

# *Luci and the Ba*

*Helen K Woodsford-Dean*



# **Luci and the Ba**

**Helen Woodsford-Dean**

# Luci and the Ba

The moral right of Helen Woodsford-Dean to be identified as the author of this work has been asserted in accordance with Section 77 of the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act, 1988.

All Rights Reserved. No part of this publication may be copied, reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means without the prior permission of the publisher, nor be otherwise circulated in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.

This ebook is licensed for your personal enjoyment only. This ebook may not be resold or given away to other people. If you would like to share this book with another person, please purchase an additional copy for each recipient. If you are reading this book and did not purchase it, or it was not purchased for only you to read (for example, as a gift), then please return to [www.spiritualorkney.co.uk/books](http://www.spiritualorkney.co.uk/books) and purchase your own copy. Thank you for respecting the hard work of this author.

Text and images © Helen Woodsford-Dean 2018.

First published in 2020 by Spiritual Orkney, Craigielea, Harray, Orkney, KW17 2JU.



This novel is a work of fiction. Any similarities to people alive or dead are entirely coincidental. Although I was tempted to give some of my friends ‘cameo’ appearances, I resisted. However, Kirkwall is a real city, most of the places mentioned do exist, and every winter the Ba game is still played between the Uppies and Doonies (the Kirkwall Ba is one of the few remaining games of medieval ‘street football’ still played in the British Isles – read more in the ‘Background’ section).

In order to lend this novel some authenticity, I have used traditional Orkney surnames; this may inadvertently result in some Orkney family businesses being mentioned but this is entirely coincidental.

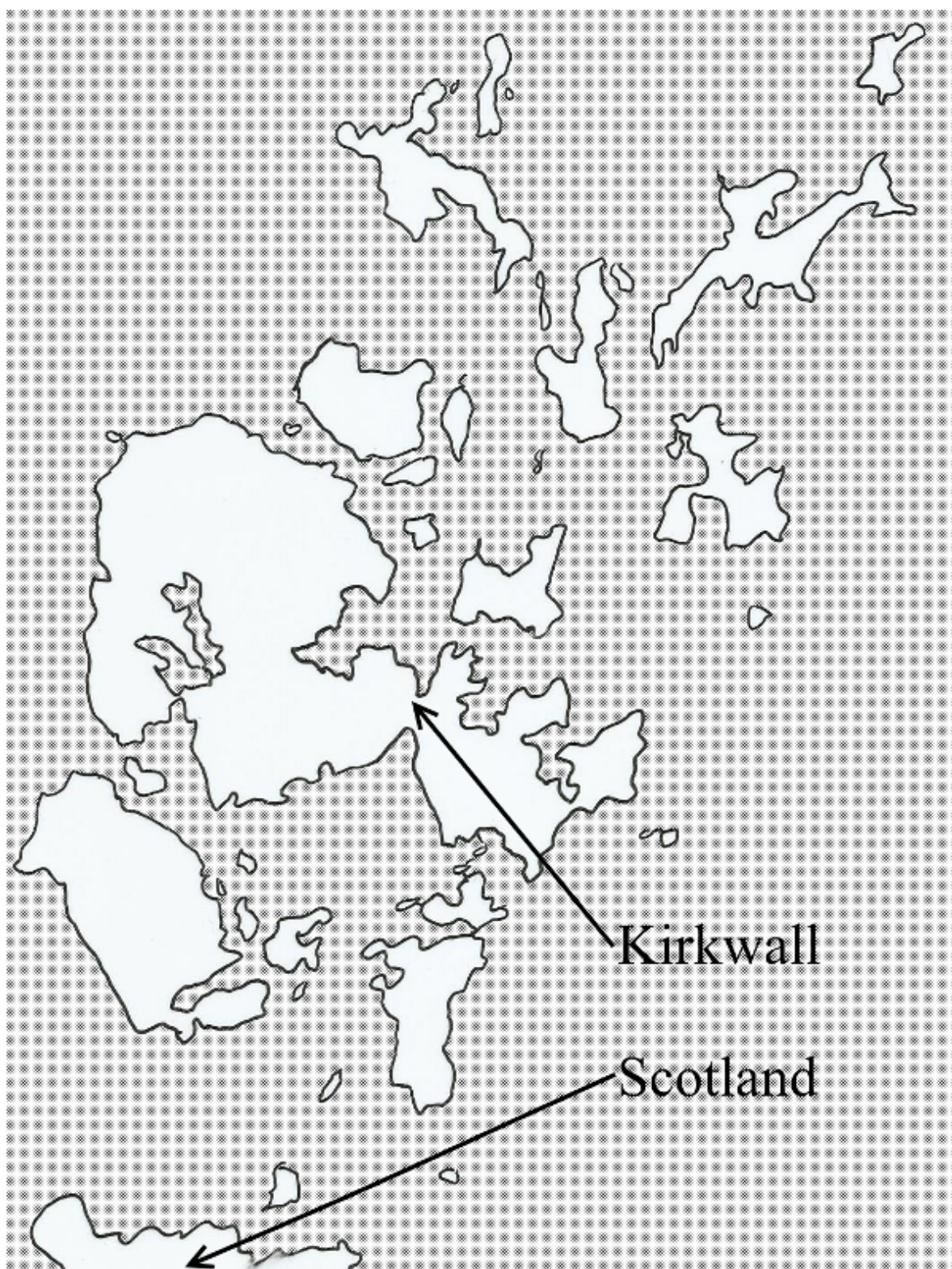
The conversations, recommendations, behaviour and observations made by the staff who work at the various locations named in this novel are fictitious. These depictions are solely plot devices: they are not intended to be representative nor typical of actual practice; neither are they intended to be comments upon the organisations, sites, charities, public bodies, authorities and committees mentioned, nor on past or present professional practice, nor on any members of staff or representatives who currently, or previously, work or are employed there.

The Ba Committee does exist but its depiction in this novel is entirely fictitious and the product of my imagination. Likewise, although victims of domestic abuse are supported in Orkney, all references to a refuge, suggestions as to its location and security, its organisation, the nature of the support provision, and ethos, are all plot devices and the product of my imagination.

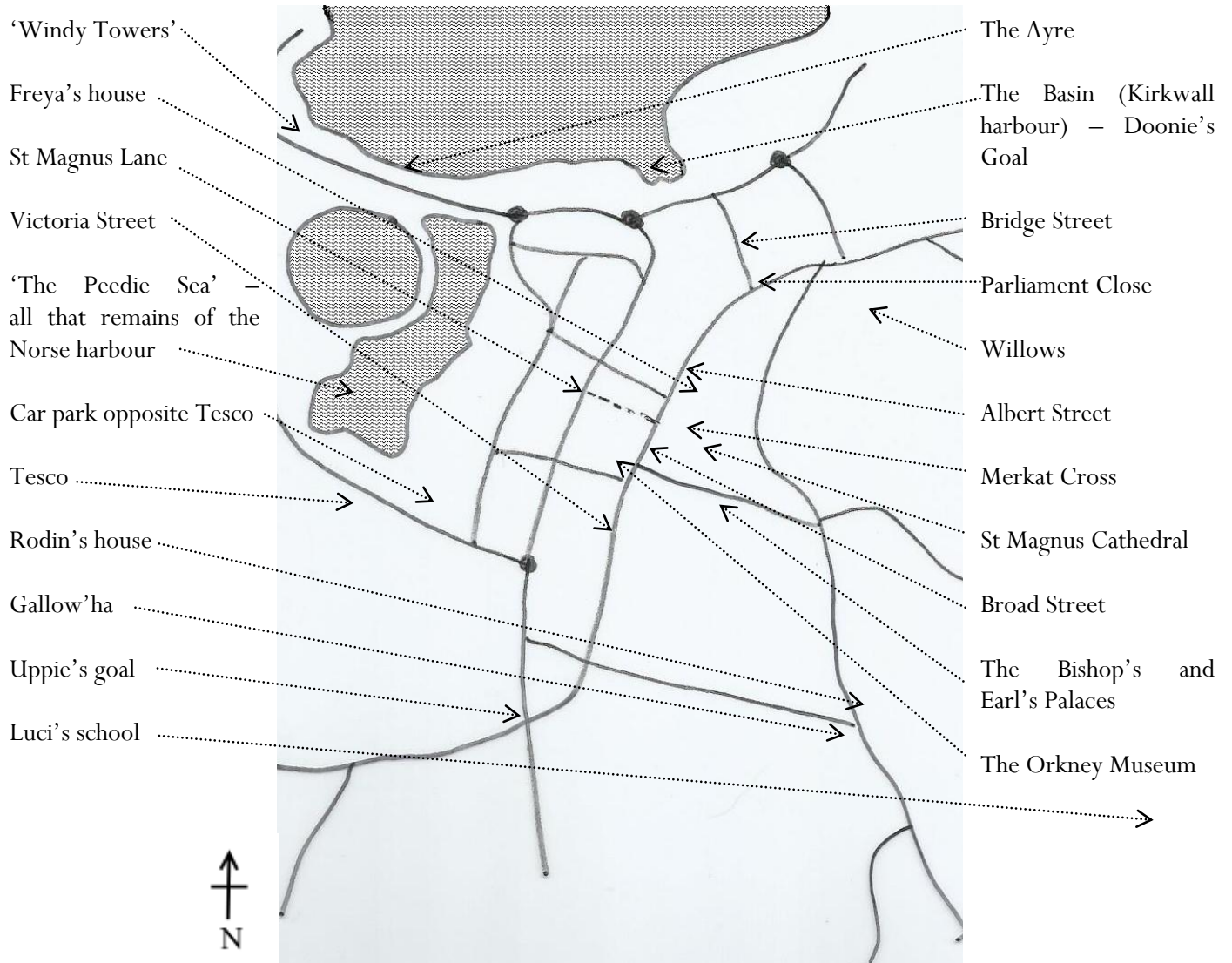
Whether the Norse (Viking) Gods still exist is a matter of belief, and entirely between you and Them.



Map of the Orkney Islands, showing most of the inhabited islands and the distance from Scotland, plus the position of Kirkwall on the largest Orkney island (called 'Mainland')



# Map of Kirkwall showing location of most of the places named in this novel



# Contents

Chapter 1 – First Impressions	7
Interlude	13
Chapter 2 – Uppies and Doonies	14
Chapter 3 – Kirkwall	18
Chapter 4 – Family	24
Interlude	34
Chapter 5 – The Ba	35
Chapter 6 – Saturday	39
Chapter 7 – Committee Meeting	43
Interlude	48
Chapter 8 – Monday	49
Chapter 9 – Ravens	55
Chapter 10 – Waiting	61
Interlude	69
Background	70
About the author	73

# Chapter 1 – First Impressions

Luci had arrived in Orkney less than a week ago but already she hated everything about it. She hated the rain and the wind, both of which were constant. She hated the way the days were so short and, consequently, the way the nights were interminably long, so all she wanted to do was sleep. She missed her entire life back in southern England; she yearned for her friends, all her things, and her dogs: Trick and Treat. Back in Hampshire she'd had a life; now she was just surviving.

She hated this school. She hated the way she was quietly studying for GCSEs one minute and was now doing Standards. She hated the way that everyone knew everyone and everything about everyone and everything. She hated the cliquiness; how you *had* to belong to one group or another and how she belonged to exactly none of them. She hated the way they spoke and how she couldn't understand what they were saying. It was Scottish but not quite: there were dialect words for everything; she'd never learn them all – it would have been easier if they'd gone to the Western Isles and she'd had to learn Gaelic from scratch because then there would at least have been formal lessons, but oh no, they'd gone north.

She glanced around the dining hall. She hadn't any friends. *Yet*. Her mum kept saying 'yet' as if it was 'Amen' or 'Abracadabara'. She sat alone, pretending to read whilst stealing surreptitious glances around the room. A girl with long ginger hair locked gazes with her, smiled cautiously, looking for a moment as if she might come over and try to be friendly. Well, Luci didn't need anyone's charity, so she glared defiantly back, emanating hatred and disdain. The girl dropped her smile and rejoined the conversation at her table. Luci sneered at the way the girl had given up indecently quickly; clearly nobody really wanted to be friends with her and any advances were just shallow.

It was really shit being new.

Luci went back to reading her book. It was a collection of Orkney folk tales. They had to read it for part of an English lesson – 'English' being rather ironic given where they were. Homework was to choose a character from one of the tales and place them within a modern context. Luci had been reading about the mischievous Hogboys. She could imagine a Hogboy now, flitting invisibly amongst the diners, perhaps slipping a bogey into a sandwich or sitting on a bag of crisps to burst it in a flurry of crumbs. Those thoughts made her smile to herself, albeit an unpleasant smile. She'd quite like to see all the other pupils suffer a bit, just to spring them out of their smugness.

The morning break would be over in five minutes. Checking her timetable yet again, she saw that the next lesson was chemistry. Luci had already learnt that she could draw less attention to herself if she got to class a bit before everyone else, let herself in, and sat quietly at the back with her book. Teachers always liked compliant 'good' pupils. So she finished her sandwich, picked up her bag, and slouched off. She deliberately kept her hunched body close to the walls of the corridor and her gaze fixed to the ground.

The lesson was boring. The class size was small, only twenty pupils instead of the thirty five plus she was used to, and they were massively ahead in the syllabus. She had no idea what this lesson was about; she hadn't covered any of this stuff in her previous school, and she didn't have the foundation skills to understand what was being taught. She tried to keep her head down and go unnoticed but her teacher, Mrs Sinclair, was asking questions around the class and it was only a matter of time.

'Who can tell me what an atom is made of? Perhaps our new student will know, Luci?' Luci widened her eyes and shook her head. 'No? Really? Not even a guess?' Luci shook her head more vigorously. 'Well, there are protons and neutrons in the nucleus, and electrons around the outside. Remember?'

Luci nodded rapidly, hoping to persuade Mrs Sinclair that she was just shy, not stupid. She sat as quietly as possible for the rest of the lesson, terrified that Mrs Sinclair would suss her out and she'd be put down into a lower class. Convinced that it was only a matter of time before it was revealed that she



couldn't cope, even amongst all these stupid, backwards bumpkins who never went anywhere and never did anything, and who were just obsessed with Orkney, Orkney, Orkney. And if that happened, that would give her mum something else to worry about. So Luci put her head down and tried to look like she understood or that she was at least 'making an effort'. Teachers appreciated pupils who 'made an effort'. As long as she wasn't being disruptive, as long as she was appearing to be focused, she hoped she'd be able to get away with this for a week or so, perhaps last out until the end of term, even in these smaller classes where it was so much more difficult to go unnoticed.

When the lesson finished, she made sure she wasn't the first one to leave the classroom, but made a point of neatly tidying away, eyes still down, written work handed in – what there was of it – shuffling out, keeping to the sides of the corridor to get to a maths lesson, followed by history, then finally it was over and she was out into the open and the outside world. It was half an hour after midday and already time to go home – school finished earlier on a Friday so that the kids from the northern islands could catch the ferry home for the weekend.

The sky was huge here; absolutely massive. She hadn't noticed the sky much where she'd lived before, there were too many trees and tall buildings in Portsmouth, but here you couldn't help but be awed by the immense dome covering the world in every direction as far as you could see. It made you humble if you thought about it too much, reminded you of your insignificance; so Luci tried not to think about it.

She strode away, quickening her pace as she put distance between herself and the hated school. Faster, she goaded herself, faster, before someone chased after her and asked her if she wanted to walk with them for a while, or study together, or perhaps come back to their house for tea, join an after-school club, audition for a play or try out for a band, go around the shops, or enquire whether she had any cigarettes ... but she was too quick for them all and she got away before any of those things happened and, she hoped, before anyone even noticed her going.

She had a bit of a walk back to the refuge. Its location was meant to be strictly secret, so she felt a little reassured that no one was with her. It was probably best for everyone if she kept herself to herself because she'd been told repeatedly that the location of where they were staying was kept secret in order to keep them safe. And not just her and her mum: all the other women and children who lived there depended on her keeping the secret too. So she wasn't allowed to casually invite anyone back, there'd be paperwork to do first, which meant if anyone ever did invite her back to their house for tea, she wouldn't be able to return the favour, so it really was best for everyone if no one ever did.

Living in the refuge was one more thing on Luci's list of things she hated. It was meant for women, and their children, who had escaped from homes and families that were bad. The term Luci heard used most was 'abusive'. It seemed to her that 'abuse' covered a range of situations, some of which were life threatening whilst others were simply inconvenient – Luci was convinced her mum's situation fell into the latter category. If her mum had really wanted the best for them both, maybe if she'd just tried a bit harder, surely she could've found a way to tolerate the occasional argument? Luci reasoned that if only her mum had cared about Luci as much as she claimed she did, she'd at least have waited until *after* Christmas before running away.

From the outside there was little to advertise the refuge's function; to the casual observer it looked like just another traditional stone building, exactly like all the other old stone buildings around it. You'd have to look very carefully if you wanted to spot all the hidden security. There might not be any bars on the windows but there were multiple locks on all of them, subtly concealed on the inside, and there were prickly bushes growing in the surrounding garden to stop anyone getting too near and peering through those windows. Her mum said the prickly bushes were *rosa rugosa* and that they would smell fragrant when the roses were in bloom in summer; Luci just felt it was like living on a Sleeping Beauty set.

The last refuge they'd stayed in had been more like a prison, with obvious bars on all the windows, and the inside had been drab and run down. They'd had their own room there but had had to share a bathroom and kitchen with other residents; at least here they had their own flat, even though it was



small and the carpets were worn. Her mum had said she hadn't felt fully safe before, but that she felt safer here, through distance if nothing else.

Safer but more boring, and she was stuck here, with her mum, but without any money, transport, or freedom: you couldn't go very far on a remote Scottish island before you needed to catch a ferry. When they'd left home, fled really, she hadn't been allowed to pack much; they wouldn't have been able to carry it. Now she felt less like an exile, more like a refugee; quite apt, she reflected, given she was currently living in a refuge.

Luci used her key to let herself into the foyer. She had to sign in and then go through another door, all before trying to get past the office: if there were staff in, the office door would be open. They had a policy of being cheery here, overly so she felt. They 'allowed you to talk' if you needed to. She didn't want to. She hoped she could get quietly past the office door, if it was open, without being noticed.

'Hello Luci, how you doing?'

She wasn't going to get quietly past.

Eyes down. Minimal wave of acknowledgement like any normal surly teenager would do.

'I'm OK, Jan.'

'Ok, doky, Loky.'

She could feel Jan smiling, trying to encourage interaction, the way your Key Worker was obliged to do.

Luci squeezed her eyes shut in irritation. Evidently Jan wasn't going to let her sidle past unnoticed. She knew that Jan had a remit to ensure that Luci felt reassured that help was available whenever she might need it. She'd never be forced to talk about her experiences, but she would be encouraged to do so, and, if she didn't, she'd be constantly reminded that there was a sensitive and experienced ear, all ready to listen, whenever she was.

And that was the last thing Luci wanted or needed right now, thank you, but she also knew enough of how things worked in these kinds of places to be fully aware that if she showed any sort of reluctance to talk, it would only make Jan even more determined to get her 'to open up a bit.'

So she looked Jan confidently in the eyes and even managed a whimsical smile. Then she looked down at her school bag and patted it.

'I've got lots of homework. I thought I'd get on with it before mum gets back, whilst it's still quiet.'

'Ooh what a bonny idea. You'll certainly be more likely to concentrate on it that way.'

Luci had calculated Jan wouldn't want to get in the way of her studying, and now she was away. She'd done it. Past the communal residents' lounge and then into their flat: where she could shut the door and bar the outside world from intruding. She leant against the door. There was a mirror on the inside; she couldn't avoid her reproachful reflection: her elfin features, her short, cropped hair, the mascara smudged under her eyes.

It was just past one o'clock. Luci had about four hours until her mum got back from work, but only about two hours before it started to get dark. She put her bag down and went to see what was in the 'fridge. Not much. Toast, she'd have some toast. And then maybe a bath. She might do some homework but probably wouldn't.

