

THE SILENCE OF THE STONES

BY

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Though people living on the St Davids peninsula may recognise the location of Coedy-Cwm, the village, its people and the events are fictitious. Any similarity to real events or people is coincidental.

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Dedicated to John and Elia Knight, for always being the best they could be.

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The Vigil

I wait

As darkness steals the day
And silence like a blanket falls.
Far points of distant, lonely light
Still glimmer in a moonless void;
Life stops.

I wait

Behind a pane of window glass,
Trapped, separated from my life
But, like a long-dead star
For countless eons shining bright,
Hope burns.

I wait:

Dark, smothering nights stretch endless
To a dawn that will not break.
I hold your image to my heart,
Bright smile and sparkling eyes, lest I

Forget

I wait.

For all those who wait.

Prologue

Katherine pulled the duvet over her head and pressed her hands over her ears. Her parents' raised voices carried through the floorboards and made her curl into a tight ball. It hadn't always been like this, though she couldn't remember when the shouting had begun. She took her hands from her ears.

'That child...'

She clamped them back again and curled into a smaller ball. What had she done wrong? She wouldn't do it again, she promised, if only she knew what it was she'd done. Hot tears soaked her hair. The garble of voices fell quiet. Footsteps thudded on the stairs and the door to her bedroom opened. She didn't want to be Katherine anymore: one day, she promised herself, when she was grown-up, she wouldn't be. She clutched her need tight inside her, built a little wall around it so it wouldn't cry out, and pretended to sleep.

Chapter One

The inside of the second-hand shop was as dilapidated as the outside. Alana picked through paperbacks, trying to quell the feeling of impending doom that Dad's phone call had reawakened. She selected a Sarah Stuart and a John Grisham for fifty pence apiece: she hadn't come looking for literary inspiration.

A long silk scarf caught her eye. She held it against her neck and bent double to peer into a gilt-framed mirror that had once looked onto more salubrious surroundings. The muted greens and turquoises accentuated her dark eyes and black hair; definitely more Alana than Katherine, and the price suited her purse. She ran her fingers through unruly curls and tucked the scarf under one arm; she hadn't come looking for accessories, either.

A short, plump man wearing a stained shirt and grubby jeans waved an inch-thick sandwich at the ceiling. 'There's more upstairs, love. You after anything particular?'

'It's my dad's birthday tomorrow and I'm about out of cash.'

He looked pointedly at the books and scarf. 'A nice watch? I got lots of nice watches going cheap.'

'He'd rather have one that goes tick.'

The man huffed a small laugh. 'How about a trumpet... or a clarinet?'

She smiled. 'Do they go cheep, too?'

He ignored her quip. 'Fifty quid.'

'Too much.'

'Gimme a clue, love. I got two balls, and neither of them's crystal.'

She smiled again, despite the knot in the pit of her stomach. 'I could use a crystal ball, right now.' She'd know soon enough what Dad wanted. 'He used to play the piano.'

'I got just the thing.' He rummaged through a low shelf and put a keyboard on the counter. 'Electric organ... does all sorts.' He wagged a green safety-ticket attached to the lead. 'New plug, instruction book, music... the lot.'

'How much?'

Shark eyes assessed her worth. 'Thirty quid to you.'

'I'll give you ten if it works.'

He unplugged his kettle and slapped the organ's lead into the socket. A loud wail deafened her as he hit a key. 'Yep, that works. Got to be worth twenty.'

'Twenty? A fiver's more than enough.'

He unplugged the organ, put both hands on the counter and leaned towards her, breathing pickle into her face. 'Fifteen, and I'll throw in the books and that scarf you've got tucked under your arm. That's got a designer label.'

She stood her ground. He thought she'd been trying to steal it? She'd seen a scarf like this earlier in the year and, with a price tag of thirty-five pounds, it had stayed on her wish-list. 'Ten and we have a deal.'

‘How about twelve?’

‘Done.’ One of them had been and she hoped it wasn’t her. ‘Can you wrap it for me? I’m meeting Dad for coffee in a few minutes.’

‘Who do you think I am, Harrods?’

‘Cardboard box? Bit of bubble-wrap?’

He retreated under the counter, muttering. ‘You girls, want everything just... will this do?’ He held up a roll of corrugated cardboard that had seen better days.

‘Fantastic. You do have sticky tape?’

‘You want bloody jam on it?’ He smiled, showing inventive DIY dental work. ‘Don’t answer that. I got string.’

‘Wonderful. Thank you.’ She paid for her purchases and left the shop with an urgent need for space, fresh air and somewhere to wash her hands. She wound the scarf around her neck and picked her way along the pavement, through slushy snow, heading for the café. She was early, but Dad had sounded anxious on the phone and she didn’t want to keep him waiting.

A familiar tall figure strode towards her. Her heart skipped a beat. She hadn’t seen Tony since she’d walked out of his life, almost two years ago. His mop of blonde hair was unmistakeable, as was the way he walked, the slight tilt of his head. Her feet rooted her to the spot, her heart thumped loudly and her knees went weak. He hadn’t noticed her. She wound her new scarf over her hair and ducked her head.

The laughter lines around his grey eyes crinkled. ‘Alana.’ The smile lingered too briefly. ‘How are you?’

Her throat went dry. ‘Tony...’ He was the first and last person she’d hoped to see. ‘Good, I’m good. You?’

‘Yeah. Where are you living, now?’

‘Trafalgar Street. Number 14. You?’

‘Same place...’

She tried to read his feelings into those two words. Did he miss her? Had he found a new partner? Moved on? ‘How’s your mum?’

‘Not good. The cancer’s spread. The chemo’s playing havoc.’

She leaned towards him instinctively, needing to be home, to comfort him, to feel safe in his arms: loved and wanted... to belong. She could almost touch the smooth cheek, run her fingers through the silky hair on the nape of his neck, breathe in his warmth. ‘I’m sorry. It must be hard.’

