way into the interior of his foot through his boot. Gasping, face creased in agony, the adrenaline pumping through his veins, he pulled himself upwards hand over hand, the muscles on his forearms standing out like cords.

How long had it been? How long did he have left before the explosives blew?

He had no way of knowing, all sense of time had stretch away into an unending nightmare. He kept climbing, grunting loudly as he pulled himself nearer to the top. Keep going. Keep going.

Then Watts squeezed his eyes tight shut and screamed so loudly it hurt his ears. The weight hanging from his foot had suddenly gone, just disappeared. He looked down at the remains of his mangled leg for a moment, not really believing what he saw. His whole foot had gone, all that was left was a mess of tendons, veins and shredded skin flapping about. The creature lay far below him, eye-stalks pointed in his direction.

Watts went back to his task, hands bleeding and raw as he slowly moved higher up the rope. He could see the lighter patch of the circular opening above him now, and it gave him the energy to keep going.

Watts was almost at the top of the rope when the explosion hit him. The raging flames crisped his skin and the

percussive force stripped the muscles from his body. He fell back down into the inferno below, hands outstretched to the moon above him, as though beseeching it for help.

The explosion sent a spout of flames and debris high into the air above the island, and as chunks of rock splashed into the sea all around them, Conal realised how lucky they were that none of them had been hit.

Lyra opened her eyes and moaned. Conal held her head above the water, wiping her face with his hand.

“What the hell just happened?” Troy said.

“Someone blew up the lab,” Conal said.

“Why?”

“To cover up what’s been going on there. And it’s my guess there were after—” Conal felt for his pocket, his stomach contracting when he realised that it had been torn off, gone, along with the hard drive. “Now we definitely can’t go back to the island,” he said, pushing the loss of the hard drive from his mind. “Whoever did that will be waiting to get picked up by the helicopter.”

Lyra began sobbing quietly. “I can’t take any more of this,” she said. “I really can’t.”

“Lyra. Lyra, listen to me,” Conal said. “You’ve done really well so far. But we have to swim to the mainland. Do you think you can do that?” Lyra shook her head. “How about you Piers? Could you swim that far while Troy and I stay here with Lyra?”

“No need,” Troy said. “Hang on here. Won’t be long.”

As Troy took off with powerful strokes towards the island, Conal shouted after him, but either the boy didn’t hear, or chose to ignore him.

Conal watched Troy swim to the stern of the sunken dingy and pull himself over. He reappeared a moment later with something in his hand and dived into the sea. Five minutes later he was back at their side, bobbing in the sea with a big smile on his face.

“A double lilo,” Troy said, unrolling it. Fishing in his pocket, he pulled out a small rubber ball-pump and attached it to the valve. “Hold it out straight while I pump it up.”

They were soon arranged around the lilo, hands grasping the edges of their make-shift life-raft.

“I reckon if one of us takes a rest on it while the others kick-swim, we should get across to the mainland with no problem,” Troy said.

“Tell you what Troy. Lyra’s all in. Why don’t you and her get on the lilo? Piers and me’ll take the first shift.”

“You sure?”

When Conal nodded, they helped Lyra onto the lilo. It took a couple of attempts but eventually she was aboard, laying in Troy’s arms, cuddled into his warmth.

Conal and Piers had been swimming for perhaps half-an-hour when Piers looked at Conal. “There’s been something I’ve been wanting to tell you,” he said.

Piers settled his chin on his crossed arms, feet splashing the sea, rubbing the tips of his fingers on the material of the lilo, thinking back to the time he’d seen his first alien.

“It was five years ago,” he said to Conal, “when I went over to the island on my own.”

Chapter 43

Piers told Conal how he had run the boat up onto the beach on Flat Rock Island and sat listening. The last thing he wanted was to get caught by the scientists and be taken into the laboratory so they could experiment on him.

Running across the sand, he made for the steps leading up the side of the cliff. When he was halfway up, he saw the glow of the big lights surrounding the field above him and slowed down. Reaching the top, he knelt, looking through the low fence at a huge slab of concrete, his mouth hanging open.

He knew it! They were waiting for the aliens to bring their ship in, just like in the film. He had to get inside and see what was happening. He needed to see one of the aliens, to find out if they were like in his books.