She looked out of the window to contemplate this so-called 'city' of Kirkwall, which seemed no bigger than a village. She hadn't been allowed to explore it yet; unless she was at school, she was meant to stay in the refuge for her own safety. In the distance the skyline was dominated by a big red church. It looked boring. It probably wasn't; it was probably 'historical' and her mum probably intended for them to visit it soon. Together. It would probably be educational, might even count as 'quality family time'. Luci grudgingly admitted that the light from the low sun did make the church look slightly more attractive than the slurry grey of the rest of Kirkwall.

She exhaled an exaggerated huff. It was just all so boring. It was boring now without mum around; it would be just as boring when mum got back. It rained for a bit which meant that even the weather was

boring. Winter was well entrenched here: the worst bits of winter, the bits without snow. She flicked through the books that had been left in their flat: they were boring too.

By three o'clock, all but one of the refuge workers had gone home and the one that was left, Bev, was noisily vacuuming the communal lounge whilst singing along to the music that had started up in the flat next door. It was lame, pre-teen manufactured boy-pop-band music. It was loud and annoying, and made worse by Bev's tuneless additions.

The rain finally stopped; Luci had had enough of being cooped up, she was going out.

\*\*\*

Luci wandered aimlessly for a bit, around the twisting and narrow streets which any tourist would be absolutely bound to love for their charm and quaintness. Everything seemed built of the same grey sandstone. It was dull, even in the last of the afternoon sunlight. Luci could only imagine how dreary it was going to look in the depths of January without the benefit of the Christmas lights and decorations that were currently struggling to bring glad tidings.

Christmas! Please don't let us still be here at Christmas. Make the argument up with dad and take me back south to Portsmouth, please.

A bell was tolling. Repetitive, the chimes sounded doleful. It called to Luci to follow. Lured on, she emerged from the tightness of a back-street into the sudden openness of a lawned area that hemmed the big red church she'd seen earlier. Set back from the road and the other buildings, the church was slightly uphill, approached via grand stone steps, all of which, Luci grudgingly admitted, added to its magnificence.

Directly ahead, between Luci and the church was a large stone cross on a plinth; there was a bronze plaque on the plinth – it showed an image of hundreds of people crushed together in what looked like a fight.

The bell was still tolling. There was a funeral taking place and mourners were making their way into the church, through the central door of the west end, all dressed in black and sombre. There were lots of hats. It looked like a wealthy send-off: the hearse was a fine copy of a Victorian coach, pulled by a pair of huge black shire horses. Luci climbed the stone steps to the kirk green and sat on one of the benches at the front of the church, staring at the people going in to the service. Her eyes were playing tricks on her because from this angle the two shire horses looked like they were just one giant horse with eight legs.

She moved her head, shifting to a different position; how silly of her, it was definitely two horses.

'Amazing, isn't it, how the angle at which you look at something can make it seem like something else entirely? That's how most optical illusions work.' The coachman had climbed down, walked over, and was now talking to her. To her!

'It's OK,' he continued, seemingly oblivious to how uncomfortable she was about any sort of human interaction, 'you can talk to me; I'm quite safe. Everyone knows me because of this.' He tapped an eyepatch.

Luci stared pointedly ahead. He really was talking to her. She tried to ignore him, and she certainly didn't want to give him the impression she was staring at his eyepatch, but he was a persistent one.

'Is this the first time you've seen St Magnus Cathedral?'

Luci nodded, despite herself.

'Oh, well that's a bit problematic that.'

'Why?'

'Because you first approached the Merkat Cross from the west. Directly from the west. That means we won't know whether you're an Uppie or a Doonie.'

'What?'

‘See that,’ he pointed back to the stone cross, ‘Mercat Cross. Not the original, that’s inside in the north transept, but very important is the Mercat Cross. You’d probably call it “The Market Cross”.’ He said that last bit in beautifully pronounced Queen’s English and chuckled.

‘Depending on which way you first approach the Mercat Cross determines whether you are an Uppie or a Doonie, and since you came at it from the west, that makes you neither. Or possibly both. Unlike me, who’s an Uppie.

‘Don’t worry, I’m not going to hold it against you, well, not for a week or so yet. You may have to choose at some point though. Most folks are Uppies these days, what with most bairns being born at the Balfour’, he gestured vaguely in the direction of the setting sun, ‘or down at Aberdeen and then flying home and first coming into Kirkwall from the airport,’ and now he pointed up the hill. ‘Of course you do get a few of the old Doonie families doing a bit of a circuitous tour around Kirkwall to ensure their newborns approach from the Basin, which is that way,’ he thumbed downhill, towards what seemed to be the main shopping street. ‘Old days of course, folks birthed their bairns at home and then everyone knew which side of the city they belonged to.

‘And why’s this all so important, I can tell you’re dying to know ... well because in the middle of winter, and it’s not quite the middle of winter yet, we have this Ba game which is a bit like rugby only without any rules, and it’s played between the Uppies and the Doonies. And it’s very, very important, is the Ba, especially if you live in Kirkwall. Very important. Keeps us all young too.’

Luci looked at him in disbelief; the coachman interpreted her look as one of continuing interest and plunged on with his description.

‘Not one rule. Well, there’s a sort of code of acceptability, some things that aren’t done. Like smuggling the Ba in a car. They did that one year, not too long ago. Can’t be against the rules when there aren’t any rules, but word were sort of put about that it wasn’t fully approved of. It won’t happen again.

‘I expect you’re wondering whether people get hurt?’

Luci widened her eyes.

‘Not as much as you’d think; a few cracked ribs and dislocated knees. Property though, well, that’s another matter. Did you notice any wooden barricades across any windows when you came through town?’ Luci nodded. ‘Well you come back in a week or so’s time and they’ll be barricades across each and every one of the doors and windows in this part of Kirkwall. Look around, can you see holes by all the doors and windows of the shops? They’re to take the barricades. They tend to leave ‘em up all year on the empty properties but by Christmas Eve, Kirkwall will look like a town under siege. Players have been known to break glass falling through a shop window after the Ba ... this is street football after all, oldest type of football, not like your modern FIFA rubbish. Take a big pinch of rugby and a dash of the sort of shove you get at a jumble sale, and you’ll have the general idea. But you have to see it really and even then you won’t understand it because you’ve got to have been playing it for years, generations even, to have a chance of fully understanding it. Not that you’ll ever be allowed to play.’

‘Why not?’

The coachman smiled, Luci felt hooked.

‘You’re not to get all feminist uppity with me about it: it’s men only. They did have a couple of women’s games, just after the war, but them wifeys went and poked each other with knitting needles and hat pins, so there’s no way we’ll allow it to happen again. Biggest honour a woman can have now is to be asked to throw the Ba up from the Mercat Cross to start the game. Lasses’ main job these days is to encourage their menfolk and keep out of the way of the pack when it gets in a scrum – because it’s not just the players who can get hurt: by-standing’s quite an art in its own way, gotta be awful nimble at times.’

‘So do they put goal posts out at either end of this bit of green then?’

‘Goals? Ha, you’re still thinking of that FIFA bruck. You can’t see either of the goals from here. Our goal is back that end of town by the Catholic Church’, he pointed in the same direction as the hospital. ‘Us Uppies have to touch the Ba to the wall.’

‘And what about “those” Doonies?’

‘Why, they’ve got to get the Ba in the Basin itself. Ba’s gotta go in the water of Kirkwall Harbour – usually a load of players go in with it, and they all get mightily cold. And the game isn’t over until a goal is scored, just the one mind. Can go on for hours sometimes, everyone gets tired and cold, but the Ba’s the Ba and it’s worth fighting for. For honour, for pride, for lots of reasons.

‘Oh look, that’s me now, back to work: funeral’s over and I’ve got a body to transport. If you want to know more, you can always ask in the museum there.’ He pointed to a white harled building opposite the cathedral, then he looked up at the cathedral spire and shook his head. He chuckled to himself and muttered: ‘And that’s another battle that’s been going on for a fair few years too.’

‘What?’

‘Nope, gotta go. Payin’ clients to see to and the dead always pay the best prices ‘cos they don’t tend to argue over my fee.’

The bell of the cathedral rang again, it was four o’clock and already dark. Luci would also have to leave now, if she had any chance of getting back before her mum, otherwise she’d only have to explain where she’d been. She looked up at the clock, then at her watch; the cathedral clock was fast, just a bit. And then she thought she saw a red blur move near the weathercock, but she dismissed it. She turned and made her way back to the refuge, noting as she did, the extent of the provision for barricades. Come Christmas, she thought, it would indeed be like the place was at war.

## Interlude

As cathedrals go, St Magnus Cathedral is not a particularly big one, about the size of a large medieval church, but it's substantial enough for a city as compact as Kirkwall. And the highest point in Kirkwall is still the very top of its spire. Even now, in this modern age, where other cities have had their cathedrals dwarfed by sky-scrapers and office blocks, the nearest one can climb towards the heavens in Kirkwall, if one so desires, is the top of this steeple. And if one were to yearn in such a way but, instead of climbing, were just to look up, following the line of the steeple up and up, until one's neck was to hurt with the bending of the back needed to be able to see so far up, then, right at the very top, one would see a golden weathercock, bravely pointing in the direction of the prevailing wind.

This is a glorious, gilded bird, with a plumage to be proud of, and it swings perpetually on its perch, reliably informing all who take the bother to look up, what the wind is doing. And it does this at all times, in all seasons, and without fail.

It is splendid, it is accurate, it is steadfast, it is often lonely and, periodically, it is insulted. For the little red blur which Luci had thought she'd seen, was something she actually had seen, and, if only she'd looked more carefully, or caught the movement at a better angle, and if she'd had a great deal of patience and luck, then she might have seen a cheeky red squirrel bounce its way up to the top of the spire.

And if Luci had had supernatural powers of hearing, she'd have heard the squirrel chirp out: 'Call yourself useful? You'd only be useful if you laid eggs - you're a waste of space!'

The weathercock, who'd heard much worse – and much better – before, replied: 'Having a bad day, Ratatoskr? Is that the best your master can manage? Scamper away, why don't you, and tell him to come up with something different. Or is he running out of insults? And I may be a waste of space, but you are a waste of my time.'

And the weathercock yawned and went back to turning in the wind.

The squirrel put his nose in the air and shimmied his tail. 'Not his best, was it?'

The weathercock twirled around once again, 'Try and do better tomorrow.'



## Chapter 2 – Uppies and Doonies

Luci flicked through the signing-in book as soon as she got back to the refuge. According to all the signatures, her mum wasn't back in yet. She felt a sense of relief at knowing she could be in the flat and settled, with her homework all spread out around her and the kettle on, and no one should ever need know that she'd been out. Conveniently she'd 'forgotten' to sign herself out, as well as in, so there was every chance she'd get away with it.

Now for the model daughter act. In. Shoes away and tidy. Kettle filled, mugs out with tea-bags in, all waiting to go. Homework out on the kitchen table. Look busy. Sound of key turning in the door, so look up expectantly and happy. Don't get up to switch the kettle on until you can be seen to be doing it

...

'Hello love, good day at school?'

'Yes thanks, mum.'

'Made lots of friends?'

'Starting to. What's for tea?'

'Chippy?'

'I'm veggy ...'

'And I'm tired. Can you not be veggy, just for one meal? Or just have the chips?'

'Can't. They fry them in beef dripping up here.' Luci screwed her face up in disgust. 'I checked.'

'It's traditional. And you don't get many vegetarians up here – it's a farming community.'

'I was thinking of going vegan ...'

'No, Luci, you're not. You're thinking of ways to be difficult. But I'm already one step ahead of you because I popped into Tesco on the way back and got some bargains – I got them for lunch tomorrow but if you don't fancy the chippy, they can do for now. Ta da! Look, salads for 10p, cucumber portion for 3p, some egg sandwiches for 15p. I got *all* of this for less than two quid. Don't look at me like that please; let's treat it as a picnic – there won't even need to be any washing up. Was that the kettle?'

Luci made the tea and got some cutlery out of the drawers. Another mix-up meal of odd, nearly-out-of-date food that no one else wanted. Squidged cartons and torn labels, but it was cheap. Whether it was balanced and nutritious was questionable, but it didn't cost much, and mum got quite excited about her bargains.

There was a tub of hummus with a weird flavour, no wonder it hadn't sold. Luci dipped some apple slices into it. It was OK. Some savoury biscuits would have been more OK but beggars can't be choosers.

'Mum, what's the Ba?'

'Oh, are they already trying to find out if you're an Uppie or a Doonie, darling?'

Luci nodded and carried on eating, as nonchalantly as she could.

'You're a Doonie. I'm a Doonie, we come from a long line of Doonies. One day you'll marry a Doonie and have lots of Doonie babies and continue the wonderful Doonie tradition. Jaw is open, Luci.'

Luci shut her mouth.

Her mum laughed. It wasn't a nasty laugh, Luci realised, it just wasn't a sound she'd heard for a while.

'They take the Ba very seriously in Kirkwall. *You* don't have to but it can be a way in, socially, if you want it to be. On the other hand, it can also be a bit restrictive because it can all get a bit Capulets and Montagues. If you're not interested, my advice is not to let anyone know, at least not for a while.'

'How do you know I'm not an Uppie?'

‘Oh you haven’t got too much choice about that. Firstly, there’s our family tradition and secondly, when I take you into town tomorrow afternoon, I’m going to make sure we go into Kirkwall the right way. Don’t worry; there isn’t a funny walk we have to do or anything.

‘Anyway,’ Luci’s mum got up and rummaged in a bag for a bit, returning to the table with a solid wooden box which she opened to reverently reveal a leather ball. The stitched panels alternated between dark and light dyed leather. She placed it in Luci’s hands, ‘to answer your original question: *that* is a Ba.’

‘What’re you doing with a Ba? Wait a minute, mum. Of all the things you could’ve brought with us, you brought this? Why this?’

‘As you are well aware, when we left that man, I didn’t have much time to grab much and I had to be extremely careful to only take what was definitely mine. Anything he’d bought me, he could’ve argued it was really still his, and then he’d have the law on his side. This Ba is one of the few things that is absolutely mine because it was won by my dad, your granddad.’

‘Dad wasn’t that bad.’

‘You weren’t the one married to him. He *was* that bad; worse in fact, and, as I keep reminding you, he wasn’t your real father.’

‘He’s the only dad I ever knew.’

‘Luci, love, I know you miss him and your life in Portsmouth, and all the things he bought you, but please ... I couldn’t stay there and put up with ... oh, you’ll understand when you’re older. Do you really think I want to live like this; dependent on charity and benefits, and having to take a cleaning job, and eating this only-just-best-before food to get by? Do you?’

Change the subject, Luci, change the subject, ordered the clever voice in her head.

‘It’s heavier than I thought it would be.’

‘They’re all handmade and unique. My dad always told me that inside each one is a tiny golden ball, but I think he was teasing me. If he wasn’t, then I may have taken something incredibly valuable, and if he was, then I’ve still taken something incredibly valuable.’

‘How come?’

‘Because in places like this, small island communities, who you know and who you have connections with can be your most valuable commodity. By donating that Ba to the museum or perhaps to the Ba Committee, complete with all its family history, well, that could buy us some connections. Doors might open for us, Luci, and hopefully it won’t be too long before I can get something better than a cleaning job, possibly even something which actually uses my qualifications.’

‘Do you think it has got gold in it? Gold’s worth a lot these days.’

‘It hasn’t, it was a joke. I passed a metal detector over it once, just to see; not so much as a faint bleep. Anyway, I have an early shift tomorrow and you have a support session with Jan as soon as she’s in, so we both need to go to bed.’

‘Do I have to?’

‘Yes, you do. You really do.’

\*\*\*

Jan was waiting for Luci when she emerged from the flat in the morning. There was no escape or way to avoid it and the clever voice in her head always seemed to be annoyingly quiet at times such as these.

‘Come into the lounge, Luci, we’re just going to have a chat. Do you want a cuppa tea?’

Luci shook her head. She sat down. Said nothing; she was going to make Jan work.

‘Do you know what my job is, Luci?’

‘Yeah, I had a “Jan” before, when we were at Portsmouth. Your job is to make me open up and tell you all my problems so that by expressing them I can find my own solutions.’

‘Very good. But wrong. Nobody’s going to *make* you do anything in these sessions, so if you don’t want to talk at all, that’s fine with me. In fact, if you just want to sit in silence for an hour, that’s fine too, but I think you should at least listen to what I’ve got to say about your mum because, at the moment, you’re just another hindrance for her and I’d rather you helped her.

‘What’s up, Luci, conversation not comfortable? Do you think you’re the first young person I’ve worked with who’s been determined not to engage with me? You’re not, and you won’t be the last either.

‘I’m being a bit mean, aren’t I? After all you’ve been through; I shouldn’t be giving you a hard time like this. So why *am* I doing it?

‘Firstly, because I don’t see any point in us playing games. It’s just a waste of time for both of us. I’m going to be honest: funding is being cut so I can’t work with you as much as I’d choose to; I haven’t got time to build up a relationship with you, so I’m just going to ask you to trust me. Secondly, I’m near to retirement, so I can take a few more risks – if I lose my job through being unconventional, it won’t be the end of the world for me. And thirdly, you’re not a child, you’re a young person; an adult in anyone’s eyes except those of the law, and so I’m going to talk to you, as equals, and this, essentially, is it: Stop. Giving. Your. Mum. A. Hard. Time.

‘I know how much you miss what you had, but you have no idea how brave your mum has been to get away. You really don’t. And you probably never will because she’s still shielding you from it. Do you know why you used to get the treats you got from your step-dad? You got them as bribery. To keep you there. So you wouldn’t leave with your mum if she ever asked you to. She begged you to, didn’t she? All through your childhood, you’ll have fairly persistent memories of your mum begging you to leave, and you always refused. So she stayed because of you, and you had to learn to ignore her screams and tears, but it was alright because it was happening to someone else and not to you, and you still had all your nice things.

‘I bet you want to go to university, don’t you? I bet you don’t want all that student debt? I bet he promised to pay for you to go, to fund the lot?

‘Were you hoping for a car at 17 and lessons? ‘Thought so. It’s all promises, Luci, future promises and bribes. It might have happened, it might not ... your pony never materialised, did it?’

Luci’s expression leaked surprise.

‘I know because your mum told me, Luci! And I’m not stupid, I know how these men work. It’s all a way to get you to be compliant, to behave, and you got fully taken in by it. It’s not your fault. It’s a form of manipulative and emotional abuse that is well-documented and studied. But it’s all done to keep you beholden to him because he was terrified of losing your mum. It was never about *love*, Luci, it was certainly never about *you*, it was all about keeping *you* tied to *him*, so that *she* would be too.

‘Now, why do you think your mum ran all the way up here? To inconvenience you as much as possible? To take you away from everything you love in order to punish you; to separate you from all your friends, especially the ones you fancy? To ruin your life? It’s all so unfair, right?

‘Wrong. She came up here to put as much distance between herself and him as she could. The night she got away was a bit touch and go. But you probably know that. What you may not know is that he found out where that refuge was and kept pestering them to let him in. Got a bit violent. Scared the other residents and some of the workers. They had to call the police. Your mum didn’t feel safe there, so she looked around for a refuge that was as far away as possible, that had a vacancy, and that was Orkney. And that’s why you’re here and that’s why it’s really important, vital, that you don’t do anything that might alert him to where you are.

‘Of course you’ll know that your mum also says she’s got some distant family ties here, which may help, although she’s never actually met them. But in reality, all she’s really got are some second-hand memories from her father – your granddad – and *you*. Your mum is terrified, Luci, really scared – but she’s got a chance of a fresh start here, a new life, please help her to build it.

‘You know she’s tried to kill herself a couple of times, don’t you?’

‘No’

‘Well you do now. People don’t do that sort of thing lightly. Look, I know you had a brilliant life back in the south. I know you were spoilt. I know it must be very different for you here, but you need to be grown up and appreciate the price your mum was paying for all of that. Perhaps now it’s time for you to be a bit less selfish and pay back some of your mum’s love?’

‘Give Orkney a go, Luci, you may end up liking it – loads of folks do. Oh yes, they come up on holiday and, before you know it, they’re decided to move here. You must’ve noticed there’s a lot of non-Orkadian accents around? Like mine! ‘Bout a third of the population these days. So it may be exile for you, but you’re not alone.

‘Have you changed your mind about that cuppa tea?’

Luci shrugged. ‘Strong with milk please, Jan.’

‘I suppose I’d be pushing my luck if I asked if *you* wanted to talk now?’

