

BLAKE PIERCE

when
you're
close

a finn wright mystery--book #3

WHEN YOU'RE CLOSE

(A Finn Wright FBI Suspense Thriller—Book
Three)

BLAKE PIERCE

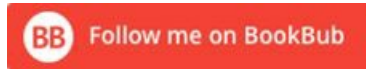
Blake Pierce

Blake Pierce is the USA Today bestselling author of the RILEY PAGE mystery series, which includes seventeen books. Blake Pierce is also the author of the MACKENZIE WHITE mystery series, comprising fourteen books; of the AVERY BLACK mystery series, comprising six books; of the KERI LOCKE mystery series, comprising five books; of the MAKING OF RILEY PAIGE mystery series, comprising six books; of the KATE WISE mystery series, comprising seven books; of the CHLOE FINE psychological suspense mystery, comprising six books; of the JESSIE HUNT psychological suspense thriller series, comprising thirty-one books; of the AU PAIR psychological suspense thriller series, comprising three books; of the ZOE PRIME mystery series, comprising six books; of the ADELE SHARP mystery series, comprising sixteen books, of the EUROPEAN VOYAGE cozy mystery series, comprising six books; of the LAURA FROST FBI suspense thriller, comprising eleven books; of the ELLA DARK FBI suspense thriller, comprising twenty-one books (and counting); of the A YEAR IN EUROPE cozy mystery series, comprising nine books, of the AVA GOLD mystery series, comprising six books; of the RACHEL GIFT mystery series, comprising thirteen books (and counting); of the VALERIE LAW mystery series, comprising nine books; of the PAIGE KING mystery series, comprising eight books; of the MAY MOORE mystery series, comprising eleven books; of the CORA SHIELDS mystery series, comprising eight books; of the NICKY LYONS mystery series, comprising eight books, of the CAMI LARK mystery series, comprising ten books; of the AMBER YOUNG mystery series, comprising seven books (and counting); of the DAISY FORTUNE mystery series, comprising five books; of the FIONA RED mystery series, comprising eleven books (and counting); of the FAITH BOLD mystery series, comprising eleven books (and counting); of the JULIETTE HART mystery series, comprising five books (and counting); of the MORGAN CROSS mystery series, comprising nine books (and counting); and of the new FINN WRIGHT mystery series, comprising five books (and counting).

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An avid reader and lifelong fan of the mystery and thriller genres, Blake loves to hear from you, so please feel free to visit www.blakepierceauthor.com to learn more and stay in touch.



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PROLOGUE

As the storm lashed his boat, Ivar Ward peered warily up at the cragged rocks of Huldra Island that loomed high beyond. The rocks jugged out like huge shards of black glass in the night, and Ivar knew that if he struck them, the sea would become nothing but a watery grave.

Pulling desperately at the wheel of his small white fishing boat, he tried as best he could to push up against the shifting waves. Each one reached up from the blackened depths of the icy sea, and each one threatened to flip the boat over onto its back, taking Ivar with it.

Steering and letting out an almighty gasp, Ivar managed to avoid one large piece of rock in the bay by inches.

“Fool!” he screamed into the night air, the rain battering down on the roof of the tiny cabin. It cascaded down the glass in front of him, turning each shard of rock into a grasping hand, warped into something nightmarish.

He cursed himself for having been in the wrong waters for the wrong reasons. Now it looked to him as though those waters were about to claim his life.

Something smashed against the side of the bow, and Ivar lost grip of the wheel. The violence of the impact threw him downward. His body ached as it crashed against the wet wooden floor.

For a moment, he stayed there. Just a moment. A serenity started to creep in. The thunderous waves and rain became like the song of a siren, beckoning him towards them. But he knew what that was. It was the call of the abyss. He'd heard the tales before from the older fishermen back on the mainland. The moment when a man of the sea gives in to her embrace. Where death approaches, and he relinquishes his desire to fight any longer. Where he is dragged to the depths and the water fills his lungs.

That feeling was seeping into his bones, dark and insidious. Death was coming.

But that would not be this day, not if Ivar had anything to say about it.

He thought about his grandkids and then pushed himself back up onto one knee and then grabbed the wheel, standing up tall and strong in the tumultuous storm around him. Up ahead, another piece of jagged rock was in his path, and it would be only moments before he struck it. Ivar pulled with all his might. The boat turned, sloshing around the gigantic waves like a

child's bath toy.

Ivar grinned in momentary triumph as his boat started to pass the outcrop of rock. But it was a grin come too soon. Suddenly, a rogue wave at least fifteen feet high battered against the boat. The force thrust the boat into the rocky outcrop.

The entire world around him shuddered, and Ivar heard a grating noise of rock cutting into wood.

“The hull's breached,” he said to himself with dismay. If it was bad, he'd only have minutes, seconds even, before the boat sank.

Now, there was nothing else he could do. There was only one way he could make it. He had to get onto the island, even if it was the last place on Earth he wanted to step foot. He had avoided it for years, but now it was his only hope. Ivar's eyes searched through the glass before him and then trained his gaze on what looked like a slope in the shoreline next to the steep cliffs. If he could just steer the boat there, he could at least get onto land.

But that land, the land of Huldra Island, was a place he had sworn to never step foot on again. Not since his younger days. Not since that terrible time. He did not want to be there. Not now. Not ever. He also knew the stories, and he believed them. He knew about the hidden folk and what terrible things they had brought forward into the world. Ivar's grandmother had told him the tales. He had never seen them or their foul offspring. Outsiders classed it all as interesting folklore, but he believed they were there. He believed *it* was there. He could feel it.

Another wave crashed against the side of the boat, pushing it off course towards a line of rocks. Dread rocketed up through Ivar's throat as he pulled at the wheel, gripping onto it with white knuckles. The rain and waves continued to lash everything around him, but with one final, last-gasp effort, somehow luck had smiled upon him.

The boat juddered as it struck land. Ivar was thrust forward with the momentum, the steering wheel slamming into his chest. For a moment, he couldn't catch a breath. Looking up, he could see that the front of the boat was resting on a steep incline of sand and dirt. But he knew that the rear of the boat had probably been breached and was taking on water. He had to abandon her.

Grabbing an emergency bag and flashlight, he left the cabin and entered the fray. Above, the thunderous blackened sky wailed and bellowed at him. Lightning arched across the soaring clouds, followed by an almighty clap.

Ivar shuddered at the noise. It was as though the world itself was telling him “get back, walk no further”.

But there was no way to listen. It was the island or certain death. There was no in-between.

The ocean waves battered all around him, and one clattered against the stern, thrusting its water forward and over Ivar. He fell forward and watched in horror as the emergency bag, complete with the flares and supplies he needed to survive, washed over the deck and into the water.

He gasped as another wave leaped onto the boat, this time clawing at his body, dragging him towards the edge of the deck. Ivar scrambled with his hands, his palms and wet fingers slipping against the wooden surface. He felt his legs sticking out over the edge of the boat, dangling above the water.

He let out a cry for help, but no help was coming. This much he knew. As his body slid over the edge, he flailed wildly, and in a last-gasp effort, his right hand caught a loose piece of railing that was still attached to the boat's frame at one end.

Another wave. Then another came. Ivar's body swung left and right like a pendulum striking midnight. Ivar thought again of his wife, of his kids, of his grandkids. A flash of the funerals he had attended arched across his mind as lightning did likewise across the sky. He remembered each and every one of them. Each man lost at sea. Each fisherman mourned by his family and the village community which raised him.

Ivar's hand began to slip on the cold metal of the railing. He reached up with one last ounce of strength and grabbed hold of the edge of the boat. With his old bones creaking with age, he found a last reserve of strength and pulled himself up onto the decking. The boat slid on the sand as another wave hit it. The stern pulled downward beneath the sea, and the bow rose up into the air in return.

A loud sound of sucking air gulped down by rushing water filled Ivar's ears. The boat was about to go down. As it bubbled and groaned with its final breath, the boat slipped down into the water. Ivar ran to the bow and leaped blindly. A leap of faith into the darkness.

Ivar fell at least ten feet downward, but the sand and soil of the ground caught him. His legs stuck into the wet surface for a moment, the impact causing a sharp pain in his right hip. Pulling his legs out of the blackened sand, Ivar turned, only to watch the cabin of his boat sink into the roaring sea.

It was gone. He felt a maelstrom of regret and relief surge through his

body. He'd lost his ship. He'd lost his livelihood. But he had not lost his life. He was still there.

Looking around, he put his hand in his pocket.

“Thank the Lord,” he whispered under his breath.

He pulled out the flashlight he had taken from the cabin and was able to see that the sandy incline continued up to a small plateau. Scrambling up the incline, he reached the top. The land now spread out before him, the dark shapes of Huldra menacing like prowling animals beyond the reach of a campfire.

The flashlight wasn't going to do much in that hellish weather, its beam barely lighting a few feet ahead. The cracks of lightning were likewise dulled by the cloud cover in places, but when they did strike, he could see what was nearby.

Ivar knew the old rule: three hours without shelter; three days without food; 3 weeks without water. Shelter always came first when it came to surviving. In that October downpour, there was no doubting that the icy rain would bring hypothermia soon enough.

He stepped forward hoping for some shelter, a cave perhaps, even an overhanging rock face, but there was nothing. The land was a blanket of stone, soil and grass. Another flash came from above; it passed through clouds above and struck something in the distance. The flash was almost blinding, but it had given Ivar a lifeline.

Looking in that direction, Ivar could now see the dim glow of windows.

“Huldra House,” he murmured to himself. Yes, the stories of that place were enough to put any fisherman off from the area.

But it was shelter at least, a sprawling mansion that stood lonely on the moors of Huldra island. Lights beckoned from the windows in the distance. There was life there. If he could make the hike, he would live.

Ivar took a step forward and then saw another flash of lightning. This time, he froze to the spot. The momentary light had revealed something standing ahead of him, between him and the house in the distance.

It was a cloaked figure, dark and brooding in the rain.

“He... Hello...” he asked.

But the figure said nothing.

Ivar wasn't certain, but he thought he could see that the clothes around the figure were rags, and that was enough to put the fear of God into him.

He remembered his grandmother's stories of the hidden folk... And their

wraith.

The figure now pointed a lonely, blackened finger towards Ivar, and that made Ivar's blood run cold. Like being faced with a violent animal, Ivar started to back off. As he did so, the figure stepped forward.

Ivar backed off further and then tripped. He tumbled back down the incline towards the water's edge. Dazed, he regained his composure, but the fear was still flowing through his veins. He looked around, panicked, but could see nothing but rain and grim land.

Then one more flash came.

And so, too, did the hideous face lurching out of the darkness towards him.

Ivar screamed, but those screams were but a drop in a murderous ocean of death that had come to Huldra island.

CHAPTER ONE

Finn Wright felt the tension in his fingers as he clutched his phone, his thumb hovering over the message box. Demi's words stared back at him from the screen: "I'm not leaving the UK without you."

The cottage around him was quiet in the autumn morning, leaves of brown and gold cascading over the otherwise pristine lawn outside. He looked to the window, wondering what to do next.

It had been weeks since Demi had arrived in the UK. She had just shown up, demanding to see him. But Finn had refused. He had been recovering from his injuries during the last case with Amelia and Rob—a gunshot wound to the shoulder—and had persuaded himself that he needed to be alone at the cottage in Great Amwell to recuperate.

The truth was, Finn was scared to see Demi. He was mad she had come to London, forcing her way back into his life, but the apprehension came from a different thought. Finn was worried he'd fall straight back into her arms the moment he laid eyes on her. She had wanted to be there for him as he got better, but he couldn't let her. He couldn't open himself up to that sort of hurt again.

Staring back at Demi's message, he wondered how it had come to this. The bright-eyed woman he had proposed to seemed almost a figment of his imagination now. The Demi he knew—or thought he knew—would never cheat on him, yet here they were, enmeshed in a mess of doubt and betrayal. Blackmail, she had claimed, had forced her to say those hurtful words. She was forced to tell him she had had an affair.

It all seemed so confusing, so pieced together to excuse infidelity. But what if she were telling the truth? Now, though their communications had only been through text, Demi was still refusing to leave England unless he came home with her.

Finn's phone buzzed suddenly with a new incoming call, jolting him from his reflections as a breeze cast up some fallen leaves in the front yard, Autumn whispering against the window pane. The caller ID displayed Rob's name. Finn felt a mix of intrigue and relief, an antidote to the stress bubbling away under the surface. Part of him yearned for another case, another foray into the dark to test his detective skills.

"Rob, my man, what's going on? If it's your aunt's cottage you're worried

about, I haven't destroyed it yet," he answered, trying to sound more put-together than he felt. "Though I did burn some toast, I hope you're not mad.

"We've got a situation, Finn," Rob said, sounding more serious than Finn was used to. "The Home Office needs us on another case. It's a double murder. Are you game?"

Finn stared at the blank wall in front of him, digesting Rob's words. Another murder. It could be just what he needed: an escape from his own problems into a world of solving someone else's. It was a familiar dance—a dance of shadows and secrets—and yet, although each case weighed heavily on his soul, the chase made him feel more alive than he had done for quite some time. He felt needed. That need and acceptance from his partners, Rob and Amelia, felt like an anchor, grounding him in a reality that was spiraling out of control.

He winced slightly, feeling his shoulder with his hand. The gunshot wound had healed from the case at DeGrey Castle, but there was a lingering pain when the cold got into his bones. He wasn't quite 100%, but then, was he ever?

"Where is it?" Finn finally asked, trying not to sound too keen.

"Look, Finn," Rob said, his voice now sounding concerned. "If you're not able, I can..."

"No," Finn said, standing up. "I can do it. Besides, I wouldn't want you and Winters to grab all the good press. You need a handsome face for those front page headlines."

Rob sighed. "Yes, very good. Just remember, I'm the handsome one in this operation."

"Rob, I've told you before," Finn said. "Leave the jokes to me."

They both laughed. Finn felt good hearing his friend's voice again.

"So," Finn said. "Where are we off to? London? A castle? Has some rich Lord eaten too much cake again and thinks his chef was trying to kill him? I keep telling you, it's the British food."

"I'm sorry we don't all eat hamburgers and hot dogs for breakfast, lunch, and dinner," Rob replied.

Finn then heard a muffled voice on the line, someone talking to Rob.

"I have to go... Pack a bag and get to Heathrow Airport," Rob replied urgently.

"Heathrow?" Finn said. "A plane?"

"Yes, it's one of those things with wings that got you here in the first

place. Though this is a little more... Off the beaten path than you're used to. Amelia will be going with you, I can't make the journey, not yet. Get over to the airport as soon as you can., and be prepared: It's going to be a bumpy flight."

Finn sighed and hung up. The jokes with Rob quickly faded into the past.

He had always been able to separate his personal life from his professional duties. The murder cases he solved were like complex puzzles, and he didn't need a shrink to tell him that he sometimes used those puzzles as a substitute for fixing his own problems. Today, the boundaries between the two worlds seemed perilously thin. Having worked with the Home Office as a consulting detective, it had done him good to keep his mind off of his legal problems. But he was beginning to wonder if he was now using the cases as a crutch, a way to avoid facing up to what was really going on in his life with Demi and his career with the FBI.

His career back in the US was still on hold, the date of his court case still up in the air. The allegation was that Finn had caused hundreds of thousands of dollars worth of damage to a hotel building by ignoring a direct order from his superiors at the FBI to stand down until a hostage negotiator arrived. Finn knew there was no time for that and went in, rescuing the hostage, but much of the building becoming collateral damage in the firefight.

At least no one was hurt, he thought. But he did wonder if, like his relationship with Demi, he was accepting these cases from the British Home Office simply as a way to stop facing the pain ahead.

Finn's eyes shifted back to the message from Demi. He wondered about her claim of being blackmailed. Could it be true? The Demi he had fallen in love with had always been forthright, even blunt at times. Could she be trapped in a situation so dire that it would force her to betray him?

Doubts gnawed at his thoughts. He wanted to help her if she was in trouble, but he was so conflicted about whether it was a ruse or not. There was only one way to stop the thoughts swirling in his head, and the realization that he had put the confrontation off for too long dawned on him. With a new case to explore, there wouldn't be much time for that. In good conscience, he felt he couldn't leave her waiting forever. He had no idea how long this new case would take. The conversation had to move forward.

He needed to talk to her, to hear her voice, to gauge the sincerity—or deceit—in her words. With a sense of trepidation, Finn dialed her number. The phone rang twice before she picked up.

"Finn," she breathed out, relief palpable in her voice.

"Demi, we need to talk," he started, struggling to keep his voice steady. "Why couldn't you just phone or write a letter? Coming here has complicated things."

She sighed audibly, and for a moment, Finn pictured her—probably sitting alone in her hotel room near London, her eyes perhaps wet with unshed tears.

"I want to explain, Finn. I really do. But not over the phone. I've been staying here for weeks, trying to gather the courage to face you, to tell you everything. But you keep saying no. I'd half thought about coming to the cottage where you are staying."

"So why haven't you?" Finn's voice rose despite his efforts to remain calm. "Me saying no never stopped you before."

"Because I was scared, okay? Scared you wouldn't believe me, scared that it would be the final nail in the coffin for us," Demi replied, her voice tinged with desperation. "I... I wanted to give you time to feel ready to talk. I didn't want to push you to breaking point."

"That's a risk we'll have to take eventually, but... But not now," Finn retorted, "because right now, I can't separate the facts from the lies."

"I'm not one of your cases, Finn," she said, her voice somber.

There was silence, a stretching quiet that filled the room like dark water rising up to their necks, paddling for dear life just to stay afloat and keep their connection alive.

Finally, Demi spoke, her voice barely above a whisper. "I love you, Finn. I want to fight for us, for our future. I'm not going anywhere until you hear me out. I'll stay in this crummy hotel all winter if I have to..."

Finn felt his resolve waver. There was an earnestness in her voice that he couldn't ignore. But could he afford to be swayed by emotion? With a heavy heart, he found himself saying, "I have to go, Demi. There's another case. Another murder. I can't deal with this right now. I wanted you to know before you read about it in the newspapers."

"So, what? You're just going to leave? Avoid facing what's happening between us?"

Finn clenched his jaw. "I said I have a case. I can't ignore my responsibilities. Lives may depend on it."

"And what about us? What about our life together?" Her voice cracked.

He paused, feeling the enormity of the choices in front of him. Finally, he muttered, "I loved you so much, Demi. First you tell me you had an affair,

and then you left me. Now, you're telling me it was all a lie, and you've flown here to explain? None of it makes sense."

"It will if you let me explain," she said.

"I don't want you wasting money and time on something that might not work out," Finn said. He knew he sounded defeated, and that was not a sense that entered his personality very often.

"I can wait," she said. "I have money."

Finn thought for a moment. He was starting to think he had been too cruel. "I don't know when I'll be back, Demi. It could be a day or a week, maybe more. But I'll text you. When I return, whether you're still in that hotel room or back home, we will talk... I owe you that."

"Thank you, Finn," she said quietly.

"And *you* owe me an explanation," Finn replied. "It better be a good one, and the truth, if we have any hope. Goodbye."

"Be careful, Finn," she said.

That cut him deeply. To hear her concern for his well-being reminded him of how it used to be between them.

"I... I will," he said. "I... I still love you."

"Oh, Finn," she said, beginning to sob.

"I'll be back soon. Goodbye, Demi."

Without waiting for her response, he hung up. The finality of that disconnected call loomed large in the room, like an uninvited guest. He felt torn between duty and the growing urge to untangle the knotted threads of his relationship with Demi.

Finn stood up and looked outside as leaves fell from a nearby sycamore. For a moment, he thought about how short life was, each of us dangling at the end of a branch, discarded when the seasons turn.

Then, through the haze of it all, the image of Amelia Winters came into his head. Why that happened there and then, bothered him deeply. What bothered him even more was that the thought of his partner was so comforting in a sea of misfortune and unknowns.

There was no time to unpick the confusion in his mind. It was time to head out on a case again, and hope that somehow the answers, both personal and professional, would come easy to him as the sky clouded overhead, casting a dark shadow across the cottage lawn.

CHAPTER TWO

Finn ignored the cacophony of sounds around him caused by the storm. The small passenger plane jetted through the clouds, almost groaning as it did so. Glancing through the window next to him, its surfaces were covered in rain, and he could see the sun caught in a shroud of misty rain and water vapor in the distance.

The sound of the rain rattled off the outside of the plane like a tin can. He had seen the forecasts—a dangerous storm system was hanging over the West of Scotland, threatening the islands.

So far, it had battered the rugged communities below with rain, wind, and sea. Weather forecasts said that it would hopefully pass in a week or so, dissipating, but one meteorologist had stated that there was a small chance the storm might turn into something far bigger, far more dangerous. A storm not seen in that part of the world for generations.

Finn glanced at the beads of water on the window as they smeared across it, hanging on until their inevitable end, then he turned his attention back to the case files in front of him.

The plane's engines growled as it hit another patch of turbulence, shaking the aircraft from side to side. Amelia gripped the armrests next to Finn, her knuckles turning white and her long red hair momentarily sitting over her face.

"That's a great look, you should keep it," Finn said.

Amelia tucked the strands of hair behind her ears and then glanced over at Finn, who was once more engrossed in the case file, seemingly undisturbed by the rumbling.

Finn looked up and noticed her unease. "Sorry, I know you don't like flying. Are you alright?"

Amelia tried to sound casual. "Oh, you know, just the usual mortal terror of flying through a storm to a remote Scottish island. Nothing much to worry about, except hurtling into the sea like a dart."

Finn grinned. "Well, try to relax and console yourself with the fact that at least I'm not the one flying this thing."

Amelia took a deep breath and exhaled slowly. "Just... Just take my mind off it. Have you caught up with the case file?"

Finn glanced down at the file open on his tray table, flipping it around so

Amelia could see the photograph attached. It was a black-and-white picture of Huldra House, the Victorian mansion at the center of their new investigation. "Just familiarizing myself with our next 'haunt.' So, we're dealing with two deaths, most probably homicide. The first was Lord Carmichael, an aristocrat, killed outside his cottage several days ago. It looks like his head was caved in, a piece of black rock lodged in his skull. Pretty vicious, makes me think it was personal. Then, just last night, a fisherman from the mainland ran aground on Huldra Island. No pictures yet since the body was only found a few hours ago, but the report here says his body has been difficult to reach. We'll find out more when we get there."

Amelia looked at the picture, and her face turned serious. "We need to find out if the two deaths are connected. Apparently someone who lives there has called in a favor from the Home Office, someone with clout. A Lady Ferguson. She lives at this Huldra House, and she specifically requested us. Apparently, we're being put up there, but I can't say I'm looking forward to that. The mansion looks even creepier than its description."

"Right? Maybe we'll find a ghost there," Finn agreed, his eyes still glued to the eerie photo. "Or one of the Little People."

"That's Ireland, you numb skull," Amelia said, sighing. "Remember, I spent a lot of time as a kid in Scotland."

"Wait," Finn said, turning to Amelia as the storm rumbled outside. "You're... You're not *one* of the Little People, are you?" He gasped jokingly and then put his two index fingers across each other to make the sign of the cross."

"You'll need more than that to stop me from tossing you out the window," Amelia sighed, looking back down at the photograph of Huldra House. "Actually, I'd say that house does look like something right out of Scottish folklore. And some people take that stuff really seriously. They do not like you messing around with it."

"Really? Do tell."

She sighed. "Scotland is a land of myths and legends. Growing up, I spent a lot of time in the Highlands and a little around the islands. And let me tell you, Finn, people there are serious about their folklore. You might think it's all old wives' tales, but there are locals who avoid certain places like the plague."

Finn chuckled, amused by the idea. "Are you telling me I should pack garlic and holy water?"

Amelia grinned but shook her head. "That's Eastern European tradition. It's not about vampires or anything like that. It's about the Huldufolk."

Finn raised an eyebrow. "The what now?"

"The hidden people," Amelia explained. "They're supposed to be these supernatural beings who live in the natural elements—hills, streams, woods. Some stories even say they can enchant you and lead you to another realm. But their main aim is to stay away from humans and to keep humans away from them."

Finn leaned back, a playful smile on his lips. "A hidden realm? Well, that sounds like a good time. Maybe they can provide some tips for the case. Or even give us the lottery numbers for next week. I'm still suspended with the FBI, so I could do with a cash injection."

Amelia smiled, but her eyes remained solemn. "I don't buy it, either. But I know some who do. According to the tales, seeing a Huldufolk is an omen. An omen you don't want hanging over your head."

A sudden jolt of turbulence shook the plane, causing the overhead lights to flicker. A few passengers gasped, and Amelia clenched her fist around the armrest. Finn glanced at her and said, "I guess the plane didn't like your story. Oh God! What if the pilot is one of the Hidden Folk!"

Amelia shot him a nervous smile. "Very funny. I'm not one of superstitions, but let's keep mocking the supernatural to a minimum while we're thirty thousand feet above the sea."

The pilot's voice suddenly filled the cabin with a thick Scottish twang. "Ladies and gentlemen, we're beginning our descent. Please fasten your seat belts and make sure your seats and tray tables are in their upright and locked positions."

"He's very professional for being a pixie," Finn said.

As the plane began its descent through the turbulent atmosphere, Amelia stared past Finn out the window, her face turning introspective. "You know, the thing about folklore is that it taps into our most primal fears. And when you're in a place where those stories originated, it's hard not to feel... affected."

Finn looked over at her. "Are you sure you don't believe in the Huldufolk, Winters?"

She hesitated for a moment before answering. "I believe that stories persist for a reason, even if that reason is just to make sense of things we don't understand. Even if those things don't exist, a belief in them can affect

people's behaviors. It can make them do crazy things."

Finn nodded, his eyes falling back to the case file, then back to Amelia. "That's a fair point, but folklore or not, something bad is happening on that island."

She looked back at him, her eyes tinged with apprehension. "You know, they say that if you see a Huldufolk, you're already dead."

"It's fine," Finn replied. "I'll just keep my eyes shut. Clever like a fox, that's me. But it does mean you'll have to lead me around so I don't bump into things or walk off a cliff."

The plane finally broke through the clouds, revealing the shadowy silhouette of Huldra Island below them. It was an unsettling sight—a dark, shapeless mass surrounded by the churning sea, as if it were a realm separate from the world they knew. Finn felt a shiver crawl up his spine, and he suddenly understood what Amelia meant. Here was a place where the line between myth and reality could blur into one unsettling narrative. The landscape is so domineering that it could even trick you into believing in the old tales.

They both stared out the window as the island grew larger, its details still hidden in the mist and darkness. And for the first time, Finn felt a sense of unease that went beyond natural explanations, beyond the details outlined in their case file. For lurking in the shadows of Huldra Island were stories, myths, and perhaps truths that neither of them could fully comprehend—yet.

CHAPTER THREE

Finn and Amelia stepped out of the airplane into a rainstorm that seemed to have been waiting for them all day. As water lashed against their faces, both rushed to shelter beneath the plane's wing, struggling to make out the figure standing next to a battered Jeep, holding a sign that read "Wright & Co."

"I guess I'm 'Co'!" Amelia shouted over the wind, her red hair blowing unpredictably in the wind.

"That must be McGregor," Finn shouted in reply, looking all around the wild landscape at the solitary figure by the jeep. A playful grin stretched across his face. "He looks just as cheerful as this lovely Scottish weather!"

"Shhh!" Amelia said. "Your voice will carry on the wind. He might hear you."

Footsteps above clunked down the plane stairs as a small number of passengers left the plane behind. They huddled in the rain and ran off to a small building across the tarmac runway, which Finn assumed was about as close to an airport as that part of the world could get.

"Maybe we should get back on the plane?" Finn joked.

Amelia elbowed him gently as the man now approached the stoic, his expression as craggy as the cliffs and jagged hills that dotted the landscape.

"Mr. McGregor, I presume?" Amelia asked.

The man nodded curtly. "It's a dreich night the night. Get in and I'll take ye tae Huldrahoose. We have to get moving."

Finn shook his hand, and the man's grip was like iron, despite being more broad than tall. They nodded at each other, and then the three figures stepped to the green jeep, and they all got in.

"Is it always this sunny?" Finn asked as McGregor started the engine, and they drove off the runway in the rain.

"Aye, lad," he said. "This is the way, oot here."

Finn looked at Amelia, and their eyes met in the back of the jeep. He was struggling with this particular dialect of English, but Amelia shook her head as if to say "don't you dare make a joke about it".

Instead, they sat in the rear of that jeep, battered by the elements as the rain and wind fingered their way all around the vehicle. Through water-covered windows, the landscape of Huldra Island appeared almost ethereal,

like an alien world with large jutting rocks rising out of the deep green and yellow grasslands stretching for as far as the eye could see.

The drive was nothing short of a journey through a maze of curling, wet roads, cliffs that seemed to drop into oblivion, and a sky that had transitioned from angry gray to an unsettling black in the darkening early evening. The island seemed to be constructed mostly of a peculiar black stone, which Finn found both intriguing and unsettling.

"What's that black rock I see everywhere?" Finn said, trying to slice through the tension. "Volcanic?"

"Aye," MacGregor said at the wheel. "The island, she's ancient, laddie. Born out of the seabed. She rose up out of an eruption. You'll see the rock used in some of the hooses around here. Ye, ken?"

Finn nodded with a smile and then leaned into Amelia. "Why does he think my name is Ken?"

Amelia let out a loud laugh. "Finn. Ken means know in some parts of Scotland. Ye ken?"

Now Finn laughed.

McGregor didn't so much as twitch a smile. "There's nothing funny about what's happening around the island and Huldra House."

Finn glanced at Amelia, who gave him a subtle shake of her head.

"What makes you say that?" Amelia probed.

"It's the old curse, lassie," McGregor stated, as if that explained everything.

"You're going to need to unpack that a bit," Finn said, raising an eyebrow.

McGregor sighed. "Old stories talk about a gateway to the realm of the Huldufolk—hidden people. They live in another world below our island. When they're displeased or someone ventures too close to their world, they send out a banshee, a wraith. Anyone who sees it is doomed. Deed."

Finn nodded. "Is this a two-for-one deal? A murder investigation *and* a ghost story? Amelia, why didn't you say we'd be having so? I would have brought my Ouija board."

Amelia gave him a disapproving look. "I'd respect McGregor's words more seriously if I were you."

"I'm sorry, McGregor, I'm only joking. Do people really believe that stuff here?" Finn quipped.

"I live on the mainland a lot of the year, coming back and forward," the man grimaced, the jeep shuddering on an uneven piece of trail. "But I've seen

enough around here tae know that there's something bad on Huldra island, and if you know what's good for ye, you'll stay out of its way."

Arching around a large grassy hill, suddenly Huldra House came into sight. It was made of black and red stone. Finn had never seen anything quite like it, and he knew immediately that much of the house had been constructed from the same black volcanic rocks that populated the landscape.

As they approached in the jeep, the vehicle's windscreen wipers shrieking back and forward against the wet glass, no one said a thing. A silence hung in the air of that cavity in the storm, that interior where the wild winds had not yet penetrated.

For Finn, the house beyond looked like a colossal shadow, glaring down at a steep valley from its high ridge. Its many windows were eyes peering out across the land, and a swirl of smoke emanated from a chimney on the high roof, which was then caught by the storm and pulled up from the house like an invisible hand extracting teeth. On the outside of the windows, clawing their way onto the stone sills, were what looked like strange stone-sculpted figures.

The Jeep climbed the steep ridge and then pulled up to Huldra House, and Finn felt a shiver run down his spine. The mansion was even more imposing close up. It loomed over them like a monstrous entity, each brick carved from the same black stone that seemed to dominate the island. It was three stories of Gothic architecture, with unsettling gargoyles and grotesque figures carved into its facade. Two turrets spiraled into the sky, and the windows seemed almost as black and vacant as the rock from which the gargoyles were carved.

McGregor killed the engine. "This is where I leave you. I won't go beyond this point, not by evening."

"You're kidding," Finn said incredulously. "You're not coming in?"

"I don't go into Huldra House unless the Lady asks. I'll stay at an old fisherman's cottage on the East side of the island. I leave by boat in the morning. If you'll have any sense, you'll come with me."

Amelia eyed the house warily. "So, we're on our own."

"No, Lassie," McGregor said. "On Huldra Island, yer never alone." McGregor then nodded as if thinking over something important. "I'd have thought we'd have more polis with ye?"

"Polis?" Finn repeated, confused.

"Police," Amelia answered.

"I read in our report that there isn't a full-time cop on the island?" Finn

asked.

"Aye, we have needed one," McGregor nodded. "So you'll need more than you two."