‘Mike’s been a brick. I don’t know how we’d cope without him.’

His brother’s name made her cringe. There was so much she wanted to say and couldn’t. ‘Tony...’

He watched a couple walking hand-in-hand along the opposite pavement, laughing. His eyes were bright when he turned back to her. His voice hardened. ‘You made your choice, Alana. I’m sorry I couldn’t give you what you wanted. I hope you’re happy.’

The nightmare from which she could never wake would have no happy ending. ‘It wasn’t your fault. I’m sorry, Tony. I never meant to hurt you. I’m truly sorry.’

He shrugged and walked on. Life ceased, all over again. She brushed away tears with a gloved hand. It was her, alone against the world, as it had been since she’d forced herself to walk away from Tony, and Dad was waiting.

He was already there when she arrived. She put the books on the table and the package on the floor. He looked greyer and thinner than ever, showing every one of his almost sixty-five years, yet it had only been a month since she’d seen him last. He looked ill. ‘Dad?’

‘I ordered two cappuccinos. I hope that’s okay?’

She adopted her brightest voice. ‘My favourite.’

His smile creased the corner of his mouth but his grey eyes didn’t light with their customary twinkle. Two cappuccinos arrived, accompanied by large portions of carrot cake. He pushed one towards her. ‘You’re always hungry.’

‘Yum, I hope this is your treat.’

He laughed and his eyes sparkled briefly. ‘Of course. You’re always broke. Alana, don’t you think it’s time you got a proper job?’

She stirred brown sugar into her coffee. ‘And a husband... You sound like Mum. *You’re thirty-three, Alana. Your looks won’t last forever.* Who’s she to talk? She was thirty-four when she had me.’ She slurped coffee and wiped froth from her top lip. ‘Anyway, I’ve got a proper job. It just doesn’t pay much.’

‘And one day you’ll be famous... and youth lasts forever. You always were a dreamer.’

‘What’s life without dreams? Damian Hurst made it, and all he did was pickle half a sheep in formaldehyde.’ She waved a dismissive hand. ‘You call that art?’

‘Not personally, no. Alana, I didn’t ask you here to talk about pickled mutton.’

She took a bite of carrot cake and raised an eyebrow questioningly.

‘I’m leaving your mother.’

Cake crumbs sprayed onto the tablecloth. She swallowed hastily, choking. ‘You can’t be serious. Why?’

‘Alana... It’s been a difficult relationship for a long while.’

The knot in her stomach tightened. ‘You think I didn’t know?’ Somehow, she’d never thought the feeling of impending doom would come to this. She unclenched her jaw. ‘You don’t know how lucky you are to have someone who loves you. You’d throw all that away? Why now? What’s changed?’

‘It’s not that I don’t love her. I can’t live with her, anymore. I stayed... I don’t know why I stayed. It went wrong so long ago... I should have left when...’ He opened cupped hands in a gesture of exasperation. ‘I suppose I thought I could fix things but I never did more than put up with them.’

‘What things?’

‘You don’t need to know.’

Childhood guilt followed the doom to the surface. Her anger subsided. 'This is because of me, isn't it? I thought you were getting on better since I left home. I wouldn't have let Mum have Saffy if I'd thought you were still arguing.' She studied her coffee for a moment and looked up when he didn't answer. She searched his face for the smile she'd sought as a child: the smile that would say it wasn't her fault. 'You two always went quiet when I walked into the room. I could have carved your silences into ice sculptures.'

'At least ice sculptures have a market, which is more than your stuff seems to have.'

'I've had good comments about my sculpture, and I sold two paintings last week. If I sell another, I can afford a new...'

His eyes hardened. 'Alana, strange though this must seem, not everything is about you.'

His tone shocked her. 'So what is it about?'

'I retire at the end of the month and I suddenly realised this is it. This is all I have to show for my life. I have what... fifteen active years, if my health holds. My brother died at sixty... I want a life... some freedom, while I can still enjoy it.'

'A life... freedom... You've met someone, haven't you? You're having an affair.'

'That isn't why I'm leaving your mother... I would have left, anyway. But yes, I've met a woman who makes me feel like a man, no, like a teenager, not a useless has-been.'

'And you think feeling like a teenager is okay when Mum's sitting at home crying?'

'Don't judge what you can't possibly understand.'

‘But what about Mum? You know she’s not well... God... She’ll be distraught. I’d better get over there.’

He put a hand on her arm but she shrugged it away. ‘Alana, listen to me. I love you. You know that. Don’t ever believe otherwise, whatever your mother tells you. She’s always been a... needy person... pretending she’s not well is a ploy to get her own way. She can be very manipulative. Like she was over Saffy...’

‘What has Saffy got to do with anything?’

‘She has everything to do with it. Mum talked you out of a termination, not that I understand why you wanted one.’

‘We’ve had this conversation.’

‘And you’ve never given me a satisfactory answer. I know you wanted children.’ He sighed. ‘Sweetheart, if you let her, Mum will suck you dry. She doesn’t mean to. I don’t think she realises she’s doing it, and you don’t feel it happening, but one day you’ll realise she’s taken your life and rearranged it according to the gospel of Gweneth Harper.’

‘You haven’t told her, yet, have you?’

‘I wanted you to be prepared, first.’

‘Huh.’ She pushed away her plate and mug and got to her feet. ‘You want me to do your dirty work? You’re spineless. What were you planning to do, send her a text and leave me to pick up the pieces?’

‘No, of course not.’

‘She’s cooked and cleaned and slaved for you for nearly forty years, raised your daughter, and waited for you to have time to spend together.’

‘Time together? Saffy takes all her time.’

She slumped back into her chair. ‘I knew this was down to me. This *is* about her looking after Saffy isn’t it?’