Luci nodded and smiled, in spite of herself.

‘That’s OK,’ Jan called from the kitchen area, ‘I said what needed to be said, it was enough for both of us; you listened, and I got a smile. A smile’s a start. You know where I am if you need me.’

They sipped tea.

‘Well, this is very nice but I have to see Lauren from flat 2, so just remember: don’t let on to *anyone* back south about where you are please.’

Luci reddened.

‘Have you put this on FaceBook?’

‘I’m not friends with my dad on FaceBook,’ Luci protested, ‘and my settings are private.’

‘You’ve got to be more careful, Luci. Promise me that you will double-check your settings for privacy, make sure your posts go to friends only, and don’t accept any new friends. I also want you to unfriend and block anyone you don’t know, and I want you to delete *any* references to Orkney. Immediately. Can we meet again soon, say, Wednesday, straight after school, is that OK?’

Luci nodded.

‘One other thing: do you have a mobile ‘phone? You know they can be tracked, don’t you? Your mum said that your dad had bought you both a new one recently and I advised her to change her SIM, but she said you hadn’t had time to grab yours when you left ... just be aware, Luci; your dad will be trying anything at the moment to find you, don’t give him a chance.’

## Chapter 3 – Kirkwall

‘Don’t pull a face, we’re going to the museum this afternoon. I’m going to see if they’ve got any information about the Ba games and on the way I’m going to make you a Doonie.’ Luci pulled a face. ‘And afterwards, I’ll treat you to a coffee.’ Luci pulled less of a face.

Luci noticed that her mum took her on a less direct route to the cathedral than the one she had taken by herself; they were keeping to the main roads rather than sneaking around the narrow back-streets. She let her mum lead so she wouldn’t give away she’d been there before. She also noticed that her mum was walking slightly differently now, she seemed to be, well, taking up more room: she wasn’t keeping out of everyone’s way by hugging the shop fronts, and she was saying ‘hello’ to quite a few people whom they passed. Clearly this wasn’t a place where you could be anonymous.

They approached the cathedral and kept walking; then, as they passed the Mercat Cross, Luci’s mum announced: ‘That’s you then, just been made a Doonie. Didn’t hurt, did it?’

‘What? You mean just walking past here, turns me into one or the other?’

Luci’s mum nodded, ‘All to do with the Mercat Cross. Silly isn’t it? I think the museum’s over there.’ Luci tried to look like she’d just learnt something new and then let her mum lead her through a gateway and into the courtyard of the building just opposite the cathedral. It was an old building that would clearly have been grand in its day, but there were various banners and posters announcing that it was now the Orkney Museum. Passing through a square courtyard, they pushed open a glass door exquisitely engraved with a stylised eagle. There was a small gift shop, just to the inside, on the right, and they went in, hoping to find a member of staff.

‘Hello,’ Luci’s mum addressed the young man behind the till, ‘do we have to purchase tickets?’

‘No, madam, entrance to the museum is free of charge. Is there anything in particular you’d like to see?’

‘I wonder if it might be possible to learn something more about the Ba game?’

‘Of course, we have a display just up the stairs, the ones straight behind you. Go up, then turn immediately to the right and you’ll see a cabinet dedicated to the Ba. If you want even more information there’s some folders in the twentieth century gallery, or there’s a DVD to purchase. But you should find the display upstairs will answer most of your questions and, by all means, come back and ask me if there’s anything else you want to know and I’ll do my best.’

Upstairs and there was indeed a single cabinet display, with plenty to read and lots of faded sepia photographs of men wearing splendid moustaches and proudly holding footballs very similar to the one Luci’s mum had brought with her. There was a small display of Ba’s too, all made of hand-stitched leather.

‘Can you see what the date is on those photographs, Luci? Your eye-sight is better than mine.’

‘Early twentieth century. They’ve been playing this for a while then?’

‘To the best of my knowledge, it’s been played for at least the last couple of hundred years. I don’t think anyone knows exactly when it started.’

‘We could ask downstairs – he seems helpful.’ Luci hoped her mum wouldn’t notice her subtle attempt to get out and onto the promised coffee.

‘I guess you couldn’t work in a place like this without being fascinated by the past. Ooh look at those little figurines ... that one’s got a Ba under his jumper, the label says he’s “smuggling”!’

‘There really are no rules, are there?’

‘Except the “no women” rule.’



‘Well, she won it once,’ Luci pointed at a photograph of an attractive young lady with a hairstyle typical of the 1940s, ‘says here that she donated her Ba to the museum, so you might end up with your photo in here if you do the same thing mum.’

‘It wouldn’t be a photo of me, I didn’t win it; it’d be a mention of me, at most, and a photo of granddad. Nice thought though and good to know all things are possible.’

‘She looks very young and very beautiful in that photo. Not unlike you, mum.’

‘Oh, Luci, sometimes you say the sweetest things! Now, shall we go and ask when these games started?’

Back downstairs, in the shop, the custodian had just finished serving a customer. He smiled as Luci and her mum came back in and asked: ‘Did you find out what you wanted? Do you need directions for the twentieth century gallery to watch the videos? Or perhaps we could interest you in a postcard of the Ba’s in our collection? Only 30p and every purchase helps to keep the museum free ...’

‘Well, we were wondering when the game dates from.’

‘Oh, no one knows for sure. Some say it goes back to the medieval period, some say it’s even earlier than that. As street football goes, of course, it’s not unique; other places around Britain have similar traditions – no doubt you’ll have heard of the Shrove Tuesday Shove in Derbyshire? – a hundred years or so ago such games were quite common, even in Orkney they had similar games in Stromness and some of the outer islands and most of the parishes. But Kirkwall’s game is one of the few still going. Of course red tape and those giants of bureaucracy that are the health and safety laws threaten its continuance every so often, so who knows how much longer it’ll be allowed to go on for ... and are you Uppies or Doonies?’

‘Doonies!’ They both said it at the same time; Luci’s mum laughed whilst Luci tried her best to pretend she’d said nothing.

‘Ah, so you’ll be Earl’s men, from doon tha gates.’ Luci and her mum exchanged a look of puzzlement between them; the custodian continued: ‘The Uppies are traditionally the Bishop’s men, from the Laverock, church land, whereas the Doonies are traditionally the Earl’s men, from the Burgh, the business district. In the middle ages, Kirkwall was a bit like two cities in one. Earl Henry Sinclair, he was around about the 1300s; he was expressly told not to build a castle in Kirkwall but legend tells how he declared “The Bishop has a Palace up the gates, it is only right that I should have a castle down the gates.” And that’s why we’ve got a Castle Street in Kirkwall because that’s where he built it. His castle isn’t there anymore, got destroyed about 1600, but you can still see the Bishop’s palace – just up the hill and over the road from the cathedral – small entrance charge to get in, but well worth a visit. Is there any reason why you’re so interested in the Ba?’

‘My dad won one – I inherited it. I was hoping the museum might be interested if I offered to donate it ...’

‘Oh I wouldn’t be able to comment on that, you’d have to speak to one of the curators, which means you’ll have to make an appointment. And the best way to do that is to send them an email – here’s their contact details.’ The custodian passed Luci’s mum a scrap of paper on which he’d hurriedly scrawled an email address. ‘But I’m not really the best person to talk to about the Ba either, I mean, I know a bit, but I’m really a prehistorian by training – I’m more interested in all the theories about how the earliest games kicked around a human head, or that the Ba symbolises the sun, with an Uppie win meaning a good harvest for the farmers and a Doonie win foretelling a plentiful catch from the seas.

‘The person you could do with talking to is Rodin; you’ll see him around here quite a bit, he drives the horse-drawn carriages. Rodin loves to blether about the Ba – he’s on the Committee, actually he tends to head up the Committee these days. Doesn’t play himself anymore, but he was a stalwart of the game when he was younger. Won a Ba, I believe, as a younger man; even lost one of his eyes in a game! Oh yes, it can get *that* violent.

‘But usually it’s more of a place to find true love – many a Kirkwall marriage has its roots in a lass setting her sights on a man who’s played a good game. A lady visitor from sooth once asked a player to dinner all because she’d seen his shoes, and that was all, sticking out of a scrum ... seemed she decided

there and then that if he had such stylistic tastes in shoes, they'd have something in common. She was quite a forceful character, by all accounts, used to getting her own way – corporate lawyer or something – and she *was* offering to pay for dinner. Dinner turned into a weekend at a fancy hotel before it all fizzled out. It would seem that a shared fascination for smart footwear remains insufficient grounds for a long-term relationship ...

'Hold on, I've got one of Rodin's business cards in the till.'

The custodian passed them a business card. It was green and announced:

*HOARBEARD'S HORSES*

*Traditional horse-drawn carriages for hire*

*Funerals, weddings, leisurely drives around Kirkwall*

*Fully insured, Orkney family business*

'His contact details are on the back but, honestly, I'd just try and catch him – he has a lot of waiting around to do in that job, and won't need any encouragement to talk about the Ba. Good bloke is Rodin, bit eccentric, but his heart's in the right place and, if he takes a liking to you, you won't find a truer friend.'

'I've got to be back at work for my second shift at four, but we should be able to visit the palace and still have time for a coffee.' Luci's mum was plotting out loud. Luci had a vision of her coffee evaporating before her eyes but nodded anyway. 'So which way is it to the Bishop's Palace?'

'You go out of the door behind you, the one you came in by. Through the courtyard, then head up the hill; keep the cathedral on the left and mind the traffic because it can get a bit chaotic out there on the junction outside: traffic can come at you from quite a few different directions. Keep going up the hill, you can't miss the ruins, they're on the right.'

'Thank you, you've been very helpful.'

'And entertaining,' Luci added.

'Glad I could help; I try to be a font of knowledge. I hope you enjoy your holiday in Orkney.'

'We're not on holiday, we've just moved here.'

'Great, so we'll see you in the museum again soon, will we? You've got lots more to see and you'll need to learn as much as you can about Orkney's history – it will help you to fit in, help you to understand why things are like they are. I hope you like it here; it feels like I've been here forever ... the winters are the worst, especially the first 5 or 6 of them, then they just merge into one in your memory. Don't look so worried, you'll get used to it, and once you've got accepted into the community there isn't a better place to live in the world, I'd say.'

\*\*\*

'Well, that's positive,' said Luci's mum as they walked up the hill.

'You think?' said Luci.

'Yes, I think. Here we are: ruins. Must be the palace. Ooh look: trees! Have you noticed there aren't many? I think we're meant to pay at the hut first.'

They went into what was basically a large garden shed that had been spruced up to act as a rather crammed gift shop and ticket office. The steward was a youthful, bustling woman who looked up from her paperwork as soon as they walked in.

'One adult and one child please.'

'May I ask how old the young person is? Adult rates start at 16 in Scotland.'

'She's nearly 14.'

The steward raised an eyebrow. 'She could pass for older, but I daresay you hear that a lot.'

‘Thanks.’ Luci was thrilled with the compliment.

‘Few years from now, you’ll be trying to look younger than your age, not older, believe me. Am I right, big sis?’

And now it was Luci’s mum’s turn to be complimented, ‘No, we’re not sisters, I’m her mum. I’m 35, but I won’t be offended unless you try to sell me a pensioner’s ticket.’

‘35? No way! Whatever you take, bottle it and sell it, you’d make a fortune. You do know you could pass for early 20s, don’t you? Amazing. I’m sorry, I’m being rude now, none of my business how old either of you are, just as long as you buy the right tickets, please forgive me and forget I said it.’

‘Are you joking? You’ve just managed to flatter both of us – if that’s you being rude, bring it on.’ Luci’s mum was beaming, even Luci had to concede that she looked happier than she had for ages.

‘Have you been to this site before? This is the point when I’m meant to either sell you membership or a pass to all the sites we manage in Orkney, but I’d prefer just to tell you that those sorts of tickets are available if you wish to purchase them and could save you money if you are planning to visit this site again, or our other sites in Orkney.’

‘Thank you, but for today I think it’ll just be tickets for here.’

‘Well, most people start in the earliest part of the site, that’s the original palace, built by Bishop William the Old in the twelfth century. The other ruins are more recent, early 1600s and were built by the most hated man in Orkney’s history – to date that is – Earl Patrick Stewart, or Black Patie as he’s nick-named. There’s information boards at various places around the site and you may like to consider purchasing a guidebook.’

‘You really do have to sell, don’t you?’

‘You might be a mystery shopper ...’

‘I’m not, don’t worry, you’re doing a grand job. So, is this where the Uppie’s base is then?’

‘If you believe the legends, yes. If you climb the Moosie To’or – there’s a wonderful view from the top – you can look down on where the Doonies’ castle used to be.’

\*\*\*

‘Interesting, but we’ve taken longer than I thought we would and we’re going to have to skip coffee now because I can’t risk being late for my shift. Sorry, Luci, but I can’t lose my job. Ooh, is that that Rodin man there, with the horses?’

Luci’s mum pointed to outside the cathedral. There was a driver and trap with two magnificent black horses, both pulling a bit, wanting to be away. Luci recognised the same man she’d spoken to yesterday and hoped he wouldn’t give away the fact they had already spoken.

‘Look! There must be a wedding – the bride’s just walking up to the cathedral with her father. She looks so happy,’ observed Luci’s mum, ‘I hope she will be.’

The man with the horses had a different hat on today, although it was still pulled down over his eyes. His cloak was a smart dark blue which matched the livery of his horses. He smiled and waved to Luci.

‘Do you know him, Luci?’

Luci shook her head; she had no idea how she was going to get away with this. She crossed the fingers of one hand in desperation and then hid them in her pocket.

‘Hi’, Luci waved back confidently, approaching at a quick stride to outpace her mum, ‘are you Mr Hoarbeard?’

‘Rodin Hoarbeard at your service, ladies,’ and he tapped his hat and swung down from the carriage, far more nimbly than a man with that much grey hair should be capable of. Then he sketched a low, theatrical bow.

Luci’s mum giggled. Rodin reached out as if to shake her hand and instead, gently took it and lifted it to his lips, giving her fingers a tender kiss. All the while he maintained eye contact with her so that she blushed furiously. Luci shuffled her feet a little awkwardly.

‘Now then, you must be the two exquisitely attractive ladies who want to know all about the Ba, won’t you?’

‘Have we met at all, Mr Hoarbeard?’

‘Rodin, please, and no, we have not met before, madam, or should I say miss, for I surely would have remembered *you*. No, rather my confidant at the museum described you both and advised that I could further your knowledge by sharing mine. So I have been keeping one eye out for you both, which is all I can do.’ He smiled rather disarmingly and looked up. Luci noticed that he wore his eyepatch in a jaunty, roguish way, and not in the manner of someone nursing an injury. It rather suited his pirate swagger. He was clearly a ladies’ man and a charmer, but she felt confident enough to uncross her fingers, trusting that he wasn’t going to let on that they had met before.

‘Now, whilst I would be delighted to assist you delicious damsels, you can see, I am sure, that I am currently gainfully employed and I will have to keep one eye on the clock. Again, all I can do these days ... You’ve been up to the Bishop’s Palace then? And you’re probably wondering now where the earl’s castle is that’s meant to be doon-tha-gates? Right, well, see over there? Opposite that while building, that road running off to the west, is known as Castle Street, and see that bank on the corner? That is where Earl Henry Sinclair’s castle once stood. You have to remember that, at the time the castle was built, the water from the harbour came right up to here, lapping against the cathedral steps. All this,’ he gestured expansively, to the west, over the buildings in front of the cathedral, ‘was underwater. So the earl’s castle was built on a promontory of land, jutting into the original harbour, giving it a highly strategic and defensive position. He weren’t stupid that Henry Sinclair, bit fond of power and very ambitious, but you wouldn’t believe the connections that man had.’

‘So why isn’t there a castle anymore?’

‘I presume that, as well as the Bishop’s Palace, you also took the time to see the Earl’s Palace? Different earl. Different in many ways. 300 years difference in time. *That* earl was a Scottish Stewart, imposed on Orkney by the crown. Came to a sticky end, did Black Patie, got tried for treason, his son raised a rebellion, there was a siege involving the castle, which is why there’re all these little holes in the front of the cathedral – bullet holes from muskets! – siege failed of course, and the castle was destroyed in revenge. Castle ruins were still up until about a hundred years ago, when they needed to widen the road, and they were completely removed then. All that is left now is a rather enigmatic road name and a plaque on the side of the bank.

‘Now, I believe those bells are telling me that troths have been plighted and a happy pair of newly-weds are about to emerge and will immediately require me to drive them to their reception. So, may I suggest we continue this delectable conversation in about half an hour, preferably at a local hostelry? I plan to meet up with my wife and son for a quick bite and no doubt she will attempt to stop me from spending everything I’ve earned today.’

‘Rodin, we’d love to, wouldn’t we?’ Luci’s mum turned to Luci for endorsement. ‘But I have to go to work; I have split shifts today, morning and then late afternoon. Thank you for the information, but I understand you are on the Ba Committee and that you may be interested in my father’s Ba ...’

‘You have a Ba? Hhhmm, yes, of course you do. In that case, could I continue this conversation with young Luci here in your absence and she can update you later? I’ll even buy her a bite of supper, that’ll save you time when you finish work. And I’ll make sure that she gets home safely and she’s not home too late. She’ll be fine, it’ll be my wife and son there too, not just me and her alone, and it’ll be a public place.’

Luci bit her lip, she hoped her mum hadn’t noticed that Rodin had just called her by name when they hadn’t told him their names. In fact, she was fairly certain she’d never told Rodin her name the last time they’d met.

She needn’t have worried; her mum seemed bowled over by Rodin’s charm, almost hypnotised by him. ‘If that’s OK with Luci, I’m sure that’ll be fine with me. Luci, you’re to be back no later than 5pm.’

‘Yes, mum.’ She just hoped now that Rodin wouldn’t say or do anything really stupid, that he wouldn’t give away that they’d met previously. But he didn’t. The newly married couple were coming out of the church and his attention was fully on them. He managed a ‘See you at the burger van in the car park across from Tesco in half an hour, keep to this end of town if you can’, and was up and on his carriage before Luci could protest about being vegetarian.

Her mum laughed, ‘You can just have the bread roll, love. Can you remember how to get to Tesco from here?’ Luci nodded. ‘I’m off, then, see you later this evening.’ Then suddenly, as if thinking through what she’d arranged, she added, ‘He does seem OK, doesn’t he? Just keep to places where there’s lots of other people around, OK, and if his wife doesn’t turn up with him, leave immediately. You’re street-wise, anything suspicious, anything at all, make your polite excuses and go.’

‘Yes, mum. Go to work.’

Luci felt somewhat side-lined. No coffee and either relegated to a carnivorous tea or else a rather reduced one. Her mum had let her down yet again. She knew she only had a bit of time to kill before the meeting, so she walked in the direction of the erstwhile castle. She planned to read the plaque and walk the long way around to Tesco, around the land allegedly reclaimed from the sea. As she set out she passed the Mercat Cross, the bronzed information board still showed what looked like untold numbers of men pushing and shoving together, with a little bit of information about the Ba. It looked like a riot, pure chaos; it didn’t look like much of a game at all.



## Chapter 4 – Family

Rodin was already waiting at the burger van. He was settling his horses, putting a feedbag over their heads and patting them for a job well done. With him was a dainty woman and a muscular younger man.

‘This is my son, Thorfinn, and my wife, Frida.’ Thorfinn was tall and broad, with bright ginger hair and an incredible beard. ‘Say “hello” to Luci, Thorfinn.’

‘Hello, Luci. I am very pleased to meet you. I hope we can be friends. My da has told me about you. This is my step-mum.’

Thorfinn put his muscular arms around the shoulders of the diminutive woman. She had the most amazing white blond hair, tied in two long plaits. She opened her arms to Luci and stepped forward to hug her. ‘My name is Frida, and yes, I am from Norway!’ Frida’s accent made her introduction sound as if she had just announced the most exciting thing ever said. ‘Although nearly everybody I know in Orkney has Norwegian ancestry if you go far enough back in time.’

‘Thorfinn here takes after his mother more than me. Strapping lad, isn’t he? He’ll win a Ba in the future, of course. So, what will you have to eat? We’re all having cheese burgers.’

‘I’m vegetarian.’

‘Don’t you like meat?’

‘It’s more to do with animal welfare.’