Running back down the steps, Piers worked his way along the sand towards the cave he knew was just around the big rock outcrop on the beach. He'd last been in the cave six months ago with the boatman and a couple of engineers. He often helped the boatman take the staff across to the island, but this time they'd also taken two enormous round crates over with them as well. Two engineers had loaded the crates on the boat, both dressed in light blue overalls with a small yellow flash on the pocket, reading, 'Arckle Filters'.

Piers had helped the engineers change the big filters, and in the process had discovered the hatch leading into the building off the ducting. That night, after he got back from the island, he went home and thought about what he'd seen.

And now here he was, back on the island, edging his way passed the filters, looking for that hatch. Opening it, Piers stepped through and took out the torch he'd brought along. Moving over to the door, he listened, then pulled it open a crack, listening again. He could hear talking somewhere in the distance, and the soft hum of a fan.

Easing his way out of the room into the dimly lit corridor, he slid the torch into his back pocket. The room he'd exited was at one end of the corridor, at the other end he could just make out a lift button set on the wall. Stopping at each door in turn to listen, Piers moved down the corridor towards the voices. Standing outside the canteen door, he heard two people talking inside.

"I told him that I want the project closed down," a woman's voice said.

"After all the money he's invested, I can't see him doing that," a man answered.

"Yes, he tried to pull that guilt trip on me, but I told him I had no intention of carrying on." The sound of a spoon rattling in a cup covered the next few words. "—sort of threatened him with the papers."

"You did what?"

"Well I would never do that of course. Think what it would do to my reputation. But I wasn't going to let him know that was I?"

A whine came from the far end of the corridor and Piers cocked his head, looking towards it. The whine got louder and he realised that the lift was coming. Turning, he ran back along the corridor, sliding to a stop as a door opened further down.

Somebody appeared, still looking back into the room. "I'll check out the results before we leave tonight," the woman said.

Piers ducked into the nearest room, pulling the door too behind him. The woman's footsteps passed by in the direction of the canteen and he stood looking through the sliver of a crack he'd left between the door and the frame. The lift bell pinged and a man in a dark-blue security uniform stepped out into the corridor. He had his hands on his head and was quickly followed by two other men holding guns. They were dressed in black clothes and wore black balaclavas.

Pushing the guard down the corridor the men marched him into the canteen and followed him inside. Piers heard four shots. He gasped, his eyes widening, finding it difficult to breathe in the room's obnoxious atmosphere.

A door farther down the corridor opened and a man's voice shouted, "What's going on?"

Piers heard another shot and looked towards the man who had stepped out into the corridor. His white lab coat had blossomed with red over his heart, and he was staring up the corridor with wide eyes. Looking down at his chest, the man fell to his knees and collapsed on to his side. It was obvious to Piers that he was dead.

Heart pounding Piers eased the door closed, leaning his forehead against it. He was trembling and sweating and could hardly breathe. If they found him, they would kill him. Of that he had no doubt.

Having closed the door, the room was now in complete darkness and Piers didn't want to turn the light on in case it attracted attention. Shining his torch around the room, he searched for a place to hide. A small wall surrounded a sort of pool of stuff in the middle of the floor. Walking over, he jerked his head away when the smell hit him, nearly gagging. As he watched, the surface of the pool rippled, as though something was swimming around just under the surface.

Crossing to the back of the room, Piers found a tier of shelving on which were enormous glass tanks with metal lids on top of them. Hearing footsteps in the hall, he panicked and threw himself on top of the lowest shelf, easing towards the back of the metal cover. The cover was hot but not unbearably so.

A few moments later the door to the room opened and he heard footsteps enter. They paused, then headed towards the pond. After a brief pause a torch clicked on and a beam of light swept around the room.

Piers pushed himself as far as he could down behind the lid of the tank he was laying on, praying that he wouldn't be discovered. The man seemed to be examining the tanks on the shelf above him. Piers heard one of the lids move and cringed, worrying at his bottom lip with his teeth.

There was a sudden splash from the pool and Piers watched through the glass as the man swept his torch over towards

it. There was a grunt, then the torch switched off and the door closed.

The man had left the room. Piers took a deep breath and close his eyes. He stayed down behind the tank, listening to the men searching the rest of the facility for what seemed like hours, during which he heard another shot, then someone pleading for their life, followed by another shot. Soon after that, the lift doors opened and the lift departed with a whine.