‘She manipulated you into that choice. I love Saffy. She’s not the reason I’m leaving Mum.’

‘Your leaving isn’t going to force me to become Saffy’s mother, if that’s what you think.’

‘Alana, I didn’t understand why you left Tony. He was crazy about you. You got engaged, for God’s sake, then you go off with someone else. Explain that piece of stupidity if you can.’

She wanted to explain: she couldn’t bear Dad thinking badly of her. ‘I can’t.’

‘So don’t judge me if you’re not prepared to be judged. I accepted that you didn’t want Tony to know about Saffy. I trusted you had your reasons... didn’t press you to explain.’

‘So don’t press me now... please.’

‘A man has a right to know he has a child.’ He put down the teaspoon he’d been brandishing. His hand was shaking; his face took on a greyer shade. When he spoke again, his voice was tremulous. ‘He has a right to see her grow up, be part of her life.’

She hated seeing him so upset. She hated lying to him even more. ‘Tony isn’t Saffy’s father.’

The computer in his brain calculated dates. ‘You slept with someone else while you were with Tony? I thought I’d brought you up better than that.’

‘Maybe I take after you? I loved Tony. I’d have stayed with him... I wanted a child so much. He wanted to wait until we could afford them. House first, then kids.’

He sighed. ‘And that was a reason to put yourself about like a whore? A child at any price?’ His voice was a low growl. ‘Tony wanted the best for you, for his family.’

Her fingers dug into her palms. ‘It wasn’t like that. If all I’d wanted was a child, any child... I wanted Tony’s child... Saffy ruined everything.’

He leaned towards her, his face a greyish-red. ‘Don’t you dare blame this on Saffy.’

‘I’m not.’ She covered her face with her hands and rubbed the tightening band across her forehead. Tears ran unchecked down her cheeks. ‘I was raped, Dad. Saffy is a child of rape. That’s why I didn’t want her.’

He leapt to his feet, his chair crashing to the floor, and rested his palms on the table. ‘Who? Tell me the bastard’s name.’

She matched his pose, her face close to his. ‘Why? So you can beat the fuck out of him?’

‘Katherine!’ He looked around. The café was silent, a sea of faces blurred around them. He righted his chair and sat down. ‘Alana, he can’t be allowed to get away with this. It isn’t too late to tell the police.’

‘I can’t.’

‘Why the hell not? Suppose he did this to another girl.’

‘I don’t think he would... not go out and look for someone to rape, that is. Maybe rape’s too strong a word. It was more jealousy than anything. He took advantage, didn’t take no for an answer... It was partly my fault.’

‘No, means no, Alana. Rape isn’t a woman’s fault.’

‘It was at our engagement party. I had too much to drink. I was flirting.’

‘That’s no excuse. It was someone you knew? Someone I know?’

She’d made Mum promise not to tell anyone the name of Saffy’s father, especially not Dad. Could she trust him not to go after the man, now that two years had passed? The need to tell him won out. ‘It was Mike... Tony’s brother, Mike. Dad, you have to promise you won’t say anything. His mum’s been fighting cancer for three years. It would tear them apart.’

‘Mike?’ His fists clenched.

‘Dad, promise me.’

‘And this is why you broke off the engagement?’

She nodded. ‘I spent weeks in denial... refusing to admit it had happened. Then I discovered I was pregnant. Tony would have known it wasn’t his. He knew the pill didn’t suit me, and he was so careful about contraception. It was me who hoped we’d have a burst condom... he even used spermicidal gel.’

Dad’s face reddened, she shouldn’t have gone into her sex life, but his hand reached for hers across the table. ‘I wish you’d told me all this before. I’d have made Mum see you needed that abortion. Tony need never had known.’

‘I would have known. I couldn’t have lived with the lie.’ She removed her hand from beneath his and took a sip of coffee. One day, Saffy would ask why she had a blank space on her birth certificate. When Saffy was born, and she’d held her for the first time... ‘Part of me loves Saffy, but every time I see her it reminds me what happened, and what it did to me and Tony. It was Mum wanted her.’

He shook his head. ‘Just the thought of what Mike did to you. I could have been there for you.’

‘Don’t beat yourself up, Dad. I couldn’t talk about it.’ The hurt in Tony’s eyes still haunted her. Every touch that wasn’t his reminded her of Mike’s touch. She rolled her shoulders to disguise a shudder. ‘Tony thinks I left him for another man.’

‘You’ve seen him?’

A familiar fire burned in the pit of her stomach. ‘Just now. He’s not interested in me. He’s moved on.’

Dad fiddled with his teaspoon. ‘You don’t think he’d have you back if he knew the truth? It’s obviously what you want. You should trust him. You shouldn’t make this decision for him.’

She sighed. ‘And if Saffy got to know? Mike can count dates, too. I wouldn’t trust him not to blab for spite. How could I explain her conception without her hating Mike for forcing himself on me, and me for getting paralytic?’

‘You’ve told me.’ He studied his coffee. ‘Do you want her to live with a lie? The truth may be painful, but living with lies is worse, and they have a way coming back to haunt you.’

‘I trust you and Mum. No, I have to get used to being alone. I’ll never love anyone but Tony.’

‘You will, one day. I didn’t think I’d ever love again, but I have.’ He patted her hand. ‘We both have to look to the future, now. And you’ll grow to love Saffy, too, if you let her into your heart. Spend more time with her, Alana. You’ll regret it if you don’t. And one day you’re going to have to take some responsibility for her whether you like it or not.’ He smiled that smile and her heart lifted. ‘Anyway, I told you, this isn’t about you. It’s about me having a life... not being controlled...’