‘Of course. You don’t like the idea of baby calves being taken away from their mums within hours of birth and then being kept in dark, dirty factory conditions. Fed with artificial nutrients. Never having a day out to frolic in verdant fields of lush grass under a golden sun. Pumped full of unnecessary antibiotics. Then, in a final nightmarish episode, herded terrified into cramped crates and transported for days on end, without adequate water, to a place of slaughter. A place which stinks of the fear of other animals, where they are murdered and then butchered in a cruel and unhygienic manner. All very laudable.

‘But if those are your reasons, you won’t have any problems with Orkney beef. The burgers’ve won awards, the abattoir’s won awards, the butcher’s won awards, and so has the farmer who raised the cow. The only thing that hasn’t won awards is the bread roll – and that should have because it was baked on Westray.

‘They don’t call our beef “Orkney Gold” for nothing. We don’t do that intensive farming here. Orkney beef cattle, well, you been out to the country yet?’ Luci shook her head. ‘Well, when you do, you’ll see that the cattle are kept in herds: the bulls stay with their heifers, his harem if you like, and the calves are kept with their mums. That means the whole herd are unstressed. Unstressed animals don’t get ill as much, so they don’t need as much precautionary medication. And they’re all kept outside on rich Orkney grass. Couldn’t be any more natural. Couldn’t be any happier. Over winter, farmer won’t want his cattle to lose too much weight, so he brings them into his byre, keeps them under cover and warm, and fed on hay and silage that he’s made from his own grass during the summer. Almost cosseted, they are. Of course, old days, they used to take the cows into their own homes, but that’s going a bit far.

‘Sure, those cattle have still got to be slaughtered, but there’s an abattoir in Kirkwall, so the livestock don’t have far to travel. That means they don’t get distressed in transport, it’s more like a day-trip to the seaside for them. The slaughter house staff know that to get the best price for meat it has to be tender and to get tender meat, you have to keep the animals unstressed, so they’re dispatched quickly and cleanly. There are very high welfare standards here and it’s all heavily supervised to make sure those standards are maintained.

'It all means that Orkney produces a premium product, which when you have such high export costs, is the only way to ensure a decent profit for the farmer.

'So, try a burger. I won't tell anyone you've indulged, but if it's welfare issues stopping you from eating meat, don't let them, because there's no need, not here. And if you don't like it, Thorfinn here'll eat it for you, so it won't be wasted. Very little gets wasted around Thorfinn, after all, he's got to keep his strength up.'

Luci was still wavering, her hunger starting to win out over her principles, when she felt a vibration in her pocket. She got her 'phone out and looked at the number. She knew who was calling; she'd been ignoring the calls and texts for the past week, and they'd been more and more of them every day. On an impulse she took the call, walking away for a little privacy and to stall on the meat decision.

'Luci? How is my beautiful, clever one? I'm missing you so much.'

'Dad?'

'That's right, Luci, of course it's your dad. I've been calling and calling but you weren't picking up.'

'Sorry, dad, mobile reception isn't brilliant here. I ...'

'How's your mum? Luci, I swear there's been a misunderstanding; I never meant to hurt her, and I'll never do it again. I'd just had a bad day at work and I just lost my temper; I've been trying to think of ways to make it up to you ever since ... I've already booked some riding lessons for you and ...' Luci heard him starting to cry. 'You're my best, my most favourite child. I love you so much. I just want you both to come back home ... can't you persuade your mum?'

'Dad, I miss you so much and everything back home, but I'm not meant ...'

'Oh, darling, did the people at the refuge tell you that? Those women's workers ... they're all the same, you know, all divorced, single-parent lesbians. They're all man-haters. They're bound to tell you that I'm a bad person. They've probably put words in your mum's head, twisted things, made her believe I'm much worse than I really am, distorted what happened, but it's all lies. I know I have a bit of a temper, but I'm a man, it's only natural ...'

'Dad, do you really miss me?'

'So much, darling. All your things are still here; your room is kept exactly as it was. You'd like to come back to all your things, wouldn't you?' He started to cry again. 'I just want you back, my darling, please. Don't you want to come back home, to me, back to how it was? I bet things are tough with mum, aren't they? I expect money is a bit tight? Come home, Luci, it can all go back to how it was. Your friends miss you; they've been around asking after you, especially the one with the dimples who wears too much eye make-up.'

'Joanna?'

'Yes, Joanna, that's the one. She misses you. And her friend, the one with the nose-ring.'

'Karen? Have Jo and Kaz been 'round, dad?'

'They keep coming around, they really miss you. I've told them you'll be back soon and when you do, you're going to have a big party to celebrate coming home. They're looking forward to helping you to plan it. I'll get you a proper DJ and everything. And a young lad's been asking after you ... blond, a bit lanky, said his name was Siggy or something that sounded a bit European. Seems a decent enough young man.'

'Sig's been asking after me? Oh, I never ...'

'Come back Luci, come home. Persuade your mum. Tell her I'm so sorry. It'll never happen again, I promise. Tell her, Luci, please. Do you need some money? I can send you some if you like ... there must be some way I can get some money to you, so you don't have to struggle quite so much. Be nice for your mum too, you could treat her, it could be our secret ... she wouldn't have to know ...'

'Please, Luci. All I want to do is to help you, even if your mum and I never get back together, I still want to see *you* and support you ... please Luci ...'

'Dad, I can't talk much, but you wouldn't believe how awful it is here, what I'd give to come home, but I ...'

'Don't hang up, Luci, please just don't hang up. Please, it's so wonderful to be able to talk to you again. You have no idea how much I've missed you, how much we're all missing you. OK, I won't keep you anymore, I can tell you're busy but before you go, just promise me you'll talk to mum, promise me you'll tell her I still love her and want her back. Promise me, Luci, promise me?'

'OK. I'll ask but ...'

'I know, I know, I'm so sorry. I'm only doing this because of how much I love you both, you do know that, don't you Luci?'

'Yes, dad, I do.'

'Good. So how are you getting on? Have you made any new friends yet?'

'No.'

'Oh, Luci, you must be so lonely, what was your mum thinking of, taking you all that way? You know you still have all your friends here still, don't you? They're all asking after you, they all want you to come back. Joanna and Karen said they'd been to see the new James Bond film at the cinema. Have you seen that yet?'

'No. But mum says we can see it at the Pickaquoy Centre together, as soon as they put it on. There's only one screen here, and the cinema doubles as a lecture theatre – everything here doubles as something – so sometimes it takes a while to get the latest films.'

'Sounds a bit backwards?'

'Like you wouldn't believe.'

'And school, what about school? Are you still top of the class, my clever Luci?'

'No, dad, not anymore.'

'Oh Luci, what are they teaching you there? Is it a different GCSE syllabus?'

'They don't do GCSEs here, they're called Standards.'

'Tut tut, doesn't your mum realise how damaging it is for you to disrupt your education at this stage of your life? Well, don't worry, do your best – I know you always do – and when you get back I'll get you a private tutor to help you catch up. I won't have your whole life ruined by your mum's thoughtlessness.'

'Thanks, dad.'

'Anything for my Luci, anything at all, you know me. Well, I'd better let you go, it'll be dark soon and time for bed.'

'It already is dark, dad, soon it'll be really dark.'

'Is that seagulls I can hear?'

'Yeah, it is.'

'You're kidding me? They sound a lot posher than Portsmouth seagulls! I suppose seagulls are seagulls wherever you go. Your ones still mob you for chips? Remember that one who pooped on mum's head when we were looking around HMS Victory?'

Luci laughed. 'She made such a fuss! And you tried to convince her it was lucky, what was the word you used?'

'*Auspicious*. I did too. That was mean of me, wasn't it? But you know I was only teasing her. Even your mum laughed a bit, after a while. I'd love to hear her laugh again, Luci, I'd love you both to come back. Can I get some money to you somehow? You still got that secret bank account I set up for you?'

'Yeah.'

'Well, I'll put £200 in it. I've kept a note of your sort code and account number, but it might take a couple of days to arrange, so you'll have to keep checking your account.'

'Thanks, dad, but ...'

'No one needs to know, it's OK, you've not broken any confidences. Just do me a favour, eh? Treat your mum to something: lunch out, a dress, next time she has a day off – I take it she *is* working?'

'Mmm.'

'Cleaning?'

'Mmm.'

‘Oh how could she? What on earth is she trying to prove? She doesn’t need to do that. Anyway, Luci, just text me, the day you get the money ... and then tell me what you’re going to do, where you’re going to go, for your treat. It’ll make me happy just to know you’re about to have some fun together, OK?’

‘Well ...’

‘Luci, just a text, something like: “coffee and cakes today”. That way I’ll know when the treat is happening and I can send happy thoughts to you both. It’ll be like I’m joining in, in a way. What harm can it do? It’s not like I’ll know where you are is it? You’ve not told me anything, you’ve been incredibly careful, no one could accuse you of that. Just a text, Luci, just a quick text, promise me, Luci, please promise.’

‘OK, dad, just a text.’ What harm *could* a simple text do?

‘Thanks, Luci, you’re a good one, the best. Love you, now look out for the money and don’t tell anyone, it’s our secret. I’ve got to go now; I have to feed Trick and Treat.’

‘How are they?’

‘Well, they miss you, obviously, but I’m doing my best to look after them. They’re pining for you, Luci. And I don’t know how much longer I’ll have the time to look after them ... can you hear them now?’ There was some faint barking in the background. ‘I’d better go; it would be cruel to neglect them. Bye.’

Luci stared at her mobile. He’d hung up. She felt confused. She turned back to Rodin and his family.

‘Hope everything’s alright, Luci. Thorfinn ate your burger for you. He said it was going cold.’

Thorfinn had the decency to look slightly embarrassed. ‘It wasn’t very nice, Luci. It had gone very cold. They’re not as nice when they’re cold. Do you want another?’

‘Yeah. Yes, please, I am quite hungry now.’ She smiled broadly.

Thorfinn went to get her a replacement burger.

‘None of my business, lass, but that call seems to have put you in the best mood I’ve seen you in yet.’ Rodin was insightful.

‘Has it?’ Had it? ‘I suppose it has.’

Luci’s head was swimming a bit. She tried to remember what she’d said to her dad. She was sure she’d kept it vague, hadn’t mentioned Orkney. They’d talked about seagulls, but loads of places had seagulls. No, she was certain she’d been discrete. And Sig had been asking after her. Wow. She didn’t even realise Sig had noticed her, but more than that, he’d missed her. And her friends – she was going to be so popular when she got back and got to throw a party. Sig and her would slow dance and ... and everything would be back to normal, no, better than normal.

Thorfinn watched her carefully whilst she ate. It was more than a little obvious that he was hoping her veggy conscience would get the better of her and she wouldn’t finish it. She smiled. Thorfinn smiled back, suddenly aware that his motives were transparent. ‘Sorry, Luci. I like burgers and I’m always hungry.’ Thorfinn shrugged. Luci had half her burger left, she offered it to him, he took it – she didn’t need to offer twice.

Rodin nodded. ‘Always hungry. Now, Luci, what is this about your mum having a Ba?’

‘Mum has a Ba. She brought it to Orkney with her.’

‘Have you see it?’

‘I’ve held it.’

‘Describe it. Please.’

‘Hand-stitched. Leather. Dark brown. About so big,’ she held her hands apart, ‘weighs about the same as bag of sugar.’

‘And how’d your mum get it?’

‘It was grandad’s. He won it when he was younger.’

‘And she doesn’t want to keep it?’ Rodin seemed a little confused. Thorfinn also looked a bit confused but Luci realised that might just be a normal expression for him.

Then Frida added, concerned: ‘She really doesn’t want to keep it? For herself?’

‘No, she’s really keen to donate it, either to the museum or to the Ba Committee; she wants it to come back to Orkney.’

‘Well, that’s very generous. Gracious even. The Ba Committee would think very highly of that sort of thing. Especially one that was made predominantly by, going by your description, Ver. But I think your mum needs to make a more informed decision ... if I called a meeting of the Ba Committee, one evening this week, would you both be able to come along? How about Wednesday? Always the best day for me and it gives Frida a couple of days’ notice to get everything ready.’

‘Mum mainly works mornings, so yeah, Wednesday straight after school will probably be fine.’ Luci felt only slightly guilty knowing she was agreeing to something which would clash with her own appointment with Jan. But equally it would be the perfect excuse to get out of that meeting with Jan, who would no doubt just be pleased to see Luci and her mum making friends in Orkney.

‘I’ll write her a note.’ Rodin had become quite serious. He went back to his carriage and quickly scribbled out a note, folded it and passed it to Luci. ‘It’s nearly 5pm; I promised your mum you’d be home by now, get up in the carriage with us and I’ll drop you wherever’s convenient, we’re going back up the hill.’

Luci climbed up into the open carriage; she figured they wouldn’t be going that fast and that she’d be able to jump out if she needed to, but Rodin and his family seemed perfectly safe. He dropped her where she indicated and carried on up the hill.

‘Let me know what your mum thinks please, Luci, and I’ll make the arrangements.’

\*\*\*

‘Ida? No one calls me “Ida”! Luci, did *you* tell him my name?’

‘No, mum.’ She couldn’t remember doing so; had Rodin managed to guess both their names?

‘I hate “Ida”. “Ida” makes me feel fifty. This letter is utterly charming otherwise. I’ll write a reply to tell him we can both get along on Wednesday and I’ll also reassure him that I’ve got my Ba in a safe place – he seems a bit concerned about that. And whilst I’m at it, I’ll ask him to stop calling me “Ida” – he can call me “Oona” like everyone else.’

\*\*\*

Rodin had given them instructions to his house. It was on the hill that grew around and behind the cathedral and shopping area of Kirkwall. This area was mainly residential with most of the houses being substantial and in the style of Victorian villas, built of the local grey sandstone with slate roofs that were shiny with rain. They noticed that it was clearly a well-to-do neighbourhood, not heavily built up and with an area of carefully manicured grass directly opposite, across the road, with a tight circle of box hedging in the middle.

‘I wonder why no one’s built on there?’ Luci pondered out loud.

‘I think that must be Gallow’Ha – where the town execution site used to be. One of my colleagues was telling me about how they used to burn witches there.’

‘Oh yuck!’

‘No need to be worried, I’m fairly confident they don’t do that here anymore.’

‘They probably still want to. And why on earth would anyone want to live facing that?’

‘Perhaps they didn’t know about it when they bought the place. Perhaps they still don’t know.’

‘Are you joking? This is the sort of place that has been in the same family for generations; it almost screams ancestry.’

‘Still, better not say anything, and let’s try and reserve our judgement, for now, eh?’

They paused outside Rodin’s house. It stated heritage. There was a small garden area between the pavement and front door, laid to a neat lawn and flower border, and a short gravel path. The border was full of evergreen shrubs and the gravel path was weedless. The frontage was neat and well

maintained. There was a house sign made of local stone and impeccably carved with some strange marks:



Luci looked at Rodin's business card; the marks matched those on the first address line on the back of the card. They were clearly in the right place. They both checked their watches, they were a little early – something they had quickly learnt was unexpected and largely unwanted in Orkney. Oona smoothed and straightened her clothes.

Earlier Oona had asked Luci whether they should get Frida a present for her hospitality. Luci could feel the inadequacy of the gift they'd hurriedly decided upon as she held it in her sweating hands.

'Like what? Chocolates, flowers, cakes, drink?'

'Not cakes. I think cakes might be too competitive. I think we eat any of Frida's cakes with an attitude of awe. Not flowers either because her garden sounds wonderful, I don't want to imply it isn't.'

'Social minefield. How about a bottle of something?'

'That'll end up more Rodin's than Frida's ..'

'We'll find something – we'll know it when we see it.' They had found something, it wasn't right, they'd both known it wasn't right, but they had a lack of time, choice and money against proffering anything better.

Just as they stepped up and onto the gravel path, the front door opened and Rodin was there to greet them. Luci wondered if he'd been observing them whilst they dithered outside, as they'd discussed Gallow'Ha and as they'd fluctuated between whether and when to come in and, if he had, for how long he'd been watching. He wasn't wearing any of his hats, which made his eye patch more obvious than usual, but he still wore his steady, all-knowing smile.

'Welcome to my home, to Valaskjalf. Whilst here, please consider yourselves honoured guests.'

Luci paused and then she saw Frida push past him and reach out to her, grabbing her arm and gently steering her and her mum into the hallway. 'Too formal, Rodin; come in, come in, my friends. Have you coats I can hang up for you? What would you like to drink? I have baked for you – come and see what there is to choose from.'

'We've brought you this, we thought you'd like it; it's a bit unusual.'

Luci passed the paper bag to Frida. The top of the bag had become crumpled with the sweat from Luci's hands but Frida opened it as if it was the most delicate and artistic gift-wrap.

'Oh, how kind and thoughtful – look Rodin, a box of crystallised fruits. I love crystallised fruit, that is so clever of you, we normally only ever buy them for Yule – what you might call Christmas. What a treat to have them a little early. Now come and sit in our lounge and eat cake and drink tea.'

Frida led them into a room at the back of the house. There was a wonderful aroma of fresh baking, of cinnamon and honey; the room was impeccably clean and comfortably warm. The lounge had huge patio doors with magnificent views over their garden and the back of Kirkwall, beyond and to the sea. 'Rodin can see everything that goes on from up here, can't you, my delight?'

There were three large sofas along the walls of the lounge and a massive wooden coffee table laden with cakes and biscuits.

'Sit, please, help yourself. Would you like some tea to drink too?' Frida laughed. Luci realised she must have been staring at the cakes. 'I baked special for you both, of course, but the Ba Committee are meeting here today too, as you know, and they will eat all these cakes and I will have to bring in even

more for them. They always need more. We hoped you would get here early, before they started to arrive, to get the best choice of cakes. So not just for you, but a little more special, just for you.'

'If you haven't yet gathered, my lady wife is rather proud of her baking – and rightly so – please eat as much cake as you want because the best compliment for an Orkney wifey is an empty plate and an empty table. And if you don't eat your fill, Frida will only assume that her cakes are not to her usual standards, and then she'll fret, and then Thorfinn will feel obliged to help by eating anything that's left. And since Thorfinn can and will eat anything and everything, *his* empty plate won't count as a genuine compliment as far as Frida is concerned; so, please, do keep Valaskjalf a contented family home by loading your plate and forgetting about calories – for my sake, as much as for anyone else's.'

'Rodin, I am *not* that bad – you exaggerate, you are so skilful with words ... I am making a big pot of tea, do you both like it strong?'

'Yes, please, Frida, with milk, no sugar and, if we could be so rude to ask, in mugs, please.'

'Oh, I have just the thing; our mugs hold a whole pint.'

Frida brought in mugs, milk, and an enormous teapot that Luci would not have been too surprised to find a dormouse hiding inside.

'And when the Committee arrive, all I shall be doing is constantly back-and-forth, to-and-fro, to the kitchen to make more tea ... until they start on the whisky.'

Rodin winked at Luci and stage-whispered: 'She loves it, makes her feel wanted.'

'Again, Rodin, you stop telling lies about me, you silly old riddler.'

Rodin scratched his beard, 'Load your plates, I'll show you the garden.'

They went out of the patio doors and onto an area of decking. The views were expansive; they could see across and over most of the town as well as to the new harbour at Hatston.

'I don't miss much from up here. These views are why we chose this place.'

There was a movement behind and on the lawn, a flapping of black and a hoarse kronking sound.

'Showing off with acrobatics again,' said Rodin, 'they do it because they think it earns them cake, but actually they get cake because they get cake.'

There were two large ravens on the lawn, looking warily at Luci and greedily at her plate. 'Got a scone going spare?' Rodin reached out to her plate and liberated a fruit scone from the pile. He broke off a piece and held it out to the ravens. They continued to look warily at Luci and strutted around the lawn, it seemed to Luci that they were pretending to be uninterested in Rodin's offering.

'When have I ever tricked you two?' Rodin asked. 'She won't hurt *you*.' Luci felt a pang of guilt. It was as if Rodin would see right into her; that he somehow knew that sometimes she just wanted to hurt indiscriminately, just to get back at the world. She looked down and away.

The ravens strutted up more confidently, but only to Rodin, still keeping a nervous distance from Luci and her mum. First one, then the other, pecked at the scone he was holding patiently out to them. It was eaten quickly. They looked at Luci's plate and then back at Rodin. Back at the plate, then at each other.