Piers stayed where he was for the next half-hour, too frightened to move, until eventually the cramp in his leg got too much to bear and he tried to get out from behind the tank. Finding himself stuck, he wriggled around, pushing his back against the wall, easing the tank forward. It unexpectedly shifted and he fell right down behind it, stuck between the glass and the wall. There was only one thing he could do now. Using his hands and knees, he jerked it off the shelf, cringing when it hit the floor and shattered.

Climbing off the shelf, Piers hurried over to the door, easing it open. He looked out. Two bodies were laying in the corridor, both unmoving. He stood there for a moment, not sure what to do, wanting to help but not knowing how.

Sensing a movement behind him, Piers turned, glancing over his shoulder, gasping. It was his first sight of an alien and it was even worse than the things he had seen in the films and read about in his books. Its orange body was dripping pieces of vegetation and other matter. The stink was unbelievable. Its mouth opened and a long tongue waved at him. He could clearly see the backward facing teeth laid out in rows along it, starting at the back of its throat, then out along the tongue's surface, over the end and back along underneath.

The alien leant over the wall of the pit, slivering out of the pool onto the floor with a wet slap. It was enormous. Piers couldn't tear his gaze away from the alien as he backed down the corridor, one hand held out behind him.

When Piers stumbled on one of the bodies, it dragged him from his terror and he turned, running down the corridor to the Electrical Intake Room, screaming at the top of his voice. The hatch crashed to the floor and he threw himself into the ducting.

Chapter 44

Conal looked at the man swimming beside him, thinking how lucky he'd been to get out in one piece.

"I didn't leave my room for a week," Piers said. "And when I eventually told my mother what I'd seen on the island, she just shook her head at me, as though I'd been watching too many horror films on TV, and had had a nightmare, like I did when I was a kid."

Conal turned his attention back to the shore, which was surprisingly close now.

A short while later they were close enough to make out the people lined up along the quayside.

Conal stopped swimming and they all floated in the water. Lyra had recovered and was now in the water too, having taken her turn in paddling the lilo ashore.

"Look," Conal said, "I really don't want to get caught up with the police just yet." When Troy went to speak, Conal held up his hand. "No hear me out, Troy. Whoever was on the island, it's certain that they were looking for the hard drive I took. I'm sure of it. And if I'm right, then Lyra's mother and aunt, and Willow and her parents are in danger. If we spend time trying to explain what's happened to the police, even if we get them to believe us, the guys on the island will have time to swim back to the mainland. It would be too late to stop them. I really do believe Lyra's and Willow's family are in danger."

They floated on the waves, holding on to the lilo, each lost in their own thoughts. A shout from the quayside finally brought them out of their reveries.

"Okay," Lyra said in a firm voice. "I think you might be right. And even if you're not, it won't do any harm to go check first, will it?"

"Okay," said Troy, "let's get to it then."

Piers just nodded and they paddled their way parallel to the shore for awhile, leaving the crowd behind them.

Fifteen minutes later they were standing outside Sea View Holdings cottage, surveying the broken front door. Lyra realised that Conal had been right when he'd said they were in danger.

"Auntie! Mum!" she screamed, breaking away from the others and running into the cottage, her eyes widening as she looked around. The downstairs rooms were a wreck.

Troy ran into the cottage behind Lyra, taking her by the shoulders as she looked around, the worry plain on her face for all to see.

"Where are they, Troy?" she whispered. "What's happened to them?"

Conal ran up the stairs, pushing his way into the bedroom. "Up here," he shouted down to the others when he heard the banging coming from the cupboard.

Troy and Lyra burst into the bedroom as Conal yanked open the cupboard door. Squatting down, he released the self-locking latch on the trunk and raised the lid. Laying in a foetal position inside the trunk was a woman he guessed to be Lyra's mother. The resemblance was unmistakable.

"Mum!" Lyra cried, rushing across the room to help Conal ease her mother out of the trunk.

The woman seemed to be in a state of deep shock, her lips and hands trembling as she stood up. She collapsed and Conal caught her under the arms, all the time talking to her as he helped her across the room towards the stairs. She balked at going any further when they reached the landing and it took all of their persuasion to get her to go downstairs.