She’d forgotten about Mum and doom, wrapped in her own troubles, *all about her*. He was throwing away the marriage she’d give her left arm for. Had he any idea of the black hole he was creating? ‘Is it because Mum’s older than you?’ She waited for him to deny it, to come up with a reason she could understand, but he remained silent. She sighed and placed the package onto the table. ‘I hope you have a happy birthday, Dad. I doubt Mum ever will again.’

Chapter Two

Alana drove home to the ground-floor flat in a terrace of Edwardian houses. She couldn't go to Mum's and act normally, knowing what she did, and she certainly wasn't going to be there when the shit hit the fan. All she could do now was wait for Mum's phone call.

Her easel stood in the centre of the room, where she'd left it that morning, before her parents' arguing culminated in the end of life as she knew it. Before meeting Tony again had brought back every tear she'd cried, and every sleepless night she'd spent pacing the floor, while the malignant tumour that was Saffy grew inside her. Only the fact that her child was an innocent victim had stopped her stepping off a pavement in front of a bus.

She took a two-inch hake brush and squeezed fresh white paint from a pot. White was all colours, the colour of light... loneliness... emptiness. She swirled the brush in her jug of water, dabbed it on kitchen roll, and scooped paint from her palette. Thick daubs of distress swished across the painting, obliterating carefully stated light and shade, well-observed tone and form, and accurately-proportioned buildings.

She washed her brush, added ultramarine and mars violet to her palette and created a smouldering doom-filled sky with deft, angry strokes. With a smaller brush she went back into the sky with white, forming and blending racing clouds. She stood back. Something was happening she hadn't expected: something very different from her normal style. She squeezed out a yellow, not bothering to look which one, and mixed it with the

ultramarine. A slash of deep turquoise became sea, a touch of the sky colour added cloud shadows. Cliffs, she needed cliffs: hard, stubborn, angry cliffs.

The phone trilled and she dropped her brush, splattering paint across the carpet. She grabbed the receiver. 'Mum?'

'Is that Miss Katherine Harper?'

No-one who knew her called her Katherine, except Dad when he was angry with her. 'Is this another cold call?'

'I need to confirm that you are Miss Katherine Harper.'

She wasn't Katherine, not anymore. She wouldn't be a victim. 'Get off my bloody phone. I'm waiting for an important call, you moron.' She slammed down the receiver, shaking. What the hell was she going to say to Mum when she did ring? She took a deep breath and returned to her painting. Cliffs...

She painted more intensely now, channelling anxiety and anger into jagged shapes and deep shadows. Burnt sienna and raw sienna, the edges of the colours lost and found, merged and separated. Brighter yellows and soft greens on cliff-tops sang against the moody blues and greys of sea and sky. White breakers foamed against rocks. A thin line of pale turquoise hope gleamed distantly on a despairing horizon. She'd never painted the sea before but its energy surged inside her, fulfilling a deep need. It was something she had to do. Something she was born to do.

The phone rang again and a spray of black Indian ink, intended to form deep shadows beneath rough bracken, arced across the wall. Her fingers painted the receiver black, blue and yellow. 'Mum?'

‘Miss Katherine Harper?’

‘Will you please remove my number from your list and leave me alone. I told you, I’m expecting a call.’

‘This isn’t a cold call... listen to what I have to say, please. Just five minutes of your time and...’

‘You have twenty seconds.’

‘You are Katherine Alana Harper?’

‘Yes, but whatever you’re selling I’m not buying.’

‘I’m not selling anything.’ The voice picked up speed. ‘It really is in your interest to listen...’

‘Fifteen seconds.’

‘I’m Harry John, an heir finder.’

‘I can find my own heir, thank you. There’s plenty of it around.’

‘No, you don’t understand. You should have received a letter.’

‘Eight seconds, Mr John.’

‘I’ve been waiting for your call. I believe you may be entitled to an inheritance...’

‘You think I’m that gullible? Three seconds.’

‘A relative of yours has died. You may be her beneficiary.’

‘I don’t have any relatives, Mr John, long-lost or otherwise, unless you count my parents who are both alive... if they haven’t killed each other by now... and a daughter who isn’t old enough to leave me anything. Time’s up, goodbye.’

‘Her name was Alana...’

She pressed the receiver back to her ear. ‘Alana? Alana who?’

‘That’s all I’m prepared to say until I can verify your relationship to the deceased. I’m on my way to you, now. I can be there in an hour. If I show you my research I know I can convince you.’

It was a sick hoax to snare the hard-up, it had to be... and no one was more hard-up than she was. ‘And what do you get out of this?’

‘I’m being paid to find you. Terms are already agreed with the solicitor handling the will but I need your signature. What have you got to lose, Miss Harper? Five minutes of your time, that’s all I ask. There’s no money to pay up front.’

No money, no risk, surely? ‘I shall still take some convincing, Mr John. You have my address?’

‘14 Trafalgar Street, Leicester.’

‘Okay. Five minutes, but if this is a hoax I shall call the police.’

‘I’m absolutely legit, I assure you. I’ll see you in an hour.’

The grey-haired man wearing a rumpled suit, shivering on Alana’s doorstep, didn’t look like the bailiff. ‘Miss Katherine Harper?’

‘Alana... can’t stand Katherine. You must be Mr John?’ His high, uneven brows, large penetrating eyes and narrow jaw reminded her of a cross between a self-portrait Picasso had painted and some of the artist’s cubist portraits, except he was stouter, and his short, receding hair was peppered with grey.

She caught a whiff of tobacco smoke on his clothes. ‘Come in.’ She shoved a pile of papers off a chair and onto the floor. ‘It’s not very comfortable, I’m afraid, but the other one is worse.’ She sat down carefully in the worse one and willed the phone not to ring. Dad obviously hadn’t yet found enough backbone to face Mum. Either that or they really had killed each other. What the hell would she do then?