'Kronk,' they said.

'Will Frida be offended if I offer them some more?'

'Kronk, kronk kronk.'

'Not in the slightest, but I think they might like something different next. Perhaps some flapjack?'

'Kronk.'

Both ravens strode purposely to stand in front of Luci and waited. With her mum's help she found the flapjack, broke it in two, and threw both pieces gently on the ground. It was eaten immediately.

'Kronk.'

'Probably the chocolate brownie next.'

Luci retrieved the brownie and held it out to them but they weren't ready to feed from her hand like they had with Rodin; instead they sidled around and tried to snatch the food a couple of times, but they weren't quite brave enough to take it. Luci put the brownie on the ground and stepped back.

'Kronk.' It was gone.

‘Do you know, I’m sure I spotted a piece of shortbread in there somewhere, Luci. They’re rather partial to shortbread; try a piece of that.’

Shortbread was found and presented. They are it and then both ravens looked at Rodin.

‘Not a chance; she’s rather fond of marzipan herself.’

‘How ...?’ asked Luci.

Rodin winked at her, or perhaps he blinked, it was difficult to tell with the eyepatch. The ravens continued to stare at Rodin pointedly. He shrugged. ‘Pass us your plate, would you please, Luci.’ Rodin took Luci’s plate and started to sort through it. ‘Right, there’s some malt-loaf, some fancies, yes, there is some Battenburg but I don’t think so, and some gingerbread.’

‘Kronk kronk.’

‘Gingerbread it is. You won’t be able to fly ...’

The gingerbread was devoured and both ravens looked at each other, put their heads on one side, and took to the air, spinning around each other as they flew off, as if to prove a point. They glided away, over the roof, the wet ridge-tiles of Rodin’s home flashing silver with the sun’s reflection.

Luci and Oona laughed, ‘Are they your pets?’

‘No,’ Rodin’s answer was emphatic, he sounded shocked.

‘But they seem tame.’

‘They’re not tame, not in the least. They’re intelligent opportunists. There’s a massive difference.

‘Now, we’d better go back in, before those Doonies eat everything. Oh sorry, I forgot: you’re both Doonies,’ he grinned, ‘and see, true to form, you’ve just polished off most of a plate already.’

Oona sniggered whilst Luci opened her mouth to remonstrate. Rodin put a conspiratorial finger to his mouth:

‘Eat your favourite quickly.’ There was only the Battenburg left on her plate; Luci loved Battenburg. ‘Frida will be incredibly flattered by your empty plate, and even more so when you fill it again almost immediately.’

They went back in. The lounge was now buzzing and filled with men of Rodin’s age. Some were in suits and some wore what Luci had come to consider the Orkney ‘uniform’: blue overalls known as ‘Dickies’. They were all eating cake and praising Frida’s home-bakes.

Frida was fluttering around, refilling mugs of tea and explaining: ‘Oh not at all, they are just a few old family recipes.’

As the men mingled, Luci heard the formal Orkney greeting: ‘Whit like, beoy,’ and the requisite reply: ‘Weel, no bad, no bad.’

Gradually the mumbling and scoffing died down and as plates were refilled – more sparingly second and third time around – and fresh inroads made on demolishing the heaps of tray-bakes. The meeting naturally progressed to an accepted level of hushed attention so that Rodin could start on the agenda items. Rodin seemed to be the quiet authority in the room.

‘You will have noticed, gentlemen, that we have a couple of guests present today.’ There was some muttering at this announcement, as if of dissent, many eyes turned to look at Luci and Oona. ‘Gentlemen, gentlemen, I am fully aware that *ladies* are present and that is the reason why their “concern” is the first item we will deal with, and then they will leave; they will not be here whilst we discuss other Ba business. Please bear with me for it is Oona here, Luci’s mother, who is the one who has a Ba to donate.’

There was silence.

‘Tait’s Ba is it, Rodin?’

‘Was that your father’s surname?’

Oona nodded

‘Been missing a while, that Ba has.’

‘Aye.’

‘A while noo.’

Rodin looked around once more, getting eye contact. Silence reigned once more.



‘An absent Ba is different from a missing Ba, you all know that.’

‘Weel, where *is* the Ba noo?’ Breathing seemed to stop in the room. Rodin raised one eyebrow.

‘Could you kindly confirm the whereabouts of your Ba please, Oona.’

‘Safely back at our flat.’

Pause. Breathing resumed.

‘It’s not missing then?’

Breathing paused again. Pregnant silence. A teaspoon clinked against a saucer, slightly too loudly.

‘No. It’s at our flat. It’s safe.’

This time the collective out-breath was more audible.

‘Gentlemen, I’m sure this Ba is being exceptionally well looked after by Oona and I am confident it will come into the safe care of our Committee soon enough.’

Muttering.

‘I am absolutely certain of that,’ Rodin stated assertively.

Silence.

‘Rodin, you are so shifty eyed!’ There were shocked gasps from the men around the room as Frida suddenly spoke up. ‘You, none of you, are being fair, and well you all know it. You cannot ask Oona to give up her Ba when she clearly doesn’t know what they are ... how they are made.’

Rodin stared at his wife, for slightly too long; it was uncomfortable.

‘You are right, my love,’ he conceded at last. ‘Would you both like to see how they’re made? I could take you to see; that way you’d have more of an appreciation of the err ... the craft that goes into them. How about Friday afternoon?’

‘I can’t, I’m working,’ regretted Oona, ‘But Luci can go, if you like, would that be OK? You don’t really need both of us, Luci can tell me what I need to know, and I don’t want to hold any processes up.’

‘Luci? Friday afternoon?’ She nodded assent.

There were more mutterings around the room.

‘Gentlemen, I suggest we move on now to other agenda items and that we all agree to meet here on Saturday evening to progress this most vital issue. That’s OK with you, Oona and Luci?’ They both nodded. ‘And Frida will be pleased to provide hospitality again, won’t you Frida?’

‘Of course, of course, Rodin, always Frida will provide.’ Frida rolled her eyes in mock exasperation.

‘And next time, Oona, please bring your Ba with you. I think some of us were expecting to see it this evening. At the next Committee meeting I would anticipate that we will be able to formally accept the Ba ... but in the interim, please keep it safe, don’t take it out of your flat and certainly not out of Kirkwall.’

Frida came up to them and guided them out to the kitchen. ‘Now it is just the menfolk talking. Very boring. Please take some cakes with you, for later.’

‘That’s kind of you,’ said Oona, looking around Frida’s kitchen whilst Frida packed some cakes for them, ‘gosh, you really like birds, don’t you?’

‘No, I like bird of prey. All of them. I did my post-doctoral research studying their migratory routes. And my friends always gift me things with them on.’ There were ornaments and ‘fridge magnets, even a tea-cosy, in the design of various hawks, falcons and eagles, all over the kitchen.

Oona picked up one of the smaller ornaments.

‘Ah now that one was a gift from my friend Freyja. It’s a falcon, a peregrine falcon to be precise. Freyja’s a bit obsessed with them; she did her research into the aerodynamic qualities of their feathers. *Falco Peregrinus*, it means “foreign falcon”; they are wanderers or strangers, they don’t stay long in one place.’

‘Do you get them in Orkney?’

‘They do nest in Orkney, yes, but they are rare and thus highly protected. Freyja’s always reminding me about their keen intellect and ability to focus ... but she also tells me that they are believed to represent freedom and the ability to rise above any situation, even out of oppression, so this is a perfect

symbol to keep in one's kitchen, don't you agree?' Frida laughed. 'Now, you said you are working on Friday, what work do you do?'

Oona blushed and stammered, 'I've got a few hours here and there cleaning and doing a bit of home-help. As soon as we got here I just went around all the shops and offices and asked if they had anything, a few of them had cleaners off sick, and I offered to do it, quickly, cash-in-hand, immediate start. But my degrees are in health care, I haven't worked since, well, since Luci here was born, but hopefully I'll be able to get back into it.'

'Rodin and I will let you know if we hear of anything coming up. You already have a reputation for being a hard-worker.' Oona blushed even more at Frida's compliment. 'But now I really must run the dish-washer ... if it ever fails me I shall rename it a wish-dasher!'

\*\*\*

The following morning, on the way to school, Luci checked her bank account. It took less than a minute to send her dad a text:

*'Got money, thanx. Will go out together on Saturday, early afternoon. Pls don't get rid of Trick and Treat.'*

## Interlude

High up on the spire of St Magnus Cathedral, a little red squirrel bounces and bobs up to the weathercock. Ratatoskr coughs until the weathercock twirls around in the wind to face him and then announces: 'I say, I say, I say, call that a tail? More like a fail!'

The weathercock looks aghast at the squirrel.

'Really? I mean, *really*? That's not even original, Ratty, your master last did that one, or one very similar, back in 1912; April 21st I believe. It was a Sunday; raining, with a brisk north-westerly ...'

The squirrel looked a bit embarrassed. If it wasn't red already, it probably would have blushed. The weathercock twirled away again, loyally reporting the wind direction to anyone who might be looking up.

'I'm only the messenger,' the squirrel muttered, taking a moment to collect his pride before setting off back down the steeple to report that the insults were still not working.

The weathercock, alone again, made a noise that was most likely: 'Pah!'

## Chapter 5 – The Ba

‘So today, we’re actually going to go inside the cathedral, I mean really inside. Are you religious at all?’

Luci shook her head. Rodin had arranged this meeting surprising quickly; now here they were, Friday afternoon, going to see how Ba’s were made ... Luci realised this must be a high priority for him.

‘Me neither, not religious in their way anyway, but we still have to be respectful seeing as some people will get a bit upset with us if we’re not. I ought to take my hat off and we should speak quietly and turn off our mobile ‘phones whilst we’re inside, that sort of thing. OK?’

Luci nodded.

‘Right, well, mind the doors as we go in because they’re quite heavy and we don’t want them slamming shut and making a lot of noise.’

Once inside, she noticed the ambient temperature was slightly cooler than she was expecting. Lines of stone arches stretched ahead, supported by massive round pillars. The high vaulted ceilings gave an amazing sense of space and invited receptiveness. Luci felt quietened by a sense of presence that awed her into a reflective state. She watched the play of light through the stained-glass windows and she marvelled at the acoustics – beyond the choir, far ahead and not visible from the nave, someone was singing: a crisp and clear voice that cut through the air. It was all rather poignant and Luci had to fight down an urge to cry.

‘This way; we’re going to the vestry.’

‘We’re not going to see the vicar, are we?’

‘Ha! No, we’re most definitely not. And it’s “minister” here, not “vicar”, and if anyone’s going to have holy water thrown over them, it’s me, not you. There’s a room under the vestry which is, shall we say, rented out. That’s where they make the Ba’s; I just hope the girlies are here today, they said they would be, but sometimes they get distracted.’

Rodin pulled a key out from his hat band and started to open the vestry door.

‘How come you’ve got a key?’

‘Because I have, that’s why,’ Rodin winked at her, ‘And now I need to lock behind us because we can’t have just anyone following us in ...’

The vestry also had stone vaulted ceilings and varnished wood panelling around the walls. There were priest robes hanging up, awaiting use. Rodin made his way to some wooden doors, slid them open, revealing stone steps down into a basement. Luci followed him down. The steps were cluttered with hymn books that were missing covers as well as piles of paperwork. At the bottom of the stairs was an ancient looking toilet, covered in cobwebs, the type with a flushing cistern high up on the wall. There was an ‘out of order’ sign on the lid, which Luci felt was rather redundant.

Rodin turned left along a short corridor and knocked at a door. ‘Ladies? Can we come in?’

‘They rent a room down here?’ Luci whispered.

Rodin nodded, ‘They actually *like* it,’ he whispered back, ‘plus the rent’s *really* low.’

Luci widened her eyes in disbelief. She could hear giggling from the other side of the door, and a sound of shuffling as if things were being quickly tidied and put away. Lots more giggling and, as the door finally opened, excited whispering.

The tiniest woman that Luci had ever seen peered out from behind the gap in the door.

‘Ooh, it *is* you, Rodin. Sisters, it’s Rodin.’

‘Lovely, well let him in, Ver.’

‘He did promise he’d come today!’

‘And someone’s with him!’ The woman at the door turned back to update her companions.

‘That’ll be the one I’ve been expecting.’

‘And the one I’ve known about for some time.’

‘Well, Rodin, since you’ve brought company, we must extend our hospitality to both of you. Come in, you must both come in, do,’ and, at last, Ver opened the door to admit them.

‘After you,’ Rodin held the door for Luci, ‘This might get a bit weird, bear with it,’ he whispered as she passed him. Luci noticed that he pronounced ‘weird’ rather oddly.

Inside, the room was comfortable but cluttered. Box upon box of wool, yarn and thread were piled up against the walls and in every conceivable space. It was warm and cosy and in the centre of the room there were three chairs made from woven straw, once golden, but now brown with age. There were also three antique spinning wheels.

‘Skuld put the kettle on about five minutes ago, so the tea will be perfectly brewed by now. You’ll both accept a cup, won’t you?’

‘Milk, no sugar, please,’ said Luci.

‘In herbal tea? Are you sure?’

‘Why not try it with a teaspoon of honey instead?’

‘Might make you sweeter ...’

Giggling. More giggling and laughter but with her, not at her.

Rodin sat on the floor, cross-legged. He patted the rug next to him, inviting Luci to join him. One of the tiny ladies passed them a mug of tea each. Luci sipped. Heather and honey, spices, a summer’s day suspended in a drink.

‘Go careful,’ cautioned Rodin, ‘that stuff’s addictive.’

Luci blanched.

‘Teasing. Again. I’m such a naughty Rodin. There’s an unlimited supply, Luci. Good?’

Luci nodded.

‘Enjoy it. Not many people get offered tea.’

The ladies had stopped bustling and giggling and each had perched on a chair and started their spinning wheels. The whirring and clicking was repetitive and soothing. Luci found herself becoming relaxed and rather sleepy.

‘Lovely to have company, Rodin.’

‘Oh yes, lovely.’

‘Tea and company, whilst we spin, what could be more perfect?’

‘You want to know what we make here, don’t you, Luci?’

Luci snapped out of her reverie, ‘How do you ...?’

‘Don’t worry about how or what. Drink your tea. There’s plenty more in the pot.’

‘Rodin’ll be sure to top you up when you’re ready!’ Giggling.

‘Will do, ladies,’ Rodin confirmed and winked at them.

‘We make the Ba’s!’ All three tiny ladies chorused together.

‘Skuld makes the ones for the boys.’

‘For the boys are the future.’

‘Ver makes the ones for the men.’

‘For the men are the present.’

‘And Urd makes sure that they’re all made to the same standard ...’

‘... that all Ba’s have ever been made to.’

‘Because Urd can remember every Ba that’s ever been made ...’

‘... every Ba that’s ever been played.’

‘And this is how we make them ...’

‘First, we take a solid centre of gold – like a little golden sun, a miniature apple, full of promise and fulfilment – that gives the Ba weight and balance and that’s the real treasure.’

‘Like a yolk in an egg! But unlike an egg, we hide the gold so well you can never find it, even if you try to look.’

'Not that a Ba winner would ever take their Ba apart.'  
 'No. Not never. They're not that stupid ...'  
 '... or irresponsible ...'  
 '... or disrespectful ...'  
 'A Ba winner, is none of those things ...'  
 '... and wouldn't do it, couldn't do it ...'  
 '... it would be against their nature.'  
 'And if they were those things, they wouldn't be a Ba winner ...'  
 '... because they wouldn't get chosen ...'  
 '... they wouldn't get the vote ...'  
 'So, it's enough just to know ...'  
 '... and imagine ...'  
 '... and dream that the Ba has a golden ball inside that ...'  
 '... then becomes the stuff of legend ...'  
 '... myth ...'  
 '... and folk-tale.'  
 'Second, we weave and spin a thread ...'  
 '... strong and supple ...'  
 '... long and straight ...'  
 '... and we wind ...'  
 '... and we wind ...'  
 '... and we wind ...'  
 'Until the little yellow sun ...'  
 '... inside the Ba ...'  
 '... is completely covered and hidden ...'  
 'And in the thread is the life of the winner ...'  
 '... whom we already know ...'  
 '... for they have already been chosen ...'  
 'So if a Ba winner was to take a Ba apart ...'  
 '... which they'd never do ...'  
 '... they'd be able to read their life ...'  
 '... in the thread and as it unravelled ...'  
 '... so would their life, there and then ...'  
 '... before their eyes and inquisitive fingers ...'  
 'And third, we stitch leather around the golden ball and the thread ...'  
 '... to keep them safe and secure ...'  
 '... hand-stitched patches of leather, tiny stitches ...'  
 '... and each stitch is a spell ...'  
 '... a spell, yes, a spell ...'  
 '... our favourite charms ...'  
 '... a working of youth upon the winner and his lady ...'  
 '... a working of fortune upon the winner and his lady ...'  
 '... a working of health upon the winner and his lady ...'  
 '... for as long as they keep the Ba.'

The spinning wheels whirled. The ladies giggled. Rodin sipped tea and Luci found herself lulled into a contented daydream. No longer able to follow the conversation as it was batted between the three sisters.

Suddenly the room was quiet and a little chillier. The ladies had all stood in unison. They still smiled, but it was clear that it was time to leave.

'The tea pot is empty.'

‘Another time, Rodin.’

‘Don’t leave it too long.’

Luci shook her head, trying to wake herself. She was definitely groggy. She let Rodin steer her out, away and up. As they climbed up into fresh air, her head cleared.

‘Rodin, what was in that tea?’

‘Well have you ever heard the sound a cat makes when it walks?’

‘Cats don’t make a sound when they walk. That’s why their owners put bells on them.’

‘Wrong. Cats don’t make a sound when they walk *anymore*. Because the sound they used to make when they walk is one of the things that went into that tea.’

## Chapter 6 – Saturday

When Luci woke on Saturday there was something niggling at her; something not quite right. There was something she hadn't done, or something she shouldn't have done, but she couldn't quite scratch her mental itch. She carried a sense of her foreboding with her into the shower and even spread it onto her toast, which she nibbled at distractedly.

'What's wrong, Luci? Don't try to tell me "nothing" please.'

Luci pursed her lips, she'd let the worry simmer, it would surface eventually. But for now, she had to test out the story she'd worked on to deceive her mum about the money.

'Whatever it is, I can't promise not to be upset or angry, but I'll try to not to be. How's that? Anyway, we're meant to be having a treaty time later today, you haven't forgotten, have you?'

'Not at all and, actually, it's going to be really treaty because I won a hundred quid and want to buy you a new dress or something ...'

'You *won*?'

Luci nodded. 'Scratch Card. Don't be cross.'

'You've not been buying Scratch Cards? Please don't. They're addictive you know, you have to be careful.'

'Just say "no", eh mum? One Scratch Card does *not* equal drugs.'

'You're not 16 yet, how did you buy it?'

'They didn't check my age, mum, and anyway, I look older than I am, remember?'

'They ask for confirmation of age when you try to claim the prize though, don't they?'

'I got one of the older girls to do it.'

'As a favour, from a friend to a friend?'

'She took a ten per cent cut.'

'Luci! Why didn't you ...'

'Because I wanted it to be a surprise for today, for you, mum. I was trying to do something nice for you, for a change. Don't have a go at me when I was just trying to do something nice. Sheesh. Look, I found a pound coin, I had nothing to lose, so I bought a Scratch Card. Just one. I don't make a habit of it, I'm not planning to make a habit of it, I'm not addicted. I've not been raiding your purse to feed my addiction and I've not been hiding bits of losing Scratch Cards in the recycling. I bought *one* card, with a lucky pound I picked up – turned out it was a really lucky pound because I got a winning ticket. And, yes, I could've asked you to claim it for me but then it wouldn't have been such a surprise. So I got one of the older girls to claim it for me, but she wouldn't do it without a cut, but I've still got ninety quid to spend on something nice for you, mum, because you haven't had anything new for a while and you used to get something at least every week ...'

Luci's mum's face whitened.

'Those days are over.'

'No. They're back, for today. You're having a pressie from me. Think of it as an early birthday if you like.'

'I'd rather have the money towards the grocery shop or to top up the electricity key ...'