"It's okay mum," Lyra whispered in her ear over and over. "I've got you now. Whatever it was has gone now. Come on, just one more step, one more. Please."

Conal, realising that Lyra's mother needed medical attention as soon as possible, pulled out his mobile. The screen was wet and when he held it to his ear, he could hear no tone.

"Anybody got a mobile that works?" Conal asked. Troy and Lyra pulled theirs out, looking at the screens and shaking their heads. Piers didn't have one. "We'll have to get your mother out to the car, Lyra," Conal said.

Surrounding Macey, they set off along the garden path, Troy leading the way. They'd got halfway to the front gate when a man stepped out of the shadows, pointing a gun at Conal's head in a two handed grip.

"Hello Mr Mitchell," he said, "So nice to meet you at last."

Chapter 45

Payne heard footsteps approaching and knelt in the shrubbery flanking the garden path. Having recognised his target from the photo King had supplied, Payne decided to wait for them to come out of the house again. He'd have to kill them all of course, but Mitchell was the real problem. He was ex-Special Forces and would need to be taken out first.

As Payne waited, he smiled to himself, his thoughts going back to the pig. Hearing the screaming pig had unsettled him, and anyway, he didn't know how near the neighbours might be. The last thing he wanted right now was someone turning up to find out what all the bloody noise was about.

After throwing a warning at the two women, he eased his way out of the front door, waiting a few minutes for his eyes to adjust to the dark. Running on his toes, he made his way towards the shed, stopping when he saw a man struggling with a pig. The man had the animal by the back legs and was pulling it towards a van. It was obvious the pig didn't want to go and it let out another loud squeal.

Moving around behind the man, Payne walked closer. The man was too engrossed in what he was doing to notice Payne creeping up behind him. The pig suddenly broke free and headed across the garden. Payne grabbed the man in a strangle hold, pressing his forearm into the back of his neck, locking it off by grasping his other arm. The man struggled, pulling at Payne's forearm, mouth opening and closing soundlessly as he gulped for air.

Payne kept up the pressure and the man slowly stopped struggling, collapsing down onto his knees. Payne went with him, tightening his grip, keeping the hold locked for a further three minutes. He knew it was surprisingly hard to strangle a big man to death.

Finally releasing his hold, Payne grabbed the man's head between his hands and twisted sharply. Then dropping the man to the floor, he turned to head back to the cottage.

Something rose out of the shadows beside him - something very big. Payne pulled out his gun, turning towards the threat. He was a fast mover, but whatever had been waiting in the shadows moved faster, slamming into his side.

Payne was thrown across the grass, slipping in the mud on the top of the bank leading down to the brook. Arms cartwheeling, he couldn't stop himself from running backwards down the steep slope, where he smashed into a tree. The last thing he heard was his gun going off and the splash of water as he fell into the brook.

Waking sometime later, Payne recovered his gun, checked it was okay, and scrambled his way up the bank. He had no idea how long he'd been unconscious for and was worried that the two women might have got free.

Passing the place where he'd killed the pig-man, Payne hesitated, surprised that the man's body was no longer there. That shouldn't have been possible, unless of course, he was losing his touch and he'd only injured him.

Shaking his head, Payne moved through the undergrowth, ducking down when he heard voices approaching.

They stood on the path facing the man with the gun. Conal recognised a mercenary when he saw one. The man knew what he was doing, the gun in his hand was as steady as his hard stare.

"What do you want?" Conal asked quietly, his own gaze flicking here and there, searching for a way out of trouble.

"To kill you," the man said, pulling the trigger.

Lyra screamed and Piers gave a muted shout, but the bullet hadn't been aimed at Conal, it had been aimed over his head, at the large creature that had risen up behind him.

The bullet hit the hideous looking thing square in the middle of its body, having no effect whatsoever. Ignoring the screams all around him, Payne kept firing until the gun was empty. Then he kept pulling the trigger, rooted to the spot as the huge monster waved its body over him.

The Sycler swung its attention to Lyra, who was still screaming uncontrollably. It hesitated a moment, then lowered the upper part of its body, opening its great maw. Lyra was overwhelmed by the stench and stopped her screaming. The Sycler's maw opened further and descended towards her head.