"We have some police officers boating back and forward from Storn on the mainland," Amelia said. "We'll liaise with them soon, weather permitting. Don't worry, everything will be in hand."

McGregor smirked, clearly not believing Amelia. He sighed.

"Good luck, young ones," he said, handing Finn a small sheet of paper.

"What's this?" Finn asked.

"My number on the mainland," he replied. "If you need me to come and get you, call me."

"Thank you," Amelia said, before stepping out into the wild weather. Finn did likewise.

They both stood in the downpour, watching as McGregor drove away, his tail lights disappearing into the curtain of rain.

Turning back to the house, Finn approached the imposing oak door, its wood old and gnarled like plagued wood. "After you," he gestured to Amelia.

"Don't you think we should knock?"

Finn lifted the enormous iron knocker and let it fall. The resounding clang seemed to echo into the storm, swallowed by the winds. There was no response.

"Perhaps they didn't hear—" Finn started to say, pushing slightly against the door, but then it seemed to creak open all on its own. "I feel like I've stepped into a 50s haunted house film. Where's the smoke machine?"

Amelia looked at Finn, alarmed. "I really think we should wait for someone to let us in."

"I'm wet enough already," Finn grinned, trying to dispel his own rising sense of unease. "I'm pretty sure I heard a scream from inside. Oh... Yes, there it is again. As an investigator, I'm compelled to check it out."

"You did not hear a scream," Amelia admonished, but she stepped in beside him as they both crossed the threshold.

The moment they did, the door slammed shut behind them with a resounding boom, causing both to jump. Finn looked at Amelia, who looked back at him, her eyes wide.

"It's just the wind," Finn said, trying to reassure her.

Somewhere deep within the mansion, a clock chimed six.

"Remember when I said I wanted to come to Scotland?" Finn murmured

as they stared into the dark corridor that stretched before them, its shadows thick and tangible as if they could reach out and grab them. “I meant the cities. A town, even. Anywhere with people... Living people. *Actual* living people.”

“I’ve never known you to be frightened,” Amelia said.

Finn cleared his throat. “Me? Frightened? No, I just like to add to the atmosphere, that’s all. Come on.”

They moved forward into an expansive lobby with a central staircase, lit only by the tumultuous gray skies through the windows behind. The wind clawed at the panes, shaking them. That felt like a threat.

Finn couldn’t shake McGregor’s parting words from his mind. The island was cursed, a gateway to a realm of hidden, malevolent beings. For the first time, he wondered if some gates are meant to remain closed. But it was too late for second thoughts; they were already in Huldra House, and whatever mysteries it held were now theirs to discover—or to be consumed by.

Finn took another step forward, he had the distinct feeling that he and Amelia were not alone.

CHAPTER FOUR

As Finn and Amelia stepped further into the embrace of Huldra House, a chill wind whooshed through the ancient hallways, sweeping the scent of mildew and dust into Finn's nostrils. There was a faint hint of charcoal to it.

"Smells like grandma's attic," Finn quipped, looking around the cavernous entryway with a sense of foreboding.

"Don't be disrespectful," Amelia chastised, but her voice wavered slightly, revealing that she was just as unsettled as he was.

Before Finn could reply, a low, unearthly wail echoed through the house. It was so distant that he couldn't tell where it came from, but the resonance seemed to shake him to his core. Surely it was the wind. But there was a guttural, vocal quality to it, as though the noise came from something that was alive.

"What on Earth was that?" Amelia's eyes widened, her professional demeanor slipping for a moment.

"Probably just the wind having a laugh," Finn offered, chuckling nervously. "Or maybe it's the infamous banshee stopping by for a coffee."

Amelia gave him a sidelong glance. "I'm pretty sure banshees don't drink lattes."

Finn grinned. "Ah, but have you ever offered one some? Maybe that's all they've ever wanted."

Before Amelia could shoot back a retort, another strange noise filled the air. It was muffled, indistinct, but Finn sensed a pattern to it, almost like someone—or something—was moving inside the house. And that movement was drawing closer. Without exchanging a word, they started following the sound, their leather-soled shoes sinking into the heavy, opulent carpets that covered the hardwood floors.

The house was a maze of hallways and closed doors, and the dim gray light from outside cast eerie shadows on the walls. Family portraits lined the corridors, each face appearing more sinister than any artist could have intended. Stopping by one beneath a flickering chandelier, he leaned in to read the name at the bottom of the frame.

"Nathaniel Ferguson," Finn read out loud. The gentleman in the painting, dressed in military clothes from the Napoleonic wars, glared at him as if seething at modernity. "He's a happy one."

"Lady Ferguson is supposed to meet us here," Amelia said. "Why would she go to the trouble of calling the Home Office and requesting us if she wasn't going to be home when we got here."

"Unless she's ended up being the third victim," Finn answered. "We should stay sharp. I hate that we're not allowed to carry guns."

"I'd be worried you'd shoot yourself in the foot," Amelia said. "Or me in the foot, for that matter."

"Do you get the feeling that we're being watched?" Finn muttered, eyeing a particularly unsettling portrait of a woman with no name. He presumed she was another ancestor of Lady Ferguson.

Amelia sighed. "You're a consulting detective, Finn. Not a 12-year-old on his first haunted house tour. Focus. We're here for a reason. You are right about the possibility, at least. What if the killer decided to pay Lady Ferguson a visit? What if—"

She was cut off by a sudden crash. Both agents flinched as a black cat, its fur puffed up in fear or aggression, sprang from behind an ornate cabinet and darted down a side corridor.

"Son of a—" Finn caught his breath. "Okay, I'll admit it. That got me. I might actually need a change of pants."

Amelia shot him a look, both amused and irritated. "We're supposed to be hunting a human monster, Finn. Not getting spooked by the local wildlife."

Finn chuckled. "You know, your ability to suck the fun out of everything is truly remarkable."

Amelia rolled her eyes, but before she could respond, another sound split the air. Unlike before, this one was clear—a gut-wrenching scream that seemed to come from directly above them.

Both agents froze for a split second, their eyes locking in a moment of shared dread. Then, thinking someone could be hurt or being attacked, Finn burst into motion, heading for the grand staircase that spiraled up from the entrance hall like an ancient tree trunk. Amelia was hot on his heels.

"That sounded like someone in trouble," she gasped as they ascended, taking the stairs two at a time.

"More like pain," Finn asserted, his voice tinged with urgency.

The stairs seemed to go on forever, each step echoing ominously as they reached the top. The second floor was as dark and foreboding as the first. Another staircase caught their attention, narrower this time, leading up to a closed door—the attic. The light outside was getting dimmer, and Finn was

becoming concerned just how quickly nightfall was approaching that far North.

The muffled sound of anguished gasps and sobs reached their ears.

"It's up there," Finn whispered.

Amelia nodded, her face pale in the gloom.

They walked up the narrow staircase together, one step at a time. With each step, the strange, sobbing and moaning sound grew in intensity until they both stopped just one step from the door.

Finn approached the door cautiously, signaling Amelia to keep her distance. He then tried the handle, but he noticed a small keyhole at its center. It was locked.

A scream suddenly erupted from beyond the door.

"I'm going to kick it in," he whispered. "Get ready for anything."

Amelia nodded, stepping back, her fists clenched by her side in seeming preparation for anything coming through the doorway.

Just as Finn was gathering his breath and strength to kick open the door, a voice echoed from behind them, startling both agents.

"What do you think you are doing?" It was an elderly voice with a dignified but icy tone that seemed to still the air.

Both agents turned around. A tall, imposing elderly woman stood at the foot of the narrow staircase. Her face was lined with age, her eyes sharp as tacks. For a moment, it was hard for Finn to read her, so much was her expression solemn and un-moving. She carried with her a small battery powered lantern, and the beam cast eerie shadows, which moved around the walls of the narrow staircase like spiders legs.

"Lady Ferguson, I presume?" Finn spoke, trying to hide his relief at the interruption.

The lady nodded. "What business do you have entering my house during a storm? Make it quick before I call the authorities."

"We heard a distressing noise and wanted to make sure no one was hurt," Amelia said.

Lady Ferguson slowly ascended the remaining stairs. "Ah, that would be my son. He has severe emotional issues, you see, exacerbated by storms and other loud noises. He's best left alone until the weather clears."

"We're agents from the Home Office, Lady Ferguson. We're here to investigate the murders on the island," Amelia interjected, showing her identification. "I believe it was you who called us in?"

Lady Ferguson's eyes flickered, unreadable. "I was informed that the Home Office would send their best. I hope you're up to the task." She looked past Amelia to Finn and glared at him. "You're the yank, aren't you? Good. Someone from the new world will be more resilient to the effects of Huldra."

"Effects?" Finn asked.

"Forgive me," Lady Ferguson said, breaking into a sad smile for a moment. "It is best if you keep your mind clear of the old stories. Sometimes I forget that the outside world has long since moved on from the superstitions of us island folk."

A loud clatter of thunder rumbled somewhere in the distance. "I saw your bags at the door. I would have someone to bring them up for you, but I am afraid I am quite alone this evening."

"That's okay," Finn said, gently. "I can do that."

The sobbing began again from the door behind them.

"We are disturbing my son by talking," Lady Ferguson said. "Come, I'll show you to your rooms."

They had no choice but to follow her. As they walked, the air seemed to grow colder, and Finn felt compelled to look around every corner as though he were about to be confronted by some hideous specter. They moved through corridors filled with antique furniture covered in sheets, as if the house itself was in mourning. It seemed to Finn that large sections of Huldra House had been left untouched for some time. A place that was once grand had now withered from the inside out.

Lady Ferguson stopped in front of two rooms across from each other. "These will be your accommodations," she said, handing them each a set of old-fashioned iron keys. "I'll have one of my servants take you to the crime scenes in the morning when they are here."

"Excuse me, Lady Ferguson," Finn said. "But isn't it normal for servants to live in the servant quarters? I mean, surely a place as huge as Huldra House requires a full staff to keep going?"

The lady looked lost in thought for a moment. "Yes, that is normal. But Huldra House is unlike anywhere you will have stayed before. It is made from the rock of this island. And the earth has a habit of tricking you. Not many have the stomach for it, but my son and I do quite well enough. The servants live elsewhere on the island or come from the mainland, and that suits my purposes."

"About the two deaths, are you certain they are connected?" inquired Finn.

"I am tired. There will be time for questions tomorrow."

"We had hoped to get out there before night and look things over," Finn explained.

"It is too dangerous," Lady Ferguson said. "Wait until tomorrow when the storm has gone. Besides, it will be pitch dark in the blink of an eye, and you don't want to be wandering around the island after dark, unless you know the place. And even then..."

"Thank you, Lady Ferguson," Amelia said. "We appreciate your hospitality, and after our journey, it would be good to get an early sleep."

"The kitchen is on the ground floor to the rear of the house, if you would like some food and refreshments," she said. "Please do help yourselves." The old woman's eyes narrowed, her faint smile somehow becoming fainter. "Just one other thing. Don't open any windows. You wouldn't want anything crawling in. It's not safe."

Finn couldn't let that go. "What do you mean by 'not safe'?"

But Lady Ferguson turned, ignoring his question. "Goodnight," she said, her voice carrying with it a mounting sadness as she walked away.

Finn and Amelia exchanged a concerned look as the older woman retreated down the shadowy hallway, her steps quiet against the worn carpet.

"Charming place, isn't it?" Finn quipped, trying to dispel the discomfort that Lady Ferguson had left in her wake.

"Utterly delightful," Amelia responded, her voice tinged with sarcasm. "Maybe you should share a room with her; you both seem to have a unique sense of humor."

Finn shrugged his shoulders. "Tempting, but I think I'd be safer facing the hidden folk or whatever they call them here. Speaking of which, want to bunk together? Safety in numbers, you know."

Amelia laughed softly, shaking her head. "I'll take my chances with the local ghosts and legends, thank you. I think I will lie down for a bit, I have a little bit of a migraine coming on. I might just sleep. Scream if you need anything."

"Will do," Finn grinned. "Pleasant dreams."

With that, they unlocked their respective doors and stepped into their rooms. Finn's space was larger than he'd expected, dominated by a massive four-poster bed that looked like it belonged in a different century. Dusty portraits hung on the walls, their eyes seeming to follow him as he moved. He couldn't shake the feeling that he was being watched, and it wasn't just by

the people in the paintings.

He threw his bag on a rickety chair and began to unpack, setting down his identification and notepad on the bedside table. The room was cold, the kind of cold that seemed to seep into your bones, and he wished not for the first time that he was back in the cozy embrace of the cottage at Great Amwell.

Settling into the bed, he pulled the heavy drapes closed, but they did little to keep out the persistent draft. The wind outside howled and rattled against the windows, as if angry for being denied entry. He decided that an early bed wasn't too bad an idea. He read for a couple of hours and then tried to phone Rob, but couldn't get a signal. That didn't seem so bad a thing.

At least Demi can't put any more doubt into my mind, he thought.

After another while of letting his thoughts swirl around like the storm outside, he lay there for what felt like hours, listening to the creaks and groans of the ancient house, each noise magnified by the clawing wind and rain and his own heightened nerves.

But then another sound caught his ear, something different—scratching, like fingernails against glass. It was coming from his window.

Finn sat up, heart pounding in his chest. He stared at the window, half-expecting to see a face staring back at him, but there was nothing there. Still, the scratching continued, slow and deliberate, as if taunting him.

"Okay, that's enough," he muttered to himself, swinging his legs over the side of the bed. Taking a deep breath, he moved cautiously toward the window. Every step felt like an eternity, every creak of the floorboards loud as thunder in the silence of the room.

With a swift motion, he yanked back the curtains. But there was nothing there—just the dark, impenetrable night and the relentless rain pelting against the glass. He could see that small pieces of grit and grass were occasionally being blown against it in the dark. He hoped that was what had been causing the noise.

Just as he was about to turn away, convinced that his mind was playing tricks on him, he caught sight of something. A shadow, just for a moment, darting away from the window and disappearing into the blackness of the storm. His heart sank as he realized that Lady Ferguson's warning may have been more than just the ramblings of an old woman.

Peering out into the darkness, he wondered if it had simply been his imagination. He certainly wasn't going out into that storm to find out.

Finn stepped back and took a deep, shaky breath. "This is going to be a

long night," he murmured, eyes never leaving the window as he climbed back into bed. He kept staring at it, even as his eyelids began to feel heavy, wondering if among the shadows out there on the island, a killer lurked.

In the morning, he would know one way or the other.

CHAPTER FIVE

After a night of fitful sleep and unsettling dreams, Finn woke up to the faint aroma of coffee wafting through the air. Outside, the wind still blew, but it and the rain had calmed to an almost bearable dull howl.

He dressed quickly and made his way downstairs, following the smell to a large, grand dining room adorned with an elaborately set table. A massive chandelier hung from the ceiling, its many crystals throwing soft light across the room.

Amelia was already there, sipping on a cup of coffee and flipping through a file. "Morning," she greeted, not looking up from her reading.

"Did you sleep well?" Finn asked, taking a seat across from her.

"As well as one can in a haunted mansion," she replied, finally setting down her file to give him her full attention.

"How is the migraine, or was that an excuse not to stay up all night and stare out at a window with me?"

Amelia looked puzzled. "I'm feeling better... What window?"

"I saw something last night," he replied. "A shadow near my window. I thought it might have been a person, but I can't be sure."

"Finn Wright," Amelia said. "Has the wise-cracking Floridian finally fallen foul of paranoia?"

"No," Finn scoffed. "But a very real killer might be here, and I didn't like the idea of him looking in on me while I slept. In any case, I..."

Their conversation was interrupted by the entrance of a man carrying a tray laden with breakfast foods—eggs, toast, fresh fruit, and a steaming pot of coffee. He looked to be in his late fifties, with graying hair and a humble demeanor.

"Good morning," the man said with a polite nod. "I'm Frederick. I assist Lady Ferguson with the house. She has instructed me to help in any way possible."

"Finn Wright. And this is Amelia Winters. Pleased to meet you," Finn responded, shaking Frederick's hand.

Frederick began serving them breakfast, his movements efficient but not rushed. "I trust you both slept well?"

"As well as one can expect, considering," Amelia said with a wry smile.

Frederick returned the smile with a knowing look. "Yes, the house has that

effect on people, especially during storms."

Finn glanced around the large room, noting its faded grandeur. "It's a big place for just Lady Ferguson and you. Are there other staff?"

"Most of the staff come in the morning by boat, do their duties, and leave before sundown," Frederick explained as he poured coffee into Finn's cup. "No one stays overnight. Lady Ferguson doesn't mind, but it does worry me sometimes. I myself have offered to stay more permanently, but the Lady knows my wife would hate the idea of staying here, and she does not wish to split us apart. It is a worry, though, the Lady being here on her own."

"Worry you? Why?" Finn asked, intrigued.

"Well," Frederick hesitated, looking uncomfortable for the first time, "the island has a history, and some of the locals are quite superstitious. They'd rather not be here at the house after dark. You know Lord Ferguson died here several years ago. He fell down the master staircase. But some think he was pushed. The locals think it was the house that did it."

"I've never heard of a house killing someone," Finn said, looking at Amelia. "Can you imagine the size of the jail they'd have to build?"

Amelia raised an eyebrow and shook her head. "May I apologize for my colleague?"

"No problem," Frederick replied. "It's good to have someone around here who has a sense of humor."

"It does seem odd, though," Amelia said. "That in the 21st century people are so frightened of a place due to ghost stories."

"Maybe," Frederick conceded. "But this place has a way of getting inside your head. It makes you see things, hear things."

"Like banshees and hidden folk?" Finn asked, only half-joking.

Frederick's eyes narrowed ever so slightly. "Those are just stories to scare children. But there's an energy here that even grown men don't want to challenge."

Finn exchanged a glance with Amelia. They both knew better than to dismiss local knowledge, especially when it aligned so closely with their own experiences. Even if there was almost always a conventional explanation, beliefs went a long way to motivating people into incredible, or terrible, acts.

"Thanks for bringing breakfast, Frederick. It's lovely," Amelia said, breaking the silence.

"Yes, thanks," Finn echoed, pushing away his empty plate. "I could definitely get used to that sort of thing, but then none of my Hawaiian T-

shirts would fit, and that would be a damned shame. We've got a long day ahead of us."

Frederick nodded. "Of course. Lady Ferguson mentioned that she'll have someone show you to the crime scenes after breakfast. If you need anything, don't hesitate to ask. I shall be here until about 5PM."

With that, Frederick retreated from the room, leaving Finn and Amelia alone again.

"Are we going to get that 'this place is so spooky, don't stray from the path' spiel every time we speak to someone here?" Finn asked.

"Like I told you before, Finn," Amelia said. "Whether any of the stories are true, the point is that people believe in them enough, and that affects their behavior. It can make otherwise sane people make strange choices."

"But could it make someone kill?" Finn asked.

"I've wondered that," Amelia said. "I have a statement in this file from Ivar Ward's wife on the mainland."

"Ivar Ward," Finn said. "Have the police on the mainland been speaking with the dead fisherman's relatives?"

Amelia nodded.

"They have," Amelia confirmed. "According to his wife, he always spoke of the island with a kind of reverence mixed with fear. He'd always been warned by his elders to stay away from Huldra Island, especially after dark."

Finn raised an eyebrow. "So why did he come here the other night?"

"That's the question, isn't it?" Amelia replied, scanning the file. "It's clear he had reservations about the place. It could have simply been the storm that took him off course. But could something have drawn him here, or someone? If he came here deliberately, it would have taken a lot for him to do that, considering his apparent superstition about the place."

"Or maybe he simply didn't believe in the tales," Finn speculated. "People tend to grow out of childhood fears. He could have come here simply because he *didn't* fear anything, only to encounter someone out on the moors. We should try and look at the body. Is it still on the island?"

Amelia looked thoughtful. "Perhaps, but the human mind is a complex thing. Even if we outwardly dismiss something, it can linger in the recesses of our minds, influencing our actions in ways we might not even realize. And yes, the body hasn't been moved to the mainland as far as I know, but then these files have been cobbled together in the last couple of days, it's only a day or so since Ivar Ward was missing. We'll find out more when we liaise

with local law enforcement."

"There's a police force here?"

"No," Amelia answered. "There's only one town on Huldra Island, and then a few cottages and smaller settlements dotted around. There's no need for police here when only a few hundred people live here. Rob sent me a message to say that some police and forensics had been sent over from the mainland. They're only getting to look at things now since the storm was so bad."

There was a momentary pause as the weight of Amelia's words settled. Then, the sound of a door opening at the far end of the corridor caught their attention. Both of them turned to see a woman in her early thirties entering the dining room. She was lean with curly dark hair and a rugged look about her, as if she'd spent a lot of time outdoors.

"Good morning," she greeted them with a slight nod. "You must be with the police? I'm Kirsty. Lady Ferguson sent me to take you around the island."

Finn extended his hand. "Finn Wright. This is Amelia Winters. A pleasure to meet you."

"It's nice to meet you, Kirsty," Amelia said. "Do you work for the Ferguson estate?"

Kirsty shook both their hands firmly. "Likewise. I've been ferrying supplies and people to and from this island for years. My mother did it before me, and her mother before that. This place," she said with a hint of sadness, "has a pull. And not always a good one."

Finn was getting sick and tired of people talking about the malevolence of the place. He had an interest in the paranormal, but he was beginning to feel that the islanders weren't wanting to concede that one of them was a killer. Instead, it was as if they wanted to implicitly blame the island itself than take stock of that unnerving fact.

Amelia's brow furrowed. "Did you know Ivar Ward then?"

Kirsty nodded. "Yes, I knew him, briefly. And I heard he's the one they found down at the docks. That's so sad. A few around here had dealings with him, though only through trips to the mainland and Storn town where he lived. A lot of the islanders go back and forth from there for work and to meet relatives. Nice guy. It's a shame, really. No one expected him to end up on this island, not after the stories he grew up with. He always joked over on Storn that he'd never step foot on here."

"So, you're familiar with the tales of Huldra Island?" Finn inquired.

Kirsty's gaze turned distant. "All too familiar. But I've always treated them as tales. Maybe that's why I can come and go as I please. Respect the island, but don't fear it. It's more the treacherous weather that's the danger."

"Do you think Ivar Ward had any enemies?" Amelia asked.

"Not that I know of," Kirsty answered. "But then, I only knew him to chat to occasionally."

"Let us know if anything else springs to mind," Finn remarked. "Shall we?"

"Yes," Kirsty said. "There are some police now tending to the crime scene, I believe. It's not far from here, so we can walk. If you want to go further, I have a car Lady Ferguson let's me use."

Kirsty led them out of the mansion and down across the bleak glen of grass and rock, and as they walked, Finn couldn't help but notice how in-tune she seemed with the environment. Every so often, she'd pause, scanning the horizon or the ground beneath them, as if reading the island's mood.

They arrived at a cliff edge overlooking a secluded cove where the remains of Ivar Ward's boat protruded from the shallow water like a hand grasping for life. The boat had been torn to shreds, and below, police officers were carefully hoisting parts of it onto another boat.

"Low tide," Kirsty remarked. "Makes the job a bit easier. They've been at it since dawn."

Finn observed the scene, trying to piece together what had happened. "I don't suppose you were here when it all went down?"

Kirsty shook her head. "No, but I was one of the first to find out. The whole community is shaken. This wasn't an accident."

Amelia, who had been intently watching the police work below, turned to Kirsty. "We're here to find out exactly what it was. But we don't know this island, so the help of someone like you with local knowledge is invaluable."

The sharp scent of saltwater was in the air as Finn and Amelia approached the two uniformed police officers busily coordinating the retrieval of the boat fragments. The officers looked up as they approached, their faces a blend of exhaustion and concern.

"Morning," Finn greeted, flashing his badge. "I'm Finn Wright, a consulting detective with the Home Office, and this is Inspector Amelia Winters. We're here to assist with the investigation."

One of the officers, a stout man with a grizzled beard, nodded. "Inspector Reynolds, and this is Constable Peters. We're from the mainland, but this is a

bit out of our usual jurisdiction."

Finn noted the reluctance in the sergeant's voice. "Have you spoken with the islanders about the incidents?"

Reynolds sighed. "We've tried, but most of them are tight-lipped. They don't want anything to do with this mess. Few words here and there, but nothing substantial."

Constable Peters chimed in, his young face filled with unease. "To be honest, Mr. Wright, I get the sense they're just waiting for us to leave. There's a discomfort here, and I get the feeling they just want all of this, including us, to disappear."

Amelia, brows furrowed, jumped in. "Where have the bodies of the victims been kept?"

Reynolds exchanged a glance with Peters, who cleared his throat. "Lord Carmichael, his body has already been taken to Storn mortuary for an autopsy, but the body of Mr. Ward... We've run into a bit of a complication."

Amelia's expression grew sharp. "What do you mean 'complication'?"

"It's... stuck," Peters said hesitantly. "Under the cliffs. Next to an old dock not far from Huldra House. It's in a tight spot. We're having trouble retrieving it. It wasn't safe to get at it until this morning because of the waves."

Finn's eyes widened. "Stuck? How does a body get stuck?"

Reynolds shrugged, discomfort evident. "We're not sure. But it's wedged under an old iron dock, almost like it's been purposefully jammed in there. One of the guys over there said he thinks he saw a chain attached to body. We've got a team trying to get to it, but the terrain's treacherous, especially with the recent storm damage. And I think there's issues because they don't have the right equipment."

Amelia's gaze darted to the cliffs looming above. "If you know Huldra a little, considering the body is underneath the cliffs behind Huldra House, could the death be related to the house?"

The two officers looked at each other.

"There's a lot of superstition around here, guys," Finn said.

Peters rubbed the back of his neck and looked directly at Amelia. "Could be anything at this point, Inspector Winters. The stories of this place have been around for as long as anyone can remember."

"We need to see the body," Finn declared, urgency evident in his voice.

Kirsty, who had been observing quietly, nodded. "I can take you there. It's not a place many venture, even the locals, but I know the way."

Without waiting for a response, Finn started in the direction of the cliffs. Amelia shot a grateful look at Kirsty and followed suit.

As they made their way along the rugged coastline, the sound of crashing waves intensified, echoing out, a malevolent reminder of nature's fury. The sense of foreboding grew with each step in the pit of Finn's stomach. He enjoyed tall tales as much as the next person, but real lives had been lost, and he needed to put that at the forefront of his mind.

Finally, they reached a trail that ran along the shoreline beneath tall black cliffs that looked sharp as broke glass. The old dock came into view, two officers standing at the end of it, looking perplexed. Tools were scattered on the dock surface.

Its strange black iron construction was unlike any dock Finn had seen before, and he wondered if the metal was a peculiar alloy designed to stop any rusting. It creaked and groaned ominously underfoot, overshadowed by the towering cliffs above, threatening as they presumably always had, to topple down on the world and sink all within their collective shadow.

Looking down, they could see the trapped body, its outline barely visible through the churning waters.

"What in the world..." Finn whispered, both fascinated and horrified.

Kirsty's face was grim. "I can't bear to look." She turned her back.

Amelia patted her on the arm before stepping past her towards the body. "Go back up to Huldra House, get yourself a tea. We'll come and get you once we're finished here."

Kirsty nodded and took a few steps away from the dock. "This place has a way of hiding things," she shouted over the waves around them, her voice fraught.

Amelia took a deep breath, her eyes never leaving the scene below. "Then let's make sure they're not hidden any longer."

CHAPTER SIX

The decaying dock groaned under Finn's weight as he stepped tentatively across the creaking black metal of the dock. It gave slightly beneath his feet, the metal wet and moss-covered. From here, the sight of the trapped body was even more visceral. The man's cold eyes stared blankly upward, his features twisted in a final grimace.

Finn leaned down and looked closer. He could see a thick set of chains around the man, pulling his limbs together. Somewhere underneath, to the back of the dock, Finn was sure the man had been chained.

Amelia, following closely, inhaled sharply at the sight. "This is just... terrible." She turned and looked back up the sloping ridge along from the cliffs. Finn did the same and could see Kirsty, the woman who was helping them around the island, disappearing over the crest. The woman still had her back to them and didn't turn before she vanished, clearly not wanting to see the body of a man she knew.

"We need to get Ivar Ward out," Finn whispered, almost to himself. His empathy for the victim was evident. "No one deserves this."

Amelia nodded in agreement, her expression resolute. "Agreed. Let's see what we can do."

They both approached the two officers who were busily looking at an array of tools lying slapdash on the metal dock. One of them, a man with red hair and a grizzled look on his face, stood up when he saw Finn and Amelia nearing.

They shook hands. "Are you the cavalry?" the man remarked.

"I'm Inspector Winters," Amelia said. "This is Finn Wright, he's a consulting..."

"Oh, the American!" the man's face suddenly lit up. He shook Finn's hand. "I've seen your work on the television. The last two cases worked out well then?"

Finn felt his shoulder wince in the cold at the mention of it. It still hadn't healed completely from the gunshot wound. "Yeah, they went well. Now, we're just trying to solve this one. How did Ivar Ward get identified if we haven't gotten to the body yet?"

The man scratched his head. "I think some of the guys found documents on what was left of his boat. We found his wife and she had reported him

missing, said it was the same boat, though she didn't understand how he got here.”

“The storm probably brought him in after fishing for some herring,” the other officer piped up while trying to tape one pole onto another. “It looked like he ran aground and jumped off.”

“Then someone on the island killed him,” Amelia said.

“That's what I think,” the younger of the two officers said. “But Wilson here thinks otherwise.”

The man with the red bear rolled his eyes. “I never said I believed the stories. I just said that if something bad lived off the coast, you could see it making Huldra island its home.”

“What have you tried so far?” Finn asked the two men.

“We tried to hook the body with some poles, but so far no luck,” Wilson said.

The younger officer went back to taping two long poles together, one of them with a hook on the end. Finn recognized it as a type of pole used to hook crab lines out of the sea.

“I don't think that's going to work,” Finn said. “We need something to get through this dock metal.”

“I don't know what metal this is,” Wilson said, “but this stuck is rock solid. You'll need something with a bit of grunt to get at it.”

“We could go back to Storn and see if our station or the local fire crew has something,” the younger officer said.

Amelia shook her head, looking frustrated. Finn could tell she wanted to examine the body and get ahead of what was happening.

“That's going to take too long,” she said. “We're already two victims behind.”

“You think there'll be more?” Wilson asked.

Amelia peered down at the body, staring up at them from under the dock. “No one does a thing like this and just stops. This is a blood thirst.”

As Amelia conversed with the two officers about trying to find something that could get at the body on the island, Finn suddenly saw something up on a ridge nearby. A subtle movement caught his attention. Glancing up, he noticed a figure silhouetted against the gray sky. Standing atop a nearby rock outcropping, the man observed the scene with an inscrutable expression.

“We've got an audience,” Finn said. He looked up at the man and had a strange sense of unease staring at him. The man looked almost peaceful,

despite the horrendous scene down below him. "There's something off about that guy," Finn murmured to Amelia.

She followed his gaze. "Do you think he could be observing his handy work?"

Finn had read most of Valerie Law's work from the Criminal Psychopathy Unit back at Quantico. She had served there at the same time as him, though she had, in the last couple of years, left to start a detective agency with her old partners. Her work had helped Finn understand more than one killer, and this was no different. In the protocols she had developed, she advised investigating agents to post someone in the crowd of onlookers in plain clothes, to see if they could catch anyone exhibiting strange body language in the crowd. On more than one occasion, serial killers had been known to watch the police investigation from the sidelines, getting a perverse joy from it.

And Ivar Ward's death definitely qualified as an abhorrent act.

"I'm going to have a chat," Finn eventually replied, curiosity piqued. "Maybe he knows something."

"Or maybe he'll know someone who can cut through this metal," Amelia said.

"Good idea."

Leaving Amelia with the officers, Finn began his ascent to the ridge. It was a short but steep climb, made slippery by the recent rainfall. By the time he got there, he saw that the stranger had moved and was half way up a further steep incline to the top of the cliffs where Huldra House stood.

Taking a deep breath in the wind and rain, Finn followed. It was a tough climb, and the man had clearly done it more than once.

Reaching the plateau, Finn found the stranger standing nearly at the edge, looking out to the sea. The man was tall, with the rugged features of someone who had spent many years weathering storms. His graying beard was unkempt, and he wore a long, brown raincoat that seemed to have seen better days.

"A man only follows another yin up a hill if he has questions," the man remarked in a thick accent, his voice low and gravelly. He turned to face Finn and gave him an intense, furred stare.

"I do have questions," Finn replied cautiously. "Did you witness what happened here by any chance?"

The man looked back at the scene far below, his expression unreadable.

"Only the island knows the truth of that tale. Are you here to listen to it?"