'No. I want you to have a present. If you don't let me buy you something, I shall keep the whole ninety quid, get an older girl to buy me alcohol and drugs and glue, maybe I'll get a tattoo or a piercing or a pregnancy testing kit ...'

'OK, OK, I get the point. Sorry. It's just, well, it's kind of you, but it's easier in a way if we just accept that we don't have spare money any more, rather than trying lots of risky schemes to recreate a life that we'd just be better putting behind us.'



‘I found a pound coin.’

‘Yes, but those Scratch Cards can be addictive. I don’t want you to get addicted to anything and especially not because I can’t give you what you’re used to.’

‘It’s not your fault, mum.’

‘I think it is.’

‘Can’t be, mum; Jan told me it wasn’t your fault.’

‘Don’t tell me you’re starting to listen to Jan.’

Luci shrugged.

‘Thank you. I’d love a dress or something but you should get something for yourself too – we’ll shop together? It’ll be fun! But next time you need money, and there will be a next time, there always is, don’t take the easy route of gambling, please, in any form, because it’s not easy. Gambling’s highly addictive. Promise me.’

‘OK mum, I promise,’ Luci nodded and wondered whether lying was also addictive.

\*\*\*

*‘Coffee n cakes, later today.’*

Well, what harm could it do?

\*\*\*

‘I really can’t be bothered to sign in and out of here too many times, so I’m going to take granddad’s Ba with me. That way we can go straight to Rodin’s after we’ve had our shop; it’s not that heavy really.’

‘And finally, the national shopping champions hit Albert Street, Kirkwall!’

‘With a whole ninety pounds.’

‘Good job Albert Street’s not that long then.’

\*\*\*

Even in mid-December there were still tourists around. They were identifiable by their sunglasses and inappropriate clothing. Luci had already learnt to dress to expect rain and wind; even if it looked like it would be staying dry and sunny. So, despite the tentative brightness and surprising warmth, Luci still wore a waterproof jacket, although she was considering carrying it, rather than wearing it. Her jumper, however, would probably stay on. In a little over a week of exposure to Orkney’s weather, Luci had already become environmentally indoctrinated.

Their usual coffee shop was in Albert Street, between the cathedral and the Brig – in Doonie territory (Luci shuddered, had she actually just thought that?) – but today they were trying somewhere new for them, a little further away, because she’d heard some of the teachers recommending it. Although within walking distance, it was away from Kirkwall’s historic centre, up a low hill and near a wooded spot called ‘The Willows’. There was a burn or stream that surged between the trees, with a couple of picturesque foot-bridges linking various paths.

The door of the café caught as they went in and they had to kick it shut behind them. Like everything made of wood in Orkney it expanded and contracted constantly with the changing humidity, never fitting perfectly in its frame. The coffee shop was what Luci would describe as ‘retro’ anywhere other than Orkney. She and her mum chose to sit at the back, near some glass patio doors, her mum tucked away so no one could see her, whilst Luci sat directly opposite. The aroma promised that the coffee here was hand-ground barista coffee rather than what sometimes passed for coffee elsewhere in Orkney: a couple of teaspoons of instant granules plonked in a mug with hot water from a kettle, or, even worse, an oily jug of filter coffee kept warm for hours on a hotplate.

They ordered their usual: two large lattes with almond syrup, as hot as possible, not too much foam. Luci remembered when this was a frequent treat for them, back in the days when they went shopping as their main hobby. Now it was a rarity, no longer affordable.

‘Do you want a cake, mum?’

‘We can’t.’

‘Yes, we can. Today we can. Do you want a cake?’

‘Shall we share one?’

‘We can afford one each. Today we can afford it.’

‘Sorry, I’ve got used to not having one, not even thinking about having one.’

‘I’ll go and choose something, shall I? Something to share.’

‘Yes, please, thank you, Luci, and when you get back you can tell me all about how the Ba’s are made.’

Near the front of the café, by the counter, was a glass cabinet, a tall hexagonal pillar which revolved slowly so that the sweet treats within could be assessed and evaluated from every angle. Chocolate. She would inevitably choose something which involved chocolate. The brownies looked sticky and decadent but the gateaux sang of a more substantial sharing potential. Luci ignored the glazed fruit tartlets – she figured there was no point in trying to redeem calorific sin by fibre intake. She ordered at the counter: chocolate gateaux, one portion, with two forks please.

When she got back to their table, the coffees had been waitressed but her mum was missing. Luci assumed she’d gone to use the customer toilet, so she picked up a newspaper to read whilst she waited. ‘The Orcadian’ – the local weekly newspaper – was printed on Thursdays, so by Orkney standards, reading it on a Saturday counted as being ‘warm off the press’. The front page was dominated by an article about renewable technologies but most of the paper was given over to agricultural reports and local sport.

The cake arrived. Luci started on it with the intention of leaving half. She continued to read the paper; there was a lot of coverage of various parish and island community events including prize-winning animals and crafts.

The cake was moreish and she had to put it down and push it out of the way because, if she was honest, she’d eaten more than half already. Although to know that, you’d have had to have seen how big it was originally, which her mum hadn’t. Where was she? And where was her bag?

Luci went up to the counter and asked: ‘Excuse me, but the woman I came in with, did you see where she went?’

‘Don’t think so,’ the waitress shook her head.

Luci went back to her table. She finished her coffee. It had cooled rapidly. It seemed a shame to waste her mum’s coffee, so she picked it up. Under the saucer was a folded piece of paper.

*Luci, I have been searching for you and your mum for weeks now and it is a tremendous relief to have finally found you. I have rented a flat in Orkney which I’m hoping you and your mum will agree to move into. Your mum and I have a few things to discuss between us, but my dearest hope is that we can be reunited as a family again soon. Your mum says you’re to do what you’d originally planned to do this afternoon and she’ll call you later this evening, after we’ve sorted everything out. Dad xxx*

What?

Luci was dismayed. How had he found them? And how could her mum go off like that without telling her? Why didn’t her dad want to see her too? Who was looking after Trick and Treat? Where was this rented flat? How long had he been in Orkney? When had they left the café?

There was a slight breeze to her left. Of course, that was how. The patio doors: they must’ve gone out that way. She got up and looked quickly outside, they were nowhere to be seen and the patio itself was full of outside plants and ornamental containers; there was no way she was going to be able to spot them.

She went back in and sat down again. She was really quite cross – all that stuff from her mum about sticking together, partners together against her dad, but as soon as he showed up again he'd obviously swept her off her feet; she'd fallen into his arms no doubt, crumpled like a schoolgirl with a crush. Parents could be so selfish sometimes. She imagined them now, laughing together at her expense. She was glad she'd drunk both coffees now; she set about finishing the cake in petty vengeance. And they'd left her with the entire bill – she snorted in disgust, consoling herself that, at least with her dad around again, she'd get her money back.

A text came through on her 'phone. It was from her mum:

*'Pls keep appointment with Rodin, apologise 4 me xxx'*

Great, so now she had to take responsibility for repairing her mum's social rudeness too. And her parents were *still* telling her what to do with her time.

But she had nothing else planned – it wasn't as if she had an alternative offer of hanging out with tons of friends from school. In fact, Rodin was probably the nearest thing she had to a friend in Orkney, which was really quite lame.

She still had most of the money her dad had transferred to her. She'd had too much caffeine and was buzzing a bit. It was too early to start out for Rodin's, so she decided to go back to Albert Street and buy herself some CDs first ... as long as there was somewhere that sold something other than traditional fiddle playing, classical, or folk music ...

## Chapter 7 – Committee Meeting

Luci had bought an ice-cream to make the walk to Rodin's more pleasant. It was decidedly winter but Orkney ice-cream does not need a seasonal excuse. She had no idea what to tell Rodin about her mum – after all her mum'd been quite rude, just dropping everything for dad – and she really didn't want Rodin to know that her mum and dad had gone off together. Specifically she didn't want Rodin to know that her parents had gone off together *without her*, because that might make her look even more unwanted than she felt.

Luci paused outside Rodin's house. She had toyed with just going back to the refuge because she was sure that Rodin was more interested in her mum and the Ba than in her but, of the two options, this was the better. And she liked Rodin: he'd befriended her, didn't patronise her, and there seemed something constant about him. She didn't want her mum's rudeness to mess up the nearest thing she'd come to a friendship in Orkney. But what *was* she was going to say to explain her mum's absence? She had an inclination to treat it as if it was of no consequence and nothing to do with her. After all, her mum was an adult and adults were meant to take the 'responsibility and repercussions of their decisions and actions' – at least that's what the adults she knew kept telling her. Well, this time her mum could do exactly that; Luci wasn't prepared to make any excuses for her.

The door opened, Rodin looked directly through and past her and then asked: 'Your mum couldn't make it along today then?'

'No, sorry, she's gone off with ...' Luci forgot herself for a moment before recovering quickly, '... something came up, urgent, private. She said she'd be along later if she could get away, she's really sorry.'

Rodin nodded to himself. 'That's a shame. I had hoped she'd be here today ... and you haven't seen her since ... when?'

'Earlier this morning, when she left the flat.'

'Pity. So she *may* still be along?'

'She could be, yes, at any point, if she can get away – she said coming here was her highest priority.'

'Her "highest priority", after the other thing that was urgent and private ...' Rodin muttered to himself. 'Can't be helped, we'll have to get on with the meeting without her. Come on in, the rest of the beuys are here already.'

They went through to the lounge. There were fresh mountains of cakes. The sound of a cup falling and smashing on the floor revealed that Frida was clearly agitated in the kitchen. The room went silent as Rodin and Luci entered. The men of the Ba Committee stared at Luci. Luci stared back, they all seemed slightly greyer and thinner than previously, and they were not eating so much.

'Regrettably Ida has had a rather urgent and unexpected call on her time today.' Rodin looked at Luci for endorsement.

'Oona' Luci corrected and reddened.

'Weel, where *is* the Ba noo?' Breathing seemed to stop in the room. Rodin raised one eyebrow at Luci.

'Luci, could you kindly confirm the exact whereabouts of your mum's Ba at this precise point in time, please.'

'Oh, my mum's still got it.'

Pause. Breathing resumed.

'It's definitely not missing then?'

Breathing paused again. Pregnant silence. A teaspoon clinked against a saucer, slightly too loudly.

'No. Mum's got it with her. I know she has. I saw it. It's safe.'

This time the collective out-breath was more audible.

'Gentlemen, I'm sure this Ba is being very well looked after by Luci's mother and I remain confident that it will come into the safe care of our Committee within days.'

Muttering.

'I am absolutely certain of that,' Rodin stated assertively.

Silence.

Luci's mobile pinged to tell her she had a text. Surreptitiously she glanced at the screen:

*'Staying at your dad's tonight, hope to see you tomorrow xxx'*

'Have you got an update for us?' Rodin had seen her look. How? He was staring directly at her with his one ice-blue eye.

'Mum's accepted a night shift at short notice. She's got to cover a colleague's sickness. She says "sorry".' Luci looked down and moved her eyes across the screen, pretending to read the text out.

Rodin continued to stare at her, for slightly too long; it was uncomfortable.

'Gentlemen, I suggest we move on now to other agenda items, as quickly as we can for I, for one, am feeling tired this evening. Can we all agree to meet here in a week's time to progress this most vital issue? That's OK with you, Luci?' Luci nodded. 'And Frida will be pleased to oblige again. Next week I would hope we would finally be able to formally accept the Ba ...'

Luci nodded fervently. Her mum had to be back within a week. She hoped she was being convincing enough.

Frida came up to her and guided her out to the kitchen. 'Please take some cakes with you, for later. I do not know what is wrong; they have hardly eaten any tonight.'

'Thank you, but I really don't need to take cakes.'

'But your mum would like some, I'm sure. Later, for tonight.'

'I'm sure she'll have plenty to eat, thank you.' Luci was trying to keep the bitterness out of her voice.

'Really? I would not have thought she would have that much opportunity to eat whilst cleaning on a night shift?'

'No,' you're probably right, Luci pretended to concede quickly, 'perhaps I will take her some for when she gets home, after all.'

\*\*\*

Luci made her way back to the refuge via a circuitous route. If she was honest, she didn't really know what to do with herself. Perhaps a part of her hoped that she might just happen to bump into her mum and dad by sheer coincidence.

She kept checking her 'phone for another text, or a missed call, any sort of update. She was upset, angry and embarrassed, and all three emotions were vying for supremacy inside her.

What was she supposed to do now? What was she going to tell the support workers at the refuge? Should she tell them anything? How long could she get away with fending off their questions about her mum?

And how dare her mum let her down over the Ba! Rodin was the nearest thing she had to a friend here, at least he'd been the most supportive person she'd met ... and her mum had gone and ruined it.

And why didn't her dad want to see her too, why just her mum?

She kicked a stone. She hurt. Inside.

Somehow she hadn't meandered enough and she was back at the refuge. She checked her watch. It was dark and past 5pm; the support workers should have gone home. There were no cars in the car-park. It should be safe.

She let herself in. Signed herself in the book. Wondered whether to sign her mum back in too. Part of her wanted a support worker to still be there so she could tell them what had happened, get some sympathy, but a bigger part was relieved that she could sneak in alone.

Alone. That looked like the way her life was going to be for a while. No matter how much she'd supported her mum, her mum clearly couldn't be trusted to support her in return.

She'd have a bath, watch some TV, read for a while. She'd make sure she came back down early enough to sign her mum back in. She could pretend they were both tired and were staying in all Sunday to sleep and take life gentle.

All of a sudden she had all the independence and freedom she wanted – no one to tell her what not to watch on TV, or what time to go to sleep – and now she didn't know what to do with herself.

She was frightened. How long *would* this go on for? Her dad had whisked her mum off on holiday before: a surprise romantic getaway. Admittedly, then he'd left Luci in the care of his sister, but this time he hadn't even bothered to make any arrangements for her care at all, no contingencies. It was flattering, in a way, for him to trust her to look after herself now, but it was also rather terrifying. Far too many 'what ifs?' How long could she cover up for her mum? She'd lose her job if she was away too long. And the tenancy at the refuge was in her mum's name, how long would she be allowed to stay here on her own? Wasn't there some sort of clause whereby you had to tell the support workers if you were going to be away? What would happen when they found out, as they inevitably would? Surely her mum wouldn't let her be taken into care, not after all they'd been through together ... was there even a children's home in Orkney? Perhaps she could go and stay with Rodin and Frida ...

Don't be so stupid. She told herself off promptly. They wouldn't want you to live with them, not when they found out that you were a habitual liar. They hardly know you. And Rodin seemed a bit cross today.

Her bath had run. Out of spite she used some of her mum's bath oil. Not much. Not enough to be missed. The water was scalding hot. Her skin reddened and she felt light-headed. The heat seeped into her muscles and she felt them untense. She bit back tears. No point crying. Crying didn't solve anything.

She'd have to check the electricity – she'd blown a lot of what should have lasted a week on this hot water. She had no idea how much was left on the key, her mum usually topped up on a Monday. Luci closed her eyes in exasperation. Another thing to sort out. Being an adult had some serious shortcomings.

She still had Frida's cakes. She ate some in the bath. She felt decadent. Then, within minutes, she felt sick as the blood rushed to her stomach. She pulled the plug out with her foot and let the water drain out around her until she was just lying in a puddle, waiting for her body temperature to settle.

There was no one to tell her not to catch a chill. No one to pass her a towel. There was no one to tell her to mop up the drops of water on the bathroom floor, but she did it anyway.

The flat was silent and empty and lonely. She put the TV on. There was no one to tell her not to watch some of the shows with 'adult humour' so she watched and didn't fully understand them. Then she turned to channel surfing and tried to find some cartoons but these TVs were old and this *was* a refuge, so there weren't a great number of channels to hop through. There were news programmes and a documentary, some cheap chat-shows, and that was what passed for choice.

She made some tea. Got it as strong as she could. It still didn't taste the way her mum could get it.

She checked her 'phone. Nothing. She went to bed and she tried to sleep but it felt strange without her mum around: not right and she felt unsettled.

\*\*\*

Luci slept lightly, awakening in the early hours of the morning; she put one of her mum's coats on, with the hood up, just in case one of the other residents happened to be around, slipped downstairs, and

signed her mum in. May as well keep to the night-shift pretence. To all intents and purposes her and her mum would be in the flat all Sunday. She'd probably bought herself until Monday morning. Probably.

The electricity had about £3 left. It might be enough to last, but no more baths. There was bread for toast. She sniffed the milk, it was out of date, just, but hadn't turned yet. It would do. It would have to.

She checked her 'phone. Nothing.

She texted her mum:

*'Where r u? When r u comin bak? R u comin bak?'*

She deleted the last question before sending it.

She had absolutely no idea what she was going to do with herself, so she went back to bed and tried to sleep. That failed; she wasn't tired enough and all that she could achieve was a light nap with fitful dreams. In desperation, she got some of her school books out and tried to read in bed, but she found it too hard to concentrate and had to keep re-reading the paragraphs.

Mid-afternoon she checked her 'phone again. Nothing. She finished Frida's cakes and made more tea. Then she showered and cleaned her teeth.

She watched some TV, kept checking her 'phone, and moved her text books around on the kitchen table. By early evening she was quite frantic and she started to talk to her 'phone, urging it, daring it, beseeching it to ring.

And then it did.

Luci jumped. Had she just *made* the 'phone do that?

Quickly she answered: 'Mum?'

'No. It's me, Rodin. Luci, please, just answer me – yes or no – have you still got your mum's Ba?'

'Yes. No. I ...'

'Luci, this is important. Vitally important. Is the Ba with you now, in your flat?'

'No.'

'Has your mum still got it?'

'Yes. I think so. No, I know so; she's definitely got it with her.'

'Where *is* your mum?'

Pause.

'I ... I don't know.'

She hung up. She'd already said too much. She'd get chucked out of the refuge at this rate. She couldn't do anything right. She was meant to be lying low today. Just one day. 24 short hours, that's all. If she couldn't cope for less than a day without human contact, how would she ever cope when she went away to university? She despaired at herself.

\*\*\*

By Sunday afternoon, the milk had started to smell decidedly off and Luci was bored with toast. Strangely she was craving some fresh fruit.

She wrapped herself up in her mum's coat again, pulled on a hat, and went out – signing herself out as her mum. She walked to Tesco, keeping her head down and trying not to make eye-contact with anyone. She had exactly 89p left in her purse; she was kicking herself for having frittered away all the money her dad had transferred to her. She planned to get a pint of milk and perhaps an apple. There might even be something decent in the reduced food area. Exasperated, she was fully aware that she was thinking increasingly like her mum now.

Tesco – or whichever was the major supermarket in Kirkwall at the time (and local folklore could list the historical predecessors, there had been several, each one allegedly increasing the economic stranglehold on the smaller local shops) – was not only where people shopped, but also where they met to gossip. Luci had even heard rumours that the shopping aisles were the widest in the British Isles, a

condition apparently built into the planning permission so that Orkney folk were able to stop and blether, even with their trolleys, whilst other shoppers with other trolleys still had room to pass.

On the rare occasions that she had accompanied her mother shopping recently, Luci had been embarrassingly aware of how often they had had to stop just to exchange news and enquire after people's health and family. Luci really didn't want to talk to anyone right now, she just wanted to shop and get back to the refuge, but she also realised that she had disguised herself as her mother – the one everyone seemed to know: the one least likely to be able to get in, shop, and leave.

She crossed her fingers and walked in, keeping to the sides of the aisles and continuing to stare at the floor. She grabbed a pint of milk and then looked quickly at the reduced items. There were some tubs of prepared fruit that were cheap and more appealing than an apple. She grabbed a pot, she had just enough money to buy it and the milk, and made for the self-service check-outs.

On her way she nearly bumped into the trolley of an old woman. She stammered an apology and rushed over to the tills.

Then, as she left the store, she looked back. Thorfinn was helping the old lady to load a bag of potatoes. He seemed to be struggling with the weight. Luci quickly looked away, before he spotted her and waved or anything.



## Interlude

‘Why did the chicken cross the road?’

‘You are kidding me, Rattie?’

‘No. Go on, say it: “I don’t know, why *did* the chicken cross the road?”’

‘OK. Why did the chicken cross the road?’

‘Because it could. Because unlike the chicken I’m currently talking to, it *didn’t* have a huge metal rod stuck up its arse, pinning it to the top of a church!’