Troy rushed forward, spinning Lyra clear, but in doing so, put his own body in the path of the Sycler. Troy's head disappeared into the Sycler's mouth, which closed with a loud, wet chomp.

Troy's body was flung from side to side, his feet just missing Payne's head - who was still standing where he had been, trying to reload his empty pistol.

Lyra was screaming again, punching at the Sycler's body.

Something caught Conal's attention and he ran to the front door. Troy's headless body flew through the air, landing on the cottage roof in a cascade of slates, before rolling down onto the path with a wet thwack.

Shouting at the others to get back, Conal tossed the red petrol container high into the air. It arched down towards the Sycler and at the same moment, Conal threw himself forward, shoulder rolling as he scooped up the shotgun he'd spotted in the shrubbery. Continuing the roll onto one knee, he shouldered the gun and fired.

The can exploded into chunks, spraying Payne and the Sycler with petrol. Flicking his lighter, Conal threw it at the creature and turned his back.

The crump of the petrol exploding into flames threw Conal onto his face. Turning over he watched as the Sycler and Payne seemed to do a jerking kind of death-dance around one another, the flames lighting up the front of the cottage. The Sycler's maw opened for one last time and Conal could see Troy's head speared on its tongue.

Closing his eyes, Conal spewed up on the path, heaving over and over again. With a long wailing cry, the Sycler

collapsed on top of Payne and lay still. The smell of burnt flesh hung over them all.

Running down the path, Piers turned Conal over and slapped at his back, putting out the smouldering flames. Luckily his leather jacket had taken the worst of the explosion.

Staggering to his feet, Conal followed Piers towards the gate, trying to ignore the crackles, pops and hisses issuing from the burning bodies behind him. Putting his arm around Lyra's shoulder, he turned her face away from the scene. She shook for a minute, then burst into tears. Piers helped Macey along as they headed for her car.

Conal drove them to the hospital, dropping them off at the door. "Piers," he called as the man help Lyra and her mother towards the A&E entrance, "give me a half-hour start will you? I've got some things back in London that need taking care of."

Piers looked back at the man who'd twice saved his life and nodded. He watched the car's red rear lights until they had faded out of sight, then turned back towards the hospital, ushering Lyra and her mother inside.

AFTERMATH

Lyra was sitting in her bedroom, updating her Facebook, page when her mobile buzzed at her side.

“How are you doing?” a voice said when she answered it.

It had been two months since she’d heard Conal’s voice and it brought a rare smile to her lips.

“So, so,” she said. “You?”

“Pretty good. Did you see the News a couple of weeks back?”

“About Drewsbeck you mean?”

“Uh huh.”

“Yeah, it said he fell down the stairs of his mansion during the night and broke his neck.”

“That’s right,” Conal said. “Shame really, but there you go.” He paused a moment and she wondered if he’d rung off. “Just rang to give you a heads up on the latest event in the Drewsbeck empire,” he said finally.

Lyra sat back. “Which is?”

“Watch the News tonight,” he answered and rang off.

Lyra looked at her mobile to get his number but it showed as withheld.

That night Lyra watched the News, her eyebrows rising when the newscaster reported an explosion on an island off Japan. Cause unknown, it had destroyed a factory owned by the late multi-billionaire, Dermot Drewsbeck. The factory was believed to have been undertaking experiments in the production of protein for the third world food market.

Lyra snuggled back in her chair and turned the TV off, a soft smile playing across her lips, wondering if she would ever see the enigmatic Conal again.

If you enjoyed reading this book and would like a personal message and a cover signature from the author visit this webpage:

<http://www.authorgraph.com/authors/peterbarns>

About the Author



Peter Barns lives in the Highlands of Scotland.
Retired, he now spends his time writing
and refurbishing houses.

Connect with him online

Website: boddaert.co.uk

Blog: boddaert.co.uk

Twitter: twitter.com/peterbarns

Face book: facebook.com/BoddaertBooks

Smashwords: smashwords.com/profile/view/boddaert

Lulu: lulu.com/spotlight/boddaert

Also available by the same author

The Gastropoda Imperative

Payback

7 Days In May

Fire Rock

Hobart at Home

Tears

Burnt Toast

Hole

Love Is

Cautionary Tales

Twittclass

Tales From The Cottage