Finn sighed impatiently. "Enough of the fortune telling. I'm with the police investigation. I need answers, not riddles."

The man's eyes met Finn's. "McReady. I'm the caretaker for Huldra Island Lighthouse. It's not far from here." He pointed to the distance. Far away, around another inlet of the island, Finn could see a tall white lighthouse standing in the mist.

"Lighthouse?" Finn said. "Were you manning it two nights ago?"

"I wis, that, laddie," he said grimly.

"And did you..."

"I saw the boat," McReady said. "Oot past spindle point. The water's rough out there. I only saw it for a moment. Then, it was gone. The sea carried it out past my line of sight."

"Were you worried for anyone on board?"

"Aye," the man nodded. A seagull passed overhead, cawing. He looked up at it and wiped his brow before looking back at Finn. "He didnae answer any calls on the radio, so I got out of the lighthouse and tried to get a better look on the other side of the hill."

He shook his head and looked despondent in a way that Finn intimately understood. It was the look of someone who felt they had let a life slip through their fingers.

"The storm stopped you?" Finn asked, gently.

"Aye," he answered. "I raised the alarm, but nobody could get out there in time. We had no idea where the boat went. We only found it at first light when there was a break in the weather. I came up here to look, saw the boat, and then I noticed something under the docks below. I went down and... There the poor man was under it."

"I'm sorry," Finn said, wondering if it were all true or if he was involved. But he seemed sincere. "That must have been horrible. Mr McReady, do you know of any locals who could be capable of this?"

The man looked earnestly at Finn. "Every human is capable of that. We keep it locked up inside, hidden. But if we find that key, any man can do harm. I dinnae ken anyone who I'd think was a killer. But ye never know."

Finn walked over to the edge of the cliff and looked down. He could see Amelia still standing there, but she was looking up at him. He waved, and she waved back. Then he looked around and saw the lighthouse in the distance. An idea then came to him.

"Since you're the lighthouse keeper, Mr McReady, do you have any tools or equipment that could cut through iron?"

McReady nodded slowly, studying Finn intently. "Yes, I have a few heavy-duty tools for maintaining the land attached to the lighthouse. I've got a petrol-powered buzz saw that I use for taking down blown down trees. Why dae ye ask?"

Finn hesitated for a moment before responding, "We need to free the body. It's trapped under the dock. They'll have to send to the mainland to get the equipment we need, but if you have a buzz saw, that might do it. Any help you can offer would be appreciated."

The older man paused, weighing the request. After what felt like an eternity, he finally nodded. "Aye. I couldnae save the lad, the least I can dae is help get his body back to his family."

Finn nodded in agreement. "Thanks, Mr McReady. I appreciate."

"The name's Tam, my laddie," he replied. "C'mon, let's get this over with. You wait doon there, I'll be right back."

"I can help carry..." Finn said, before being cut off.

Tam put up his hand and shook his head. "Nae, laddie. I want to do this myself. I hope ye understand."

Finn did.

Tam McReady moved off towards the distant lighthouse. He'd hike back with the equipment, and in some small way, that would be his self-imposed penance for not being able to save Ivar Ward two nights before.

The wind grew colder, biting into Finn's skin as he descended to the dock where Amelia awaited. He could see concern etched on her face, a deep furrow forming on her brow far below. She looked at him questioningly.

"Who was the watcher?" Amelia asked.

"An old lighthouse keeper," Finn said. "He was the one who found the body. He's away to get some cutting tools for us."

"That would be handy," one of the other officers said. "I don't fancy having to go back and forward to the mainland today. We'd make it across, and I hope to later on, but the weather is going to turn again and I wouldn't like to be coming back here at night."

They stood there on the dock waiting. And in that waiting, Finn found himself looking across the miles of sea towards the mainland of Scotland. It was like the shadow of a giant lying down in the heart of a storm. Somewhere, hundreds of miles to the South, England lay, and then much

further, London.

Finn wondered what Demi was doing right now. Was she still at the hotel? Was she worried about him? Was she really telling the truth about the affair being a lie?

“Are you okay?” Amelia asked, dragging him out of his daze.

“Yeah,” Finn said. “I’m fine.

“It’s just you seem a bit preoccupied,” Amelia asked.

Finn shook his head. “I’m not, it’s fine.”

“Is it the case back in the US? Have they set another court date yet?” A sea breeze moved over them, casting Amelia’s hair around, her red locks wild and beautiful all at once.

“The case?” Finn asked. He had been so preoccupied with Demi, his ex, that he hadn’t been thinking about it. “Eh... Yeah... I don’t know what’s happening with that yet. They postponed it when I got shot, but now I’m back on a case, I assume they’ll get wind of that and speed things up. To be honest, I just want it over with.”

Amelia nodded. “I still can’t believe they are blaming you for the damage to that building, you saved the hostage.”

“I know,” Finn said. “Sometimes, I think someone is after me. But then I realize, it’s just my luck. It’s always been like that. And... Sometimes it’s of my own making.”

“Don’t be too hard on yourself,” Amelia said. “Life’s too short for that.” She cast her eyes down towards the far end of the dock, where the body was still chained beneath.

Finn did, too. He had to get himself back on track. “We’ve got to get Ivar out of that water. It’s a sin what’s been done to him.”

They then stood there for what seemed an age. Staring out at the ocean surrounding Huldra island, the vast sea ready to release its violence at any moment.

Finally, Amelia turned as though to say something important to Finn, but before she could speak, their attention was diverted to the sound of heavy footsteps. McReady emerged, carrying with him an assortment of heavy-duty cutting tools.

“I hope this works, if it doesn’t...” Amelia whispered to Finn.

“It will,” Finn replied, taking a deep breath. “Let’s get this over with.”

“Here you go, Laddie,” McReady said, handing over a petrol-powered buzz saw in one hand and a massive pair of bolt cutters in the other.

“Thanks, Mr McReady. But you don't need to see this.”

The older man looked for a moment as if debating with himself. “I'll be up on the cliffs again, just hand the tools up tae me when yer done.”

“Thank you,” Finn said, turning towards what needed to be done.

He walked along the metal barred dock and then approached its edge, eyes fixed on the trapped body. Dread washed over him as Finn removed his coat, handing it to Amelia. The cold sea air made him shiver, but he was undeterred.

"You don't have to do this," Amelia told him, her voice filled with a mix of concern and admiration.

Finn glanced at the body, his resolve hardening. "No one should end up like this," he replied determinedly.

Taking the buzz saw in hand, Finn set to work. Sparks flew as metal clashed with metal. The deafening noise was in sharp contrast to the morbid silence of the scene before them. After several tense minutes, the iron gave way, creating an opening large enough to retrieve the body.

Together with the police officers, Finn carefully maneuvered the body, pulling it out from its watery grave and laying it gently onto the dock. The air grew heavy with the weight of death and unspoken fears. More than once, Finn looked up to the imposing cliffs and wondered if more than Mr McReady was watching them.

"Thank you," one of the officers murmured to Finn, gratitude evident in his eyes.

Finn simply nodded, his gaze fixed on the body. The cruel chains that bound the man seemed to gleam menacingly in the muted light. Finn took the large bolt cutters and cut the chains.

Amelia approached cautiously, her investigative instincts kicking in.

Finn was looking at the body. “Looks like his neck is broken, but we can't be sure that's what killed him until an autopsy is carried out.”

“He could have died of fright,” one of the officers said, nervously.

"He wasn't just dumped," she noted, studying the chains. "This was deliberate. They wanted him found. They could have wrapped him in those chains and he would have sank to the bottom of the sea, but instead the killer attached him here so someone could find him."

"Very true," Finn pondered, looking lost in thought. "It's as if the killer is sending a message. But to whom?"

The two investigators shared a look, the same troubling question going

around Finn's mind since they had stepped foot onto Huldra Island: What were they dealing with?

The haunting cry of a distant gull snapped them back to the present.

Finn could see a mist rolling in, slowly obscuring the mainland in the distance. "I think the weather is turning again."

Amelia's gaze was unwavering. "We have work to do. We can't stop now, not with daylight still on our side."

Finn nodded in agreement. He turned to the other officers. "Take the body to the mainland. Inspector Winters and I need to head to Huldra Town, see what the locals can tell us about all of this."

The men nodded.

Amelia looked up to the clouds swirling above, their outlines blurred by high winds mixing them together into one thick blanket. "Let's hope the townsfolk can give us a lead," she said.

Finn nodded. "They'll have to, we don't have much to go on yet."

As they prepared to leave, the horizon darkened further, and the wind picked up. But Finn and Amelia moved up the incline, their determination as bottomless as a maelstrom.

Once up on the ridge, they could see Huldra House up towards the cliffs, looking down on the glen. Finn knew they needed to head to town, but he couldn't help but feel the house was hiding more than one secret of its own.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Finn's knees almost uncomfortably touched the dashboard of Kirsty's car as he watched the grayish hues of the sky melding seamlessly with the rugged terrain of Huldra Island. Muted greens and browns were painted across the rolling landscape, a desolate beauty that spoke of solitude and timelessness. The winding road stretched ahead, snaking its way through hills and glens that seemed untouched by the modern world.

"A lost world..." Finn whispered out loud.

If either Amelia or Kirsty heard him, they did not reply.

Inside the car, the hum of the engine was the only sound that punctuated the silence of the wilderness outside. Amelia sat in the back, gazing out of the windows, lost in the melancholic beauty of the island. Finn turned and looked at her, seeing the same keen thoughtfulness that often brought preceded her own unique brand of detective work.

"The first victim," Amelia began, breaking the silence, "Lord Garrett Carmichael. He used to rule these parts, right?"

Kirsty, keeping her eyes on the road, nodded. "Aye, Lord Carmichael once called this island home. But he left years ago, for reasons nobody really knows. Two months back, he returned, said he wanted to live out his days in Raven's Cottage, the old family place."

"Do you know what brought him back after all these years?" Finn inquired.

"No one really knows," Kirsty replied. "Some say he wanted to make peace with his past, others think he had some unfinished business here. The islanders... we've always been good at coming up with stories."

Finn leaned forward, curiosity piqued. "Speaking of stories, when was the last murder on Huldra before all this happened?"

Kirsty gripped the wheel in thought. "I can't recall one in my lifetime. Accidents, mishaps, and bad luck, of course. But murder?" She shook her head. "This island, on the edge of the world, has its fair share of tragedies. But they're usually accidents or the works of nature. Not... this."

Amelia let out a small sigh, as if sensing a depth to her words. "It sounds like you have a deep respect for the island and its forces."

Kirsty nodded. "You can't live on Huldra and not be in awe of its power, its spirit. The sea, the cliffs, the storms — they shape our lives. They're

unpredictable, sometimes merciless, but they're also our identity."

The car continued its ascent, the road narrowing and becoming steeper. Finn and Amelia exchanged glances. Amelia smiled at Finn for a moment, and then she looked back out of the window as if catching herself before she went too far. This was a place of mysteries, some older than memory itself, but Finn also felt the romance of the place. With her beautiful red hair and silky skin, Finn thought Amelia could fit right in. If he didn't know any better, he would have said she had Scottish blood.

As they approached the top of a ridge, the view opened up dramatically. Below, nestled in a natural cove and shielded by imposing cliffs on either side, was a quaint sea town. Whitewashed cottages with slate roofs were clustered together, their chimneys emitting thin trails of smoke. The harbor was dotted with fishing boats, bobbing in the water. It looked like a scene straight out of a painting, its charm undeniable. The cove seemed to protect the town somewhat from the wind, but Finn couldn't help but feel how fragile such a place seemed in the face of nature's fury.

"That's Huldra Town," Kirsty announced. "We're almost there."

The Fair Folk Inn stood like a relic of another era, one long gone yet stubbornly resisting the inevitable passage of time. It was a low, timbered building, its wooden beams warped and twisted by centuries of exposure to the salt air and harsh island weather. The whitewashed exterior walls bore the brunt of countless storms, and the dark brown thatched roof looked like it had seen better days. Above the wooden door, a faded sign swayed gently in the breeze, depicting ethereal, almost ghost-like figures, under which the name of the inn was carved.

Kirsty slowed the car as they approached. "That's the Fair Folk Inn," she said, pointing. "Older than anyone can remember. It's seen a lot of history."

Finn noticed her hesitancy. "You're not coming in?"

She shook her head, her face clouded. "Drinking's a favorite pastime here, and I'm trying to stay on the straight and narrow. Old habits die hard."

He gave her an understanding nod. "Thanks for getting us here, Kirsty."

Amelia touched Kirsty's arm in a gesture of support. "Take care of yourself."

The two left the car and then entered the inn, and the contrast from the

bleak outdoors was immediately felt. A warm, golden glow enveloped them, emanating from the hearth where a crackling fire danced merrily. The walls were lined with old pictures, vintage signs, and antique trinkets that whispered tales of days gone by.

Behind the bar stood a stout man, his girth barely contained by an old-fashioned white apron. His eyes twinkled, and his face creased into a smile at the sight of new patrons. "Hello there! I'm Bill. What can I get you?"

Finn smiled back, "We're not here for a drink, but rather some information."

Bill's eyebrows raised, intrigued. "What about?"

"The recent deaths," Amelia replied, her voice soft but firm.

The landlord's expression sobered. "Aye, that's a tragedy. Lord Carmichael's return ruffled quite a few feathers."

"Why?" Finn inquired.

Bill sighed, wiping a glass. "He had grand plans, Lord Carmichael did. Wanted to build a holiday resort, bring in tourists. Some folks were all for it, but I knew it wouldn't pan out."

Amelia leaned in, "Why's that?"

Bill glanced around, ensuring no one was within earshot. "Because of the Fair Folk. They wouldn't stand for it."

Finn shook his head. "Between the Hidden Folk, the Fair Folk, and the rest of us regular folk, it's getting a bit crowded on this island, don't you think?"

Amelia elbowed him playfully, "Sometimes, 'Fair Folk' refers to old tales of entities. It's another term for the Hidden Folk, really." Pointing to the sign above the door, she added, "You named the inn out of respect, didn't you?"

Bill nodded slowly. "My great, great grandfather changed the name after strange happenings started. Once he did, things settled down. I wouldn't dream of renaming it."

"Why Fair Folk?" Finn wondered aloud.

Bill leaned closer, his voice a conspiratorial whisper. "The old stories say the Hidden Folk dislike being referred to as 'fairies'. They prefer 'Fair Folk'. A mark of respect, you see."

Amelia leaned forward, her green eyes capturing Bill's attention. "What can you tell us about Ivar Ward, the fisherman who died two nights ago?"

Bill's face clouded for a moment. "Poor soul. I can't say I knew him, he was never here to my knowledge, but a few around here knew him from Storn on the mainland."

Finn's brow furrowed. "Why do you think someone would kill a fisherman?"

Bill took a moment, glancing around the inn before answering, his voice barely more than a whisper. "The way I see it, it was an accident, a sad case of being in the wrong place at the wrong time. The Hidden Folk sent out their wraith to deal with Lord Carmichael. But, once its job was done, it happened upon Ivar. With it built to do one thing, get rid of newcomers or threats to the island, well... It likely thought Ivar fit the bill."

Amelia's face turned somber. "A wraith? You mean a ghost?"

Bill nodded, "Legends about the Huldra wraith date back centuries. The stories I heard as a child, told by my grandparents, painted a vivid image of a creature that the Hidden Folk would release upon feeling threatened or wronged. It's said to be an entity born out of the land's fury, a guardian to ensure the island's sanctity remains untouched. It makes sense then why it would kill Lord Carmichael since he was trying to build a resort here."

Finn stared at the flames dancing in the fireplace, deep in thought. "Do you genuinely believe in all of this, Bill?"

Bill locked eyes with Finn, his gaze serious. "Aye, at times I do when something unusual happens." He then broke into a mischievous grin, his eyes twinkling. "And sometimes, it's good for business." He winked. "Tales of the Fair Folk, wraiths, and hidden secrets always draw in the curious ones."

Finn laughed. "Everyone's an entrepreneur these days."

Amelia gave a soft smile. "Every place has its stories, some more enticing than others. But we don't believe that the two murders were the result of some mythical creature. We think someone here, on the island, probably did it. And they're probably still here, considering how difficult the weather has been. Thank you, Bill."

The innkeeper nodded, "Just be careful out there. Wraith or no wraith, the island has its ways. Respect it, and it'll respect you."

The weight of his words settled around them. The warmth of the Fair Folk Inn keeping the chilling winds of the island at bay, which continued to whisper its own tales outside, and Finn felt the depths of the mysteries they were yet to uncover.

The dark, aged wood of the pub seemed to drink in the silence after Bill's revelation. The air grew thicker as Amelia shivered slightly next to the bar.

"I bet quite a few around here would have their own stories to tell, maybe even about a potential suspect," Finn muttered, glancing around at the pub's

patrons, most of whom were huddled over their drinks, lost in their own worlds.

Bill cleared his throat, drawing the duo's attention. "I've got a bottle of Huldra whiskey tucked away, aged for a good twenty-one years. Special occasions and such. Fancy a nip?"

Finn's eyes gleamed with mischief, and he shot Amelia a hopeful look. "What do you think? Could use a bit of something to warm me up?"

Amelia shot him a stern look, her eyes narrowing. "Absolutely not. Maybe after duty."

Finn grumbled, "You're no fun."

Bill chuckled, patting Finn on the shoulder. "The offer stands for when you're off duty. But tread carefully, both of you."

Amelia gave Bill a small nod, her expression grateful. "We appreciate your openness, Bill. We might just be here for an investigation, but it helps to know the land's stories. Especially considering everyone seems to be blaming this wraith creature."

Walking away from the bar, Finn and Amelia found a quiet corner and settled in. The hushed murmurs of other patrons washed over them as Amelia looked around, clearly contemplating their next move.

"We should talk to more locals, maybe someone will let something slip," she said, rubbing her temples.

But Finn shook his head, an idea brewing like the storm outside. "There's only one thing on my mind now, Amelia. That attic door at Huldra House. We need to speak with Lady Ferguson's son. The body of Ivar was found a short walk from the house, and you could imagine someone with psychiatric issues..."

"The vast majority of people with mental illness are no more likely to be murderers than you or I," Amelia said. "Let's not tar him with prejudice."

Finn leaned back in his chair. "Come on. You know me better than that. I'm not saying he is any more or less likely to be a killer, but it took someone with a lot of strength to put Ivar's body under that dock, especially during a storm. Lady Ferguson couldn't have done it, and as far as we know, she and her son are the only two who stay at Huldra House during the night. Process of elimination makes him at least worth talking to."

"We need to tread carefully as Bill said over there," Amelia nodded. "After all, Lady Ferguson was the one who called us onto this case. She could easily have us thrown off of it."

"Hey," Finn smiled, holding up his hands. "I'm the very definition of diplomacy."

Amelia pursed her lips. "I understand, but that house has a dark history. And the more I hear about it, the more I feel like we're diving into a rabbit hole that might not have anything to do with the killer. I don't want to get stuck down it."

Finn took her hand, squeezing it gently. "That's what we're here for, right? To uncover the truth, no matter how deep the hole is."

Amelia sighed, looking into Finn's eyes. "Just promise me you won't start throwing accusations around. Promise me you'll be careful."

Finn nodded. "Always."

CHAPTER EIGHT

The coarse grass crunched underfoot as the killer moved with a slow, deliberate pace across the top of the towering cliffs. The wind whipped up, carrying with it the scent of the salty sea and the cold promise of the approaching storm. Clouds gathered menacingly on the horizon, mirroring the darkness that lay within the killer's own heart.

Looking down, the killer marveled at the vast expanse of churning waters below. The sea, in its relentless march, battered against the base of the cliffs, the waves breaking with a frothy rage. It was a breathtaking dance of nature – the slow, inexorable erosion of earth by water. One that had been taking place for eons.

There was a tranquil beauty in the chaos of it all. Just as the waves wore away at the cliffs, time had a way of wearing down everything. Empires crumbled, love faded, and life itself slipped through fingers like grains of sand. To the killer, this steady decline was not just inevitable; it was poetic.

The shrill cry of a seabird pierced the air, drawing the killer out of the contemplation. It circled overhead, riding the gusts of wind with an ease and grace the killer envied. From up here, the bird would have a vantage point of the entire island – every nook, every cranny, every hidden secret. It would see the world in its entirety, understanding the beauty of the fleeting moment and the passage of time.

With a sigh, the killer knelt down and let a handful of dirt run through gloved fingers. The soil was gritty, infused with tiny fragments of shell and stone, each telling their own millennia-old story. This was the residue of time, of pressure, of change. It was a testament to the persistence of nature and the inevitability of decay.

Yet, even in this process of breakdown and erosion, there was creation. New lands would form, new life would emerge, and the cycle would continue. In the same way, the killer saw their actions not as destruction but as a necessary reordering—a cleanse of sorts, making way for the new.

Lost in thought, the killer barely registered the approaching footsteps until they were almost upon them. Instantly alert, the killer stood, muscles tensed and senses heightened, prepared to face any threat. But the steps slowed, and a voice called out.

“Hey! Are you alright?”

The killer didn't respond, merely turning to gaze upon the intruder with a detached curiosity. The newcomer was young, probably in their twenties, with a concerned look etched upon a weather-beaten face. Their eyes, wide with alarm, darted to the cliff's edge and then back to the killer.

The killer smiled politely, the practiced smile of someone who's learned to blend in, to mimic normalcy. "Just enjoying the view," they replied, voice calm and even.

The young intruder nodded slowly, though suspicion still lingered in their eyes. "Be careful up here," he cautioned, "I'm just visiting from the mainland for a few days, but I know many have lost their footing up here. The cliffs are treacherous. Take care."

The killer watched him go, the exchange barely registering. Soon, the cliffs and the sea were the only witnesses to their presence. As the wind howled and the waves continued their endless assault, the killer pondered the fragility of life, of worlds, and of secrets waiting to be unearthed. The dance of time and erosion continued, and the young man, the orchestrator of this latest rhythm, walked away, melding once more with the shadows.

The dark, swollen clouds seemed to move closer, encircling the island with an almost malevolent intent. As the first crack of thunder split the sky, the killer looked out, seeing the approaching tempest as if it were a tangible entity, hungry and unyielding. The air grew heavy, charged with electricity and anticipation, mirroring the tumult within the killer's own soul.

A whisper of doubt began to creep into the killer's thoughts. Would it be wiser to disappear, to become another faceless wanderer on the island, to retreat into the comfortable cloak of obscurity? The very thought of it was tantalizing, but there was a fire inside, an all-consuming urge that the killer had tried, time and time again, to quell.

It started as a flutter deep in the pit of the stomach. Then, like a rolling wave, the desire swelled, consuming every fiber of his being. The need to kill, to feel that surge of power, was a heady cocktail that intoxicated and entranced.

"No," the killer whispered, voice trembling with the strain of resistance. The storm's first raindrops pelted the ground, growing rapidly in size and intensity. As the heavens wept, the killer began to move, every fiber of being screaming for release.

Running became an instinctual response, a desperate attempt to escape the demons that constantly lurked in the shadows. The rough terrain of the

hillside, slippery and treacherous from the downpour, did little to slow the frenzied pace. But as hard as the killer ran, there was always something following — not just the insatiable urge, but now a new, otherworldly presence.

A glance over the shoulder revealed a figure: ethereal, almost mist-like, but with a chilling solidity that defied natural explanation. Its arms spread wide, the wraith beckoned with a silent invitation. Its eyes, twin infernos of malevolence, bore into the killer, promising a fate worse than any mortal could imagine. The killer had encountered it many times before, but was always uncertain as to whether it was a phantom of the island or merely a ghost of his mind.

Heart pounding, the killer's gaze locked onto a sanctuary — a humble cottage, its windows dark, standing isolated against the backdrop of the storm. The door, battered and old, seemed to be the last hope for escape.

As fingers closed around the cold, wet door handle, a moment of clarity pierced through the adrenaline and fear. The familiar, intoxicating lust for blood surged again, stronger than ever. The killer's breath caught, the rain soaking through clothes and chilling to the bone.

Whirling around, the killer was met once again by the approaching figure of the wraith. But instead of fear, there was now a sense of grim acceptance. The arms that had been reaching for safety now opened in invitation. The dance of predator and prey was about to take another turn.

They embraced, and once more, the killer was standing alone, but now given once more to the dreaded need to kill again until justice was served.

CHAPTER NINE

The vast lobby of Huldra House seemed even more imposing to Finn as dusk settled around it. The rich, dark wood of the staircase and panels swallowed up the little remaining light, and the chandeliers overhead, though grand, threw eerie shadows that danced upon the walls.

Frederick, the closest thing the house had to a butler, looking somewhat out of place amid the opulence, was buttoning up his coat when Finn and Amelia approached. The man's otherwise immaculate appearance seemed slightly ruffled, and his face held an expression of subdued anxiety.

"Leaving for the night, Frederick?" Finn inquired, nodding towards the coat.

"Yes," Frederick replied, his voice betraying a hint of relief. "Another storm is brewing, and my dog gets quite agitated during these tempests."

Finn smirked, noticing the wedding band on his finger. "Not to mention your wife, I'm sure."

Frederick managed a weak smile.

"Has everything been okay today, Frederick?" Amelia asked.

He nodded. "I've prepared dinner and supper for you both. They're in the kitchen and will only need reheating."

Finn's curiosity took hold. "Frederick, tell me about Lady Ferguson's son. Do you interact with him much?"

Frederick hesitated, then sighed deeply. "Sometimes, during the days when he is calmer... Nathaniel was a sweet boy, full of life and curiosity. But something shifted when he was ten. He began displaying certain... pathological behaviors. It only worsened as the years went by."

Amelia's brow furrowed in concern. "Is he dangerous?"

"I'm not one to diagnose," Frederick said carefully, "but it's clear that Nathaniel's condition is beyond Lady Ferguson's ability to handle. I've suggested more than once that he be moved to a specialized facility on the mainland."

Amelia's eyes widened in surprise. "And?"

"Lady Ferguson was horrified at the idea," he replied grimly. "She's had her fill of doctors and claims they've done nothing but harm. But I think it's only a matter of time before it becomes too much. The lady should bite the bullet and get the man the help he needs."

Their conversation was abruptly interrupted by a stern, commanding voice. "Frederick! That is not your place to discuss!"

Lady Ferguson, clad in a flowing dark gown, stood at the foot of the staircase, her eyes piercing and filled with reproach. She held herself with a regality that seemed to challenge anyone to defy her.

Frederick lowered his gaze. "My apologies, Lady Ferguson."

With a huff, the older woman watched him closely. "See that it doesn't happen again."

Frederick nodded, taking a deep breath. "If anyone has further need of me, I'll be at The Fair Folk Inn," he declared before making a swift exit.

Finn watched Frederick's retreating figure, an eyebrow raised in amusement. "So much for going home to his frightened dog."

Amelia shot Finn a look of mild reproach but remained silent. It was clear that Huldra House, with all its secrets, was a place where allegiances shifted as quickly as the island's unpredictable weather.

The sitting room was a testament to the bygone era of Huldra House. Rich, dark woods, faded tapestries, and gilded frames holding portraits of stern-faced ancestors decorated the walls. Thick maroon drapes framed tall windows, and the setting sun cast a warm glow over everything. However, there was a sense of dilapidation, of something beautiful that had been left to wither away, much like Lady Ferguson herself.

Amelia and Finn followed Lady Ferguson into the room, their footsteps muffled by the plush carpets. The aging matriarch took her place in an ornate armchair that stood noticeably higher than the rest. She settled in, her gaze surveying the room like a queen overlooking her court. And though she was a queen of sorts, her realm was one of fading grandeur and whispered secrets.

Finn tried not to show his discomfort at the height disparity, but Amelia noticed. She gave him a knowing look before turning her attention back to Lady Ferguson. Outside, wind and rain lashed the windows.

"Lady Ferguson," Finn began, striving to keep his voice level, "we wanted to ask about the docks under the cliffs near Huldra House."

Lady Ferguson's gaze remained unwavering. "I assumed as much. They were put there by one of my ancestors so that he had access to some boats he used to keep down there. He, like many, thought that you could build something in the face of nature. It only took one bad storm to wreck his dreams, but the docks remained. When I learned of another death on my island, and that a body was trapped down there, I felt it imperative to call the

Home Office. I demanded they send the best to investigate."

Finn's eyebrows raised subtly at the 'my island' reference but he said nothing, instead waiting for Lady Ferguson to continue.

"I'm pleased that you two were dispatched for that very purpose," the lady continued, nodding at the detectives. "Your reputation over these last few months has grown in political circles."

Finn leaned forward, the question gnawing at him. "Do you have any idea why someone would chain a victim to those docks? Especially so close to Huldra House?"

Lady Ferguson's gaze, which had been cool and distant, darkened. "It is a warning," she whispered. "A macabre message intended for those with old ties and deep roots on this island."

Amelia leaned in, intrigued. "And you believe this message is for you?"

The matriarch's chin lifted defiantly. "With Lord Carmichael's unfortunate demise, Nathaniel and I are the only ones left of aristocratic blood on this island. Our lineage, our legacy, makes us prime targets for whoever is behind these heinous acts."

Finn frowned. "Why do you think the killer would target the aristocracy specifically?"

Lady Ferguson's voice dropped lower, laden with gravity. "This island has a history, Detective. Old grudges, ancient feuds. With Lord Carmichael gone, my son and I represent the last remnants of an era many wish to forget. I called for help, not just for the sake of the island, but to protect my only child."

Finn and Amelia exchanged glances. There was more to Huldra Island than met the eye, and they were only beginning to scratch the surface. But Lady Ferguson's fear was palpable, and it lent weight to her words. The killer had a message, and it was one they intended to decipher.

Lady Ferguson looked away from Finn's probing gaze, her fingers tracing the delicate embroidery of the cushion beside her. The dim, ambient light from the ornate chandelier above cast a soft glow on her pale skin, highlighting the intricate web of wrinkles that told of age and stress. She seemed a woman burdened by memories, both fond and regrettable.

Amelia leaned forward, her demeanor warm yet assertive, "Lady Ferguson, understanding the tensions within the community might help us to solve these murders, if they are a product of that. Any piece of information, no matter how trivial, could prove valuable."

The older woman sighed, "Young lady, this is an island where past meets present and sometimes, they clash. The people here are proud of their heritage, their stories, their legends. They are wary of outsiders and change. Lord Carmichael's plans were a disruption to the balance that had existed for so long. I was initially as opposed to them as they were. But look around, this place is in decay, I realized soon enough that new life had to be brought here, otherwise Huldra would diminish until, like St Kilda Island many decades ago, the entire community would be gone."

Amelia nodded, her eyes never leaving Lady Ferguson's face. "We understand that, but we're only interested in bringing the killer to justice."

"And I want to help you," Lady Ferguson said, her tone hinting at exasperation. "But the islanders, a few of them appeared here one evening. They were the ones who spoke against the resort plans... I can't recall their names as, beyond the few who help me here, I am too busy looking after my son, but there were so murmurs in the corners, hushed conversations in the halls when they came here. I knew it was not a friendly visit checking in on their lady of the island."

Finn interjected, "Can you describe them? Any particular characteristics that stood out?"

Lady Ferguson closed her eyes momentarily, trying to retrieve the memories. "There was one... a tall man with a beard. Sea-weathered face. He seemed to be leading the conversation. The others deferred to him. And then there was a woman, younger, probably in her early thirties, with striking red hair, much like yours, Inspector. She was vocal, emotional about the island's traditions being ruined."

Finn and Amelia exchanged glances. Finn had noticed a few islanders matching those descriptions during their visits to the pub and around the town. "Do you think they might have taken their objections to a violent level?" Amelia asked, her voice filled with a mix of curiosity and concern.

"I'd like to think not," Lady Ferguson replied slowly. "However, emotions run high when people believe their way of life is being threatened. It might drive someone to do something they'd regret."

The conversation was interrupted by a distant rumble of thunder, the storm outside growing more vehement. The wind howled, shaking the windows of Huldra House, a reminder of the island's unpredictable temperament.

"We'll need to track these individuals down and speak with them," Finn noted, jotting down the descriptions in his notebook.

Finn then spoke: "Before we go, Lady Ferguson, we were hoping to talk with your son."

Lady Ferguson's face immediately tightened, her previously amiable demeanor replaced by one of caution and defensiveness. "And why would you want to speak to Nathaniel?" Her voice was colder, clipped.

"We're merely exploring all possible avenues, Lady Ferguson," Finn replied, his tone steady.

The matriarch's eyes flashed with anger. "You are guests in this house, Detective. Remember that. I won't have you or anyone else implicating my son in this."