A flash of red and the squirrel had scampered away and down again.

## Chapter 8 – Monday

The following day, Monday, she still hadn't heard anything from her mum and she gave into her worry and sent another text. She had to go to school and she managed to find some cereal which would stop her from getting too hungry. She made sure she left the refuge before the support workers arrived for their shifts. She was getting anxious about her situation now and she didn't want to answer any questions until she knew what was going on. As soon as 'the professionals' knew her mum was missing, the whole social services machine would kick into action and she'd have no control or say in the situation. For a while she'd have to continue to pretend that everything was 'normal', although her life hadn't been that since they'd moved here.

Luci walked up the hill to school, passing through the area of undeveloped land opposite Rodin's house which made her shudder now that she knew what it had once been used for.

Suddenly she heard a voice from behind and a breathless panting as someone caught up with her. She turned, prepared to run from an attacker, but it was only Rodin. He looked older than she remembered and he moved as if his joints were stiff. Luci wondered if he had arthritis and whether it was playing up, he was normally so sprightly.

'Luci,' he paused to gather his breath, 'Luci, this is *very* important: where is your mother?'

'Back at the refuge. She worked last night and is sleeping in this morning. I have to go to school, excuse me.'

Rodin reached out to keep her from turning away. His grip on her arm was weak.

'Luci, please, where is your mum really?' And then he looked at her. Straight. His one eye to her two. His unblinking, as if he was trying to see into her, to read her thoughts.

'I told you, she's ...'

'Luci, stop it. I know she's not at the refuge. I know she didn't work last night or yesterday. Do you know where she is? Yes or no.'

She shook her head.

'Luci please.'

'Why's it so important?'

'Look at me! This is why it's so important!' Rodin held his arms up and wide open, revealing his predicament to her. He looked like an old man, as if he had aged 20 years over the weekend. 'You think *this* is bad? You should see Frida: her hair is falling out. And Thorfinn's losing his strength ...'

Luci snorted, 'So what's that got to do with my mum?'

'Everything. Now, this might sound like an odd question but please answer it: where is your mum's Ba?'

'I don't know. I assume she must still have it with her. She had it when she ...'

'You haven't a clue where your mother or her Ba is, have you, Luci? She's been missing, what, a few days now? And you don't know what to do about it? And to compound it all, you're trying to cover it up ... how long do you think you'll get away with this?'

Luci didn't answer. She just rocked gently in agitation. She started to sob. The whole weight of professional do-goodery – of whom Rodin was almost certainly a fully paid up member – was about to come crashing down and around her. No doubt she'd be in 'a home' by this evening, probably being beaten up by tough kids who sniffed glue.

'I have to go to school,' she said, quietly and determinedly, and tried to walk past Rodin.

'No, you don't. You need to find your mum. And quickly. And not just for your sake. Tell me what you know. Everything. Anything. Luci, I'm here to help you, believe me; I want to find your mum as

much as you do and, just like you, I'd prefer to do it my way: without the 'help' of the police and social services. When did you last see her?

'Saturday.' She cried a bit more. She didn't tell him about her dad nor that it was her who'd told her dad where they were. She didn't want to admit that any of this was her fault.

'And her Ba? She had that with her at the time, you said?' Luci nodded.

'Skip school, Luci, we'll find her. Together. Don't worry. I'll be able to explain to the Head. And you really have no idea at all where your mum might be?'

She shook her head.

'We'd better find her sooner than later then. We'll start at the bottom and work our way up.'

Rodin set off down the hill. His pace was slower than usual and he had to keep stopping to regain his breath. He even wheezed a little.

'I'm not ill, Luci, just feeling my age. I'm not used to it and I don't like it, not one bit. *This* is what happens when a Ba goes missing. Really, after everything I've shown you, everything you've observed ... well, if you don't believe me now, you will do by the end of today. We're going in here first.'

'The gardens behind the museum? Why?'

'Call it habit; we won't be here for long.'

They walked down Tankerness Lane, then turned immediately right, into the gardens. Luci was surprised to see there was an old well, fringed with a circle of stone. Rodin reached down between the metal grill and stirred the water with his hand, he muttered something, then he rinsed both hands before lifting his eyepatch and splashing water on his face. Finally he cupped his hand and took a sip of the water, before bowing.

'Spring water, holy well, There's a stream that runs under the cathedral. Older than that young kirk by a good few years. The custodian in the museum drinks here every day, says it keeps his mind active. I often stop here and listen.'

'To what?'

'To the water. As it trickles and gurgles, it chatters, and amidst the chatter you can sometimes hear things.'

'Things?'

'Wisdom, guidance, things to come. The day is going to get weirder, Luci, weirder with a "y". Because first we are going to venture into the land of the dead. She should be in town by now.' The bells of St Magnus Cathedral chimed. 'Follow me.'

He strode out of the museum gardens, went back up Tankerness Lane, crossed the road and entered the kirkyard of the cathedral. It was packed with sandstone graves, some leaning at precarious angles, others broken off entirely. Rodin pointed out a couple of famous graves: that of the Victorian explorer John Rae, the wooden one for the ship's carpenter, then John Mainland's, the man who's gravestone declared that he had died on February 30<sup>th</sup> 1887.

'And there she is.'

Luci followed Rodin as he walked towards a neat and severely handsome woman in a motorised wheelchair. She was whirring around the cemetery, reading the gravestones carefully and making notes. Every so often, she stopped for longer, apparently making sketches.

'Helga records the dead. More than just records though, she's been surveying this kirkyard for so long now she knows it better than anyone, and she talks to them.' Rodin looked at Luci meaningfully. 'And sometimes they talk back. Helga's paralysed. Waist down. Try not to stare.'

'But I wouldn't ...'

'Try even harder than usual.' Then out loud to Helga: 'Helga, whit like?'

'Rodin! No bad. I've nearly finished this section.'

'I'd like you to meet my young friend here: Luci.'

Luci smiled and tried not to look at the withered legs arranged awkwardly on the foot support of the wheelchair.

'Luci's interested in your survey.'

Helga looked Luci up and down. She did not return Luci's smile. 'Is she indeed? We'll see.' She showed Luci one of her sketches; it depicted ornately carved letters and a clear hour-glass design and skull.

Luci looked around. 'That's amazing. Which grave is it?'

'Right behind you.' At last Helga smiled. Not pleasantly.

Luci looked behind her. There was a large slab of red sandstone, almost upright, heavily eroded. Luci scrutinised the sketchbook and compared it to the gravestone. She could just about make out the edges of what could vaguely, with imagination, be an hour glass.

'Oh yes it is,' whispered Rodin to Luci.

'You must have excellent eyesight to be able to see all that detail.'

'I don't,' Helga admitted, 'I asked.'

'Asked who?'

'Mr Samuel William Baikie himself, of course. It's usually polite to ask.'

'Does he know all the graves here too then?'

Helga looked at Rodin and mouthed: 'Is she stupid?'

'Have a closer look at Helga's sketch, Luci, why don't you?'

Luci did. The grave commemorated a Mr Samuel William Baikie. Luci felt the shudder go down her spine.

Helga smiled even more unpleasantly. A smile full of smug satisfaction. Luci backed away. Rodin reached for her hand and held it. His touch was comforting, like a father's.

'Anybody gone over recently, Helga?'

'I was waiting for you to get onto what you wanted, Rodin. Depends what you mean by "recently".'

'Over the weekend.'

'No, surprisingly, given the time of year. I'd have thought you'd have noticed the lack of funeral custom yourself. Good folk of Kirkwall must've discovered the secret of eternal life – been so few passing this year – if they have discovered it, I'm sure it will bring them much joy.'

'I couldn't possibly comment either way, Helga.'

'Rodin, it all depends on what you've got to do eternity in. You can take my advice on that.' Then Helga swivelled round to face Luci, 'Do you think I *like* being like this? You young people are so rude, so unappreciative of what you have ...'

'On the contrary, Helga, Luci and I are extremely appreciative of the time you have taken to explain your, ah, survey and to clarify that the person we're seeking is still with us, so to speak.'

Rodin tightened his grip on Luci's hand and started to pull her away. 'Thank you,' Luci managed to splutter to Helga as she turned away, shocked by the brutal bitterness oozing from the woman.

'We'll have to look elsewhere, Luci. Helga, please, get word to me if the situation changes. You know how.'

'Never more, Rodin, never more.'

He bowed to her and walked away, through the war memorial gate to the west of the kirkyard and out onto the kirk green.

'Car crash?'

'Born like it.'

'And with that attitude?'

'She was grumpier than usual but it takes all sorts, Luci. And now, having looked down, we must search upwards. Next we're going to go and see a lady who is, how should I put this? ... "professional" in most of the things she does. But she also makes a bit of a living through "seeing". Lovely lady. Rather friendly and mysterious, which is all part of the franchise, I suppose ... try not to stare this time.'

'But I didn't ...!'

'Try even harder than back then.'

'So what, specifically, shouldn't I look at this time?'

‘She’ll be wearing a necklace. She always wears it. It’s probably going to be the most dazzling necklace you’ll ever see. Try not to stare at it. Try not to even glance at it. And if you can’t manage that ... whatever you do, please don’t ask her how she came by it. Really, whatever else you do or say – and otherwise Freyja is not easily offended – please don’t ask her how she got that necklace. Please.’

‘Ignore the necklace.’

‘Yes. If you can. Please.’

They had walked back up the hill, to the east, via one of the twisting wynds of Kirkwall. The houses were close together and there was only room for pedestrians to walk two abreast along these alleyways. Above them, in the low trees, noisy dark birds scuttled and cawed.

‘Rooks mainly and some jackdaws,’ explained Rodin, ‘corvids, related to ravens, but not as big. Nor nearly as intelligent.’

Rodin knocked on one of the doors. No response. He knocked again and waited, watching the birds.

Eventually the door opened to reveal a beautiful woman, long brightly dyed red hair, large green eyes, a perfect smile, and an enthusiastic hug for Rodin.

‘Hello gorgeous, it’s been too long since I’ve enjoyed your company. I was beginning to think I wasn’t good enough for you anymore.’

Rodin blushed. Luci actually saw him blush. ‘This would be fairer if you weren’t best buddies with my wife, Freyja ... we’re only here for a reading today,’ and he gestured Luci over, almost holding her in front of him like a protective talisman.

‘Shame,’ Freyja laughed and winked broadly and opened the door so they could both go in. Rodin courteously held the door so that Luci could go in first.

‘Sit down at the table, there are many seats to choose from, so you shouldn’t need to disturb my cats. I’ll get my staves. Do you want tea?’

‘No, thank you, we just need a reading. We need to find out an answer if we can, then we’ll be on our way, time is not on our side.’

‘Not like you to be in a hurry, Rode In.’ Freyja said the syllables of his name slowly, as if they were two separate words. She chuckled to herself. Her laugh was magical and infectious and Luci found herself joining in. Eventually so did Rodin.

‘I like to think I still can, on those occasions when necessity requires, surprise a woman by acting out of character, Freyja, but not today. Today we really do just need a reading.’

‘Shame; you’ll leave me disappointed and wanting then. So what is your question?’ Frame it carefully, for the staves always answer what has been asked.’

Rodin was clearly formulating, concentrating, whilst he pulled a chair out for himself and gestured to Luci to take the chair next to him. Freyja sat opposite them. She shook out and arranged a round cloth in the centre of the table, and placed a leather bag on top, which she then shook. It rattled. She sat back and waited for Rodin’s question. Then, rather seductively, she took off the tasselled shawl she was wearing, and let it slip casually to the floor.

Luci let out an audible gasp. Freyja had revealed a magnificent necklace of precious gems linked with delicate gold tracery. Freyja absent-mindedly stroked her neck and looked pointedly at Luci, raising an eyebrow and almost daring her to ...

‘Hiccup,’ spluttered Luci.

‘Should have had the tea I offered,’ Freyja purred, raising her neck slightly and smiling conspiratorially. ‘Got a boyfriend? No? Girlfriend then? Or one of each ...?’

Luci felt herself redden. She made herself look into Freyja’s eyes, forced herself not to look at the necklace, anywhere but the necklace.

‘Will I find Luci’s mum if I continue to look?’ Rodin relieved Luci by interrupting with his carefully worded question.

‘That’ll do, we can ask that. You know what to do: they don’t call you Fulfiller of Desire for nothing.’

Rodin picked up the bag, shook it, reached in, grabbed a handful of whatever was inside, and tossed them onto the table.

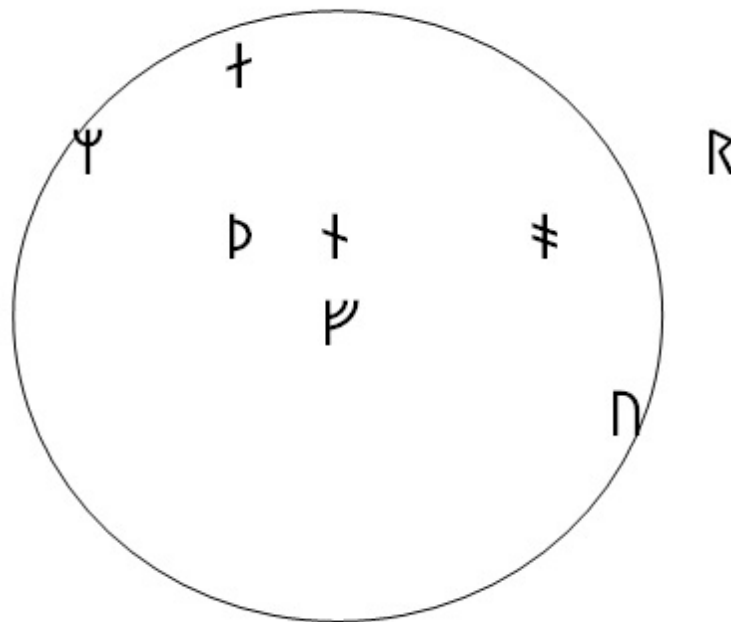
Luci was astonished, 'What are they?'

'Runes. Norse writing.'

'Quiet now, I need to focus.'

Luci looked down at the table, glad of something to concentrate on other than Freyja's necklace. In the centre of the table was the little round cloth. All around were smaller discs of wood, which Rodin had just thrown randomly onto the cloth. Some of the discs had strange symbols on them.

Freyja took the bag and picked up all the discs which were blank. 'We don't read these because they have fallen face down.' She put them back in the bag. 'We only read what is left.'



'We start from the middle because the centre is more certain to happen and then we read outwards. As we do so, what is described becomes less proscribed, but the most likely outcome given the current fates. Nothing is definite. The staves give you the "heads up" so to speak, the flavour of the future.

'In the centre is naudhr – this is the rune of need. It tells how the current situation has come about because of the needs of individuals, their compulsions, drives and obsessions. Individual people behaving selfishly.

'Nearby is thurs and fe, the runes of thorn and wealth respectively. This provides us with more information about what was driving the original need. Thorn tells us that some of the forces were chaotic, even evil, it's already been revealed that they were selfish, but now we learn they are worse, more psychotic. Meanwhile, the rune of wealth tells us that it is a desire to possess that is strong here; particularly the need to possess inherited wealth.

'These are the things that are being spun now. Around these runes, the other fates mingle, sometimes they hesitate before becoming into being, sometimes they never manifest at all, especially if they are thwarted before they get a chance to.

'The rune most likely to come into being next is the rune here, to the right of the central group. This is oss, the message rune. But this isn't a message like a letter or something said in passing, this is a message of prophecy straight from the Gods. It is foresight and wisdom and ways of knowing beyond that of humanity.

‘Next is this pair of runes, right on the edge of the circle: madhr and ar, the runes of humanity and harvest. The outcome rests with people: humans and mortals, not with the Gods.’ Freyja looked pointed at Rodin. ‘And those people are on the edge, in balance, they could fall or choose one way ... or another. The rune of humanity tells us that the selfish people, here in the centre, all have an opportunity to grow from this situation, and to protect each other in the process. The rune of harvest, so close by, is particularly auspicious because it tells us that these people have gifts and skills, special abilities that they won’t be aware of yet. What they need to do is grow into these abilities, then they will fall into their destinies. But they are on the edge in so many ways; in here too,’ Freyja tapped her head, ‘they are unbalanced, not thinking straight.’

‘And last, on the outside, are raeidh, the rune of travel, and ur, the rune of iron. Raeidh tells us that there is a journey – we know already that these people have to pass from one way of being into a newly enabled way of being, now we learn that this will involve, or has involved, a physical, mundane journey as well. At the end, they should expect a reunion. The rune of iron is a most fortunate stave with which to complete a reading for it signifies physical health and vitality – if these people take the opportunities offered to them to move beyond their own selfish and individualistic desires, then not only will they grow in maturity and rise to their destinies, but they will also grow together, deriving kinship and protection from each other in the face of adversity. And, as they mature mentally, so too will their physical health benefit – for the two are inextricably linked. The opportunities will be offered in the form of direction from the Gods.

‘But remember, these people are on the edge; there is every possibility that they will shy away from their fate and, if they do, their vitality will leach away and they will be left indecisive and unempowered.

‘I can tell from your expressions that what I have said carries meaning for you both and that the runes have spoken truth for those who choose to listen – as they always do to those who are willing to be open.’

Freyja rubbed her forehead. ‘Sorry, headache, nagging one. Had it for the last day or so. Must be coming down with something ... not like me to get ill.’

Rodin nodded, as if thinking to himself. ‘We’ve looked up and we’ve looked down and now,’ he mused, ‘I think we involve my ravens when we search through the middle.’

## Chapter 9 – Ravens

Rodin and Luci left Freyja's home and made their way back down the wynd, trying not to slip on the wet flagstones and the black and white droppings of the rooks who still called conspiratorially from above.

'Does it ever stop raining here?'

'It does, but at this time of year it doesn't stop long enough for anything to dry out. Better resign yourself to everything being wet for the next five months or so.' Rodin rubbed his beard and looked up. 'Well, if anyone can find your mum, it'll be my ravens.'

'You mean those two birds in your garden?'

'They're certainly a pair of optimistic opportunists. Tell me, have you ever noticed a couple of men around Kirkwall who look a bit down on their luck, a bit shabby? Usually they're together.'

'The ones who always look unkempt and like they're covered in coal dust? Yeah, I've seen them hanging around: usually drinking beer and gossiping.'

'That's who I mean. They have their special perches in town. They're my friends and, despite appearances, neither of them are homeless alcoholic tramps – that's just a ruse which provides the majority of respectable folk with the self-permission to ignore them. Those two are astute characters and not a lot gets past them. And because the vast moral majority just dismiss them as human detritus, incapable of coherent thought, people don't watch what they say or do around them and that can be *very* useful.'

'Hugh and Mani are known as my ravens. Come with me this way; Mani'll be doing his Albert Street circuit about now.'

They emerged from the wynd and turned right, opposite the bank where the Earl's castle used to stand. They made their way down a slightly less narrow street, weaving between pedestrians who moved only just faster than the one-way traffic which also crawled along the street. There seemed to be a lot more shuffling and limping today. There was nothing orderly about this street; the buildings were all either set back demurely or jutted forward provocatively. The shop fronts were all unique; small, family businesses, on the whole. This was no planned shopping precinct but rather the product of a quirky morphology birthed from a thousand years of trade.

Rodin pointed out a few features to Luci as they walked past: the Big Tree – all that remained of a once grand garden – the ivy house where starlings roosted at night, the crow-steps on the gable ends of some of the roofs. Then they stopped, just before the street turned to the left, and Rodin steering her gently over into an area from which a building seemed to be missing and which was now mainly used for casual car-parking.

'Parliament Square. As good a place as any to wait.' Rodin pointed up to a round blue plaque which informed Luci that James V had, back in 1540, held a parliament in this exact spot.

As they waited, Luci couldn't help noticing how many people acknowledged Rodin; it might just be a slight nod or an 'aye aye' but Rodin seemed to know everyone. Now that she was no longer moving, Luci also realised how cold it was and how her breath turned to mist as she breathed out. She stamped her feet to keep warm and put her hands in her pockets. Rodin leaned nonchalantly against a wall, his broad-rimmed hat low over his face, although Luci could tell that he was still watching everyone as he periodically raised his hand to return a greeting. Soon even Rodin seemed to get restless with waiting and he took a pipe from an inner pocket, stuffed some tobacco into it, and lit up. A warm and spicy aroma curled around Luci, like a cat that wanted attention. She inhaled tentatively, mindful of the dangers of secondary smoking; Rodin just continued to puff meditatively.