Mr John smiled a lop-sided smile and opened his briefcase. ‘A Katherine Alana Harper is mentioned in a will held by the solicitors who employed me to find her. ‘Your father’s name is Derek.’

‘How do you know that?’

‘I work for a firm of genealogists who specialise in finding heirs.’

‘And you think I’ve inherited something?’

‘I believe so. If you can confirm your mother’s Christian and maiden names?’

‘I’m not happy giving out personal information. I’ve seen the reports... people like you stealing identities.’

The corners of his eyes crinkled into a grin. ‘I shan’t ask you for any proof of identity documents... and I don’t have a camera... All I need is to be a hundred percent certain in my own mind that you are the person I’m looking for. The rest can be done through the solicitor.’

‘And there’s nothing to pay up front?’

‘Not a brass farthing. I get a percentage of what you receive. I need you to sign an agreement to that effect.’

‘How big a percentage?’

‘Eighty percent of something is better than a hundred percent of nothing, surely?’

‘Eighty percent of nothing is more than I have at the moment.’ If this was a hoax, where was the catch? ‘My mother was Gweneth Williams.’

Mr John gave her an odd look, if it was odd for him, and smiled again. ‘Then I’m pleased to say you’re about to inherit some money.’

She let herself dare to hope. ‘Okay, where do I sign?’ He handed her a pen and the agreement. She couldn’t see anything dodgy in the small print. Mr John’s twenty percent was for her to pay from the proceeds of the designated estate. She signed Alana Harper, with her usual flourish. In for a brass farthing, in for eighty percent. ‘So, who was this Alana?’

‘Your aunt.’

Her eighty: Mr John’s twenty... All one hundred percent gurgled down the drain. ‘I don’t have an aunt.’

Another lop-sided look. ‘Her name was Siân Alana Ap Dafydd.’

‘Never heard of her. What makes you think I’m her niece?’

His eyebrows wriggled together like a pair of hairy caterpillars. He consulted a sheet of paper. 'Her name was Williams before she married. She died without living children, but she had a sister, Gweneth Williams, who married a Derek Harper.'

Her heart thudded. 'Mum's never mentioned a sister.'

'Nevertheless, she existed.'

'When did my aunt die?'

'About a month ago. It's taken some time to trace you and, well... those cold calls you've been ignoring all week?'

'Something to my advantage... that was you...'

He laughed. 'I'm the moron.'

'Sorry.' She was curious, now. 'How did you find me?'

'Not easily. The passport office records showed your mother's address. She was as cautious as you when I phoned her to ask about you. Understandable, in the circumstances.'

'What circumstances?'

'I wasn't at liberty to tell her why I wanted to contact you. Client confidentiality. She confirmed you existed and that was all. It was enough.' He looked at her sideways again. She found it slightly disconcerting. 'There was only one other Alana Harper in the UK. It was easy to prove she wasn't the right one. You are your aunt's only beneficiary.'

'And her estate?'

‘I can’t give you an accurate figure, but I understand there’s property in West Wales. Unless your aunt also left huge debts...’

‘It could be thousands... hundreds of thousands?’

‘I couldn’t say. You’ll be hearing from the solicitor in due course.’ He closed his briefcase and stood up. ‘Is the painting for sale?’

She surveyed the unframed boards and canvases ranged around the walls. ‘Which one?’

‘The one on the easel. I’d like to buy it.’

‘But... the paint’s still wet.’

He examined it more closely and then stepped away and looked again, his head on one side. ‘It has a lot of passion... energy. Reminds me of home. I live near the coast... Cardigan way. How much do you want for it?’

It had taken a fraction of the time she usually spent on a painting of that size. She hadn’t thought of it being saleable; she wasn’t even sure it was finished. ‘Framed or unframed?’

‘Framed.’

She did a quick calculation of framing costs, the size of her electricity bill and the extra petrol she’d need comforting a distraught mother. And she’d seen a top the silk scarf would go with perfectly. And the price of good carving limestone had gone up. And she needed a fine vee-chisel. Could she ask three hundred? She owed last month’s

rent, and the landlord would go ape when he saw the Indian ink up the wall and the paint on the carpet.

She assessed Mr John the way a lioness assessed a baby antelope. He was expecting to collect his twenty percent. His suit might be rumpled but it was good quality, his slightly portly figure showed he didn't skip meals, the tobacco smoke was cigar not cigarette, and he had a kind, fatherly smile. And confidence was all; she swallowed and prayed to the god of struggling painters and starving sculptors. 'A thousand pounds.'

'Do you need a deposit?'

She'd been missing her market all these years. A deposit? She needed the whole lot. Framing, petrol, food... 'Twenty percent?'

He laughed and opened his wallet. 'I have a hundred and twenty on me.'

She tried not to wrench his hand off. 'That'll do.'

'When can I collect it?'

'Give me a week? No, better make it two, what with Christmas. If you leave your number, I can call you when it's ready. What type of frame did you have in mind?'

'I'll leave that to you. You know what will suit the painting best.'

She did? She did, of course she did, and where to buy cheaply. 'Thank you, Mr John. I'll be in touch very soon. And cash would be good.'

Doom stopped impending at nine o'clock. Sobs gasped down the phone line. 'I'll be right there, Mum.' Damn Dad, but at least he'd waited until Saffy was in bed. She felt a pang of guilt. Had Saffy hidden under the bedclothes?

She pushed her guilt back behind its blast wall, snatched her keys from the hook and slammed the front door behind her. The ancient mini she'd christened Minnie, groaned as she accelerated, tyres skidding on newly-frozen slush. She'd forgotten to add tyres to her list of necessities: as long as she kept moving no eagle-eyed copper would see they were as bald as the proverbial coot.

Mum lay on the sofa, her shoulders heaving. Double-damn Dad. How could he do this to her after all these years? She sat on the sofa arm and rubbed Mum's back with her hand. 'Mum?'