Amelia, sensing the rising tension, stepped in swiftly, her words measured. "We didn't mean to suggest he's involved, Lady Ferguson. We just wondered if he might have been out of his room the night Ivar Ward died and perhaps seen or heard something. Anything that could help."

Lady Ferguson looked between the two detectives, her posture rigid. "He wasn't. Nathaniel doesn't leave his room during storms. The sounds distress him."

There was something in her eyes, a hint of hesitancy, perhaps a touch of fear, that made Finn's instincts flare up. He was convinced she was withholding something. But he held his tongue, choosing instead to store away this observation.

Amelia persisted gently, "Regardless of that night, we would still like to meet Nathaniel, if only for a brief moment."

Lady Ferguson's gaze was steely. "I appreciate your position, Detective, but you must understand that Nathaniel's psychiatric issues are profound. Subjecting him to questioning, even casual conversation, could prove detrimental to his mental well-being."

Finn glanced at Amelia, noting her expression of understanding. She shook her head subtly to indicate they shouldn't press any further. Not yet. As much as they wanted to gain every piece of information, they needed to tread carefully.

"Very well, Lady Ferguson," Amelia conceded, "but if at any point you feel he could assist in our investigation, please let us know."

Lady Ferguson gave a curt nod. "Thank you for understanding. But now," she glanced outside, where the world was quickly being swallowed by darkness and the storm's crescendo, "the night is coming. I suggest you both retire to your rooms. This house has many old memories, and not all of them

are kind. Sleep well."

With those final cryptic words, Lady Ferguson turned away, her silhouette receding into the dim corridors of Huldra House.

Amelia and Finn exchanged a look, a shared sense of unease passing between them. The house, with its secrets and shadows, seemed to press in on them, as if urging them to discover the truths it held within.

"If one more person tells me about secrets and shadows here," Finn said. "I'm going to break out my Hawaiian shirt and bring a bit of color to this place."

"I wouldn't wish that on anyone," Amelia said with a soft smile. "But Finn, don't get too frustrated. We've only been here two days, and a place as remote as this can sometimes push back against outsiders."

"Tomorrow," Finn murmured, more to himself than to Amelia, "we dig deeper."

Amelia nodded, mirroring Finn's determination. The weight of the mysteries surrounding them was palpable, and they both knew that the path ahead was laden with challenges. But they were resolute, prepared to unravel the threads of deceit and uncover the killer lurking amongst them.

Finn stretched his arms. "I'm starving, care for a candlelit dinner?"

Amelia prodded Finn affectionately in the side. "I'm not here for the romance, but we skipped lunch today, so I think you could bend my arm to heating up whatever Frederick has left for us in the kitchen."

Standing up, Finn nodded and then stepped out of the room into the hallway. "Uh, which way is the kitchen?"

Amelia looked around, the hallway spread out in more than one direction like veins through a cadaver. "I... I think it's this way, come on."

Sure enough, after a few corners and one dead end, Amelia lead Finn into the kitchen, which was large lit by dull incandescence. Somewhere outside, the wind howled, battering the thick black-stoned walls of the house.

In the dimly lit kitchen, the soft glow from the overhead lights caught the age-worn tiles, making them gleam. Amelia began looking through the cabinets and fridge, pulling out various containers filled with the dinner Frederick had prepared for them. A steak pie with mash and peas.

"You'd think for such a grand place, they'd have a more modern kitchen," Finn commented, examining an old kettle.

Amelia smirked, "Not all of us need the latest gadgets to make a decent meal, Finn. Some of us actually know how to cook."

"I'll have you know, I make a mean pink shrimp," Finn retorted, trying to defend his culinary prowess.

Amelia laughed, her eyes sparkling. "From a can, I presume?"

Finn grinned, "No way. You've never lived until you've tasted pink shrimp or crab claws cooked by a native Floridian."

"I might take you up on that one day."

They moved around the kitchen in a comfortable rhythm, their banter light and teasing. There was a certain ease between them, a camaraderie that had developed over the months of working together. And in that moment, amid the old-world charm of Huldra House's kitchen, a hint of something more lingered. Finn could feel it. At once, the connection was exhilarating, and yet at the same time, he couldn't help but think about Demi alone in her hotel room back in London. He had never been so romantically confused.

As they sat down to eat, the room filled with the inviting aroma of roasted vegetables and seasoned meat. The silence was comfortable as they enjoyed their meal, but soon Amelia's gaze shifted, becoming more contemplative.

"You've been different since you came here, Finn," she started. "A bit more subdued. I thought you'd love this place because of the adventure."

He gave a small shrug, "Normally, I would, but I still have a lot going on. Sometimes, I have to block everything out and just focus on the case. You know? Do you not ever get like that?"

Amelia looked distant for a moment. She nodded. Then her expression softened. "You know, if you ever want to talk about anything... I'm here... As a friend."

There was a pause, and Finn could've sworn he detected a hint of disappointment in Amelia's voice. Maybe he was imagining it, but it stung a little.

As a friend, he thought. That was probably for the best. Things would get complicated otherwise. But he was surprised by just how much he felt that disappointment.

He cleared his throat. "Thank you, Winters."

Deciding to turn the tables slightly, he asked, "What about you? Anything been happening lately? Been seeing anyone?"

She hesitated, her face a mix of surprise and sadness. "No, not since... well, you know."

Finn remembered. Amelia's fiancé had tragically died in an accident just over a year ago. They hadn't spoken about it since their last case together,

when Amelia was deeply troubled by having to view a victim's body in the same morgue where her fiance had once laid.

"I'm sorry, I shouldn't have asked," he mumbled. "Stupid. Sorry."

She shook her head, "It's okay, Finn."

He took a deep breath, "The offer to talk, it's a two-way street, you know. If you ever need someone... As a friend, I'll be there."

They exchanged a knowing look, seemingly both understanding the layers of emotion wrapped up in their words. It was a shared moment of vulnerability, of offering and receiving support.

The dinner came to an end, and they cleaned up, the atmosphere lighter. The weight of the day and their shared moment in the kitchen seemed to fade as they made their way back to their rooms. They didn't say much until they reached the corridor where both their rooms lay.

As they stopped at Amelia's door, she smiled, "Goodnight, Finn. And... Thank you."

He nodded, "Anytime, Winters. Sleep well."

She closed the door, and Finn found himself staring at it for a moment. A boundary which he felt he could not cross, not matter how much he wanted to. He was in a fragile emotional place, and Amelia was still grieving. He didn't want to hurt either of them, and he sensed that Amelia was doing her best to not hurt him, either.

Finn turned and listened to the storm raging outside. He then opened the old oak door to his room, the echoes of their conversation lingering in their minds. Amidst the shadows of Huldra House, Finn climbed into the large four-poster bed and lay there. But sleep did not come. Instead, a plan started to form in his mind as a possibility.

He wondered if he should pull on some clothes and open the doorway to the cold, dark hallway outside of his room.

CHAPTER TEN

Two hours had passed, and Finn was still awake. The storm raged outside, with wind howling and rain lashing against the windows of Huldra House. Inside, the darkness was thick, punctuated only by the occasional flash of lightning that illuminated the grand old building's rooms in stark relief.

Finn lay in bed, staring up at the ceiling, unable to sleep. Thoughts raced through his mind. Lady Ferguson's refusal to let him talk to Nathaniel weighed heavily on him. Could the young man be involved? Or had he seen something? As the wind roared louder and the room grew colder, Finn's thoughts spiraled.

Suddenly, a faint noise caught his attention. It was a soft scratching sound at his window, much like the shadow he had seen his first night at Huldra House. Curiosity overtaking his earlier unease, he slid out of bed and moved towards the window, pulling back an old red curtain. The storm outside distorted his view, the raindrops streaming down the glass. But there was no shadow, no figure.

Nothing.

He sighed, attributing the sound to the storm and his own paranoia. He crawled back into bed, pulling the covers up, still weighing the possibility of trying to find Nathaniel. Deep down, he now just wanted to get to sleep. But as soon as his head hit the pillow, a clear, distinct knock sounded from his window.

Once.

Twice.

Three times.

His heart raced. That wasn't the wind. Slowly, with trepidation, he approached the window again, half expecting to see a face pressed against the glass. But there was nothing. Then, out there somewhere in the dark, he thought he saw a brief flash of a glowing light on the moor. But as quickly as it came, it was gone, and Finn wasn't even sure if he had seen it in the first place.

The storm, combined with the history and stories of the island, was getting to him. He was sure of it. His mind was playing tricks on him. Deciding that lying in bed wouldn't be productive, and wanting to shake off his unease, he threw on a shirt and decided he might as well make the most of his

wakefulness. Lady Ferguson may have denied him an audience with Nathaniel, but that didn't mean he couldn't try on his own.

Steeling himself, he opened the door to his room, stepping out into the dimly lit hallway. The wind howled even louder now, echoing through the vast emptiness of Huldra House. The storm outside mirrored the storm of thoughts in Finn's mind, both seemingly unrelenting.

With determination, Finn set off towards the attic, each step echoing slightly in the quiet corridors. But finding the attic in the dark would prove difficult. He still didn't have a handle on the layout of the building, sometimes it felt as though the place was a little different each time he walked through it.

In the cavernous darkness of Huldra House, Finn found himself lost within its labyrinthine corridors. The storm outside grated on his mounting anxiety. Lightning painted rapid, haunting vignettes of the house's interior on the walls as the thunder played a deep, rumbling bass. Each shadow twisted and played tricks on his eyes, making him doubt his every step.

Trying to trace his path back to the attic, he came across a heavy, ornate door that looked different from the rest. Pushing it open revealed an expansive library, seemingly untouched by time. The room was vast and dimly lit by the ambient lightning. Towering bookshelves reached for the ceiling, their contents a testament to centuries of collected knowledge. It felt like he had stumbled into the very heart of the house, where its memories were recorded for anyone brave enough to find the right book.

Dust particles danced in the sporadic beams of light, and the musty smell of old parchment filled the air. Each book, with its worn spine, seemed to have a story to tell, not just within its pages, but of the hands that had once held it, of the eyes that had poured over its words.

In this room, time seemed suspended. It was somehow quieter than everywhere else. The storm outside felt miles away, despite it being overhead, and the eerie quiet made every heartbeat, every breath sound deafening. But then, as Finn moved deeper into the room, a soft creaking sound disturbed the silence. It was the unmistakable sound of a door closing.

Heart pounding, Finn looked toward the source of the noise and saw a faint glow seeping through the gaps of another door on the opposite side. His curiosity piqued, he approached cautiously. Maybe it was Nathaniel? Or Lady Ferguson? Or someone else entirely?

The door led to another hallway, this one even darker and more

oppressive. The occasional footfalls he thought he heard seemed to be just ahead of him, urging him forward. The sound was maddeningly elusive; just when he thought he was close, it seemed to dart further away, leading him deeper and deeper into the house's unknown realms.

The atmosphere grew colder, the weight of the house pressing down on him. The winding passages seemed like they were closing in, creating an oppressive feeling of being watched. The footfalls, the whispers of movement in the periphery of his vision, the storm outside - it all amalgamated into a symphony of dread.

Driven by a mix of determination and apprehension, Finn continued to follow the sounds, feeling more and more like he was being drawn into a web from which there might be no escape. He started to wonder if he should have left the safety of his bed at all.

The echoing footsteps now grew louder, the rhythm steadier, as Finn pressed himself against the wall next to the corner. He realized that they were now moving *towards* him rather than away. Each thud seemed to punctuate the intense silence between the rolls of thunder outside. His breath was shallow, his muscles taut as a bowstring, prepared to confront whoever was coming his way. The dim light from a nearby window caused shadows to dance and sway, dark patches that moved almost as if alive.

Finn was starting to realize why everyone talked about shadows and secrets on the island.

The footfalls were almost upon him. He could hear the soft rustle of clothing, the faintest breath. Every instinct in him screamed to pounce. He tensed, waiting for the perfect moment. As the footsteps reached their crescendo, Finn lurched out, eyes wide, adrenaline pumping through his veins.

The sudden appearance of a pale face framed by dark hair sent an electric shock through him. Without thinking, a sharp, startled shriek escaped his lips, piercing the silence of the hallway.

"Amelia?!" he gasped, his heart racing as the realization hit him.

She looked just as startled, but her surprise quickly melted into amusement. "Was that a shriek, Detective?" she teased, her lips curving into a smirk.

"FBI agents do not shriek," Finn shot back, his cheeks flushing with embarrassment. "It was more of a... strategic vocal distraction."

Amelia chuckled, a light, easy sound that felt out of place in the looming

darkness of the house. "Right, because that's a thing."

He cleared his throat, attempting to regain some semblance of composure. "What are you doing here? I thought you were resting in your room."

Amelia raised an eyebrow, her smirk still in place. "I could ask you the same. Sneaking about in the dark, screaming at shadows."

Finn rolled his eyes. "I was... investigating. So, were you heading to Nathaniel's room too?"

Amelia's smirk faded, replaced by a more serious expression. "Yes," she admitted. "I had a feeling he might know something, or maybe even have seen something. I thought I'd try my luck."

"Why didn't you wake me up? We could have gone together," Finn questioned.

Amelia hesitated for a moment before answering, "You're already under scrutiny back in the States. If something went awry here, I didn't want you caught up in more trouble. Especially not in the UK."

Finn looked at her, touched by her concern. "Thanks for looking out for me," he murmured.

She offered him a small smile. "Someone has to, especially with a shriek like that."

They stood there for a brief moment, looking at each other in the darkness. Then, Amelia broke the silence. "We should stick together now. Let's go see what Nathaniel knows."

The two detectives began to navigate through the dark, winding corridors of Huldra House once more, the storm outside lighting their way.

"I'd turn on a light, but I have no idea where Lady Ferguson sleeps," Finn whispered. "And the last thing we need is for her to wake up and find us. That would be a call straight to the Home Office."

Amelia's brow furrowed as she clearly tried to recall the layout of the house from earlier that day. "I think the entrance to the attic is down this corridor and to the left," she said, glancing at Finn.

As they moved quietly through the hallway, a mournful sound echoed through the walls. The distant wailing grew louder as they approached an old wooden door that stood slightly ajar. It sounded otherworldly, sending chills down both their spines.

"What the hell is that?" Amelia whispered.

Amelia's fingers instinctively wrapped around Finn's hand. Her grip was so tight that Finn could feel her pulse racing.

"I'd crack a joke about our current predicament," Finn whispered, trying to lighten the mood, "but that noise again... It's drained the humor from me."

"You have humor?" Amelia said, her voice wavering. "I could do with some of that."

The wailing noise in the room before them sounded again, a higher pitched howl. It barely sounded human to Finn.

A cry went up somewhere else in the house further off as if in response. Finn knew it had to be Nathaniel. Amelia looked up to the ceiling as if tracing the origin of the noise with her eyes. It had come from the attic.

"If that was Nathaniel," Finn whispered. "What the hell is in this room and making that other noise?"

The thought of someone or something else wandering around the house in the dark did not sit well with him. It was times like that he wished he was allowed to carry his gun.

The wailing sound erupted again from beyond the door. Finn squeezed Amelia's hand and then let go, making sure he had both hands ready for whatever was there in the darkness.

They exchanged a look, nodding slightly to each other. Amelia drew a deep breath, and Finn squared his shoulders. Together, they pushed the door open.

The room was dimly lit by the occasional flash of lightning outside, and in that fleeting illumination, they saw curtains billowing in and out from a window left on its latch. The terrible wailing sound intensified, the wind from the storm outside whistling sharply through the small gap.

Finn moved quickly to the window, securing it and silencing the eerie howl. The room plunged into a quiet calm, save for the muted rumbling of thunder in the distance.

Amelia let out a shaky laugh. "We're really letting this place get to us. I don't think you can arrest a wailing sound," she mused, trying to bring some levity back into the atmosphere.

Finn chuckled, looking down and realizing Amelia was holding his hand again. He thought of Demi and a guilt built up inside of him. He stared at their intertwined fingers before releasing her hand. "Between shrieks and phantom wails, this night is turning out to be quite the party," he said with a smirk.

Amelia grinned, nudging him playfully with her shoulder. "Let's just hope the attic doesn't have any more surprises in store for us."

With a renewed sense of purpose and the previous tension dissipated, the duo continued their journey to uncover the mysteries of Huldra House.

Amelia's heels clicked softly on a wooden floor, the sound amplified in the haunting quiet of the house. "The house is like a maze," she murmured. "But this hallway... it seems familiar."

The faded wallpaper, darkened with age and embossed with intricate patterns of leaves and vines, seemed to guide them as they continued onward. A red carpet runner led to the foot of a staircase, the polished banister reflecting the ambient light from occasional lightning flashes.

They began to ascend, and as they climbed higher, an all too familiar sound wafted down to them. The heart-wrenching sobs they'd heard before filled the air once again, echoing throughout the corridors. Both detectives exchanged concerned glances, now certain of the source.

"It's Nathaniel," Amelia whispered, gripping the railing tightly.

With caution, they followed the sorrowful cries, each step bringing them closer to the heart of Huldra House's secretive son. Reaching the landing, the sobbing became clearer, more pronounced, emanating from a dimly lit hallway that led to another set of stairs.

Amelia hesitated for a moment, her gaze fixed on the staircase ahead. "That leads to the attic," she confirmed, her voice quivering.

As they approached the attic staircase, the sobbing became louder and more desperate, each lament a testament to years of anguish. They found themselves at a heavy wooden door, worn by time, its paint chipped and faded. A rusty padlock hung from a latch, signifying the room's occupant was indeed confined.

Summoning his courage, Finn stepped forward and knocked gently on the door. The sobbing ceased almost instantly, replaced by a deathly silence. After what seemed like an eternity, a voice, shaky and timid, broke the stillness. "Please, let me out."

Amelia's sighed like her heart ached at the vulnerability in the voice. She stepped closer, asking, "Are you being held here against your will?"

A pause. "Yes."

Finn and Amelia exchanged a quick glance.

"We're duty-bound to ensure your well-being," Amelia whispered, her eyes searching the door as if willing it to unlock.

Feeling a surge of determination, Finn re-positioned himself. "Stand back from the door, Nathaniel. I'm going to try and break it down."

With a few steps back to gain momentum, Finn threw his shoulder against the door with all his might. Again and again, he rammed the door, but it stood firm, refusing to yield. Sweat beaded on his forehead, and he sighed in frustration. He would have switched shoulders and tried again, but as if to remind him that he wasn't quite 100%, the other shoulder winced again.

"It's no use," he said, panting. "The door's too solid."

Amelia looked at him, worry evident in her eyes. But Finn's face held a spark of determination. "I have another idea," he declared.

Amelia's followed Finn through the winding passages of the old house. Their footsteps echoed eerily in the silent corridor, heightening the tension of the night. The furious storm outside, still trying to find a way inside.

After descending a spiral staircase, they found themselves in a dimly lit room directly beneath the attic. An ornate window framed by heavy velvet drapes was visible, partially obscured by the torrential rain beating against it.

"Here," said Finn, a glint of purpose in his eyes as he moved towards the window. He pushed it open, allowing the howling wind to rush in, carrying with it cold, sharp raindrops that stung his face.

Amelia moved closer, her eyes widening as she took in the sight below. "Finn," she warned, her voice full of concern, "it's too dangerous."

But Finn was already gauging the climb. He could see, the deadly drop to the ground below, and then turning, illuminated by the regular crashes of lightning, a series of stone gargoyles protruding from the building's facade. Each one had a grotesque face that almost mocked him.

Finn was not one to shirk a challenge.

"I think I can make it," he murmured, half to himself, "If I can get to that first gargoyle, I can use them as a makeshift ladder to reach the attic window above."

Amelia hesitated for a split second, biting her bottom lip, "I don't like it, Finn. What if you slip?"

But Finn was already out the window, feet planted on the narrow ledge. He glanced down, swallowing the fear that rose in his throat at the sheer drop below. Taking a deep breath, he made a leap for the first gargoyle, his fingers just catching its weathered surface.

Amelia watched from below as Finn began his treacherous ascent. Every movement seemed agonizingly slow for him, the storm and rain threatening to wrench him from the side of the house with each passing second. Lightning and thunder growled through the dark clouds above.

He had almost reached the attic window. Reaching out with his fingers, touching the stone sill, a particularly fierce gust of wind caught him off balance, and his foot slipped from its precarious perch. Finn's heart raced as he found himself dangling by one hand from the window sill, three stories above the ground. The cold stone, wet and slippery from the rain, provided little grip. He could feel his fingers beginning to cramp, the energy draining from him as he clung desperately to the ledge.

Amelia screamed from below, her voice barely audible above the roaring storm, "Finn, hold on!" Finn looked down and saw her clambering out of the window.

"No! Amelia!" he screamed.

But the relentless rain and the fatigue of the climb were taking their toll. Finn's grip was weakening, the ground below seemed so far away, and the weight of his body threatened to drag him into the abyss. And Amelia wasn't going to get there in time.

One by one, his fingers started to slip.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Finn gasped as the wind and rain battered against his face. His grip was now threadbare. He knew he was going to fall. Amelia was struggling below, trying to scale the first gargoyle to reach him, but she couldn't make it.

His only hope was that somehow he could grab another one of the gargoyles on the way down, but they were drenched in the rain and so even Finn's ever hopeful attitude was now all but extinguished.

His fingers, slick from the rain, were starting to lose their hold on the stone sill, his thoughts a frenzied blend of regret and determination. He had no idea how long he could hold on. With every passing second, his desperation grew.

Suddenly, a pale hand wrapped around his wrist, yanking him upward. Shocked, Finn barely had time to register the face that leaned out from the attic window. Nathaniel Ferguson, with wide, haunted eyes and disheveled hair, had come to his rescue. He pulled with all his might, dragging Finn into the safety of the attic.

Finn's breath came in ragged gasps as he lay on the floor, momentarily stunned by his brush with death. "You... you saved my life," Finn panted, propping himself up on his elbows to look at his unexpected savior.

Nathaniel, however, looked petrified, backing away slowly until he reached a dim corner of the room. He wrapped himself in a tattered blanket that lay there, curling into a protective ball, eyes darting around as if anticipating some unseen threat.

Finn stuck his head out of the window and looked down. Amelia had seen what had happened and had climbed back into the window below. She was looking up. Finn gave her a thumbs up. She disappeared inside, no doubt rushing up to the other side of the attic door.

Finn turned and approached Nathaniel cautiously, instinctively understanding the need to be gentle.

"Hey, it's okay," he began, voice soothing. "I'm not here to hurt you."

"I know," Nathaniel whispered, his voice trembling. "I've seen you. Through the slits in the door."

"You have?" Finn asked, intrigued.

Nathaniel nodded. "Sometimes the staff talk to me, when Mother isn't watching. They told me about the American detective and his friend."

"That's me," Finn said, trying to keep the conversation light. "My name is Finn."

"And Amelia," Nathaniel added.

"That's right," Finn replied, wondering how much the man before him knew. "Have they told you about the recent deaths on the island?"

Nathaniel's gaze darkened, his fingers nervously fidgeting with the edges of his blanket. "Yes. Ivar Ward and... Lord Carmichael?"

"Exactly," Finn confirmed. He hesitated before pressing on. "Were you out two nights ago? The night Ivar Ward was killed?"

Nathaniel's eyes widened, and for a moment, Finn thought he saw a flicker of something. Guilt? Fear? "No," Nathaniel said quickly, too quickly. "I never leave during storms. I hate storms. Mother locks me in here because I had an accident once during them, but... It makes me worse."

There was a pause, Finn's eyes narrowing, trying to decipher the layers of emotion behind Nathaniel's gaze. "Do you know anything about the victims? Anything that might help?"

Nathaniel hesitated, and then, with a vulnerability that made Finn's heart ache, he whispered, "Ivar Ward and Lord Carmichael knew each other."

Finn's heart raced. "How do you know that?"

Nathaniel looked away, shame evident in his downcast eyes. "I... I heard the servants talking about it. They said Ivar Ward used to work for Lord Carmichael years ago."

"When?" Finn asked, sensing the importance of the revelation.

Nathaniel's voice was barely audible above the storm outside. "I don't know, you'd need to ask the servants. Frederick might know."

A bright flash of lightning sounded, and a roar swept through the room. Outside, the lightning struck something nearby, throwing arcs of blue lights and sparks everywhere.

The flare of lightning cast a blinding light into the attic room, illuminating it in a ghastly glow for a brief moment. The ensuing deafening clap of thunder seemed to shake the very walls of Huldra House. The overwhelming sound sent Nathaniel into a fit of terror.

Nathaniel's wide eyes suddenly looked lost, the storm in his mind out of control. With a pained scream, he began to upend furniture, sending chairs and tables crashing against the walls. His frail body displayed an unexpected strength as his fear propelled him. With one last scream, he dove under the sheets of his bed, hiding from the world that was causing him so much

distress.

"Nathaniel, it's okay..." His heart broke for him. "I... I'm going to get you out of here."

Moments later, the sound of the attic door being unlocked reached his ears. He held his breath and looked around for somewhere to hide. His gaze fell upon a large, ornate standing mirror. He slipped behind it, hoping his impromptu hiding spot wouldn't betray him.

Hidden behind the ornate mirror, Finn could barely process the rapid turn of events. Heart racing, he listened intently for any sounds that might give away the arrival of others.

The door opened and someone stepped inside.

Lady Ferguson, her usually stern countenance replaced by one of sheer maternal concern, rushed into the room. "Nathaniel!" she called out, quickly making her way to the bed where her son was hiding.

Tenderly, she pulled back the sheets. "It's alright, my dear," she whispered, her fingers brushing his hair in a comforting gesture. "The storm will pass. Just like it always does."

Witnessing the scene, Finn felt like an unwelcome intruder. Lady Ferguson, the formidable matriarch of Huldra House, was momentarily transformed before his eyes, revealing a mother's undying love and concern for her child. It was a side of her he hadn't anticipated, and it made him question the assumptions he'd held.

Seizing the opportunity as Lady Ferguson moved to close the open window, Finn stealthily made his way out of the room and headed down the winding staircase, his feet barely making a sound on the old wooden steps.

He was so engrossed in his thoughts that he almost crashed straight into Amelia, who was making her way up. They both stopped abruptly, narrowly avoiding a collision.

"Well, at least you didn't shriek this time," she joked, trying to relieve the tension of the night. "Please don't climb out of a window again."

"Agreed," Finn said, knowing how close he had come to a fatal fall. "Though, I'm sure you would have caught me."

Amelia gave him a playful shove. "What did you find out?" she whispered urgently.

Finn took a deep breath. "Nathaniel is in a sorry state, but he did give me something. He said that he overheard the servants talking. Apparently, Ivar Ward and Lord Carmichael knew each other from years ago."

Amelia's eyes widened. "A connection between the victims? Brilliant! That's our lead. But right now, let's get out of here before Lady Ferguson runs into us. I just hope Nathaniel doesn't tell her you were there."

"I have a feeling he won't," Finn said, thinking back to his promise that he would get Nathaniel out of there. There were so many possibilities running through Finn's mind. He worried that, should he release Nathaniel, that he might prove violent, perhaps even be the killer himself. Was there a good reason for Lady Ferguson keeping him locked up there in the first place?

They continued their way back to their rooms, their steps echoing in the dimly lit hallway. As Finn prepared to enter his room, he glanced over at Amelia, who was doing the same.

"Let's not go wandering around again tonight," she suggested, her tone half-serious.

"Couldn't agree more," Finn nodded. "Tomorrow, we'll chase down that lead. But for now, a good night's sleep sounds like a blessing."

Amelia nodded, "Good night, Finn."

"Good night, Amelia."

With that, Finn entered his room. He climbed into bed, wondering if he would hear a knock on his window again. Sleep did not come easy, and when it did, it was filled with visions of Nathaniel's locked room and a horrid face at the window.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Amelia awoke to the gentle sounds of waves crashing against the rugged shores of Huldra Island. The storm from the previous night seemed to have abated, replaced by a calm serenity that contrasted with the island's ominous atmosphere. The room was filled with a muted morning light that highlighted the intricate details of Huldra House's antiquated architecture.

Drawing back the curtains, she took a moment to gaze at the glistening shoreline to the side of the moors. The waves rolled in with rhythmic grace, a testament to nature's ability to find balance even after the fiercest of tempests.

Pushing her thoughts aside, Amelia walked into the bathroom and stepped into the shower, letting the warm water cascade down her body, washing away the remnants of the harrowing events from the day before. As the water droplets trickled down her face, her thoughts wandered again. The island, with all its seductions and warnings, was beginning to get under her skin.

Finishing her shower, she wrapped herself in a soft white towel and approached the vintage wooden dresser. Her hair, a fiery cascade of red, was damp from the shower. She reached for the blow dryer, watching in the mirror as her hair danced in the warm gusts.

But as she began brushing her locks, the mirror presented not only her own reflection but also a flood of memories. Suddenly, she was no longer in Huldra House but in her cozy apartment from what felt like a lifetime ago.

She saw herself struggling, a white cast enveloping her broken arm she'd damaged during an arrest, trying to manage the thick waves of her hair. A knock at the bedroom door, and Mark her fiance entered, his eyes filled with genuine concern. "Here, let me," he'd whispered, gently taking the brush from her.

Mark's touch was tender and patient as he brushed her hair, each stroke filled with love. "You know," he'd murmured, "I've always loved your red hair. To the world, it should flow like a fiery river. But whether it's up or down, you're always beautiful to me." And with those words, he'd leaned in, capturing her lips with his, their love palpable in the space between breaths.

But the memory, as sweet as it was, faded, pulling Amelia back into her room at Huldra House. The absence of Mark, the void left by his tragic departure, hit her all at once. Her eyes, filled with a mix of pain and longing, met her own reflection, showcasing a vulnerability that few ever saw.

A single tear escaped, tracing a path down her cheek. With a deep breath, Amelia wiped it away, resolving to keep moving forward. She let her hair fall naturally, choosing not to tie it up.

He'd have liked that, she thought.

Squaring her shoulders and drawing strength from deep within, Amelia dressed in her sharp detective attire. She knew the day ahead would be challenging, but she was ready. The mysteries of the Huldra Island murders awaited, and she was determined to unearth more about this supposed connection between the victims.

Stepping out of her room, Amelia let the weight of her memories linger for a moment longer. The house's corridors, filled with whispers of bygone eras, echoed the melancholy of her thoughts. But with the gentle sway of her red hair and the soft creak of the floorboards beneath her feet, she merged the past with the present, allowing Huldra Island's enigmatic pull to guide her onwards.

Amelia's fingers softly rapped on the wooden surface of Finn's door, the muffled sounds echoing slightly down the ornate hallway of Huldra House. She waited for a moment, listening intently for any sign of movement, but there was nothing.

Casting a glance down the corridor, Amelia decided to wander through the house in search of Finn. The air was cool, filled with the mingling scents of old books, polished wood, and something else; the unmistakable aroma of freshly cooked breakfast.

Following the delicious scent, Amelia reached the kitchen to find Finn, engaged in a jovial conversation with Frederick. Finn's eyes lit up when he saw her, his mouth curving into a teasing grin. "Hope you slept well, Amelia. No sleepwalking mishaps, I hope?"

Amelia shot him a knowing look, fully aware he was referencing their nighttime adventure, but she chose not to indulge him. Instead, she responded with a simple, "Morning, Finn. Morning, Frederick."

Frederick, ever the gracious host, turned to her, his tone warm. "Good morning, Inspector. Would you care for a full Scottish breakfast?"

Her stomach growled in response before she could even muster an answer, which drew a chuckle from both men. "I'll take that as a yes," Frederick said, turning his attention back to the sizzling pans on the stove.

Leaning closer to Finn, Amelia dropped her voice to a whisper, the weight of their investigation pressing on her. "Have you spoken to Frederick about

what Nathaniel mentioned?"

Finn shook his head subtly. "No, not yet."

Seizing the opportunity, Amelia turned her attention back to the butler. "Frederick, do you know much about Ivar Ward knowing Lord Carmichael?"

Frederick seemed to ponder for a moment, then responded, "Only bits and pieces, really. There have been so many rumors, especially concerning Ivar Ward and Lord Carmichael being involved in something. But a lot of it is just empty island talk."

Amelia's brow furrowed. "Do you believe they knew each other well?"

Frederick turned, pausing for a moment, his expression contemplative. "There's been a lot of talk, Inspector. Last night at the pub, I did here a few conversations about how Ivar Ward was linked with Lord Carmichael when his Lordship was still on the mainland, but I was more interested in my single malt."

Finn leaned in, his analytical mind clearly at work. "Could their connection have been related to Lord Carmichael's plan to develop the island?"

A faint smile tugged at the edges of Frederick's lips. "That's the buzz at The Fair Folk Inn. It felt like every patron had a theory. But what I found most intriguing was the idea that Ivar Ward, known for his deep superstitions, might've come to the island post Lord Carmichael's demise to meet another involved party. And that this third party might've silenced him."

"That's a lot of might'ves," Finn said, eating the last of his breakfast.

Amelia's interest piqued. "Who was discussing this?"

Frederick shrugged. "There was so much chatter, it's hard to pinpoint. But I think you'll find more answers if you head back to The Fair Folk Inn. I believe some of the fishermen were talking most since Ivar was a fellow fisherman, and they always feel it when one of them passes away."

"We'll need to see if Kirsty is available to drive us around the island again," Finn said. "Otherwise, we'll need to borrow a car."

Just then, Frederick placed a plate in front of Amelia, heaped with an array of mouthwatering breakfast items. Amelia could hardly resist digging in, but she knew there was work to be done. The inn, with its rumor-mongering patrons, awaited.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The morning sun hurt Finn's tired eyes as it cast a golden glow on the facade of Huldra House, and the residual storm clouds retreated, painting a serene backdrop against the azure skies. Finn stepped out, squinting against the bright light, with Amelia by his side. They had not been standing there for long when a car's soft rumble grew nearer. Rounding the bend, a familiar figure—Kirsty, her wavy hair catching the sun—stopped before them.

"Morning, Inspector, Mr Wright," she greeted, rolling down her window. "Frederick thought you might need a drive into Huldra town."

Finn offered a grateful smile. "Much appreciated, Kirsty."

The journey commenced, and the car weaved through the winding roads that cut across the expansive moors. Wildflowers danced to the rhythm of the passing breeze, and from the lush green stretches, the distant hills rolled into view.

Lost in the moving tapestry outside, Finn's thoughts trailed back to the stormy night before. "You know, Amelia," he began, his voice thoughtful, "I thought I saw a light out on the moors during the storm."

Amelia turned her head, curiosity evident. "A light? Out there?"

Nodding, Finn continued, "A pinpoint of bright light, almost orb-like. It was fleeting. And then... nothing. I figured I might've just been seeing things, given how tired I was."

Kirsty, her attention divided between the road and their conversation, perked up. "What did this light look like?"

"It was gone in a flash, like I said," Finn elaborated, "just a bright dot that vanished as quickly as it appeared."

Kirsty's grip tightened slightly on the wheel. "Sounds like you might've seen a will o' the wisp."

Finn frowned, unfamiliar with the term. "A what now?"

"A will o' the wisp," Kirsty repeated. "Some folks claim it's just marsh gas from rotting matter that ignites spontaneously. But there's also talk of them being something...more."

Amelia tilted her head. "Connected to the Hidden Folk, perhaps?"

Kirsty's eyes twinkled mysteriously. "Some believe so. I remember an old story saying it was a glimpse of the lanterns the hidden folk carried when they were out and about... Or their wraith. If you indeed saw one, consider

yourself lucky. Whether it's gas or not, I've been on this island most of my life and never witnessed one."

Finn wasn't sure what he saw, but he wasn't so ready to attribute the supernatural to it.

The moors gradually gave way to structures, indicating their arrival in Huldra town. Kirsty expertly parked the car outside The Fair Folk Inn. "I'll wait out here. Take your time."

With a nod of thanks, Finn and Amelia alighted, the inn's familiar ambiance beckoning them inside. The day was only beginning, but there was much to uncover.

Finn and Amelia entered The Fair Folk Inn, its warm, dim lighting providing a stark contrast to the bright morning outside. The familiar scent of wood and ale filled their nostrils, and the murmurs of conversations created a low hum. At the bar, Bill the landlord busied himself wearing again his white apron, but upon spotting the two, he straightened up with a grin that spread across his stout, rosy cheeks.

"Look who's still here!" he exclaimed, a playful note to his voice. "Glad to see the fair folk haven't driven you off just yet."

Finn smirked, catching the wink Bill sent his way. "We're a tough lot."

Amelia, always the investigator, got right to it. "Bill, was the inn busy last night?"

Bill raised an eyebrow, glancing at the assorted patrons around. "Aye, it was packed. Surprised me, really, with the storm and all. But I reckon people are spooked. Could be the tales of the Fair Folk wraith or perhaps the thought of a killer in our midst. There's a comfort in being surrounded by others, a semblance of safety."

Nodding in understanding, Amelia leaned in a bit, her tone dropping to a whisper. "We've been hearing that the two victims might've known each other. Any truth to that?"

Bill hesitated, his jovial demeanor wavering for a split second. "Heard whispers of that, yes."

"Do you know who might be able to tell us more?" Finn asked in a low voice.

"No, I've no idea," Bill said, loudly as if for everyone in the pub to hear. He glanced around, then subtly—though not subtly enough—rubbed his nose with a nod toward a corner of the inn.

Finn followed his discreet cue to a man seated in the back. The man's fiery

red mustache was in stark contrast to the dark background, and he was engrossed in puffing on a pipe. A worn fisherman's jumper hugged his frame, suggesting a life spent by the sea.

With a silent nod of gratitude to Bill, Finn made his way towards the man. The journey through the inn was short, but with every step, the weight of the island's mysteries pressed upon him. As he approached, the man's sea-blue eyes lifted, landing on Finn with a mix of curiosity and caution.

"Mind if I join you?" Finn asked, gesturing to the seat opposite the man.

The man took a long drag from his pipe, exhaling slowly. "Depends on the company," he responded, his voice deep and raspy.

Finn smirked, "Let's find out, shall we?"

Taking that as an invitation, Finn pulled up a chair, with Amelia not far behind, sitting down next to him.

As Finn and Amelia sat opposite the red-mustached man, there was a palpable tension in the air. The man stared at them as blankly as a silent ocean.

Finn decided to break the ice.

"My name is Finn, this is Inspector Winters," Finn said. "We were just wondering if we could sample some of that excellent local knowledge... Mr...?"

"Name's Bruce McCulloch," he said through gritted teeth.

"Let's focus on the local news. I love a good, what you call it? Blether? Do you know anything about Ivar Ward and Lord Carmichael?" Finn inquired, keeping his tone non-threatening. Around them, the pub was a hush of quiet voices.

Bruce McCulloch looked uninterested, puffing on his pipe. "All I know is that they're dead."

Amelia leaned forward. "Did you know either of them personally?"

Bruce hesitated, the smoke from his pipe swirling around him. "Look, I just want to be left alone."

Amelia, ever the detective, swiftly took out her ID and flashed it at him. "You know it's illegal to smoke that pipe inside a public place, right?"

Bruce rolled his eyes. "Aye."

Finn, sensing an opportunity to lighten the mood, added, "Amelia was up sleepwalking last night. When she doesn't get much sleep, she can get pretty...tenacious about the rules."

Amelia gave Finn a sharp glance, but Bruce's stern demeanor cracked into

a smile. "Fine," he said, lowering his voice. "But make it quick."

As Amelia jotted down notes, she asked, "Your name again?"

"Bruce McCulloch," he replied. "Fisherman here, but I go back and forth from the mainland in Storn."

Finn's interest was piqued. "Did you know Ivar on the mainland?"

Bruce took a deep breath. "Knew him a bit to talk tae. A lot of people don't know this, but he spent a summer here when he was a bit younger, working. But after that, he didn't want to be on the island again, so it's strange he'd be here at all. The funny thing is, a few nights ago, I saw him in Storn outside a pub. He was in a pretty heated argument with someone. It stuck in my mind."

Amelia's eyes narrowed. "Who was it?"

"Couldn't get a great look," Bruce admitted, "but I'd swear it was.... McGregor. Works with the Ferguson Estate, he does."

Finn's eyes widened in recognition. "We met him. He drove us from the airstrip to Huldra House."

"Why were they fighting?" Amelia asked.

Bruce shook his head. "Don't know. But Ivar, he's usually pretty calm. The sees him like that...it was awfully strange."

Finn leaned forward. "McGregor is on the mainland now, isn't he?"

Bruce looked thoughtful. "Told ye that, did he? Last I heard, he was staying at an old fisherman's cottage on the West side of the island sometimes, when he wasn't back on Storn. Old Miller's Cottage, it's called. Ye might have missed him though."

After thanking Bruce, Finn and Amelia left the inn. As they stepped outside, the sun cast long shadows on the town's cobblestone streets. Kirsty's car awaited them, and she looked up inquisitively as they approached.

"Know where Old Miller's Cottage is?" Finn asked.

Kirsty nodded, "Yes, why?"

"We need to question McGregor if he's there," Amelia said.

"Oh, right," Kirsty said. "I better phone my husband if we're going to be out longer than I thought, I'll let him know."

Kirsty left the car and stood on the cobbled street, talking into her phone.

"Why did she leave the car?" Finn asked. "It's hardly top secret government information."

"Not everyone likes their business out and about," Amelia said. "Can you imagine living in an island community? Everyone would know everyone's

business. It would be galling. They probably get used to taking their calls outside to minimize gossiping as much as possible.”

Kirsty returned with a smile and got back into the car. “Right, where to, again?”

“Old Miller's Cottage,” Amelia replied.

Kirsty buckled herself in as Finn took a breath, the exciting possibility of a real shift in the case afoot.

"Let's get moving," he declared, "and pay McGregor a visit. I hope he doesn't see us coming."

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Finn was deep in thought as the car rumbled along the single track roads of Huldra Island. The car ride was filled with a tense silence as the moors stretched out around them. Kirsty's car hummed, providing a gentle comfort amid the looming uncertainty. The western side of the island held an untouched beauty, the vast stretches of moorland, the hills rolling into the distance, and the sea's whispers hinting at untold mysteries.

Out beyond that was the deep blue. Finn stared towards it, knowing that thousands of miles away in the vastness of it all, his homeland sat. For a moment, he felt a real pang of homesickness. He thought of his job with the FBI at Quantico, he thought about his friends, most of all, he thought about his life in America, and how with his relationship with Demi and the investigation into his handling of a hostage situation looming, it was all built on shifting sands.

"There it is," Kirsty's voice broke the silence, pointing towards a distant structure nestled in a secluded nook.

Old Miller's Cottage looked like something straight out of a historical novel. Its stone walls bore the marks of time, testifying to years of relentless winds and sea sprays. Its thatched roof seemed ancient, but still functional. But what caught Amelia's eye was the smoke spiraling from the chimney.

"Looks like someone's home," she observed.

Kirsty took a deep breath. "I've had a few run-ins with McGregor in the past," she began, her eyes on the winding path ahead. "He can be... fiery. Not one to take lightly. But for some reason, he seems to have a soft spot for me. I can go talk with him if you like?"

Finn arched an eyebrow. "Might be good to have you with us then," he said, the corners of his mouth twitching into a half-smile. "An ace up our sleeve." Finn was now formulating some new ideas in his mind.

Amelia nodded in agreement. "It's settled then. All three of us approach together. We'll see if McGregor is more amenable with a familiar face around. It's not like we're turning up to put him in cuffs."

Kirsty parked the car a reasonable distance from the cottage. The trio alighted, the scent of burning wood and sea salt greeting them. As they neared the entrance, the old oak door loomed, its history evident in the weathered wood and rusted ironwork. Each step towards it felt weighted,

every sound magnified in the stillness around them.

Just before reaching out to knock, Finn exchanged a glance with Amelia, the air thick with anticipation. Beside them, Kirsty took a steadying breath, and Finn could feel her anxiety building.

The sound of Finn's knock echoed briefly before being swallowed by the vast expanse around them. Silence returned, save for the distant call of seabirds and the soft rustle of wind-blown grass.

Kirsty took a step forward, her voice carrying with a note of authority, "McGregor! It's Kirsty! Open up!"

Still, there was no response, no movement from within. The silence was almost oppressive, making Finn's skin prickle with unease. He felt eyes on him, an unsettling sensation of being watched, and instinctively scanned the horizon. The tall grass waved in rhythm with the breeze, forming a sea of green that could easily conceal anyone—or anything. Though he couldn't pinpoint a source for his feeling, Finn remained on edge.

Amelia tried the door handle, her face a picture of concentration. "Locked," she murmured.

Finn's voice was firm when he shouted, "McGregor, if you're in there, we're coming in!" But the house gave nothing away, its silence held resolute behind stone walls.

Kirsty motioned for them to follow her as she moved around the side of the cottage. There, nestled beneath a canopy of creeping ivy, was a window. "This one's on a latch," she said, pointing to the slight gap at the bottom.

Finn approached, peering into a window. It looked like the place had been ransacked inside, and he worried someone might have been hurt. Without hesitation, he took hold of the windowsill to hoist himself up. The window creaked softly in protest as he eased it upwards, allowing just enough space for him to slip inside. The world outside became muffled, leaving Finn momentarily disoriented in the dim interior of the cottage.

Inside the cottage, an eerie stillness prevailed, punctuated only by the muted crackling of the dying embers in the hearth. Finn stepped lightly, every creak of the wooden floor amplifying his sense of unease. He blinked, adjusting to the dim light, allowing the room's features to come into focus.

An overturned chair lay like a fallen soldier near the small dining table. Papers—perhaps once neatly arranged—were scattered across the floor, some even fluttering near the fireplace's warmth. The shards of a shattered glass bottle glinted menacingly near the door, a testament to the violence that may

have transpired.

Finn's gaze drifted to the fireplace, noting the low burn of the fire. The flames were vigorous. They'd been left unattended for only a short while.

Moving cautiously, Finn approached the main entrance, undoing the lock and pulling the door open to reveal a concerned Amelia and Kirsty. Without a word, they entered, taking in the scene.

Amelia's voice, when she finally broke the silence, mirrored Finn's inner thoughts. "It looks like there was a struggle." Her trained eyes darted around, collecting details and piecing together a narrative.

Near the corner, an old-fashioned landline phone caught Finn's attention. The receiver dangled precariously by its cord, not properly set back in its cradle. Pointing it out to Amelia, he said, "Looks like someone was interrupted during a call."

Kirsty's voice trembled slightly, with a strange quality to it, concern evident in her eyes. "Do you think someone took McGregor?"

Amelia looked to be pondering the possibility for a moment, her fingers brushing a paper on the floor. "It's definitely a possibility," she admitted, looking up to meet both their gazes. "This wasn't a simple break-in or robbery. Something significant happened here."

Finn watched as Kirsty moved around, looking in some of the other rooms.

The glint of what looked like homebrew wine smashed and spilled on the floor caught Finn's attention. The shimmering liquid had created a faint trail of footprints, gradually dissipating but leading in a certain direction. Finn's trained eyes followed their path, which led him towards another window, its latch tarnished with age.

As he approached, Finn spotted a wet patch on the latch—it looked, and more importantly, smelled like the same wine. Curiosity piqued, he carefully opened the window and peered out. His gaze landed on more footprints just beyond the window, leading toward a dense hedgerow that seemed out of place amid the otherwise clear landscape.

Motioning for Amelia and Kirsty to keep up the ruse, Finn cleared his throat. "I think I'll head back to Huldra House and call for some backup," he announced loudly enough for any eavesdroppers to hear.

Stealthily, he left the cottage, making his way around its perimeter. As he neared the thick hedgerow, Finn detected the faint rustling of leaves. Moving closer, he discerned a figure crouched among the bushes—none other than

McGregor.

With a smirk, Finn quipped, "Are you bird watching, McGregor?"

Seeing he was caught, McGregor looked up, his face a blend of surprise and resignation.

"No birds today, unfortunately, only an American Eagle," Finn continued, grinning. "Come on, we got you. The game's up."

McGregor sighed, the weight of his situation seemingly dawning on him. Finn, ever the astute detective, had caught him red-handed. With a firm grip on McGregor's arm, Finn led him back into the cottage, where Finn intended to interrogate him.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Finn was staring intently at the seated McGregor, who should have been feeling comfortable in his own armchair. But he was clearly feeling the heat of the situation. The cozy, old-fashioned setting of the cottage formed a stark contrast to the tension filling the air as McGregor was looking around his living area, surrounded by the trio of Finn, Amelia, and Kirsty.

Finn's gaze bore into McGregor, each second adding pressure. "All those tales about the island, the wraiths, and the Hidden Folk – was it all just smoke and mirrors to deter us?" Finn questioned, his voice calm but firm.

McGregor swallowed hard, glancing briefly at the worn rug beneath his feet before looking back up. "No," he said, shaking his head. "The island's seen its share of strange happenings. People disappearing, lights in the moors, eerie sounds. There's more to this place than meets the eye. You'll never understand that as outsiders."

Amelia, taking a more direct approach, asked, "Where were you the nights Lord Carmichael and Ivar Ward died?"

Sighing deeply, McGregor replied, hesitating at first. He looked at Kirsty and shook his head as if embarrassed by her presence and said: "I wasn't here when Lord Carmichael died. I was on the mainland. Plenty saw me. As for the night Ivar was murdered... I was in this cottage by myself."

"And anyone to vouch for that?" Finn prodded.

McGregor's face lost a bit of color, his voice softening. "No, Laddie. I was alone."

"That puts you in a difficult spot, McGregor," Finn remarked, a note of sympathy in his tone. "No alibi and now this... stunt," he gestured to the disarray around them, "with your home. You're hiding something, and I think I know what it is."

McGregor seemed to shrink, his gaze falling to his hands which fidgeted on his lap. The silence in the room was thick.

"Why this ruse, McGregor? Why make it look like there was a scuffle?" Finn's curiosity was evident.

The fisherman took a moment, seeming to gather himself before speaking, but it was Finn who broke the silence, laying out his own theory.

"Let me guess. Someone called you, didn't they? Was it Bruce? Let you know we were on our way so you could hide or at least prepare yourself. You

panicked, thinking we were onto you. So, you hung up the phone in haste, messed up the place a little—maybe broke the bottle accidentally in your hurry. Then, hearing us approach, you decided to jump through that window and took refuge behind the hedgerow." Finn leaned in, eyebrows raised. "Am I close? I suspect it needs a little adjustment."

McGregor, looking cornered and somewhat defeated, nodded. "Aye," he admitted, his Scottish accent more pronounced with his sadness, "That's about right."

Amelia and Finn exchanged glances. Whatever was happening on the island was more intricate than they'd first assumed. And though McGregor might not be their prime suspect, he certainly held pieces to the puzzle. Pieces that Finn and Amelia were determined to fit together.

The problem was, Finn was now thinking something else. His suspicions had suddenly leaped off at a right angle.

Amelia's piercing eyes turned to McGregor as he said, "I'd like a solicitor. This has gone too far."

Finn leaned back, his gaze shifting to Kirsty momentarily before returning to McGregor. "You can have one, of course," he replied evenly, "but I've got a hunch we can clear all this up without any need for one, right Kirsty?"

"Kirsty?" Amelia said, surprised.

Kirsty moved back a little, her face flush with embarrassment. The situation was already strange enough, and now she was edging to the door as if wanting to run for it.

McGregor's voice, roughened by emotion, cut in, "Leave her out of this."

But before Finn or Amelia could respond, Kirsty stepped forward. "It's true," she admitted, her voice quivering, "McGregor and I... we've been seeing each other. My marriage hasn't been great, and he's... been there for me."

Finn's investigative skills came into play once more, "I did notice that you seemed familiar with McGregor's cottage, almost as if you'd been here many times before. And back at the Fair Folk Inn, you stepped out of the car, saying you needed to call home. It made me wonder... Was it you who warned McGregor of our arrival?"

Kirsty bit her lip, her gaze shifting to the floor, "Yes," she whispered. "I'm sorry, I panicked and thought you were accusing him of murder. I knew he'd have to tell you we were together the night Ivar Ward died, and I didn't want that to get back to anyone. This bloody island is full of gossips!"

McGregor, looking more protective now, pleaded, "Don't hold that against her. She was just trying to protect me, too. I'm a lot older than Kirsty, she's in her thirties, I'm in my fifties, it would be a bit of a scandal. People wouldn't understand."

Kirsty's voice, filled with emotion, broke in, "Please, this island is small and gossip spreads like wildfire. We just... didn't want our affair to be the talk of the town. Can you keep this between us?"

Amelia, always the voice of reason, replied, "Our main concern is finding out who killed Ivar Ward and Lord Carmichael. Your personal life isn't our business. But we do need information that can help us solve the case or, at the very least, eliminate you both as suspects."

Kirsty looked between Finn and Amelia, nodding slowly. "I'll vouch for McGregor. The night Ivar died... we were together. I'll give a statement if needed."

Finn's gaze turned back to McGregor. "Looks like we're getting somewhere. But remember, we're here to uncover the truth. If you know anything, now is the time to speak up."

McGregor rubbed his temples, clearly wearied by the series of revelations. Amelia eyed him closely, her brow furrowing. "You went through the effort of setting up a staged escape from this cottage, McGregor. Why go through all that trouble?"

McGregor let out a sigh, his shoulders slumping. "It's probably going to get out now anyway," he began, a tinge of bitterness in his voice, "I have a record."

Kirsty's eyes widened, shock evident on her face. "What do you mean, a record?"

He took a deep breath, his gaze drifting away as he recalled painful memories. "It was years ago, back when I was in my late teens. I was at a pub on the mainland. There was an argument, and I... I threw a punch."

Amelia's eyes didn't leave his face, waiting for him to continue.

McGregor's voice shook slightly as he said, "The man, he didn't just go doon, he fell the wrong way and hit his head on the pavement. He didn't get back up. They said he died instantly."

The room was silent for a moment, the weight of the revelation sinking in.

McGregor, looking close to tears, added, "It was an accident. I never intended to kill him. But they sent me to jail for it, and I can't ever forget the time I spent inside. I thought if you knew about my past, you'd think I was

capable of the murders on the island. That's why I panicked and tried to hide."

Kirsty, the color drained from her face, reached out and held McGregor's hand, offering silent support.

Amelia spoke up, her voice softer but still stern, "Your past is your past, McGregor. But it's important to be honest about it, especially now. We are trying to piece together what's been happening on this island. Hiding the truth only makes things murkier for everyone involved."

"What I want to know," Finn said, "is did you have an altercation with Ivar Ward?"

McGregor nodded. "Yes. That was another reason to be scared. I knew that if ye found oot about that, you'd think I killed him. But I didnae!"

"Then why did you get into a fight with him?" Amelia asked.

McGregor looked sheepish. "Tae tell ye the truth, he knew Kirsty a little. And he knew Kirsty's man. He thought I was too old to be breaking up a marriage like that, and that I should walk away."

Finn sighed. "Right, I think that's enough for now, McGregor. It looks like you're going to keep your freedom if Kirsty is vouching for your alibi. But you're still a person of interest. We can't arrest you, but running away would look bad. It might make us and the entire community think you're hiding something. If I were you, I'd stay here until this is over. With you or someone else behind bars."

"Let's go," Amelia said.

"Kirsty..." McGregor said, but she only nodded at him, said nothing, and then left with Amelia and Finn.

Kirsty's eyes lingered on the silhouette of McGregor's door as the trio walked away. The heavy clouds above, pregnant with the promise of rain, mirrored the mood of the group.

Finn's mind involuntarily darted back to the memories of his ex-fiance, Demi. The bitter pang of betrayal, the nagging thought of her perhaps having cheated, seemed to sting more today. It wasn't just about their professional setback but a personal one that had been dug up from the past.

Kirsty's soft voice broke his reverie. "I'm sorry about all this. I didn't want to drag anyone into my personal mess."

Finn gave her a sideways glance. "Life is messy, Kirsty. People drift away, feelings change, and sometimes, we make choices we're not proud of." He thought of Demi for a fleeting second before continuing, "It's about how we

handle what comes after."

Kirsty gave him a small smile, thankful for his understanding.

Amelia, always the more pragmatic one, said, "We need to focus on the task at hand. Let's get our heads back in the game." As if on cue, her phone rang. She glanced at the screen and muttered, "Just the person I didn't want to speak to right now."

Finn raised an eyebrow inquisitively.

"Chief Constable Collins," she groaned. "He's going to want a report."

A sigh escaped Finn's lips. "From a potential lead to zero in under an hour. That's got to be a new record."

Amelia answered the call, her face tightening as she listened to the voice on the other end. Finn couldn't hear what was being said, but she gave a series of short polite replies, her gaze wandering over the grasslands that stretched endlessly around them. As she hung up, their situation became evident in her eyes. She walked back over to him.

Finn looked at the vast expanse of land. "Do you think the killer is still here, Winters? On this island, hiding among these people?"

Amelia paused, her gaze distant. "If he is, he's good at hiding. But if he's gone... then he's left behind a puzzle that might never be pieced together."

The wind carried whispers from the grasslands as if the island itself was trying to say something. If only it could have spoken, it would have said, someone is watching you right now.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

The hill, bathed in the muted light of the afternoon sun, offered a sweeping view of the island. From this vantage point, the killer could see for miles everything laid out like a map. The uneven terrain, the weaving trails, the secluded spots - the island was familiar, a place where every nook and cranny held a memory, a story.

Behind the killer, some distance away, nestled almost protectively amongst a hedgerow and some trees, sat Old Miller's Cottage. Even from this distance, the cottage emanated a sense of timelessness, a relic from the past that had witnessed generations come and go. Smoke rose from its chimney, the tendrils lazily making their way to the sky.

The killer noticed the figures outside the cottage, recognizing the unmistakable form of McGregor coming out. And then, there were the others – outsiders. A twitch of irritation flickered across the killer's features, but it was gone as quickly as it appeared. Why were they there? Had they figured out anything? The killer dismissed the thought almost instantly. After all, they were only visitors on this island, mere interlopers. They didn't understand its rhythms, its secrets. He could hide well, and if he ever had to do something about them, they would never see him coming.

However, this was not a time for reflection or pondering. There was work to be done, another deed needed to further the *good work* he took pride in. Every second counted, and the killer knew that moments of hesitation could be fatal.

Moving stealthily through the tall grass, the killer felt a certain exhilaration, much like a predator stalking its prey. The grass rustled softly underfoot, bending and swaying, trying to reclaim its space as the killer passed. There was a familiarity to this dance, a ritual that the killer had come to relish. The sensation of being unseen, undetected, was intoxicating.

Reaching the cliffside trail, the killer paused, breathing in the salty air. The sea below crashed against the rocks, sending sprays of mist up to the path. The roar of the waves was both calming and invigorating, a reminder of the raw power of nature.

But the trail wasn't just a pathway. It was an invitation, a winding ribbon that led to numerous secluded spots, hidden alcoves, and precipices. It was a trail that held memories of past hunts, of moments where the killer had been

both the pursuer and, in some twisted sense, the savior. For in the killer's mind, every act was a salvation, a release for the victim and for the island. They would never have to tolerate each other again.

Glancing once more towards the distant cottage, the killer's lips curled into a faint, sinister smile. The outsiders might be probing, asking questions, but they were still far from the truth. And by the time they even came close, the killer would be long gone, melted into the shadows, leaving behind nothing but a trail of chaos and unanswered questions.

Taking a deep breath, the killer began to move again, following the trail, every step echoing the rhythm of a dark heartbeat. Another victim awaited, and the dance of death would soon begin once more.

The path wove upwards, the gradient becoming steeper as the killer moved further along it. The sound of the waves crashing below seemed distant now, replaced by the whipping wind that carried the sharp tang of the ocean. The terrain grew rugged, and the cliffside gave way to a plateau, culminating in the peak of the cliff, which jutted out majestically, providing an unobstructed panorama of the roaring sea below.

There, against the backdrop of the horizon where the sky touched the sea, stood a lone figure. The posture, the way the man shifted his weight from one foot to the other – it was unmistakable. A shiver of anticipation ran down the killer's spine. Recognizing this man made the impending act all the more personal, all the more *necessary*.

Slipping through the tall grasses like a wraith, the killer approached with utmost caution. Every movement was calculated, every sound was muffled. From the pocket of a worn coat, a rope was retrieved, its ends fraying slightly from previous encounters.

A gust of wind momentarily masked the killer's advance. The man, lost in thought, oblivious to his surroundings, never heard the soft footfalls. In one swift move, the rope was slung around his neck, tightening instantly. The man's eyes bulged in surprise and fear, his hands flying up in a desperate attempt to free himself. But the killer was strong, every muscle tensing with the effort to end it quickly.

In the heat of the moment, a combination of the man's determination and perhaps sheer panic gave him the strength to resist. He managed to get his fingers between the rope and his neck, loosening the grip just enough to take a gulp of air. Using all his might, he threw himself backward, catching the killer off-guard. The rope slipped, and for a brief second, their eyes met – two

pools of shock and recognition.

But that second was all it took. With a cry of alarm, the man stumbled backward, his legs flailing for purchase. But the edge of the cliff was unforgiving. He screamed a sound that was swallowed by the gusting wind and then silenced abruptly as he disappeared over the edge.

The killer rushed to the cliffside, peering over. Far below, on the jagged, tooth-like rocks, the body lay sprawled, waves crashing near it, threatening to slowly pull it into the abyss.

A mix of emotions coursed through the killer: satisfaction at another life claimed, frustration at the messiness of the act, and a newfound need for a better kill. Sloppiness had never been a trait associated with these acts, and the killer was determined that such an error would not occur again.

Retrieving the rope, the killer vanished into the grass once more, a phantom whose work on the island was far from done.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Finn was feeling anxious. A dead end was always frustrating, but he had noticed that he was more out of sorts than he had been in many, many years.

The vast drawing room of Huldra House was bathed in a soft, golden hue from the flames that danced within the grand fireplace. The flickering light painted patterns on the wooden walls, casting everything in a warm, intimate glow. The room, with its velvet drapes and mahogany furniture, exuded a timeless elegance, a stark contrast to the chaotic events happening outside its confines.

Amelia, her red hair reflecting the flames, sat on one of the plush armchairs, legs crossed, her gaze thoughtful. "We might need someone else to drive us around after Kirsty's deceit. We can't be sure of her anymore."

Finn looked at her, his brow furrowing in contemplation. He had been mulling over their next steps since they had left McGregor's cottage. "I don't think that's necessary. Kirsty's actions were personal. She was trying to protect her affair, not hide a murderer."

They sat in a comfortable silence, the crackling of the fire the only sound in the room. Outside, the daylight began its gradual descent into evening, casting elongated shadows on the vast grounds of the house.

Finn couldn't stay still for long. Rising from his seat, he began to pace the room, each step echoing his growing frustration. "We're spinning our wheels here. The answers we're seeking are slipping through our fingers. We keep hitting dead ends."

Amelia leaned forward, resting her elbows on her knees. "What if we're looking at this all wrong? What if Lord Carmichael's resort is just a surface motive? We still can't tie Ivar Ward to the same reason."

Finn stopped pacing, meeting her gaze. "That's what's been nagging at me. Lord Carmichael being targeted makes sense. He had plans, plans that riled up the community. But Ivar... Ivar Ward was a stranger with no known enemies on this island, and by all accounts, he may have even ended up here by accident. Everyone we've spoken to so far testifies to the fact that the man was known to avoid Huldra Island like the plague."

Amelia's green eyes seemed to shine even brighter in the firelight. "Could it be possible that Ivar was simply at the wrong place, at the wrong time? Could his death be a matter of... chance?"

Finn considered her words. He walked over to the fireplace, staring deep into the dancing flames as if seeking answers. "A crime of opportunity, perhaps? But that makes our job even harder. It means there's no direct pattern or motive."

Amelia stood up, joining Finn by the fire. "We need to dive deeper, re-evaluate everything. We've been focused on the resort, on local grievances. Maybe the answer lies elsewhere."

Finn nodded, determination evident in his eyes. "Let's start fresh. We'll re-examine everything from the top. We won't leave any stone unturned."

Amelia smiled, seemingly appreciating his tenacity. "Sounds like a plan. But I'm still not sure exactly where to start."

Amelia settled into a chair, pulling her coat tighter around her as though the evening chill began to permeate the room. Finn turned away and stood in front of the fireplace, eyes distantly staring out of a window as he pondered.

"Do you remember those stories we heard when we first got here? About the hidden folk and their wraith?" Finn asked, his voice holding a hint of excitement.

Amelia arched an eyebrow. "You're not suggesting a wraith is behind all of this, are you?"

Finn turned around and shrugged his shoulders, shaking his head. "No, not at all. But think about it. Stories like these – myths, legends – they always have roots in some form of reality. What if someone is taking these tales seriously? Using the legends of the island as their guide?"

Amelia leaned back, rubbing her temples. "I enjoy folklore as much as the next person, Finn, but I'm not sure how this connects to the victims directly."