Her mother dabbed her eyes with a tissue. 'Alana... Dad's...'

'I know... I know... I saw him earlier. He told me.'

'What am I going to do, Alana? I don't know what to do.'

'It's all right, Mum. I'm here.'

Mum sat up, red-rimmed eyes pleading. 'You'll stay, won't you? Don't leave me. I don't want to be on my own, not tonight.'

'Of course I will. You'll get through this, Mum.' She held Mum in her arms as she sobbed. She could feel her ribs: she hadn't realised she was so thin. Dad's warning echoed in her mind: she'd stay tonight but that was all. She had her own life to live. 'I'll make you a cup of tea, shall I? Have you eaten?'

‘I couldn’t eat a thing. Just the tea. Thank you, Alana. You’re a good girl, a wonderful daughter.’

She stirred in sugar and milk with a guilty hand. If she was a wonderful daughter she’d want to stay. Dad was right... this was Mum dishing up a guilt trip, manipulation... No, he was wrong: this was Mum suffering the worst catastrophe of her life, while she was being self-centred as usual. Dad had calmly scattered destruction, walked away and left them to it. She hated him almost as much as she hated herself for destroying Tony’s love.

Mum lifted the cup to her lips with a shaky hand and then rattled it on the saucer. ‘And Christmas is next week, too. He’s ruined everything. You will stay over Christmas won’t you? Saffy needs you here. I couldn’t bear us to spend Christmas alone.’

Oh God... ‘Of course I will.’ Her life slipped through her fingers; her dreams of painting wild seas in West Wales vanished with every breath Mum took. Dad was right, Mum didn’t know she was doing it, but what would happen after Christmas... New Year... her birthday... anniversary... Saffy’s second birthday? There would always be some reason she couldn’t leave. If she stayed now, she might have to stay forever.

Chapter Three

The lamp threw muted light across the room as Rhiannon pulled on fur-lined boots.

Where are you going, Rhiannon?

The words were so quiet she barely caught them in the pre-dawn silence. She jammed on her hat and looked for her gloves. ‘To the stones, Nerys, like I said... to speak to our spirit guide.’

You know two wrongs don't make a right.

‘I shall right it or die trying.’

I don't deserve it righted. I'm wicked.

‘You are not wicked. If healing comes, it comes. Algiz will counsel us. Have faith.’

It's all poppycock, Rhiannon. The whisper held familiar contempt.

‘Nonetheless, I shall seek his wisdom. You'd do well to heed it, too.’

Nerys fell quiet.

‘We have to do this. Life is meaningless otherwise.’

I know. You mean well.

‘I’ll do a telling when I get back.’

Be careful, Rhiannon.

A small whimper sounded, close to. *I’m scared, Nerys. It’s dark in here.*

Nerys’ voice edged panic. *Hush, Lowri. I’m with you.*

She made her voice calm. ‘You’re safe. Nothing bad will happen.’ She closed the door behind her and the voices quieted.

She wheeled her cycle from the shed: cycles made no noise to alert the neighbours to her night-time forays. This dawn was special; she needed no witnesses. Her breath wretched before her eyes, the air growing colder as she puffed up the final hill. Moorland stretched before her: whiteness crept in wind-drifts across the road. She leaned her bike against a finger of stone and crunched the remaining half-mile through pristine snow. Rugged stones jutted against the stars, a dark blacker than night. She didn’t stop to admire them: she had long been at one with the stones and she had work to do.

Sweat chilled on her body. The cold seeped into her bones, but she stood motionless on the flat slab of rock within the twelve stones that formed the circle of Cerrig o Týr. She faced east towards the hills and drank in the freezing air. Today was the winter solstice, the day when the sun’s course was lowest, the depth of winter’s grip most keenly felt. Across the snowy ground her moon-shadow elongated, prostrating her thin body, arms outstretched towards the darkness that imprisoned the sun.

‘Aw-oo-wen.’ She traced Sowilo, the zig-zag sign for the sun, in the air before her, calling it, willing it to come. The circle of sun was completion, wholeness, self-knowledge, but this solstice was more than that. To her north, a flash lit the underbelly of

the cloudbank that hugged the coast. The flash came again and again in a rhythmic pattern that scored the sleepless hours of her night, and her conversations with Nerys, who never slept, Lowri, who would never outgrow her fear, and Algiz, her spirit guide, who came to her at need.

To her left, a lone light shone: Rhys Pen Coed, up and milking his herd of Friesian cows as he'd done, sun or snow, for the last forty years. Behind her the full-moon was obscured by ominous cloud. One by one the stars blinked out. Not yet, not yet. 'Aw-oo-wen.'

She searched deep within herself, scouring fragments of memory amongst the blanks she'd never fill, seeking enlightenment. The heat of hatred and vengeance fought the chill in her fingers and toes. 'Aw-oo-wen.' Seek change, seek healing. In the snow outside the circle she'd drawn the three rays of light: the three pillars of wisdom, the trinity... maiden, mother and crone. It was the universal symbol of Awen, the flowing spirit, and she sought its guidance. Would healing never come? Would she always be driven to seek revenge?

She lowered her arms. Fractured memory traced the lines of the rune she'd chiselled by moonlight, all those years ago, into the tallest of the twelve standing stones. The symbol of Týr, the sky god, the sword god, had similarities to that of Awen; it was a rune that gave victory. Used on weapons since Roman times, it said *fear not death: it cannot kill you*. She averted her eyes from the first rune on the adjacent stone: Kaunaz, reversed, meant a beacon gone out... withdrawal, anxiety, a closing: loss.

The shadow before her faded and the snow took on a dull, ruddy cast. It was time. The greeting of the sun would wait, for this was something that hadn't been seen for four centuries. Would her spirit guide obscure her future course with cloud?