Finn paced in front of the fireplace, animated. "Myths always have a basis in truth, Winters. They're passed down through generations, shape cultures, and become part of a community's identity. What if someone on this island is thinking, feeling, and even acting as the wraith would? Maybe they were fed these stories as a child, and they deeply internalized them. Instead of avenging the hidden folk against threats to their territory, perhaps this person is avenging the island itself."

Amelia looked contemplative, mulling over Finn's words. "So, you're suggesting that this isn't about Lord Carmichael's resort at all. Instead, it's about outsiders, intruders?"

Finn nodded earnestly. "Exactly. A kind of extreme xenophobia. Someone who believes outsiders are tainting the pure essence of their home."

Amelia sighed, her gaze drifting to the window. "If that's the case, we may be looking for someone deeply rooted in the island's history and culture. Someone with an intense passion for these legends."

Finn's eyes twinkled with renewed vigor. "It's a new angle to pursue. Let's see where it takes us."

Amelia leaned forward, fingers laced together. "But Finn, remember, Lord Carmichael wasn't just any outsider. His family has roots deep within this island. They were part of the island's tapestry for generations."

Finn paused, considering Amelia's words. "Yes, but he left, didn't he? He left this place behind for decades, choosing the modern world over tradition over his heritage. When he returned, it wasn't as a prodigal son. It was as a businessman with plans to change the very essence of this place."

Amelia nodded slowly. "So, what you're saying is, in the eyes of our potential killer, Lord Carmichael's betrayal might have been worse than if he were simply an outsider. He didn't just arrive to change the island; he returned to it, after abandoning it, to alter its fabric."

Finn pointed to the fire, the flames reflecting in his eyes. "Exactly. In many cultures, betrayal by one of your own is considered the most heinous crime. Lord Carmichael, having roots here and then leaving, only to return with intentions of modernizing... He could have been seen as the ultimate betrayer. Poor Ivar might just have been killed because he was from the mainland. If the killer thinks of himself as the wraith, then he might act like it, too. Weren't we told that the wraith could track down outsiders?"

Amelia's face took on a grim expression. "If your theory is right, Finn, then this killer might view any attempt to alter the island's traditions as a personal affront. That makes identifying them even more urgent. Fishermen and visitors come and go from the island. They could all be in danger."

Finn walked over to the window and stared out at the windswept scene. He was about to turn away from it again when something happened. Amid their conversation, a flicker outside the window grabbed Finn's attention. His eyes sharpened, focusing intently on a strange light that seemed to be hovering amid the tall grass of the moors, glinting even under the pall of gray skies. The sight of it sent a jolt of intrigue through him.

"Amelia, look!" he exclaimed, pointing out excitedly.

But by the time Amelia had turned and approached the window, the mysterious light had vanished, leaving no trace of its ephemeral existence. She shot him a teasing glance, her lips curling into a half-smile. "Seeing

ghostly lights now, are we?"

He shook his head with conviction. "I know what I saw, Amelia. It's the second time now. It wasn't just a figment of my imagination."

She shrugged playfully. "Perhaps it's just marsh gas like Kirsty said. This place is old and full of natural peat bogs and wildlife."

"It wasn't like any flame," Finn countered, a touch of frustration in his voice. "It was... glowing."

He took a step back, his gaze drifting from the window as he began to ponder. The sight of the light had rattled something loose inside of him, making him wonder about what was really out there, and that in turn sent his mind racing through many questions. The weight of the case, the unresolved matters from his past, and now these inexplicable sightings seemed to bear down on him all at once.

"I don't know what to make of any of it."

Amelia, clearly sensing his distress, spoke up, "You mean the case, don't you? You're having second thoughts?"

"No, it's not just the case," Finn sighed, his tall frame sinking into a plush, regal couch, the weight of his internal conflict evident in his posture. "I'm starting to think I shouldn't have come here. I've got too much going on in my head right now."

Amelia hesitated, looking at Finn's troubled expression. The weight of the past few days seemed to press down on him, deepening the lines on his face. She moved closer, sitting beside him on the ornate couch, her gaze focused on him. "Finn, what do you mean?"

He exhaled slowly, choosing his words with care. "Amelia, this case, this island, the myths... it's all intriguing, yes. But... I feel far removed from everything I ever cared about, and not in a good way. In a cowardly way. This place is stirring things within me. Thoughts about Demi, my ex-fiancée, things left unresolved."

Amelia tilted her head. "You've never really talked about her that much."

A bitter smile tugged at Finn's lips. "There's a reason for that. The betrayal, the loss... it's a weight I've been carrying for a while now. I thought this case would be a distraction, something to take my mind off things. I never told you, but she's here in the UK."

Amelia seemed shocked. "Here?"

"In London, and she wants to talk with me, but I don't know what to do about it."

“What does she want to talk about?” Amelia asked.

“She claims the affair never happened,” Finn said. “That she was being blackmailed into breaking it off with me. None of it makes sense. I worry that she's manipulating me, and I don't know if I can resist getting back with her if I see her. Does that sound weird?”

“No, not at all,” Amelia said. “Love makes us do strange things.”

Finn sighed. “I was certain coming here would be a good idea, that a case would help give me some perspective.”

Amelia rested her hand gently on his arm, a comforting gesture.

“Sometimes, diving into work can help, but sometimes it just magnifies the pain because we're not attending to our own needs.”

Finn nodded, taking a deep breath. “It's not just her. It's a myriad of past decisions, actions I regret, paths not taken. Being here, in this ancient place steeped in old tales, it's made me reflective. More than I'd like to be right now.”

“Every good detective or police officer I've known has been deeply impacted by their cases. Their compassion, their emotional connection to the world... it makes them excellent at what they do. It's not a sign of weakness, Finn. It means you're a good person.”

As she spoke, Finn found himself lost in her striking features. The vibrant green of her eyes, the fiery cascade of her red hair, and the porcelain smoothness of her skin were utterly mesmerizing. For a moment, the rest of the world seemed to fade away, leaving just the two of them in a silent communion.

But the moment was fleeting. Amelia, perhaps sensing the intensity of Finn's gaze, suddenly away to the storm outside, breaking the trance-like spell between them.

Regaining his composure, Finn's voice carried a heaviness that Amelia hadn't heard before. “You know, I always saw myself as someone who charged headlong into danger, always wanting to help people, to solve problems. But now... now I'm realizing that maybe I've been running from something.” He paused, collecting his thoughts. “I ran from my hometown in Florida, trying to escape the poverty, the mess I'd made of things. I ran to the UK to distance myself from the heartbreak of losing Demi and from that damned case at the FBI.” He looked down, fingers absentmindedly tracing the patterns on the couch. “And what did it get me? I took a bullet on our last case, and I'm still not recovered.”

Amelia turned, her face soft with understanding. "But you met me," she said quietly, a simple statement laden with unspoken emotion.

The weight of her words settled heavily in Finn's heart. He wanted to tell her how much her friendship meant to him, how she'd become a beacon in the darkest moments of his life. But every time he thought of expressing his feelings for Amelia, guilt gnawed at him. It felt like he was betraying his past, like every tender word for Amelia was another nail in the coffin of his relationship with Demi.

Amelia leaned back, considering his words. "Finn, everyone has ghosts from their past. The trick is not letting them overshadow the present. We're here together as partners, trying to solve a mystery. Let's focus on that. And when this is all over, if you want to talk... I'm here. Or maybe you'll finally know you need to face Demi to get closure one way or the other."

Finn looked at Amelia, gratitude evident in his eyes. "Thank you, Winters. You're a good friend. Let's do just that. Let's... Let's get back to the case."

Amelia nodded.

Pushing past the heavy silence, Finn's detective instincts kicked in. "Speaking of cases," he began, eager to divert the conversation, "I wandered around last night and found an old library. It was filled with books about Huldra Island, this mansion, the local folklore. If these murders have any connection to the island's myths, we might find something useful."

Amelia, grasping the change in topic, nodded in agreement. "It's worth a look. We need every clue we can get. I'm not sure how much more we can do out there before nightfall."

With a shared sense of purpose, the two of them left the room, their footsteps echoing in the corridor. Despite their mutual commitment to the case and helping the people on Huldra, an unspoken tension lingered, a testament to the complexities of their evolving relationship.

The grand corridors of Huldra House felt like they stretched into eternity as the duo walked side by side, the weight of their conversation clinging to the air. The house had a way of amplifying silence, the hushed whispers of the past mixing with the stillness of the present.

As they approached the library, Finn caught Amelia glancing sideways at Finn, observing his solemn profile. But he didn't say anything. It was as if, to Amelia, the confession he'd shared had given her an unexpected window into his world, one filled with its own battles and regrets. He hoped it was a reminder that beneath the hard exterior and wisecracks lay something deeper.

“Here it is,” Finn said, pushing the unusual door that seemed different from all of the others, more ornate, like whoever chose it for that room, valued knowledge above all else. Finn just hoped they'd find something to help them catch the killer.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

The weight of the grand doors gave a little resistance as Finn pushed them open, revealing the sprawling library. In the embrace of the dying daylight, the room seemed even more immense. The gray sunlight filtered through towering arched windows, casting a misty hue on the countless books lining the shelves. The bookcases, elaborately carved with designs reminiscent of an older time, seemed to stretch endlessly upward, the highest titles barely discernible from the ground.

Finn paused for a moment, taking in the vastness. He noticed how the sunlight played tricks on the wooden floor, creating patterns as it danced across the Persian rugs. The scent of old books and polished wood hit him; it was a familiar comfort, a reminder of the sanctuaries he used to seek out at college when life became overwhelming.

The walls were lined with ancient wooden shelves that reached high to the ceiling. Thousands of dusty books stood shoulder to shoulder, their spines telling tales of time and tradition. Ornate chandeliers hung overhead, casting their warm glow upon reading tables scattered throughout.

Amelia broke the silence first. "This place is incredible! I wonder what's hidden in all of these old books."

Finn smirked slightly. "A detective's dream, right? I would have loved something like this as a kid. The most I had was a small shelf with a few books from the library or church group. It's like it's grown overnight," Finn said, half-jokingly. "Feels much bigger now than when I found it."

Amelia took a moment to walk alongside one of the shelves, her fingers lightly brushing against the book spines. She picked out a weathered-looking tome, opening it to reveal its brittle pages. "This is incredible, Finn. Think of the history here. The stories these books could tell."

Finn nodded, remembering why they were here. "Yeah, and hopefully, they can tell us a story about our killer or at least about this island's folklore." He motioned towards a section filled with older, bound books. "I figured we might start with the local history or legends."

Amelia looked thoughtful for a moment, then nodded in agreement. "Makes sense. Split up?"

He smirked, "Divide and conquer?"

She gave a small smile, "Exactly."

As Finn delved into the books, he couldn't help but feel the unspoken history of the library around him. There was an immense sense of history, of countless hours spent in thought and reflection. Every so often, he would glance up to see Amelia engrossed in another volume, her red hair catching the setting sun's rays, making it glow. It was moments like this that he found himself getting lost in thought, wondering about the complexities of their relationship.

Shaking himself from his reverie, Finn focused on the task at hand. He knew they were on borrowed time, and every clue they could glean from this room could be pivotal. Somewhere within these walls, the past might hold the key to their present.

As the dimming October sun cast long shadows across the library's interior, Finn couldn't help but be drawn to the ancient texts that lay on the wooden tables and cluttered the ornate shelves. Picking up an old cookbook that was titled "Old Recipes of the Islands", he browsed through it, his brow furrowing in mock disgust.

"Hey, Winters," he began with a teasing glint in his eye, "looks like I've found a recipe for haggis from the 1700s. Ever had the pleasure?"

Amelia looked up, her face animated with genuine enthusiasm. "I love haggis! My aunt used to cook it for me all the time when I spent time in Scotland."

Finn continued reading aloud, his face contorting in mock horror. "Cooked in a sheep's stomach? You're all nuts."

Amelia, never one to back down from a challenge, retorted with a wicked smile, "The food of Scotland is hardy, made for a hardy people. Not everyone can stomach it. Especially if you're used to the easy life in Sunny Florida."

Feigning offense, Finn shot back, "Are you challenging me to a haggis eating competition? Because I will destroy you if that's the case. I'll eat so much haggis, they'll have to make me king of Scotland. Maybe Britain, who knows, it could go further than that, we'll just have to see."

Amelia's laugh echoed throughout the library, a joyful sound amid the stillness of the room. "You? A king? I'm not sure there'd be a crown big enough for that head of yours."

As the two continued their playful banter, Finn's eye landed on another book, this one appearing much more relevant to their current situation. "Traditions and Tales from Huldra Island," he read aloud, curiosity evident in his voice. "Now this... this could be interesting."

The library was filled with the soft rustling of pages turning and the hushed voices of Amelia and Finn. The dimming sunlight painted the room in hues of gold and amber. As Finn thumbed through the book, a particular chapter heading made him pause.

"The Wraith of Huldra House," he murmured, eyes narrowing.

Amelia, having overheard, tilted her head in thought. "Isn't it supposed to be the Wraith of Huldra Island? That's the story we've been told so far."

Finn, engrossed in the text, shook his head. "Not according to this old legend," he began, voice taking on the cadence of a storyteller. "It says here that the hidden folk of the island owed a debt to the founders of Huldra House and their descendants. An ancestor of the Ferguson line apparently stumbled upon an entrance to the hidden folk's realm but vowed to keep it a secret, building the house itself over that entrance. To repay this act of trust, the hidden folk pledged that if Huldra House was ever desecrated, they would unleash their most fearsome wraith to exact revenge upon the transgressors, to protect their human allies and their secret."

He glanced up from the pages, eyes meeting Amelia's. "Seems like a different spin on the familiar tale, doesn't it?"

Amelia bit her lower lip in contemplation. "What if you're onto something? What if our killer believes in this variation of the legend? Maybe they see themselves as this wraith, punishing those who've wronged Huldra House in some way."

With the ambient lighting in the library turning into dusky shades, Finn's attention was still completely absorbed by the book. "Listen to this," he began, his voice a mix of intrigue and excitement, "As a part of the accord struck between the hidden folk and the Ferguson lineage, certain individuals from the island were designated 'watchers'. To facilitate this, five homes were erected on the Siren Ridge. These watchers had the responsibility to surveil Huldra House, especially during the periods when its lord or lady was not present."

Amelia, her curiosity piqued, rose from her chair and made her way to the massive windows of the library. Drawing back the heavy drapes, her eyes swept across the landscape, stopping at a distinct feature. "Finn," she exclaimed, her voice carrying a note of astonishment, "I can see a line of houses in the distance, right on that hillside. They look a little worn down by time, but they're there."

Finn joined her, taking in the sight. They stood side by side, both sets of

eyes focused on the distant houses. "Those must be the watcher's residences," he said, the revelation spinning in his mind.

He looked at Amelia, his gaze intense. "I know how outlandish it might sound," he began, his voice measured, "but is it possible that someone, or some family living there, took this legend seriously? That they considered it their solemn duty to safeguard the house and took it upon themselves to avenge any perceived harm done to it?"

Amelia rubbed her temples, as if trying to process the new theory. "At this point," she mused, "we don't really have any concrete leads explaining why both our victims were targeted. This legend, as far-fetched as it sounds, could be our only tangible lead. A shot in the dark is still a shot."

Finn nodded in agreement. "Then it's settled. We should pay a visit to those houses before night comes, it looks like there's a storm coming again. We'll need to be quick. Let's see if this legend has any bearing on our case."

Amelia gave him a resolute nod, her determination evident. With their path decided, the two detectives made their way out of the library, drawn to Siren Ridge and the mysteries it might hold.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Finn walked with purpose as the skies continued their gray dominance outside. The clouds above were beginning to move outside Huldra House, and Finn could feel in his bones that another gale was about to blow.

The expansive corridors of the old mansion led Finn and Amelia to the enormous kitchen. The vast array of copper pots hanging from the ceiling, a testament to the house's opulence, reflected the little ambient light seeping in from the windows. As they entered, they found the place devoid of human presence, the soft flicker of the evening candlelight the only movement.

"Seems Frederick's taken his leave before night," Finn remarked, noticing the absence of the butler. A handwritten note was left on the central island, confirming he'd gone home for the evening. Finn considered their options, "Should we give Kirsty a ring? She could probably drive us over to those watchers houses on the ridge."

Amelia raised a quizzical eyebrow. "After her omission about McGregor? You sure about that?"

Finn sighed, conceding the point. The more he thought about it, the more he realized it could complicate things by asking her for assistance. Even though he still believed that she made a bad decision while stuck between a rock and a hard place. "You're right. I'm still... unsettled about her keeping that from us. I suppose we should keep her out of things for now."

Silence descended for a few moments as Finn weighed their options. Finn finally broke the quiet again, "It's a bit of a hike to those houses, probably over a mile, and daylight's slipping away fast, I don't mind doing it alone. You could stay here, and if anything goes wrong, I'll..."

"No," Amelia said gravely. "If there was another murder tonight without us doing anything, we wouldn't forgive ourselves. I am quite capable of hiking in this weather and terrain, Finn. It is going to be dark soon, though..."

Amelia, always the resourceful one, started rummaging through some cupboards. Her search was rewarded when she found a utility cupboard that contained, among other things, a couple of rugged flashlights. She handed one to Finn, her eyes gleaming with determination. "These should help if it gets dark before we reach the ridge."

Finn chuckled, activating his flashlight and placing it under his chin. "Are you ready for a night filled with tiny hidden folk and encounters of the

ghostly kind, Winters? Mwuhahaha," he intoned in the exaggerated manner of a vintage horror movie villain.

Amelia laughed, a sound that was both amused and sarcastic. "Your face is scary enough without the added effects, Finn."

He smirked, "Touché, Winters. Touché."

With their banter momentarily settled and their flashlights at the ready, the two detectives set out, leaving behind the confines of Huldra House and venturing into the gray evening. As soon as they stepped out of the confines of the building, Finn felt a strong gust of wind and wondered how long they would have until the weather became dangerous again.

He'd never been anywhere so changeable, so quickly, and that unpredictability made him feel more off-kilter than he already was.

Under the waning light of the day, the moorland appeared even more haunting than before. Tall grasses rustled, whispering as they swayed, and the island's eerie silhouette played tricks on the eyes. The two detectives found themselves on a narrower path that veered off the main road leading to Huldra House. Above, the clouds growled menacingly.

Finn pointed ahead, "That pathway should lead us straight to the ridge. Looks like it winds its way up. I just hope we make it there and back before this storm comes."

They continued along the path, their flashlights cutting through the gathering shadows. The enveloping twilight and the soft rustling of grass caused Finn to glance over his shoulder more than once, he half expected to see the hooded figure of the wraith floating through the grass towards him.

As they walked, Amelia's voice broke the stillness, "Do you think we'll ever encounter any of those strange lights you spoke about? I'd love to see them up close."

Finn looked around, realization dawning on him. "You know, you're right. I think this is actually the moor where I saw one of them. Right around here from Huldra House."

Amelia pondered this for a moment. "Since you mentioned it and enjoyed mocking me for it, I'm wondering... Have you ever seen anything... unexplainable, yourself, Winters?"

She paused, seeming to search deep within herself for an answer as they continued along the trail. "There was once. After my fiancé passed, I was at home one night. I just felt... Terrible, like I couldn't go on living like that. I missed him. And then, in the midst of my tears, there was this knock." She

inhaled sharply for a moment. "A photo frame in the other room had fallen. It was our picture. And when I picked it up, just for a split second, and I know this sounds crazy, I turned I thought I saw him in his armchair, just watching me. Then I blinked, and it was gone. He was gone... Again."

Finn looked at her with gentle eyes, "Let's say what you saw was real?"

"I don't think it was."

"But let's say it was, for argument's sake," Finn continued. "Did that make you feel any better?"

A reflective Amelia replied, "In a way, yes. But it was also a bit unsettling, almost frightening, though I know he'd never want to scare me. I always attributed what I saw to my grief, stress. You know, playing tricks on the mind."

The path beneath their feet seemed to lengthen with their conversation. Finn's voice took on a lower tone, "You know, I've often wondered. What if it's not the stress that causes us to see these things? What if it's the stress that allows us to see? Like, it breaks down some barrier, allowing us to glimpse things usually out of our sight."

Amelia looked at him thoughtfully. "That's a different way to see it. But then, isn't that what we do every day? Trying to see the unseen, hear the unheard."

Finn smiled, "Exactly. But maybe you don't go looking for it. Maybe, when you least expect it, it'll come to you."

The path continued to wind its way upwards as Finn cast the beam of his flashlight towards a rustling bush.

"I think you're safe," Amelia said. "Unless you have a fear of rabbits?"

One scurried out from the cover of the leaves and then darted back in.

"Never underestimate a vicious rodent," Finn said.

Night had now well and truly fallen, wrapping Huldra Island in a thick cloak of darkness. The path before them was nearly invisible but for the small beams of light emanating from their flashlights. Amelia and Finn trudged upwards, their footsteps the only sound breaking the night's stillness.

The landscape transformed gradually, and the eerie vastness of the moors gave way to a rising hill. As they ascended, five ominous shapes began to take form. The houses that stood there were formidable, reminiscent of a time long past.

As they approached, Finn's flashlight beam played upon the walls of the nearest house. The inky black rock gleamed dully back at him. "Look at this,"

he murmured, running his fingers over the smooth surface, "It's the same as Huldra House. This black stone... it's everywhere."

Amelia, scanning the houses, nodded in agreement. "The style is similar, too. It's as if they were all carved from the same rock at the same time. If the legends are to be believed, maybe these houses and the mansion came as a package because of some misplaced superstition."

The duo walked closer, inspecting each house. To Finn's surprise, four out of the five houses appeared uninhabited. Chains and locks adorned their entrances, while cobwebs and accumulated dust gave testament to their disuse.

"It's odd," Finn murmured, "Why would only one be occupied?"

Amelia replied, "It could be any number of reasons – perhaps the others moved, or maybe..." she hesitated, "maybe they no longer had anyone to pass their homes onto, to keep the tradition of watching Huldra House alive."

However, in the oppressive darkness, the fifth house stood apart. A faint light glimmered from one of its windows, like a beacon in the overwhelming blackness. Without saying a word, they both made their way toward it, stepping warily on an overgrown stone path.

Amelia motioned for Finn to follow her lead and raised a hand, knocking softly. They waited as the winds gather up around them, the only other sounds their synchronized breathing and the distant crashing of waves against unseen shores.

Moments later, the door creaked open to reveal an elderly woman. Time had etched lines deep into her face, but her eyes were sharp and alert. Wrapped in a shawl, she peered out at them, her gaze first settling on Amelia and then drifting to Finn.

Before any words could be exchanged, Finn tried his most charming smile. It didn't work.

"Who are you?" the old lady asked with frustration clear on her face.

Amelia, in a reassuring tone, introduced herself, flashing her badge. "Inspector Amelia Winters," she said, nodding toward Finn, "and this is consulting detective Finn Wright. Can I ask your name?"

"Agnes Logan," she said, still grasping onto the inside of the door, as if ready to shut it at any moment, should the conversation become unpalatable.

Agnes squinted at the ID before her gaze wandered back up to study Amelia's face. The old woman's face reflected a myriad of emotions - from confusion, recognition, to a growing unease, and then to apparent fear.

Amelia began, "We're on the island because—"

"To investigate the deaths? Of Lord Carmichael and the fisherman?" Agnes interjected, a tremor in her voice.

Finn nodded, "Yes, exactly. We've come to understand the significance of these houses. We recently uncovered a local legend about how these houses were built as homes for five people who could watch and look over Huldra House. We want to know more about the role of 'The Watchers', as it could help with a line of inquiry. We were wondering if you knew of anyone who may have taken those stories too seriously, or anyone who might bear ill will towards those associated with Huldra House."

Before he could say more, Agnes's face crumpled, tears pooling in her eyes, reflecting the dim light from her home. Finn had the feeling that the woman had been waiting for someone to call, and finally, when they did, she was ready to release all of her built-up worry.

Amelia stepped forward, her usual empathetic approach comforting the elderly. Finn, too, felt moved, his previous suspicions now turning into concern. The old lady very much reminded him of his grandma.

Through choked sobs, Agnes uttered, "I knew it. I had this sinking feeling in my heart. I knew that one day..." She trailed off.

Amelia gently took Agnes's hand, "Knew what, Mrs. Logan?"

Agnes wiped her tears with the back of her other hand. "It's my son, Alistair. He's always been obsessed with our family's past, the traditions of The Watchers. But lately... he's been different."

"Different how?" Finn inquired, his detective instincts kicking in.

Agnes swallowed hard, "For generations, our family has lived on this hill, keeping the traditions alive. But Alistair... ever since those talks about some resort being built here started circulating, he's become obsessed. He'd roam the moors at night, muttering about dark times and threats to Huldra House. He'd say he knew something sinister was approaching. I tried to tell him to calm down, but he couldn't."

Finn's brow furrowed. "Did he ever mention Lord Carmichael or the fisherman?"

Agnes shook her head, fresh tears trickling down, "No, but the weight of the responsibility he carried, the restless nights, it all changed him. I hated myself for thinking it, but when the news of the deaths reached me, a horrid thought crossed my mind. What if... What if my son had something to do with it?"

Amelia continued to hold the elderly woman's hand affectionately. "We'll get to the bottom of this, Mrs. Logan. If Alistair is involved, we'll find out. But we'll also ensure he gets the help he needs."

Agnes nodded, but the fear was still in her eyes. Finn was certain it was the fear of losing her son.

"Where is Alistair now?" Finn questioned, glancing around the surroundings.

Agnes peered outside into the darkening twilight, a hint of hesitation in her voice. "He's where he always is these nights... at the Green Loch."

Amelia squinted into the distance, trying to piece the vague landmarks. "Green Loch?"

Agnes pointed with a trembling finger, her face aging a bit more with the weight of her worries. "Just there, a little way from here. If you look past the tall grass, you'll see it. It's hidden like a gem in the heather. A circle of tall grass hides it, and the water is filled with thick green algae, so it blends into the scenery. You probably wouldn't notice it if you didn't know to look. But ye can see Huldra House from there, and when I was a wee lassie, I was told that my grandfather and the ones before him used the Green Loch to stay in touch with the Huldrufolk. I don't know if it's true, but my son goes out there most nights now, he has done since Lord Carmichael came back to the island. It's there, can ye see it?"

Following her pointed finger, Finn's eyes barely spotted a large green feature that must have been the water, just visible in the dimming light. There was something else too, a faint light bobbing gently, perhaps from a boat in the middle of it. It looked eerily familiar to him.

"Is that him?" Finn asked, pointing towards the light. It reminded him of the strange illumination he'd seen earlier on the moors on the other nights. He wondered if Alistair Logan had been the source of it all along, wandering the island looking for another victim.

Agnes nodded, her gaze affixed on the distant light. "Yes, that's him. He's always there, with that lantern of his. Every time I see it, I pray, hoping he's not doing something he'll regret."

Amelia touched Agnes's arm gently, offering a measure of comfort. "Go inside, Mrs. Logan. A storm is coming. We'll speak with Alistair. We'll ensure he's safe and that everything is alright."

"Thank you," Agnes whispered, her voice breaking as she retreated into her home, closing the door softly behind her.

Once alone, Finn turned to Amelia, his brow knitted in thought. "That light on the loch, it looks exactly like the one I saw on the moors."

Amelia's eyes widened slightly. "Do you think Alistair could have been out there all those times? Even during storms?"

"Perhaps," Finn mused, "if he's as obsessed as his mother says, he might have been patrolling the moors, looking for potential threats to the island's traditions. If he came across someone out there, in the dark..."

Amelia completed the thought, "He might have seen them as a threat and attacked. Superstition can sometimes twist the mind into terrible decisions."

Finn adjusted his flashlight, its beam cutting through the descending darkness. "There's only one way to find out. We need to talk to him."

Amelia nodded in agreement as they made their way into uncharted territory towards the dangers of the green loch.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Finn pulled up the collar of his coat, the weather drawing in like a noose.

The two began their descent towards the Green Loch, the grass shifting beneath their feet, their flashlights casting shadows that danced in rhythm with the encroaching night. The light on the loch, Alistair's lantern, beckoned them closer, its glow a dreadful beacon of death.

The impending storm painted the sky with dark streaks of gray, and the previously gentle wind began to roar with fervor. Clouds clustered ominously above, like a troupe of wraiths gathering for a dark assembly. With every step, Finn felt the thickening tension in the air. It had become apparent to him that in the pit of his stomach, the island environment was shaping his thoughts, making him feel more despondent at times. He was beginning to pine for the peace and tranquility of the cottage back in Great Amwell, but he knew once back there, he would have to face Demi, and no doubt an eventual call from America to tell him that the court case now had a date.

"Perfect," Finn muttered, pulling the collar of his coat higher against the wind until it could stretch no more. "We need to find Alistair before this storm gets any worse. I don't like this one bit, Winters."

As they proceeded, their path forked in two directions, encircled by a tall, gnarled tree whose branches seemed to stretch out like skeletal fingers. Amelia hesitated, her gaze darting between the two diverging trails, she turned and looked at Finn with a puzzled expression.

"Which way?" Finn inquired, wiping a stray raindrop from his forehead.

Amelia sighed, her voice barely audible over the strengthening gales. "I don't know. But I'm worried, Finn. If we make the wrong choice and come off the path, we could get lost in the middle of a storm. Hypothermia kicks in faster than most realize."

Just as despair threatened to overtake them, Finn noticed a faint gleam piercing through the veil of tall grass to their left. "There," he pointed. "A light!"

Trusting his instincts, Finn moved in the direction of the light, Amelia close on his heels. Pushing through the dense grass, they felt the sharp blades sting their faces and hands. Suddenly, as if an unseen hand had drawn back a curtain, the scene before them changed dramatically.

The towering grass gave way, revealing the dark expanse of the Green

Loch. In stark contrast to its serene name, the water now churned, whipped into a frenzy by the storm's advance. It was like a thick soup of green reeds and algae, writhing together almost as if it were one thing, an amorphous creature, ancient and with a mind far different from that of humanity.

Dead center on the troubled waters was a lone boat. A lantern, swaying violently, was affixed to its prow, its flame dancing madly in the wind. Inside, a hooded figure fought against the onslaught of nature, trying desperately to control the boat.

With each passing moment, the wind blew harder and harder, and before long it was difficult for Finn to hear anything but the roar of nature around him.

"Oh God," Amelia gasped, loudly. "He's not going to make it!"

She was right, and Finn knew it. Even in the dim light and from this distance, they could make out the frantic motions of the hooded figure. The storm was pushing him further into the heart of the loch, and with every passing second, the boat seemed to teeter on the brink of capsizing, bending one way and then another, threatening to capsize and drown its lonely passenger.

"We need to help him!" Finn shouted, looking around for a way to reach the struggling boat. The storm was against them, but there was no turning back now. He wasn't about to watch a man die helplessly, even if that man had killed two people.

The shore of the Green Loch was uneven, jagged with stones and wet grass that made each step a slippery challenge. Yet Finn and Amelia navigated it with urgency, the piercing beams of their flashlights slicing through the gloomy night as they tried to get Alistair's attention and urge him to row for his life towards them.

"Over here!" Amelia shouted, her voice swallowed by the roaring storm. The wind howled, whipping her hair around her face and tugging at her coat as if trying to pull her into the churning waters.

Finn, running slightly ahead, spotted an old mooring not too far from where they were. It was rusted, looking long-abandoned, but what caught his attention was the silhouette of an old rowing boat tethered there, half-submerged in the water, its edges battered and worn from years of neglect.

"There!" he yelled, pointing it out to Amelia. He rushed towards it, feeling the weight of each second that passed.

Reaching the boat, Finn tried to gauge its condition. It had undoubtedly

seen better days, and he couldn't be sure it would hold up against the stormy onslaught. But as Amelia climbed into it with determination, he felt conflicted.

"Finn, we have to do something!" Amelia shouted over the cacophony of rain and wind.

He looked out at the vast expanse of the loch. The situation had worsened. Alistair's boat had capsized, its lantern light snuffed out by the merciless waves. The hooded figure, undoubtedly Alistair himself, as his mother had pointed out, clung desperately to the overturned boat, his grip frantic and slipping amid the lashing rain and churning waters.

A feeling of dread consumed Finn. He knew he was about to watch a man die a horrible death. "Amelia," he yelled, grabbing her arm as she grabbed a large set of old oars and prepared to row out, "He won't last long out there! And you'll die trying!"

She met his gaze, her eyes reflecting a mixture of fear and resolution. "We can't just stand here. We have to try."

The storm raged on, indifferent to three tiny dots in and around the green loch, fighting for survival.

Amelia's hand instinctively tightened on the oar, ready to thrust the boat forward into the wild abyss. But Finn's hand closed gently around her arm, halting her.