The stones of Cerrig o Týr fingered darkly heavenwards, as they had for thousands of years, protected by such as she. She summoned her inner steel and drew herself up, her body the straight, true shaft, her arms, out and backswept, the head of the arrow tempered in fire; the sign of Týr. ‘Haidzruno runu, falahak haidera, ginnarunaz. Arageu haeramalaus uti az. Weladaude, sa'z þat barutz. Uþarba spa.’ She turned slowly. ‘Rwyf fi, Meistr y Sgriptiau hynafol, yn cuddio yma Sgriptiau o Bŵer. Wedi ei flino gan anffawd, wedi ei dynghedu i farwolaeth llechwraidd fydd yr hwn sy'n torri'r heneb hwn. Rwyf yn proffwydo dinistr.’

She closed her eyes and completed her half-turn to face westward. Raising her arms in the symbol of Algiz, she drew strength from both the bedrock and the heavens. ‘I, master of the runes, conceal here runes of power. Plagued by misfortune, doomed to insidious death, is he who breaks this monument. I prophesy destruction.’ Fury welled from deep hurts in her soul, and her fingers clenched: faith, have faith... She would have her justice. ‘I entrust my soul to your great wisdom and seek your guidance.’ She opened her eyes: the clouds had moved away and before her hung the blood moon.

Dawn brought no warmth; Rhiannon shut out the cold and busied herself in the low-ceilinged kitchen. She carried her tea and toast to the table, and chose the chair that faced the rising sun. Her linen bag of runes lay where she'd left it. She shook it, jumbling the small tiles inside, before putting her hand through the narrow neck of the bag. She let her mind go blank, let the rune tiles come to her hand as they would.

Despite Nerys' disdain, the use of runes for guidance was thousands of years old. It was akin to divining, tapping into the subconscious to find an object, a meaning or a

destiny. The high chieftains of Anglo-Saxon Britain had used the word Ruenes for their secret councils. Even in translations of the bible, runa was used as the word for mystery.

Tugging her shawl closer around her shoulders, she formed a question in her mind. Bending over the cloth-covered surface, she cast the runes she'd drawn from their bag. 'Kaunaz... not reversed this time. From the darkness, light will come. Appropriate on the shortest day. What else, what else? Raidho, a journey? No, no, it is reversed... something unexpected, or an unpleasant journey. Wait... Jera, the cycle of the year. Yes, full circle... The reaping of seeds planted. Good, good... or maybe not. Perthro... something hidden.'

She sipped her tea thoughtfully while Nerys and Lowri slept; Perthro had fallen closest to the centre, giving it greater importance. Too much was hidden: past, present and future.

A one-eyed ginger cat leapt onto the table, rumpling the cloth and scattering the runes. She stroked him under his chin 'My toast, I think, Pryderi, not yours. The signs are coming together, look. There are powerful forces at work here.' She ate her toast and then squatted on the floor beside the runes. Uruz and Nauthiz lay face up, now. 'Uruz... brute strength, a male sign. Do you think that signifies anything? And Nauthiz means caution... Nerys said to be careful. You think we need caution, Pryderi? You are probably right.' She rubbed behind his tattered ear. He'd walked into her life and was the only male she wanted.

He jumped down and she opened the door. He rubbed past her legs, and stalked across the frozen ground and out of the gate. The water in the pig trough was as hard as the purple Caerbwdy rock from which the trough was hewn. The stars had paled, the blood moon faded, and the clouds, tinged apricot-pink by the sun that rose behind the black

skeletons of ash and sycamore, threatened more snow. Squares of light showed in curtained windows across the green, shutting her and her companions out of her neighbours' lives, out of their community, like they always had.

They thought they knew who she was: the crazy old woman with the battle-scarred cat, who'd taken over old Gareth Price's cottage when he'd passed on. They didn't know her. Time, and the pain from which she tried to protect Nerys and Lowri, had changed her, bleached her hair white far beyond her years and wrinkled her face, but she knew them, all twelve of them.

She studied the curtained windows in turn. There was Elin Davis, who fluttered her eyelashes at Reverend Thomas at chapel on a Sunday, the very soul of Christian piety but a faded parody, now, of her youthful beauty. Non Richards and her cousin, who thought even their shit smelt better than everyone else's. Mair Parry, a busier body than anyone she'd ever known, her and her interfering sisters, and then there were the other chapel ladies who'd decided, in their wisdom, to be judge, jury and executioner.

And she mustn't forget Siân Ap Dafydd, the devil torment her poisonous soul. Oh yes, they thought they'd been so clever, but she knew every one of them, and what they'd done. She held the memory close: she didn't do forgiveness.

Alana took a deep breath of silence and waited for the tsunami to wash her away.

'Alana... you promised.'

'I said I'd stay over Christmas not until New Year.'

'But Saffy...'

‘Mum, *you* promised. I have my own life. I sold a painting. The man’s expecting it framed and ready to go, and I haven’t even been to the framer. He’s paying me a lot of money for it. I need to earn money. I’m behind with the rent, as it is.’

‘But...’ Mum patted the sofa beside her and looked up expectantly. ‘I’ve had a great idea.’

She remained standing: she wouldn’t play the little girl in Mum’s game. ‘And?’

‘All that rent you pay... It’s ridiculous when I have this huge house and I’d have company, and help with Saffy.’

‘Mum...’

‘You could get to know her properly. She’s the spit of you, at that age. You don’t know how lucky you are to have her. Your dad and I tried for years before you came along.’

Her daughter played with coloured bricks on a rug in front of the gas fire. Like her? She could only see Mike. She looked away, through the window into the garden. Mike had always been jealous of his more attractive younger brother. He’d waited for the opportunity and taken what he wanted: the memory still made her want to retch.

‘Please, say you will.’