"No," he said, his voice firm into her ear. "Someone needs to stay here on the shore, ready to get help if things take a turn for the worst."

Amelia met his gaze, frustration evident in her eyes. "So, you want me to just stand here while you..."

But Finn interrupted, "I've rowed before, Amelia. During some tough conditions, too. It should be me."

She hesitated, her teeth clenching, clearly struggling with the decision. The world shook around them in a spiral of thunderous wind and violence. With a resigned sigh, Amelia stepped back, letting Finn take the lead. "Just... be careful!"

Nodding, Finn positioned himself in the boat, his fingers wrapping around the oars. Pushing off the mooring, he was immediately thrust into the tempest, the boat bobbing violently as the waves tried to assert their dominance.

With each stroke, Finn's muscular arms tensed and relaxed in a rhythm that fought against the angry water. The wind challenged him, screaming in

his ears, and the rain, no longer a mere drizzle, poured down in torrents, drenching him to the bone and pooling in the boat around his feet. Yet, every drop that hit his face only fueled his resolve.

An old ache began to throb in his shoulder, a haunting reminder of the gunshot wound from their previous case months ago, an injury that had never fully healed. Every twist and turn of the oar intensified the pain, but Finn clenched his jaw and soldiered on. Giving up wasn't an option.

As he rowed, his eyes remained locked onto Alistair's silhouette, barely visible amid the storm's fury. The man's desperate hold on his capsized boat was a beacon for Finn, guiding him through the raging waters of the Green Loch. He could not give in when a life was at stake, even if his too was now in jeopardy.

The storm's roar intensified, the loch's waters swooshing around in a monstrous death roll. The waves were jagged peaks and valleys, mercilessly testing Finn's balance and mettle. It felt as though the Green Loch had awoken, its waters determined to take another unwelcome island guest to their end.

A flash of lightning split the sky, followed by the earth-shaking growl of thunder. Finn's heart raced as the blinding white light illuminated the mooring in the distance behind him. Time seemed to stand still, the world slowing down just long enough for Finn to watch in abject horror over his shoulder as a mammoth tree teetered, then crashed down onto the mooring like a hammer on ice, taking with it the slender silhouette of Amelia, his partner, his friend.

"Amelia!" he cried, his voice lost in the storm, a single drop in a vast sea of noise.

Desperation surged through him, a tidal wave threatening to capsize his resolve. He was torn. Alistair was mere feet away, his hands slipping, his eyes wide with fear. But Amelia, the woman who had been by his side through thick and thin, was now facing her own death struggle. If only he could see where she was, but the night would not give up that secret.

A fleeting image of Amelia's caring smile flashed in Finn's mind. He knew, without a shadow of a doubt, what she would want him to do. She'd want him to triage, to save the life that was there for the saving, over a dim hope.

With renewed purpose, Finn roared over the cacophony of the storm as he touched the capsized boat, "Alistair! Take my hand! Now!"

But the man was paralyzed with fear, his eyes darting everywhere but at Finn. The weight of the situation, the storm, the fear of death, all seemed too much for him to bear. He was curling up, slipping inch by inch in a fetal position.

For a heart-stopping moment, Finn thought all was lost. But turning his gaze once again to the spot where Amelia had vanished and then back again, desperation took over. "Listen to me, Alistair! If you don't come with me, you'll die out here!" he yelled, putting every ounce of his authority and command into his words.

It worked. As if a spell had been broken, Alistair's eyes found Finn's. He lurched forward, reaching out. Finn, using every ounce of his strength, grasped Alistair's trembling hand. With a Herculean effort, he pulled the drenched man into the boat as a wave clattered them almost together.

The boat rocked dangerously under Alistair's weight, but Finn's quick reflexes steadied it. Gasping for breath, Alistair lay sprawled across the boat's floor, his chest heaving.

"Stay there! And don't try anything!" Finn screamed. His eyes darted back to the mooring, to the vast, raging expanse of water where Amelia had vanished. The storm was relentless, but Finn's fear of loss was unwavering. He had saved Alistair, but now, he had another life to save, one far more important to him.

Finn's powerful strokes propelled the boat towards the mooring, each pull bolstered by his sheer force of will. But the storm was equally resolute, a maddened creature that seemed to thrive on thwarting his every move. The wind, shifting and unpredictable, spiraled and pushed against him with a force that would have overwhelmed a lesser man.

Hitting the mooring with a jolt, Finn leaped onto the land, not waiting to secure the boat. "Amelia!" he called, the word almost torn from his mouth by the ferocity of the gale. Again and again, he shouted her name, fear gripping his heart with icy fingers.

Then, he spotted a clue that confirmed his worst fear.

That flickering beacon of hope – the light from Amelia's flashlight – washed ashore, caught in a web of reeds and murky grass. The storm's chaos threatened to engulf his every thought. Fear painted images in his mind of Amelia struggling, her fingers reaching out just below the dark surface of the loch. Green water sludge filled her lungs.

Driven by adrenaline and desperation, Finn plunged into the water, each

step heavier than the last as the green algae clung to him like chains. He sunk down underneath and opened his eyes, but all he could see was a suffocating darkness. He reached up and breathed at the surface, then down again he plunged, flailing with his arms, hoping to somehow grab hold of Amelia and pulling her upward.

It was hopeless. He surfaced again and waded further into the water, reaching up to his neck.

Just when despair seemed about to drown him, he heard it—a faint shout over the howling wind.

From the towering reeds on the shoreline, a shadowy figure emerged. "Finn!" Amelia's voice cut through the storm, a gift in the tumultuous night. As they locked eyes, relief and fear merged, and Finn made his way towards the water's edge. But his arms were heavy, and the exertion had now drained him of all his strength.

Amelia rushed into the water, and beneath a shroud-like sky on an island haunted by death, life persevered: Amelia grabbed hold of Finn's failing body and pulled him to the water's edge and onto land.

Fin reached up, and they embraced, wrapped in a blanket of rain and icy winds.

Their wet clothes clung together as Finn muttered into Amelia's hair, "Thank God, Amelia. I thought...I thought I'd lost you."

The words seemed to be snatched away by the wind, Amelia acting as though she hadn't heard what was said, but the intensity of the moment communicated all that needed to be spoken. They broke their embrace, and Amelia helped Finn to his feet as he caught his breath. After a moment, they both turned to the boat where Alistair lay by the broken mooring and fallen tree, a picture of pure terror.

With the storm still in full rage, Amelia's voice was firm and full of authority. "We've got to get out of this!" she yelled, looking around as if searching for an escape route.

Finn nodded and moved slowly and wearily to the boat, pulling Alistair to his feet. The man's eyes darted around, wild with paranoia. "Where are you taking me?" he choked out, his voice barely audible over the deafening roar of the storm.

Gripping Alistair's arm tightly, Finn leaned in, "To the place you're trying to protect." He looked at Amelia and then pointed to the closest safe haven – the eerie shadow of Huldra House, glaring at them from the distant cliffs.

CHAPTER TWENTY ONE

Finn felt the cold, wet oak against his hands. The ornate doors of Huldra House loomed large as he and Amelia pushed through, their clothes dripping water, leaving dark stains on the ancient stone floor. The once-pristine grandeur of the entrance hall now bore witness to the chaos outside and the charged atmosphere within.

Finn dragged Alistair Logan with him. Finn felt exhausted, his muscles aching. But he had to keep his prisoner under control. There was no telling how dangerous he might be.

Alistair, gasping for breath, suddenly became acutely aware of the confines of the mansion. His eyes darted around in panic, sensing a trap. "Let go of me!" he shouted, voice echoing in the vast expanse of the hall. In a burst of adrenaline-driven desperation, he tried to make a break for it, but Finn was too quick. With a swift movement, he tripped Alistair, then offered him a hand to get back up.

Amelia, hair stuck to her face and her usual composed demeanor now giving way to a steely edge, stepped closer to Alistair, making sure he met her gaze. "Running is not going to help your case, Alistair," she said, her voice cold and sharp. "Now is the time for honesty. Tell us about being a 'Watcher.'"

Alistair's eyes widened at the mention of the term. He took a moment to catch his breath, his chest heaving. "How do you...?" he stammered, realization dawning on his face. "I don't have to explain myself to you."

Finn's already frayed patience snapped, he was tired of it all. With a speed that belied his exhausted state, he lunged at Alistair, grabbing him by the collar and pushing him hard against the wall. The impact sent a tremor through Alistair and the wall, and his yelp resonated through the house.

"This isn't a game, Alistair!" Finn growled, face inches from the other man's. "I pulled you from that damned loch. We both nearly lost our lives out there because of you. This ends tonight."

Amelia, though apparently startled by Finn's sudden aggression, didn't intervene. Finn's anger came from a place of desperation, and sometimes, it was that raw emotion that got answers.

"I want to hear everything," Finn hissed, eyes locked onto Alistair's. "Every damn thing you know about this island, the Watchers, and the

deaths."

For what felt like an eternity to Finn, Alistair stared back, defiance and fear waging a battle in his eyes. But he remained silent, leaving the room filled with the echoes of their confrontation.

Finn's temper flared, he could feel it bubbling up inside of himself like a volcano, and every ounce of restraint he possessed seemed to vanish in that moment. His fist tightened, muscles tensed, arm drawing back. He seemed poised to strike Alistair, but before he could act, Amelia's voice pierced the tension. "Finn, no!" she cried, a note of genuine panic in her tone.

Before anyone could fully register the gravity of the situation, a resounding voice thundered through the room, halting all in their tracks. "What is the meaning of this?!" The authoritative tone belonged to none other than Lady Ferguson. Clad in a flowing dark dress, she descended the staircase, her presence casting an undeniable shadow over the room.

Taking in the scene, Lady Ferguson's gaze was cold and assessing, her dark eyes fixing on Finn. "I would hope that you had more restraint, Special Agent Wright."

Alistair, still pinned to the wall by Finn, managed a strained nod of acknowledgment. "Lady Ferguson."

Withdrawing slightly but not releasing his grip on Alistair, Finn asked sharply, "Is this one of your 'watchers'?"

Lady Ferguson's eyes shifted to Alistair, then back to Finn. "You seem to have done your detective work, Mr Wright. Alistair is the last watcher of the island, sworn to protect Huldra House and all who reside within," she confirmed, her tone neutral.

"He might also be a murderer," Finn retorted, his voice hard.

Alistair's eyes widened in genuine shock. "Murderer?!"

Lady Ferguson exhaled deeply, her posture never wavering. "This conversation should be had in more civilized surroundings. This is neither the time nor the place for accusations."

With a grace that seemed out of place amid the chaos, Lady Ferguson led the group down a corridor, into a cozy sitting room. A roaring fire crackled in the hearth, throwing its warm golden light across plush sofas and ornate wooden furniture. The room, while richly appointed, had a homely feel, which blunted somewhat the confrontation that had just occurred.

A few moments later, Lady Ferguson returned with towels draped over her arm and a tray bearing cups of steaming hot chocolate. Each person took a

towel, dabbing at their drenched clothes and hair.

"Thank you, Lady Ferguson," Amelia murmured, wrapping her fingers around the cup, allowing the warmth to seep into her.

Finn took a moment to sip the hot chocolate, surprised not just by its rich flavor but by the gesture itself. It reminded him of the drink his old Aunt Maggie used to give him back home when he was a kid in the swamps. He glanced over at Lady Ferguson, finding her observing him. Once again, he found himself questioning the icy exterior she presented to the world. Beneath it, hints of compassion and humanity seemed to stir.

Amelia broke the silence, "Now, Lady Ferguson, please help us understand what's really happening on this island."

With the warmth of the fire and the comfort of the hot chocolate, the room seemed miles away from the tumultuous storm outside. However, the tension in the room was palpable as Finn and Amelia began their questioning.

"Lord Carmichael and Ivar Ward," Finn began, leaning forward, his eyes unerringly fixed on Alistair. "Did you have anything to do with their deaths?"

Alistair took a deep breath, his face betraying a mix of frustration and sadness. "I had nothing to do with their deaths. Nothing at all. I'm a guardian of things, not a killer."

Amelia chimed in, "Your own mother said you were out of control with your dedication to watching Huldra House. She feared that you had a hand in the tragedies, that your warning of impending doom was somehow tied to the deaths. Like you were killing people who had somehow wronged Huldra House."

Alistair's eyes darkened, "My mother worries too much. She never understood our family's commitment, our duty. She saw it as a quaint tradition, nothing more. When Dad died, I took on the mantle of the last watcher."

Amelia pressed, "She mentioned you had expressed strong concerns about Lord Carmichael's resort proposal."

Alistair nodded, taking a moment before replying. "Not hatred towards Carmichael himself! The island has a delicate balance. And Lord Carmichael's plans, the resort... it would disrupt everything. If that resort was built, forces beyond our understanding, whether you believe in them or not, would unleash their wrath on those who dared disturb the serenity of this place."

Finn raised an eyebrow, "You're saying you predicted these deaths

because these damned hidden folk everyone talks about would murder over some golf courses and a clubhouse hotel?"

"No," Alistair shook his head, "Don't joke about what you don't understand. I didn't predict the murders. I feared their possibility. I knew that Lady Ferguson, despite her lineage, was in favor of the resort. She was putting herself in danger. That's why I've been out there every night, watching."

Lady Ferguson, until now silent, interrupted, "The wraith, I presume? But isn't it supposed to protect the Ferguson line?"

Alistair's gaze turned distant, his voice carrying a weight of responsibility and regret. "That's the misconception, your ladyship, at least as my father told it, and he learned the truth from his father. The wraith doesn't protect the Ferguson line, it protects the secret beneath Huldra House. The entrance to the hidden world."

Finn's eyes narrowed, "The hidden folk. You're saying they would view Lady Ferguson's support of the resort as a betrayal? That she would be a target?"

Alistair's nod was heavy, "Exactly. The digging, the changes to the landscape... it would be seen as a grave betrayal of the promise her family made generations ago. The hidden folk and their secrets have been protected for centuries, and the wraith ensures that remains the case."

The room fell silent, the weight of Alistair's words hanging in the air. The fire crackled, and outside, the storm continued to rage, but inside, an ethereal storm of suspicion and accusations was brewing.

A cry echoed through the grand halls of Huldra House from somewhere distant but above, its eeriness amplified by the storm outside. Lady Ferguson stood abruptly, her face etched with concern. "Excuse me," she said, her voice quivering. "It's my son, Nathaniel. The storms, they torment him. I must attend to him."

As the grand door closed behind Lady Ferguson, Finn turned his attention back to Alistair. The atmosphere, already tense, now felt even more charged with the absence of the lady of the house.

"Tell me," Finn began, his tone softening slightly, "the nights Lord Carmichael and Ivar Ward died, did you see anything unusual?"

Alistair hesitated for a moment, then responded, "There were lights. I noticed them on at Huldra House, but not in the usual rooms. It was as if someone was roaming the halls. I had a feeling that someone other than Lady

Ferguson was present in the house. Someone who shouldn't be."

Amelia's phone suddenly buzzed to life, its sharp ringtone slicing through the room's tense atmosphere. She hastily retrieved it, glancing at the screen before answering. "Hello?"

Finn stood beside her and could hear the words.

"Inspector Winters, one of the officers on the mainland passed me your number, it's Bill from the Fair Folk Inn," a raspy voice said from the other end. "I'm afraid I've got some bad news. We've found a body."

We've failed again, Finn thought.

Amelia's face blanched, and she shared a troubled glance with Finn. Whatever tranquility remained in Huldra House seemed to have been shattered completely. Finn looked out of a window to the bleak pitch-black storm, feeling utterly dejected. Wherever the body was, they were going nowhere that night.

CHAPTER TWENTY TWO

The storm had raged all night, but the killer had slept soundly. As dawn broke, a deceptive calm settled over the island. The fury of the tempest was now replaced by a chilling silence, punctuated only by the distant cries of seabirds and the rhythmic lapping of waves against the rocky shore.

Perched on the cliffs beyond Old Miller's cottage, the killer observed the scene below. The vantage point offered a clear, unobstructed view of the windswept shoreline. Clad in a worn brown jacket, the killer's hat pulled low, their eyes were sharp and calculating, studying every minute detail below.

The wild night had unveiled his secret. The once hidden cove now bore the testimony of the killer's deeds—a lifeless body lay sprawled on the shore. The waters had been ruthless in their assault on the corpse, but the telltale signs of the struggle from the previous day remained evident.

Two figures had ventured down below the cliffs to this remote part of the island, watched by a crowd of fascinated and horrified islanders from above.

From their current position, the killer recognized them—a man and a woman, not locals, but two investigators, perhaps. They stood over the body, their faces etched with shock and frustration. The woman leaned down, her hand gingerly reaching out to touch the cold, wet skin of the deceased. The man, meanwhile, seemed to be scanning the area, perhaps searching for clues or signs of what had transpired.

A grim satisfaction swelled within the killer. The discovery was inevitable, but the killer had hoped for a little more time. Now, watching with glee, the killer was observing reactions, gauging the next steps of those who stumbled upon his dark secret. The thrill of the hunt, the satisfaction of a plan executed perfectly—it was intoxicating. But alongside the thrill was a rising tension, an awareness that the net was tightening. More deaths and more police officers would come if they hadn't been called upon already.

The killer knew that revenge had to be dealt out swiftly before that happened.

The memories of the kill flashed before him. The confrontation, the struggle, and then the final, fatal push that had sent the body plummeting down the cliff. The killer had been so sure that the stormy seas would carry away any evidence. But nature, it seemed, had other plans.

As the two figures below continued their somber examination of the scene,

one of them looked up and so the killer retreated slowly, ensuring that they remained unseen. The cliffs had been a refuge, a place from which the killer could watch and plan. But with the discovery of the body, they might also become a trap.

The killer needed to move, to think, to plan the next move. The game had changed, and the hunter might soon become the hunted. But for now, the shadows of the cliffs offered concealment, and the rising sun cast long, dark silhouettes that felt fitting for a funeral by the sea.

The crowds gathering on the cliff sides grew larger and louder with each passing minute. The commotion was palpable—a mixture of curiosity, sorrow, and increasing fear. It would have been safer to leave, to vanish into the thickets or the dense woods that bordered the cliffs. But the pull was too strong for the killer. The compulsion to see, to hear, to drink in the results of their own deadly actions was too overpowering.

Stepping closer to the edge, careful not to be seen, the killer weaved in and out of small clusters of people. The murmurs became more distinct. Words like "murder," "curse," and "plague" floated to his ears. And, as the killer had hoped, the name most frequently uttered with hushed suspicion was "Lady Ferguson."

"Ever since she's taken over Huldra House, things haven't been right," said one elderly woman, her voice thick with accusation.

"We should have known, with all her strange ways and that old mansion of hers. Bringing this death and horror upon us," a burly man with a thick beard concurred, shaking his head. "She should never have sided with Lord Carmichael. Now we'll all pay for it!"

Listening to these whispered speculations, a smile slowly crept over the killer's face, hidden beneath the shade of a thick hat. Lady Ferguson and her precious Huldra House had become the epicenter of blame, and this suited the killer just fine. Let them point fingers at her, let them ostracize her, and in their fear, they'd tear her and her legacy apart. It was almost too easy.

The air grew chillier, but it wasn't just the sea breeze; it was the frost of fear, spreading its tendrils amongst the townsfolk. People held one another close, eyes darting in fear. Old friends whispered, speculating on who or what could bring such terror to their peaceful isle. And every hushed conversation, every trembling word, every teary-eyed gaze brought the killer pure, unbridled delight.

For the killer wasn't just a taker of lives; the killer was a weaver of

nightmares. To know that they lived in terror, always looking over their shoulders, jumping at shadows, and suspecting one another—it was a satisfaction like no other. The taste of their fear was sweeter than the finest wine.

However, as the satisfaction swirled within, so did a burning desire—a vision of Huldra House, engulfed in flames, its great silhouette illuminating the night sky, with the shrieks and cries of its inhabitants trapped within its walls. To watch it burn, to see it reduced to ashes and rubble, with everyone inside—Lady Ferguson, her son, and those who worked there—all paying the price for their intrusions and betrayals. Their connection to the terrible wrongs that had been committed. Wrongs the killer could never face, never mind forget.

With that vivid, fiery image etched in his mind, he slipped away, leaving behind the anguished cries and murmurs of a terrified town. The work had been fruitful, but the killer's masterpiece was yet to be painted—a masterpiece where the guilty would be punished forever more, in pain and misery.

The last thought as the killer vanished into the shadows was a whispered promise, "Soon... very soon."

CHAPTER TWENTY THREE

The sharp scent of saltwater filled Finn's nostrils as he stood alongside Amelia on the rugged shoreline, observing the scene of another grisly death. The cold wind rustled their clothing, yet the chilling atmosphere had more to do with the body sprawled at their feet than the weather.

Finn couldn't quite believe what he was looking at.

The previous night, they had dragged Alistair Logan out of the green loch and to Huldra House. They still couldn't discount him as a suspect, but despite Finn wanting to lock him up and throw away the key, after their interviews it became clear they really had nothing on him. It galled Finn, but they had to let him go, for now.

Huldra's locals, a tight-knit community where everyone knew everyone, watched from a distance and from above. Their faces ranged from expressions of shock to despair, their whispered murmurs hinting at the fear that gripped them. Among them were islanders who had never witnessed such a scene, clutching each other for comfort. The deceased was clearly well loved. And Finn understood why.

Amelia, always the professional and one to keep her emotions in check, was visibly shaken. Her eyes, slightly glistening, met Finn's. "This should never have happened, he shouldn't be dead," she murmured, her voice carrying an unfamiliar edge of vulnerability.

The dead man was Frederick. The butler of Huldra House. The same man who had spoken with them several times, cooked breakfast for them, and shown nothing but faithfulness and concern to the Ferguson family.

Finn exhaled slowly, his gaze never leaving the lifeless body draped over the rocks below. "The storm last night... it should've washed him away," he observed. "It's nothing short of a miracle that he's here. Maybe it's a sign our luck is about to turn. We'll need to inform Lady Ferguson."

She turned to face him, her brow furrowed in a mixture of concern and loss. "Finn," she began hesitantly, "Do you ever feel... do you think we might be in over our heads with this?"

There was a long pause as Finn contemplated his response, still weary from the previous night. The weight of the responsibility bore heavily on him, but he wouldn't allow it to crush his resolve. "No," he said firmly. "But I do believe we need to take more proactive measures. We can't keep reacting

to each death. We need to get out in front of this."

Amelia nodded slowly, waiting for him to continue.

"We need more officers on this island," Finn asserted, his voice growing more authoritative. "And we need to advise the islanders. No one should wander alone, especially not at night. It's a drastic measure, but it might just save lives."

Amelia seemed to consider his words for a moment. The gravity of the situation was clear, and there was no room for ego or pride. "Yes," she conceded, "we need all hands on deck. And if that means shaking up the island's routine, so be it. We can't risk another murder."

Finn glanced around, taking in the apprehensive faces of the islanders above. He could feel their collective grief, fear, and the burgeoning seed of anger. They were all waiting for answers, for justice, for safety. And it was up to him and Amelia to deliver on that. They wanted their island back, but Finn wondered if a place could ever truly go back to how it was once it had been stained with blood.

He placed a reassuring hand on Amelia's shoulder. "We'll catch this scumbag," he said, trying to convince himself just as much as he was her. "One foot in front of the other, and he'll be in cuffs in no time".

Finn felt a buzz in his pocket. It was his phone. Pulling it out, he saw Rob's name flash across the screen.

"Rob," Finn greeted, trying to keep the unease from his voice.

"Finn," Rob replied, his tone indicating business. "How's it progressing over there? I was worried that there hadn't been an update."

"We've found another one, Rob. Third body." The grim nature of the news seemed to pull Finn into a daze.

A palpable pause lingered between them before Rob replied, his voice filled with disbelief. "What? Three? Finn, do you think this one is getting away from us?"

"It already is," Finn said, glancing down at the lifeless form on the rocky shoreline. "Every lead, every piece of evidence... it all just circles back. The island's legends, the lore, the fear among the locals—it's all entangled. And the murderer... They're staying ahead of us. You need to be here to know what this place is like, Rob... I know it sounds weird, but it gets to you."

Rob let out a frustrated sigh. "Damn it. We need to get a handle on this."

"We do. We're going to need to do it the old-fashioned way," Finn said, gritting his teeth. "Rob, I need more officers here. This island, these people..."

they need protection. We're out of our depth. There's only two of us right now, we don't even have any officers here from Storn yet. Hopefully we can get a few today to at least do forensics."

"More officers?" Rob echoed. "Finn..."

"I know, Rob. I know it's a lot to ask. But someone else will die if we don't act quickly."

There was a brief pause on the other end of the line. Finn could imagine Rob rubbing his temples, weighing the logistics and the demands on his force.

But then Rob's voice came back, a tinge of distress coloring his words. "Finn, it's not pulling the strings to get the resources to you that's the issue. There's something you should know."

"What is it?"

There was a heavy sigh from Rob. "I was actually calling to check in on you and Amelia to make sure you were okay. I just received a warning about an approaching storm a few minutes ago. The initial forecasts that it would dissipate were wrong. All of the bad weather the island has seen this past week was just the appetizer. The full storm is about to hit, and it'll be one of the worst the island has seen in living memory. Finn, it's already too late."

Finn's heart sank. "What? When?"

"Within the next couple of hours. The meteorologists say it's an exceptionally rare one—fast and furious, it built up quickly and is suddenly moving in your direction because of the change in wind. You're about to get hit hard. And by the time Storn gets some officers on a boat, it will be too treacherous to cross the waters to get to you and Amelia."

Finn looked out at the horizon. The sky was already darkening, the once placid waters growing restless. "That explains the winds. But Rob, I need those officers."

Rob's voice grew somber. "Finn, you have to believe me. No one can get onto or off the island for the next few days. The storm is making it impossible. All ferries, boats, helicopters – everything's been grounded. I'm sorry."

Finn swallowed hard, trying to process the situation. Isolated on an island with a terrified community, creepy superstitions, and a serial murderer. He suddenly knew what a caged animal felt like.

"I'll send officers over as soon as the storm passes," Rob assured. "Just... hang tight. And be careful, both of you."

"Thanks, Rob," Finn replied, trying to keep his voice steady. "We will."

Ending the call, Finn stared at the phone for a moment, the dire nature of their situation sinking in.

Amelia, who had been standing a few steps away, examining the body, now approached. "What's wrong?" she asked, her voice laced with concern.

Finn turned and looked his partner straight in the eyes. "Amelia... We're on our own."

CHAPTER TWENTY FOUR

Amidst the gales that began to churn the foliage outside, the front doors of Huldra House groaned open, admitting Finn and Amelia. The aging grandeur of the place, with its high ceilings and dark wooden paneling, offered them a brief respite from the impending storm. However, the cold silence of the interior did little to warm Finn's spirits.

He was starting to think the island was going to take them all down to some unseen, rotten abyss.

"Lady Ferguson?" Finn's voice echoed through the vast entrance hall. There was no reply, only the howls of wind outside and the internal whisper of air sweeping under the door.

Amelia looked around, her brow furrowing. "It's so quiet in here compared to outside. Do you think she left for the mainland with Nathaniel because of the storm?"

Finn glanced out of the window. "I doubt it. The ferries would have stopped running hours ago, and besides, Lady Ferguson doesn't strike me as the type to flee from Huldra House. Frederick wanted her to get Nathaniel to the mainland, but she had already refused. Where the hell is the rest of the staff, though, it isn't the evening yet?"

Amelia nodded, absorbing this. "Remember, the staff here don't all live on the island. Some come from the mainland."

"You're right," Finn agreed remembering. "With the storm warnings, those who could leave probably made their way back home. Still, there should be some islander staff around."

"But they might be staying in town," Amelia reasoned. "The cove offers some protection. It's more logical to gather there with other locals than stay in this massive house all alone."

"I don't know, I think this house seems like the safest place on the island, from storms at least. It's made from thick stone."

"Do you think she already heard about Frederick's murder?" Amelia asked. "Maybe she went to the cliffs to see for herself."

"She wouldn't leave her son."

Finn contemplated his own words, then resumed his calling, "Lady Ferguson!" His voice echoed through the empty corridors and grand rooms, returning to him with no answer.

The absence of the lady of Huldra House felt out of place. The vast manor, which normally resonated with hushed conversations, footsteps, and the distant movement of staff during the day, now felt like a tomb. Every shout for Lady Ferguson seemed to get swallowed by the house itself.

"I don't like this," Finn murmured, his unease palpable. "I'd say split up if it wasn't for the warning in the back of my mind."

Amelia looked around, taking in the grandeur and vastness of Huldra House. "We can't waste time searching every corner," she said decisively. "We should go straight to the only other person here."

Finn quirked an eyebrow. "Who?"

"Nathaniel," Amelia replied. "Lady Ferguson's son. He's tied to this place more than anyone else. She might even be up there with him."

Finn looked skeptical but nodded. "Alright, let's head up, but Winters, keep your eyes and ears sharp."

As they approached the grand staircase leading to the upper levels, Finn halted suddenly hearing something, lifting a hand to signal Amelia to be quiet. "Did you hear that?" he whispered.

Amelia strained her ears, trying to catch any irregularity over the growing cacophony of the storm outside. "I don't hear anything. Probably just the wind."

Finn wasn't so sure. He took a few steps onto the staircase, trying to pinpoint the origin of the sound. The wind was indeed howling, gusts making the old windows of the manor shudder. But beneath that was something else—a faint, distant thud.

"There it is again," he said, pausing to listen.

Amelia seemed unconvinced, but her alert gaze never wavered from the shadows above them. "Look, Finn, this house is ancient. It's bound to have its noises, especially during a storm. We should keep moving."

But Finn was starting to feel like they were walking into a trap. As they ascended the staircase, the thudding became more pronounced, though still distant. "That's not just the house settling, Winters. There's something else."

Amelia paused, tuning in. After a moment, her eyes widened in realization. "Okay, you might be right. That doesn't sound like any wind I've heard."

The two exchanged a worried glance. The violence of the storm seemed to be deepening by the second, and the urgency to find Lady Ferguson became even more pressing. Finn both wanted to find the source of the strange sound

and wanted to avoid it like all hell.

The howl of the storm was a constant backdrop to the fears inside of him, but that dull, rhythmic thud—almost like a heartbeat—became the focus of their attention. Finn's senses were on high alert, and his earlier unease had transformed into a tangible dread. He had a horrible feeling that the noise wasn't just inside the house—it was tied to its very core.

“The Hidden Folk,” Finn wondered out loud to himself, thinking about the hidden entrance to their world supposedly concealed beneath Huldra House. He quickly chastised himself for letting superstition into his thinking.

As Finn and Amelia reached the top of the grand staircase, the labyrinthine corridors of Huldra House stretched before them. The dim light filtering through the cloudy windows added an eerie glow to the faded wallpaper and aging portraits that adorned the walls. Eyes followed them like a vengeful audience about to watch an execution.

The thud sounded again, echoing slightly, its origin tantalizingly unclear. Finn instinctively reached for his side, a habitual gesture from his days with the FBI. Realizing he was unarmed, he muttered, “You have no idea how much I wish I had my gun.”

Amelia, her face pale and her eyes darting from shadow to shadow, replied dryly, “You have no idea how much *I* wish you had your gun.”

As they proceeded down the hallway, the thudding became both louder and more intermittent. The unpredictability of it set Finn's nerves on edge. With every step they took, the dread mounted, and the air grew colder.

Now, another noise joined the eerie chorus—the unmistakable sound of wood creaking. Amelia shot Finn a nervous glance, the tension between them the equal of any storm. Both of them moved silently, their footsteps muffled by the thick carpeting. Each corner they turned held the potential for danger, and they approached every twist and bend with caution.

“I think it's coming from the attic,” Amelia whispered as they neared.

“You're right,” Finn said in a low voice. “I bet it's Nathaniel trying to escape from his room.”

When they reached the hallway that lead to the enclosed attic staircase, they both paused, gazing at it. The thudding and creaking seemed to converge from above, beckoning them into the very heart of the house's mystery.

“Nathaniel?” Amelia said loudly, staring at the staircase doorway.

Thud.

Thud.

And a creaking noise like a withered tree,
Taking a deep breath and steeling himself, Finn stepped towards the doorway that led to the rickety steps, with Amelia close behind. With each step, the noises grew louder and more distinct. When they reach the attic stairs, it was cast in darkness.

Thud.

Thud.

Finn looked up and could see something, a shape before them on the staircase. For a moment, he thought he was staring at the outline of the wraith itself. Instinctively, he flicked the light switch to his left.

Amelia gasped, and Finn felt sick to his stomach.

Lady Ferguson's lifeless body swung gently from a thick rope looped around a set of sturdy hooks in the ceiling. The drafts from the winds outside, fingered their way through the house, causing her to sway, producing the repetitive thud against the wooden floorboards. Her face was pale, eyes wide in an eternal gaze of horror.

The rope around her neck creaked.

Both Finn and Amelia rushed forward.

"We can save her!" Amelia yelled out.

Her legs, Amelia said, rushing past him to clearly take the weight off of her neck, pushing her upwards. But Finn stopped her.

"Amelia," he said in a gentle voice. "Her neck is broken. I can see it from here."

"No..." Amelia looked defeated. "Why? Why Lady Ferguson?"

"Four dead," Finn said. "A Lord who had previously lived on the island for years. A fisherman, Ivar Ward, who had an altercation with that very man weeks before. Then Frederick, the butler of Huldra House, and now Lady Ferguson. Three of them connected directly with Huldra House, one a wild card we don't understand yet."

Finn thrust the side of his clenched fist against the staircase wall in frustration. He looked up at the dead body of Lady Ferguson. He'd had enough death on that island.

There has to be some damned hope on this island, somewhere, he thought to himself.

Amelia looked past the body. "Do you think Nathaniel is still up there?"

Finn gazed at the locked attic door. "We need to get him out of here."

Amelia walked up the stairs and knocked gently on the door. "Nathaniel.

It's Inspector Winters. Are you there?"

"Please, the storm... I can't take this," his tired voice replied from behind the door.

"We're going to come in... Somehow," Amelia said.

"I don't think he knows about his mother," Finn whispered.

Amelia nodded and whispered back. "The storm is so loud outside, it might have covered the noise... We've got to get into Nathaniel's room somehow."

"I'm not climbing up to that window again," Finn said, looking around for anything that might help him break down the door. That was when he noticed something strange about the body.

CHAPTER TWENTY FIVE

Finn stared at it for a moment, realizing that something was out of place. Clutched tightly in Lady Ferguson's hand was an object. As respectfully as he could, he reached up and pulled a key from her deathly grip. It was ornate, the kind of key meant for a lock of significance.

He turned to Amelia, speaking barely above a whisper, "I'll bet anything that Lady Ferguson was on her way up here to save Nathaniel when she was intercepted by the killer. This must be the attic key."

"But why hang her?" Amelia's voice trembled with emotion. "Why this display?"

Finn eyed the ceiling, noting the fresh imprints around the newly installed hooks. "These hooks weren't here before. This... display, it was premeditated. The killer wanted Nathaniel to witness his own mother's fate. A cruel and unusual punishment. But I reckon we disturbed the killer, he heard us coming and had to run off before having the chance to find the key to Nathaniel's room and forcing him to see this. Whoever did this *hates* the Ferguson family. He wants them to suffer."

As realization dawned, Finn gently closed Lady Ferguson's hand. With a voice filled with sorrow and regret that he couldn't save her, he whispered, "We'll make sure your son is safe, Lady Ferguson. I promise."

Finn walked past Amelia, and she gently patted his arm for a moment. Her eyes were filled with admiration for her partner. Finn then approached the door, the weight of the key in his hand feeling heavier than he had anticipated. He leaned in, speaking softly, "Nathaniel? It's Finn. May we come in?"

There was a pause, the seconds feeling like hours, before a timid voice from within responded, "Yes."

Using the key, Finn slowly unlocked the door, its heavy wood creaking as it opened. Amelia followed closely behind him, her concern evident in every movement. The room was dim, with only a faint glow from a single lamp on a nightstand casting long shadows. Outside the solitary window was Huldra Island beneath the skies, darkened drastically by a thick swirling maelstrom of clouds. In the center of the room, a large bed dominated the space, antique furniture sporadically taking up the rest of the attic space. Under the thick blankets, Nathaniel was hidden, a pale face and unruly dark hair peeking out,

eyes wide and searching.

He looked at them, a confused mix of hope and desperation in his eyes. "Where's my mother?" he whispered, his voice quivering. "I've been calling for her. Why hasn't she come?"

The weight of that question pulled at Finn's soul. Finn and Amelia exchanged glances, and Finn was certain that Amelia also understood the dilemma they now faced. Nathaniel, with his delicate mental state, was now at the mercy of a truth too horrifying for most healthy adults, let alone someone of his fragility.

Finn cleared his throat, choosing his words carefully, "Nathaniel, we need to get you out of here. It's not safe. Can you come with us?" Finn was racking his brain for a way to get the man downstairs without seeing his dead mother as he waited for an answer.

Nathaniel hesitated, pulling the blankets closer around him as though they could shield him from the reality outside his door. "I will, but only if my mother says it's okay," he insisted, his voice filled with a child-like hope that his the one person who had always cared for him would soon enter and take everything back to normal. At the very least, be there to take control of the situation.

Finn felt a pang of sorrow. How does one navigate such a heart-wrenching situation? It was a challenge, even for an experienced agent like him. But right now, he had to make decisions, not just as a detective, but as a protector of an innocent life.

Amelia took a deep breath, looking at Nathaniel with a gentle expression. "The storm outside is getting bad, Nathaniel. It's going to be the worst one on the island in living memory. We need to make sure you're safe," she said, her voice soothing.

Nathaniel's gaze darted between the two detectives, anxiety clear in his eyes. "Huldra House is the strongest building on the island," he retorted, his voice wavering but defiant. "It's made from the black rock. If it's not safe here, then where is?"

Finn knelt beside the bed, bringing himself to eye level with Nathaniel. "The storm isn't our only concern," he admitted, honesty clear in his tone. "There's someone dangerous on the island... The person who killed Lord Carmichael and Ivar Ward, and we think he might be here in this house. We don't want anything to happen to you."

The boy's face paled further. "Is my mother safe?" he whispered,

searching Finn's eyes for the truth.

Choosing his words with caution, Finn replied, "Lady Ferguson is in a place where no one can hurt her."

Nathaniel's eyes filled with tears, his voice barely a whisper. "I want to see her."

Before Finn could respond, a deafening crack of thunder erupted outside, shaking the window panes of Huldra House. Nathaniel let out a heart-wrenching scream, his body trembling violently.

The howling wind thrust forward, shattering the window and scattering shards of glass around the room. The unnerving shatter of glass seemed to freeze time for a split second. The storm's rage invaded the sanctuary of the room, and Nathaniel's mental clarity was ripped away, replaced by raw panic. As the wind whipped papers into the air from a nearby desk, his cries were swallowed up by the roar from outside.

"My pictures, my pictures!" Nathaniel cried, his voice cracking with distress

Amelia, always the quick thinker, moved swiftly to Nathaniel's side. She took his shaking hand in hers, gently drawing his focus to her. "Nathaniel, look at me," she urged, shouting over the gale. "Just breathe, okay? We'll breathe together!"

Nathaniel's terrified gaze locked onto Amelia's calm one. Inhaling deeply, she began counting out loud. "One... two... three..."

The room became a whirlwind of fluttering papers, some sticking to the wet floor, while others clung to the furniture. Finn, acting on pure instinct, lunged for an old, heavy dresser nearby, heaving it with all his might to barricade the broken window. The room once more became like a sealed tomb, separated from the calamity outside.

Amelia continued. With each count, Nathaniel's breathing began to synchronize with hers. The rhythmic counting acted as a lifeline, grounding him amid the chaos. The man's tremors slowly started to fade, and the panic in his eyes was gradually replaced by a vulnerable trust..

Breathing heavily, Finn knelt to gather the strewn drawings. The papers were covered with detailed sketches of Huldra House, each line meticulously drawn, showcasing Nathaniel's undeniable talent. But it was a peculiar drawing among the others that caught Finn's attention. It depicted a man, seemingly in a doctor's garb, standing ominously in front of Huldra House. His face was obscured by a shadow, but there was an air of sadness to the

drawing that was unsettling.

Amelia, having managed to comfort Nathaniel somewhat, joined Finn and peered over his shoulder. "Who is that?" she whispered, her brow furrowed in confusion.

Finn shook his head, equally puzzled. "I'm not sure."

Nathaniel, his eyes still filled with tears, looked towards the drawing Finn held. "He was from the island, he died a long time ago," he whispered. "Doctor Freeman. He lived here for a while when I was a child."

Finn, absorbing the new information, felt a strange sensation as if he was uncovering something he was supposed to. "But you've drawn him in a doctor's coat? Surely he wasn't wearing that around here very often? Wouldn't he have been in his normal clothes?"

Nathaniel shrugged. "He did wear the white coat a lot. He worked here. There was a fire, you see. The island used to have a small clinic hospital back then, we had to in case of emergencies, and there was no helicopter to the island. The clinic burned down, and so did several houses. It was terrible. Mother let the doctor and a nurse use parts of Huldra House that were unused as a temporary hospital for a while."

Finn thought things over for a moment, the wind outside, still rattling against the make-shift dresser barricade.

"Were there patients here?" he asked.

"Yes," said Nathaniel. "Some of the people hurt in the fire. And there was one other patient. He was a young child who needed constant care."

"Do you remember anything about this kid?" Finn probed gently, cautious not to overwhelm Nathaniel further.

Nathaniel took a deep breath, his pale fingers tightening around the bed sheet "I was young. But I remember... he was a bit older than me, always in bed, always looking out of the window. He had machines with him...beeping ones."

Amelia leaned in, her voice soft. "Did you ever speak to him?"

Nathaniel hesitated, then nodded. "A few times. He said he wished he could go outside, see the cliffs and the sea. But he was too sick."

Finn exhaled, wondering about the relevance of this memory. "Do you remember his name?"

Nathaniel seemed to search his memory, then finally whispered, "Jamie. His name was Jamie McCulloch."

"What happened to him?" Amelia asked.

“I... I don't want to talk about that,” Nathaniel stuttered.

“Why?” Amelia pushed.

“No... Please don't,” Nathaniel sobbed, suddenly his demeanor becoming more erratic once more.

There was a look on Nathaniel's face. A look that Finn had seen in so many expressions through the years. An expression of guilt. Finally, it started to make sense.

“Nathaniel,” Finn said, gently. “You did something to the boy, didn't you?”

“Don't make me, please,” he said, shaking his head.

Finn took out his phone. He did a quick search for Jamie McCulloch and Huldra House, and there it was. An article in black and white. Finn skimmed it, the implications swirling around in his mind.

Suddenly, there was another sound of glass smashing somewhere down below. Somewhere within the countless rooms and hallways of Huldra House. Amelia looked at Finn nervously.

“The wind again?” She asked, but the fear creeping into her voice could not be hidden.

Then another smash of glass, and a loud clatter.

“We're being drawn out of here,” Finn said grimly. He turned to Nathaniel. “Nathaniel, it's going to be okay. Inspector Winters and I are going to go and investigate that sound. We'll lock the door behind us, and I want you to listen to me very carefully. Barricade your door and don't open it unless one of us comes to get you.”

Nathaniel shook his head, breathing heavily.

Amelia patted him on the hand. “We'll be right back, don't worry.”

But Nathaniel said nothing, he slid back beneath the covers.

Finn and Amelia left the room, locking the door behind them. Standing for a moment, Finn waited until he heard Nathaniel doing as he said and barricading his door. Turning, Finn saw the still hanging body of Lady Ferguson. It was a sin to leave her like that, but he knew that her killer was close and trying to entice them down into the darkness of Huldra House.

Now, Finn was finished with hiding in the shadows of the place. He turned to Amelia and whispered:

“He's here. He knows this place, so he has an advantage,” Finn said.

“What the hell is going on, Finn?” Amelia said, frustration clear in her voice. “Do you know who the killer is?”

“I do,” Finn said. “And that's what I'll use against him. Come on!”

They descended down the attic stairs, past Huldra House's dead host, and towards a head-on collision with a violent killer capable of anything.

CHAPTER TWENTY SIX

Finn moved cautiously through the dimly lit corridors of Huldra House, Amelia shoulder to shoulder with him at each and every turn. The storm roared outside, causing the old building to groan in protest as though it were alive and trying to speak to them. The eerie whistle of the wind penetrated the walls, filling what should have been silence with a melancholy wail.

The occasional creak of the floorboards beneath their feet seemed thunderous in contrast. Amelia's eyes darted nervously around, taking in the dark corners and closed doors. The house felt different, menacing even, in the absence of Lady Ferguson.

"Over there," Amelia whispered, pointing towards a wet trail of footprints on the plush carpet. They were fresh, each print crisply outlined. The path they marked meandered unpredictably, as if the person making them was attempting to throw off any pursuers.

"Someone's definitely been here," she added, swallowing the lump in her throat.

Finn bent down, inspecting the footprint closely. He grimaced. "Not just someone. It's him. The killer."

Amelia's gaze shot up to meet Finn's, searching his eyes for clarity. "How can you be so sure? Explain."

Finn straightened up, looking around cautiously. "It'll take too long now, Amelia. Just trust me. We need to be careful, every step we take."

Amelia nodded, though she more unsettled than Finn had ever seen before. The two of them continued, following the trail, aware of the danger lurking in the shadows. The violent storm outside seemed to batter the house like a heavyweight boxer. With each passing moment, the storm was getting more intense, and Finn felt as if even Huldra House would not survive it.

Following the wet footprints, Amelia and Finn moved stealthily through the corridors of Huldra House. Every so often, the illumination from the occasional lightning flash painted fleeting, silvery images on the walls, like ghostly fingers crawling along the surface. The thunderous clap that followed each burst of light made even Finn jump at times.

Walking side by side, they made their way down a long, grand hallway adorned with portraits of the island's forebears. Suddenly, an unsettling noise reached their ears—a rumbling sound of stone grinding against stone,

followed by a loud crash, as if a part of the old mansion was collapsing.

Amelia's eyes widened in alarm. "Did you hear that? Sounds like Huldra House is coming apart at the seams!"

Finn nodded gravely. "Maybe it should."

As they pressed on, they were caught off guard by the sound of shattering glass from a nearby room. Rushing towards the source, they found themselves in a large drawing room where a grand window had succumbed to the tempest outside. The relentless wind and rain swirled inside, soaking the carpet and sending curtains flying like phantom figures.

Finn pulled Amelia back, trying to shield her from the piercing wind and flying debris. "With this storm," he shouted above the roar, "it's near impossible to tell if a noise is nature's doing or the killer's."

Before Amelia could respond, a chilling laugh echoed through the hallway, a sound so dark and sinister that it sent shivers down Finn's spine. It wasn't a spontaneous laughter, but calculated and maniacal, intending to instill terror.

Without exchanging words, both Finn and Amelia, driven by their duty, darted towards the eerie cackle. The dark corridor seemed to stretch endlessly in front of them, but they pressed on, racing against time and the elements, knowing that if they didn't stop the killer now, he would kill again, starting with poor Nathaniel.

Amelia's eyes widened when she seemed to spot a fleeting shadow moving past a doorway just behind Finn. Without hesitation, she lunged forward, chasing the elusive specter "Finn! There!" she cried out, pointing.

Startled, Finn quickly spun around to follow her. The atmospheric gloom of Huldra House seemed to thicken as they continued their pursuit, a murky mixture of murder and malice seething out of every blind corner and flapping curtain.

As they hastened, a loud flash of lightning striking the land outside the house, distracted them. And that was when he pounced. A set of shadowy hands reached out from another doorway, ensnaring Amelia and pulling her into the inky darkness within. The door slammed shut before Finn could act, and a heavy thud echoed through the corridor as something was wedged against it from the inside. Amelia's terrified scream penetrated the wood, filling Finn with raw, cold fear.

"Amelia!" he shouted, panic evident in his voice. Without a second thought, Finn began to violently ram his shoulder against the stubborn door,

each impact sending sharp pains through his body. Again and again, he hurled himself against the wooden barrier, desperate to reach Amelia.

With a final, thunderous crash as loud as the storm outside, the door gave way. Finn's eyes darted around the dimly lit room, finally landing on Amelia's crumpled form on the cold stone floor. A thin trail of blood trickled from a cut on her forehead, her breathing labored and uneven.

Kneeling beside her, Finn cradled Amelia in his arms. "I'm here. You're safe," he whispered, his voice trembling.

She looked up at him, dazed but defiant. "I couldn't see his face. He wore a black hood... like the wraith."

Finn's brow furrowed in thought. "He's using the legend. Either he believes he's some kind of reincarnation of the wraith, or he's leveraging the islanders' fear of it to cloak his actions."

Amelia tried to stand, wobbling slightly. "We can't let him get away," she rasped before having to sit down again.

Finn's protective instincts flared. "I'm not leaving you."

With a weak smile and fire still in her eyes, Amelia responded, "You have to. He'll kill again. We can't let that happen. He left through that other door. I think it leads into another part of the house. I'll... I'll be fine. Please, Finn. Go!"

Their eyes locked for a moment, a silent understanding passing between them. Taking a deep breath, Finn gave Amelia a brief, reassuring squeeze and reluctantly charged back into the storm-ravaged halls of Huldra House, the echo of the killer's laughter still taunting him.

As Finn darted through the hallways of Huldra House, the world was deeply troubled outside, the wind now well and truly a hurricane. Thunder growled and the rain spat venomously, both elements acting as nature's symphony to Finn's desperate mission. Suddenly, the lights flickered erratically, casting eerie, shuddering shadows, before going out entirely. The only illumination now came from the intermittent flashes of lightning, capturing the mansion and its players like a flash bulb.

Finn continued on, the darkness failing to deter him. His ears perked up to the sound of the storm's fury being supplemented by the shattering of glass again. But this time, the force was undeniable. One by one, windows exploded inwards, blown in by the force of the gale outside. With every shattered pane, the storm's voice was given entrance, making the indoors almost as chaotic as the outside.

With every step, Finn felt the foundations of Huldra House quiver. The venerable structure, once an imposing monolith, now seemed frail and susceptible to nature's wrath. Finn almost implicitly felt that the house would falter without its Lady.

Suddenly, a dark silhouette came into view at the end of the hallway. The hooded figure stood still for a moment, an ominous presence framed by a burst of lightning, a pitch-black hood across his face. Recognizing his quarry, Finn, driven by anger and adrenaline, charged straight at him.

The two collided with a force that seemed to shake the very walls of the house. They grappled fiercely, fists flying, each trying to overpower the other. Finn could feel the grit and strength of a life spent on the sea in the man's hands, but he was a son of the swamps and the New World, his own rage and desire to protect gave him an edge.

They rolled on the floor, wrestling, each landing blows. The killer managed to connect a solid punch to Finn's face, momentarily stunning him. But Finn retaliated by leveraging his body weight, flipping the hooded figure over, and pinning him to the ground. With swift hands, Finn reached out and yanked the black hood from the man's head.

"Bruce?! Bruce McCulloch?" Finn said, already having surmised the truth. The face of the fisherman they'd met at the Fair Folk Inn stared back at him, sweat and desperation evident in his eyes.

Bruce's voice came out in panicked breaths. "You won't get out of here alive, yank. No one will!"

Finn's grip tightened with anger. "I know why you did it, but none of this will bring him back!"

But before Bruce could answer, a deafening crack resounded from outside. Both men turned their heads just in time to see a massive tree, uprooted by the storm, crashing towards Huldra House. The ensuing impact was colossal. The walls buckled, and the ceiling caved in, sending a deluge of debris, wood, and stone crashing down on the two adversaries. Something immensely heavy struck Finn across the chest and he fell. The world turned black and silent.

CHAPTER TWENTY SEVEN

Everything swam before Finn's eyes, a disorienting blend of darkness, pain, and intermittent bursts of color. The pounding in his ears matched the rhythm of his heartbeat, slow and heavy. Each time he tried to pull himself to consciousness, the weight on his chest seemed to pull him under again, stopping him from getting a full breath. He felt like he was going to be crushed to death, one inhalation at a time.

He faintly registered the sound of hurried footsteps. A sense of urgency bubbled up in his semi-conscious mind. The killer! He was getting away! Pushing through the haze of pain, Finn became increasingly aware of the heavy beam pinning him down. With immense effort, he tried to push it off, but it barely budged.

Dizziness then took Finn again, and he felt like the world seemed strangely unreal.

Suddenly, there was a brilliant flash of light, brief yet intense, like an electric arc. As his vision adjusted, Finn saw several slender, pale hands, their fingers long and delicate, gripping the wooden beam. They seemed to glow faintly, and moved with a purpose, pulling at the beam in concert with his own efforts. With their help, the beam lifted and rolled to the side.

Shaken and gasping for breath, Finn pushed himself up, looking around desperately to thank his saviors. But the room was empty. No trace of the ethereal hands or their owners remained. The only evidence that they had ever been there was the now displaced beam and his own freedom. Finn didn't know if he could trust his own eyes anymore.

The room was in ruins. The collapsed ceiling and broken walls surrounded him, splintered to pieces by the old tree. But what drew Finn's attention was a massive gap in what used to be the outer wall. Through it, he could see the raging storm and the silhouette of the fleeing killer, heading straight for the cliffs at the edge of the property. The same cliffs that sat above where Ivar Ward's body had been so brutally chained days before.

Adrenaline pumping, Finn wasted no time. Despite his injuries and the disarray around him, he sprinted after the hooded figure. The wind thrust and pushed, pulling at his clothes and stinging his face with rain. The ground beneath him was slick and treacherous, but he didn't slow down. Every fiber of his being was focused on catching Bruce McCulloch and putting an end to

this nightmare once and for all.

The storm's ferocity shaped and contorted the rain, making the cliffside appear as though it was shrouded in a malevolent fog. The wind blew so violently, it was hard to catch a breath, making each step a calculated risk. Yet, the only thing more perilous than the environment was the man standing before Finn.

Finn, drenched and determined, shouted through the gale, "Bruce! I know about Jamie! Your brother!"

The wind caught Finn's words and carried them to their intended target.

The accusation seemed to hit Bruce harder than any physical blow could. He turned on the edge of the cliff to face Finn. His voice, raw and filled with anguish, echoed back, "They left him to die in that wretched house! He was just a child!"

Suddenly, with renewed fervor, Bruce lunged at Finn. Their two forms crashed together, a whirlwind of punches, grapples, and desperate shouts. Finn, still reeling from the earlier injury, struggled to match Bruce's frenzied energy. But he fought back with a fervor driven by a need to end the cycle of violence.

The edge of the cliff loomed ominously close. Each slip, each misstep could send one or both of them tumbling into the abyss. The storm around them seemed to roar in approval, egging them on.

Bruce thrust an elbow to Finn's ribs and then he was able to land a solid punch on his chin, sending Finn staggering backward. Seizing the opportunity, Bruce lunged once more, trying to push Finn over the edge. But Finn sidestepped, and with a swift maneuver, sent Bruce reeling instead.

As Bruce teetered, his eyes widened in shock. But instead of falling, he managed to grab onto Finn, pulling him along. The two men, locked in their deathly embrace, went over the edge.

Finn felt the weightlessness, the terrifying rush of the fall, and braced himself for the end.

His thoughts swirled as he faced his death, and through the tempest in his mind, the faces of his loved ones came, memories etched into his emotions. Regret, joy, pain, they all rushed together until only two faces remained. Demi and Amelia.

But as Finn flailed for the edge of the cliff and fell, suddenly, an arm reached out, grabbing him by the collar. For a moment, he dangled there, long enough to see Bruce McCulloch's body lifeless on the old metal docks far below.

With an immense tug, Finn was yanked back onto the cliffside. He found himself staring up into the wild eyes of Nathaniel. Amelia was there beside him.

“I won’t let another die,” Nathaniel shouted, panting from the exertion.

“Are you okay!?” Amelia shouted.

Finn nodded.

All three lay there, drenched and gasping, as the storm continued its relentless assault. Then, a horrid noise came. It sounded like a thousand animals shrieking at once. A terrible cacophony of tearing and breaking.

Finn stood up and watched as the roof of Huldra House, in the distance, was torn clean off.

“No!” Nathaniel screamed at the elements, watching the only home he ever knew be mortally wounded.

Though the killer had been vanquished, the night's horrors were far from over.

“We've got to get to somewhere safe!” Finn yelled.

Nathaniel fell to his knees.

“Come on, Nathaniel! We'll die if we stay here!”

But Finn had no idea where they could go, out there on the cliffs above the empty moors, lashed and torn by a vengeful tempest.

“What about a cave!?” Amelia shouted as a gust of wind nearly blew them over the side.

Nathaniel nodded. “I know somewhere! Follow me!”

They moved, sometimes against the wind, sometimes with it. Amelia and Nathaniel helped Finn as they went. Soon, they were on a small trail that dipped below the cliff line. As they rushed along it, some rocks cracked and sheered off in the wind.

“Look out!” Nathaniel shouted.

Finn was so weary, he only saw it at the last moment, but Amelia pulled him out of the way as the rocks clattered off the trail and then over to the sea below.

“It's here!” Nathaniel said, finally leading them into the mouth of a high cave, protecting them finally from the horrific storm.

The torrential rain and whipping winds seemed to isolate the cave from the chaos outside. Amelia took her phone out and turned the flashlight on. The dim light inside the cavern painted eerie shadows on the walls, casting the three figures in an almost otherworldly glow. The cacophony of the storm

outside was reduced to a faint hum, giving them a momentary respite from the terror that had befallen Huldra House.

"I thought..." Finn gasped for a breath. "That the kingdom of the hidden folk would have been comfier... Where... Where are the couches?"

Amelia's clothes were soaked through, her hair clinging to her face. Finn looked at Nathaniel, who seemed even more fragile now, his eyes distant, having witnessed something no one should ever see.

Amelia then turned her gaze to Finn, she looked concerned. And Finn could feel that his form was hunched, exhaustion evident in every line of his face.

"Care to fill me in?" Amelia said to Finn.

"You first... Let... Let me catch my breath," he said, rubbing his aching ribs.

"It was a miracle. I found that key to the attic," Amelia began, voice shaky. "It must have fallen out of your pocket. When you went after the killer, I heard more of the building crumbling, and I realized we'd locked Nathaniel in that attic. He could have died in there. So, I ran back up to the attic, fearing the worst. When I unlocked the door, Nathaniel was still inside." Her voice faltered as she glanced at Nathaniel. "He..."

Nathaniel, pale and shivering, whispered, "I saw her...my mum...hanging there."

Finn's heart clenched. He wished there was something he could say or do to take away his pain. "I'm so sorry, Nathaniel," he murmured. "No one should see that. She was a good woman. She just wanted to protect you, and in the end, she gave her life doing that."

"Anyway, I'm more interested in knowing who the killer was?" Amelia said. "I didn't get a good look at him."

Turning to Amelia, Finn composed himself. "Bruce McCulloch... he was behind it all. The fisherman we met at the Fair Folk Inn."

Amelia's eyes widened in disbelief. "But why? What was the connection? What did Lady Ferguson or any of the others do?"

Finn looked away, trying to hide how badly beat up he felt. It was one thing to chase after a faceless killer, but another to realize it was someone they had spoken to, someone who had concealed his monstrous side so well. There would always be the regret in Finn that he couldn't have figured it out before Frederick and Lady Ferguson died.

But then, he did find it all strange. The case had been filled with

coincidences. If the wind hadn't broken that window, he would never have found the drawing that led him to ask Nathaniel about it.

The darkness of the cave was only interrupted by the occasional flash of lightning from the storm outside. The sounds of rain and wind, muted by the rocky walls, created an eerie background to the conversation that unfolded.

Finn, his voice gravelly from the events of the night, began, "When we were in the attic, I did a web search and I found an old article about what Nathaniel had told us. There was a boy named Jamie McCulloch who was kept here after a fire took down the local clinic. He died under circumstances that were... dubious, at best."

He pulled his slightly damp phone from his pocket and revealed the faded newsprint article. Amelia leaned in to see the article, her eyes scanning the headlines and the images.

"Jamie was Bruce's younger brother. The way the report read, it seemed like the death was brushed under the carpet. There was talk of an investigation, but Lord Carmichael's name came up, implying some sort of influence on the press. I think he helped make the scandal go away with his influence."

Amelia's brow furrowed. "So, Bruce came back for revenge? But why wait all this time?"

"I think Lord Carmichael's return to the island was a catalyst. He must've seen it as the universe giving him an opportunity for retribution," Finn speculated. "Lady Ferguson, Lord Carmichael... they had a role in Jamie's cover-up. And Ivar Ward, he was part of the medical team. It's almost poetic justice that he landed back on this cursed island."

"Or fate," Nathaniel said.

Amelia's gaze fell on Nathaniel. "But that doesn't explain everything. Nathaniel, can you tell us what happened to Jamie?"

Nathaniel's eyes shimmered with tears. "We were friends," he began, voice quivering. "One night, I convinced Jamie to leave his bed. I thought it would be fun, you know? An adventure in the big house when the adults weren't watching. We snuck up to the attic, and... and he had a seizure. I didn't know what to do. He just... stopped."

Amelia, wore an expression of heartbreak, and whispered, "And you stayed in that room, after all these years knowing what happened in there?"

Nathaniel nodded, sniffing. "It was my fault. I wanted to be close to Jamie. And after mum and the others covered it up, I felt... I felt I had to pay

for my sins. I needed to be reminded of the guilt every day. Jamie's accident was my fault, you see. He died because I was afraid. When he had his seizure, I hid in a cupboard. If I'd gone and gotten help right then, he might have lived. But I was scared I'd get into trouble and didn't know what to do. I think my mother was worried that I would be blamed, and with my mental health issues, she felt I was too fragile for the press circus that would follow."

The tragedy of Huldra House, the tangled web of deceit and grief, had come to light in the darkest of nights.

"You can't blame yourself," Finn said. "You were only a child. I'm not saying it was right, but your mother and the others, they must have covered up what happened to protect you."

"And Frederick was killed because he was part of it, the cover-up?" Amelia asked.

"As far as Bruce McCulloch was concerned," Finn answered. "Anyone there at the time of his brother's death deserved the same fate."

Amelia reached out and placed a gentle hand on Nathaniel's shoulder. "Nathaniel, after all you've been through, it might be good for you to get a fresh start. I have a friend on the mainland who runs a retreat. It's peaceful, therapeutic, and it might just be the refuge you need."

Finn nodded in agreement, "The Home Office will probably be more than happy to help you get settled somewhere new. A fresh start can do wonders."

But Nathaniel's expression remained resolute. "I can't leave this island. Not after everything. This is my home. Huldra House will be rebuilt. It's what mother would have wanted. I hid away when one tragedy happened in my life, I refuse to do that again."

"Your mother would be proud of you," Amelia said, softly.

It seemed that everything was being put to rest, but Finn had something that still unsettled him about their time on the island.

Finn, looking a bit puzzled, asked Nathaniel, "There's one other thing... When I was trapped under that beam, was it you who helped free me?"

Nathaniel simply shook his head. "I wasn't anywhere near you at the time."

Finn's brows furrowed, a haunted look entering his eyes. "For a moment," he murmured, "I thought there were other people in the house helping me. But maybe it was just the trauma, the disorientation from the blow."

Amelia, a chill running down her spine, whispered, "What people, Finn?"

He didn't answer, because no answer would have made sense to him.

Instead, he looked distantly out towards the sea from the cave, the huge waves almost infinite, wondering. Just wondering.

EPILOGUE

The quaint cottage in Great Amwell sat nestled amid the russet and golden leaves of autumn. The crisp air carried the scent of decay and rebirth. Finn stepped out of his car, absorbing the familiar calm of the place. The key turned smoothly in the lock, and he exhaled heavily as he closed the door behind him. It wasn't Florida, but it was the closest thing he had to a home for now.

After the chaos and horrors of Huldra House, he hoped – no, he *needed* – the solace that the cottage promised. He had hoped to leave his troubles behind on that damned island, to recuperate here in silence and solitude.

But when he stepped into the living room, the sight that met his eyes made his heart stop. Demi, his ex-fiancée, was sitting primly in his favorite armchair. Their eyes locked, and the weight of their shared past pressed down on him.

She stood, her gaze unwavering. "You're not getting away from me this time," she declared, her voice a mix of resolve and emotion.

He rubbed his temples. "How did you get in?"

"Pestered Rob," she admitted with a half-smile. "He finally caved and gave me a key."

Finn ran a hand through his hair. "Look, Demi, I'm drained, mentally and physically. Whatever this is, whatever you're here for, can't it wait?"

But then, he noticed it – a suitcase, small but definitely not empty, sitting quietly by the door. He frowned, pointing at it. "What's that doing here?"

Demi took a deep breath, her eyes tearing up. "Finn," she began, hesitantly, "I'm so scared. There's something you need to know."

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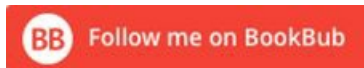


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