She forced herself to look back at Saffy: it wasn’t her fault. She was happy here and, at eighteen months old, she was surely too young to be scarred by Dad leaving. Dad wouldn’t leave Mum short of money. She could afford help with looking after her granddaughter if she needed it. She wouldn’t succumb to emotional blackmail. ‘No.’ She squatted to help Saffy build a tower.

Saffy knocked it down. 'Nana do it.'

She'd wanted a child so much, but she'd never be able to be a mother to Saffy.

'What made you so hard, Alana?'

Hard? It was a fragile shell she'd built around herself all those years ago, but it wouldn't help to tell Mum that. 'Life... Mum, I love you but I'm not the answer to your problem. I can't be what you want me to be. I thought you understood that when you persuaded me not to have a termination. I'm your daughter not your... possession.'

'You can be very hurtful, Alana. That's your father speaking, not you. What's he been telling you?'

'The truth.'

The colour drained from Mum's face. 'I've dedicated my life to you. I've only ever done what's best for you.'

'He said you'd do this. Make me feel guilty. Manipulate me. All you've ever done is make me feel everything is my fault. Pregnancy...'

'It being a mistake didn't give you the right to throw away your daughter's life.'

'A *mistake*? I'm talking about you and Dad. The arguments, the silences that shut me out... the secrets.'

Mum's hand grasped her arm. 'What secrets?'

She ached to remove the claw from her flesh. 'Why did you never tell me I had an aunt?'

The claw spasmed. ‘An aunt?’

‘And stop repeating what I say. Aunt Siân, of course.’

Mum’s voice dropped to a shaken whisper. She removed her hand. ‘Dad told you about Siân?’

‘No, I had a visit from an heir hunter. Aunt Siân has left me something in her will.’

‘She’s... dead? Siân’s dead?’

‘About a month ago. Didn’t you know?’

Mum covered her face with her hands. Sobs wracked her body. ‘Oh, Siân.’

‘What happened between you? Why didn’t I know about her?’

‘We had a falling out.’ Mum’s lips clamped in a thin line. ‘It was a long time ago.’

‘About?’

‘Nothing that’s important, now.’ Her eyes were hard, like Dad’s had been when she’d touched a raw nerve.

‘I’ll ask Dad then, shall I?’

‘No, Alana, please. It will bring nothing but heartache.’

She let the subject drop. ‘I’ll call round at the weekend.’

‘You’re not going now, surely, not after... You know I’m not very well.’

‘I have to Mum, I’m suffocating here. You have to let me go, like you have to let Dad go.’

Mum's mouth managed a brief twitch but her voice was bitter. 'Let them go and they'll come back to you?'

She kissed Mum's pale cheek and stood up. 'Something like that. I'm not deserting you forever, Mum, but I can't stay here.'

Mum sighed, her hand making a gesture of defeat. 'After all I've done for you.'

Saffy looked at her with huge dark eyes, a wisp of black hair curling over her untroubled brow. She almost gave in to an urge to scoop her from the floor and hug her, to say sorry. Instead, she picked her up at arm's length, afraid she'd feel Mike's hands on her if she held her too close, and put her on Mum's lap. 'Bye, Saffy, see you soon.'

Saffy waved. 'Bye, Lana.'

She slung her bag over her shoulder and almost ran to her car. The wave of relief tried to outrun the wave of guilt: she drove home drowning in both.

Post lay in a heap on the floor: final demands, junk mail, a letter from her landlord threatening the bailiff. The house was cold. She kept her coat on.

She tore open a manila envelope: more trouble, no doubt. Who were Davies and Davies, Abergwaun? **We are pleased to confirm that you are sole beneficiary of the estate of the late Mrs Siân Alana Ap Dafydd of The Haggard, Coed-y-Cwm, in the county of Pembrokeshire. In order that we may disburse her estate, could you please contact us on the above number at your earliest convenience.** The Haggard... Her heart sank. Why didn't the name surprise her? And where was Coed-y-Cwm?

She googled the village. A map showed its location on a peninsula in West Wales. Street-view showed a scatter of small grey houses and cottages, surrounding a rough

green with lanes leading off. Returning to the satellite view showed a wooded river-valley and open moorland; scrolling any distance had her hovering over rocks, cliffs and sea. She went back to the road map. The nearest place was shown as St David's. Wasn't that a city? It looked too small... and miles from anywhere.

She consulted the letter again. Davies and Davies were in Abergwaun, which was Fishguard according to the map. Did Aunt Siân own The Haggard? Was it part of her eighty percent? She rang the number on the letter.

'Davies and Davies, Solicitors.' The female voice pronounced every syllable with elaborate care. 'How may I help you?'

'This is Alana Harper... Katherine Alana Harper. I need to see someone concerning the estate of the late Siân Ap Dafydd?'

'Thank you for phoning, Miss Harper. When would suit you?'

'Soon as I can.'

'Mr Matthew Davies won't be here until after New Year. How about Friday? Say ten o'clock?'

'I'll be there, thanks.'

'There you go then. I'll pencil you in for Friday, cariad. You'll need to bring some evidence of identity. Birth certificate or a valid UK passport, and a utility bill or bank statement.'

Cariad? Now wasn't the time to bother Mum about her birth certificate, in fact seeing Mum was the last thing she wanted: she might never escape. She had a passport and

enough bills to paper her walls. She rang the framer, ordered a number thirty-seven of the right size and surveyed her painting. She chose a new, soft rigger from her brush roll and dipped it in a little fresh Indian ink.

She paused in the act of signing her name. This was a new style, a new start for the New Year. The life and career of Katherine Alana Harper, despoiled daughter of dysfunctional parents, ended here. She owed Aunt Siân some recognition of her eighty percent. She touched brush-tip to board and paused guiltily. It would only be her professional name, a pseudonym. She painted her new signature boldly in the bottom left-hand corner. Alana Ap Dafydd.