Luci watched the streets and how people interacted in them. Some people were purposeful, clearly working to a schedule, others seemed more intent on being social, but nobody was impatient or arrogantly rude the way they so often were in Portsmouth. She couldn't help but notice the aging demographic: there were far more old people than young ones around; lots of greying hair and walking sticks in evidence. And then there was a raggedy man staggering along the street in their general direction. He clutched a can, which he raised to the vicinity of his beard every so often, and he moved clumsily, keeping to the side so that he could steady himself against a shop window if he needed to regain his balance, which he did, often. The other pedestrians gave him a wide berth, some amused, some disgusted.

'Is that one of them?'

Rodin inclined his head towards her, very slightly, and muttered: 'Mani.'

The man seemed to hear his name and looked straight at them, almost belligerently. Rodin gave a hardly perceptible nod and the slightest gesture with his pipe. Mani stumped over to them and leaned in, close to Rodin, then his posture shifted subtly and he sobered.

'Well met, my friend, this here, you know, is young Luci, and we need your help. We're looking for Luci's mum.'

Luci tried to be helpful by pulling up a picture of her mum on her mobile 'phone and held it up for Mani to see.

Mani swivelled to give her screen no more than a cursory glance.

'Have you encountered this lady around town, Mani?'

'I have seen her around, indeed; she has a face to remember that one. But I haven't seen her recently.' Mani's speech was steady, his words not even slightly slurred, despite the stench of alcohol that wafted from him. 'When precisely did she go missing?'

'Well, when was that exactly, Luci?'

Luci did a mental calculation. 'Saturday. Two days ago. Early afternoon. I last saw her in Willows' café.'

'Thank you,' said Rodin rather pointedly, 'at last.'

'I can certainly confirm that I have not seen her in the last two days. Do you want us to start a search?'

'Aye, I think you need to.'

'Both of us?'

'Without drawing attention.'

'Usual rates?'

'If you insist.'

'Never more.'

'Never less,' countered Rodin, indignantly.

'Oh, but you would if you could get away with it.' Mani stood unsteadily before raising his beer can to his mouth and taking a swig, although Luci noticed that most of the beer seemed to splatter on the ground. He slumped away up the street and, as he disappeared from view, there was the slightest of sounds, like the flapping of wings.

'I'm tired, Luci,' Rodin shrugged, 'unseasonably so; mind if we head on back?'

They walked back to the Laverock together, through the crowds, hardly saying anything to each other. Rodin stumbled a couple of times on some of the uneven flagstones but each time Luci caught him so he didn't fall over. He ignored her assistance. They got to the cathedral and Rodin turned to go uphill, back to his home. Suddenly, Rodin nudged Luci to indicate another drunk careering straight towards them.

'Hugh?'

'Indeed and he has news.'

Hugh didn't stop but swerved to avoid crashing into them, muttering, as he passed: 'She was seen with a tall muscular man, about three o'clock on Sunday afternoon, being escorted into some buildings on the Mill end of the Ayre.'

A black feather fluttered to the pavement as Hugh staggered away.

'Luci, come back to Valaskjalf with me now, have an evening meal with us? I want to call an emergency meeting of the Ba Committee.'

Luci shrugged, her mum had been found but she had a sickening feeling it was all going to get a lot worse before it got better.

'OK, I might as well.' There was, after all, nothing to eat back at the refuge.

\*\*\*

The 'evening meal' consisted of something found by Rodin in the freezer and heated through in the microwave. Frida was not around but Luci could hear feminine crying from upstairs.

One by one the members of the Ba Committee arrived and took up residence in the lounge. Rodin didn't even put the kettle on; they all went straight to Rodin's whisky.

'A Ba is missing, gentlemen.'

Mutterings. Swearings.

'Bit obvious, that, Rodin.'

'Aye.'

'Luci has informed me that she last saw Oona and her Ba on Saturday afternoon in Willows' café. Oona did not subsequently work a nightshift at short notice, contrary to what we were all unreliably informed.' All eyes fell on Luci. 'My ravens have found out that Oona was then observed around the Ayre Mill, in the company of a large man, on Sunday.'

Lots of sharp intakes of breath.

'What were you doing outside the Burgh, let alone the Laverock, Luci? After we told you not to,' Thorfinn was shaking his head angrily, 'And with a Ba?'

'I think, Luci, that you owe it to all of us, to tell us how this situation came about. The truth now, if you would be so kind. Do you know who the man is?'

'My step-dad.'

Rodin nodded as if he'd known all along, as if he already knew everything. 'Go on. We're all waiting and listening.'

'We came up to Orkney to get away from him, at least my mum did; I wanted to stay. We've been living in the refuge since the middle of December. He's been texting and calling me every day, well, every day up until Saturday.'

'And ...? I know there's more, Luci, we all know there's more.'

'He wants my mum back. And me. He wants us both back.'

'Do continue ...'

'Remember when we went for burgers?'

'When you first accepted mine and my family's hospitality? Yes, Luci, I remember that occasion exceptionally well.'

'And I had to take a 'phone call? That was him who 'phoned me then. He offered to send me some money.'

'Which you accepted, of course. And what did he want in return?'

'Nothing. He just wanted to know how we were. And he wanted me to treat my mum to something nice, with the money. And to ...'

'And to what?'

'And to send him a quick text on the day to tell him what we were doing for the treat. Just one word: 'coffee' or 'cake'; nothing really, he didn't know where we were, he couldn't possibly have found us.'

‘So you sent him a text? Just like he asked?’

Luci reddened. ‘Two, I sent him two texts ... but I was careful not to tell him anything ... I didn’t think it would do any harm ...’

‘I’m sure you were very careful. Nevertheless he clearly did find you.’

‘Everyone says *I am stupid*,’ shouted Thorfinn, ‘but when stupidity meets selfishness ...’

‘But I only left her for a moment in Willows’, I went to get us a cake and when I came back to the table there was just this note.’ She passed the crumbled paper to Rodin. He read it quickly, his face like stone.

‘Luci,’ Rodin was intense, ‘I need you to describe your step-father to me, to us. What is he like? Everything. Anything. Start with his name.’

‘Thiassi.’

‘Odd name.’

‘He’s Greek.’

‘Got a Mediterranean temper to go with the name?’

Luci nodded. ‘And he’s large. Tall, well built, he works out quite a bit. He looks tanned but it’s just his olive complexion. He owns his own business, so he’s used to bossing people around.’

‘About your mum’s age?’

‘No, a bit older. Late 40s.’

‘And what sort of clothes does he wear?’

‘He’s got really expensive tastes. He likes suits, smart Italian ones, but when he’s relaxing he likes designer stuff like Burberry and – and he’s fond of jewellery, gold, not tasteless but obvious. He has a gold tooth too, here,’ Luci indicated her upper right pre-molar.’

‘Distinctive looks then ... but you’ve not seen him at all since you left Portsmouth? You’ve definitely not seen him around Kirkwall?’

‘No, but I haven’t been far, only to school and Tesco’s.’

‘And Willows’ café,’ someone wheezed sarcastically from the back.

‘And what about after he left that note? Have you looked for him?’

Luci snorted.

‘Sorry, of course you’ve looked, that was wrong of me. So, tell me more: how did your mum and him get together?’

‘I was really little, I don’t fully remember. I just know that soon after she introduced him to me, he was round almost constantly. Been around ever since. We moved in with him really quickly.’

‘And what does he like to do to relax?’

‘He loves the sea and anything to do with it. He’s got a couple of sailing boats – that’s what his business does – he calls them “yachts” – anyway, he rents them out to tourists or else he skippers them around the Solent on pleasure trips. And to relax he does more or less the same thing – only he’ll fish when it’s just him. He loves fishing.’

‘So he’s not short of cash then? Enjoys the finer things in life?’

‘Yeah, but he’s generous too. Buys lots of presents.’

‘And ... now I want you to use your imagination for this next question: where would he live, if he had the choice?’

‘Probably where we live at the moment: Portsmouth.’

‘More, Luci. What sort of property?’

‘Probably like where we live at the moment,’ Luci was getting exasperated, ‘he’s got a flat in Portsmouth, Southsea really, it’s new, great views, balcony.’

‘New?’

‘Yeah, he’s not a great DIYer, he always gets someone else in to fix things, and he doesn’t do gardening either, although mum’s insisted on adding a couple of planters to the balcony, which he moaned about at first but is OK now that mum takes sole responsibility for watering them and stopping them from generally dying.’

‘Moan? About that?’

‘Says her plants got in the way of his telescope.’

‘Telescope? Go on.’

‘He’s just happiest when he’s up high and can see the sea. I mean, he could easily have afforded a bigger place outside the city, but he prefers being able to see the Solent: as much of it as he can.’

‘Thank you. I know where he is: Windy Towers! Gentlemen, we have to get the Ba back, and Oona, of course.’

‘We can’t go like this!’

‘Look at us, Rodin, we’re none of us fit enough to cross the Ayre, let alone hunt through all the flats.’

‘If we all go together, we’ll lose any element of surprise.’

‘If we go alone, we’ll be too vulnerable, especially like this, all weak and feeble.’

‘If he starts a fight, we won’t be able to defend ourselves.’

‘Luci got us into this situation, Luci should get us out of it.’ That last was from Thorfinn, he was still angry and his red beard was bristling.

‘I agree,’ said Rodin, nodding to Thorfinn. Luci blanched and her eyes widened. ‘Luci, together we will work out a way for you to get your mum, and her Ba back.’

‘But I ...’

‘You’re right to be nervous, of course, you are. If you get your mum back, what have you got to look forward to? Back to the refuge and living on benefits? Why should you put yourself out for us?’ The Ba Committee collectively hissed. Rodin shushed them with an impatient gesture. ‘After all, you hardly know us. But this is important, Luci, vital even. And Frida and I have been giving this some thought. The donation of a Ba is a generous act, magnanimous even; we had planned to reward you both with the offer to stay in our self-catering let, at least until the tourist season starts up again in April, that’ll give you both a few months to get yourselves back on your feet. And Currie and Flett here have an opportunity of better work for your mother, don’t you beuys?’

‘Aye, we do.’

‘You’ll find we help each other here, Luci. Will you help us now, if we promise to help you in return?’

Every eye in the room was fixed on her. She nodded reluctantly.

‘Sensible decision. So, we need a plan. Right, Frida will smooth everything over at the refuge for you. And Gibson here will ensure everything is kept quiet from social services for a while. Kemp will take care of the school. Right?’ There were mutterings of assent from the men in the room and a loud ‘Yes!’ from upstairs.

‘Now, your parents will want you with them for Christmas Day, bound to. When they contact you, and they will, go to them. Don’t contact them before then, let them chase you. They’ll probably be “making things up between them” for a while, but they’ll want you with them for Christmas. And Christmas Day will be an excellent time for us to get the Ba, and your mum, back.

‘You can go now, Luci, we also have a Ba game to plan and you know you can’t stay for that. I’ll be in contact, probably tomorrow, because I’m going to need an early night. You keep in contact with me, won’t you? Any news, and I mean *any*, you let me know.

‘There’s a taxi waiting outside to take you back to the refuge. Craigie just called it for you.’

\*\*\*

Luci felt dismissed. She also felt like she’d been let off lightly, there had been a tangible atmosphere of anger and disappointment in the room. Head hung low she lifted the latch of the front door as quietly as possible to let herself out.

There was a gentle touch on her elbow, she turned. It was Frida, her hair was loose and straggly, she looked terrible.

‘Take this, take this for Oona, for your mother.’ Frida pressed a tiny falcon ornament into Luci’s hand. ‘If you need to persuade her to leave, give it to her. Tell her Freyja said I was to give it to her, tell her I understand, tell her to remember what it means. It may be what she needs to make her decision.’

## Chapter 10 – Waiting

Luci left in shame. Back at the refuge she went straight to bed and slept. When she woke in the morning it was to a knock at the door. Jan was there with a hamper of food hung with tinsel.

‘Every year the Ba Committee gifts a Christmas hamper to a charity of their choice, only they call it a “Yule basket”. This year we’re the fortunate recipients of their largesse and this was delivered this morning. The other residents have taken out what they want and this is what’s left, so, here you go. Happy Christmas. Or Yule. Or Solstice. Or whatever midwinter festival you choose to celebrate.’

Jan continued: ‘The Committee have also included some cash for a top-up of your electricity key and some Shearer’s vouchers for butter and cheese and other perishables. If you want them you’ll have to come down to the office because I’ll need you or your mum to sign for them. Come and collect them when you’re ready. You going to school today? You don’t look well, there’s a bug going around, best not to spread it to anyone if you don’t feel too good. Do you want me to ‘phone the school for you? I can do if you want me too, I know your mum’s on an early shift. And I’ve got a cold coming on, so I’m going to have to cancel our support session.’

Luci nodded dumbly. It was as if all her immediate problems had just been solved instantly. This was like magic. Jan had even smiled a proper smile at her.

It seemed that all she had to do was stay in and wait for her parents to contact her. Or perhaps that was all she was meant to do.

\*\*\*

Frida’s falcon ornament, on closer examination, was made of amber and had a silver jump ring threaded through a carefully bored hole in the top, it was clearly meant to be worn as a pendant. Coincidentally, wound around one of the fancy boxes of chocolates in the hamper – which were not going to survive until Christmas Day – was a leather thong which was exactly the right width to fit through the hole, and the perfect length to tie around Luci’s neck.

So she did.

\*\*\*

Luci waited. Later that day Rodin finally texted to say that they had planned the Christmas Day Ba. He had the honour of throwing it up this year. And if there was an Uppie win, Thorfinn would be awarded it as he was overdue his own Ba. Some Doonie called Anderson would get it in the unlikely event that the Ba went down.

There was still no contact from her parents.

\*\*\*

Three days later, early on Christmas Eve, the text finally came. It was from her step-dad and it invited her to meet him outside Tesco, in the foyer. The text was apologetic, profusely so, but offered her a:

*‘real family Christmas, like we used to have, all of us together’*

Luci telephoned Rodin. He told her to keep the appointment and to pack an overnight bag, just in case. As a further precaution, Luci stored Rodin's number in speed dial.

'And if you and your mum can get along to see the Ba played, well, that'll be grand, Luci, remember: when the cathedral clock strikes the hour, that's when I'll be throwing the Ba up. It would mean a lot to me to see you and your mum in the crowd – why don't you try and get your step-dad along too? It will take you about half an hour to get from Windy Towers, fifteen minutes if you have to hurry. Best to come into town by the way you first approached the Mercat Cross – do you remember that narrow lane? – you'll get the best views that way. One o'clock. Don't be any later, otherwise you'll miss the start and that's the best bit.'

\*\*\*

'Hi dad. Where's mum?'

'She's back at the flat, waiting for you to come and join us. She's baking some mince-pies and getting your room ready.'

'I missed you.'

'And I missed you too, darling. Are you ready to go? My car's over here.'

'Is this a new car?'

'Hired. I flew up a few weeks ago. Had to leave the Mercedes at the airport; this little adventure'll be costing me a fortune in airport parking charges.'

\*\*\*

'Well, this is it, our humble abode. Are you ready? Your mum's looking forward to seeing you again. The views from the top are great, right across Kirkwall Harbour. You can see Shapinsay and, on a clear day, even further to Stronsay. This way ... in you go, I'll follow you.'

Thiassi guided her into the building and ahead to a lift. He pressed some buttons and the lift juddered upwards.

'Now, you're not to upset your mum, OK? She's feeling rather delicate at the moment.'

'OK, dad, I'll try. Dad, what about Trick and Treat?'

'Oh, I'm sorry darling, it wasn't fair to leave them, so I've had to put them in kennels. We'll get them back as soon as you and your mum are home again with me.'

Thiassi put a hand between her shoulders and gently but firmly guided her towards one of the doors. He put his key in and turned it.

'Only us! Here's your daughter!'

He pushed Luci forwards and into the flat, stepping after her and quickly turning to lock the door behind him, putting the keys in the inside pocket of his jacket.

'Mum?'

'She's probably in the lounge, watching telly. Come through.'

Luci padded quietly behind him, into a large sparsely furnished space with massive windows and a magnificent view. Her mum was curled up on the sofa, she looked like she'd been crying.

'Luci? Oh Luci, you shouldn't have come.'

'But mum, I missed you, I wanted to.'

'Don't be silly, Ida, you couldn't leave her all alone in that place, not on Christmas Day.'

'Sorry, Thiassi. Here, Luci, have a seat beside me.'

'You two probably have a lot to catch up on and I have to go out for a bit, to get you both your Christmas presents, so I'll need you to stay here and look after each other, OK?'

'But I haven't got *you* anything for Christmas, can't I come with you?'

‘No. No need. Now I’ve got you two back there’s nothing more that I need. You can write me a shopping list though, so I can get all the food we need for Christmas lunch.’ He thrust a pad and pencil at his wife.

Luci’s mum started to write down a few items. ‘I’m sorry, Thiassi, I can’t think straight. We could do with a turkey and some potatoes and some sprouts, Luci you’ll want a nut roast I presume?’ Luci nodded. ‘Just grab anything you can; there probably won’t be much left in the shops now.’

‘OK, I’ll be back later. Just one thing before I go: Luci can I have your ‘phone please? I presume you brought it with you?’

‘Why?’

‘Because it’s mine, I bought it for you, and you spend too long on it. It’s not good for you. Give it to me. Now, please.’

‘Do as your father says, Luci.’

‘But!’

She slapped her mobile ‘phone into her step-dad’s waiting hand.

‘Don’t take that attitude with me.’

Luci’s mum put a restraining hand on her shoulder. ‘Don’t, love, just don’t.’

‘Right, well behave yourselves whilst I’m out, you two.’

Thiassi left the flat. Luci heard him lock the door from the outside.

‘What’s going on?’

‘You shouldn’t have come.’

‘What was I meant to do? Spend Christmas all by myself? I was worried.’

Luci’s mum started to sob.

‘Mum? What’s going on?’

She raised her shirt to reveal bruises around her ribs and chest.’

‘Mum? Did he do that to you?’

She nodded.

‘Has he done that before?’

She continued to nod.

‘I didn’t know.’

Her mum shrugged. ‘Never this bad before, but then, I’ve never run away before.’

‘C’mon mum, let’s just go, whilst he’s out, we can go back to the refuge.’

She shook her head. ‘We’re locked in, Luci, there’s no way out. Unless you want to throw yourself out of a fourth floor window – but you’ll have to break the glass first because they’re all locked too.’

‘Well let me call for help then. Where’s the ‘phone? Where’s your ‘phone?’

‘There’s no landline here; he’s got my mobile, now he’s got your mobile. You don’t get it, do you Luci? There’s no help, no one knows we’re here, this is it. I might as well show you your room. It’ll probably be best if you’re asleep when he gets back, perhaps you should move some furniture against the door, so he can’t get in to hurt you, just in case.’

‘But what about you?’

‘Don’t worry about me; I’m used to it.’

\*\*\*

Thiassi came back after a few hours. Luci heard him unlock the door and then shout at her mum to come and get the shopping and put it away. There was some more shouting and then it went quiet and the lights went out and Luci deduced they had both gone to bed.

She waited as long as she could. When she was fairly confident that they were both asleep, she snuck out of her room by nudging past the dressing table which she’d shoved over to block her door. Then, as quietly as she could, she tip-toed around the flat trying the door and the windows; everything was locked. Her step-dad’s jacket was in his bedroom. On her way back to her room she stubbed her toe on



a bag – her mum’s, with the Ba still in it. She tucked it as near to the door as she could, she couldn’t risk her step-dad tripping up over it, then she squeezed back into her room and slid the dressing table back into place behind the door.

\*\*\*

Luci woke rather late in the morning to a tapping on her bedroom door.

‘Luci, time to get up – your father says we’re to have a proper Christmas with presents and a big meal. I don’t want to disappoint him, not when he’s gone to all this trouble.’

Luci got dressed, slid the dressing table back to where it was meant to be, and came out of her room. Her mum was in the kitchen, preparing vegetables.

‘The turkey’s been in for hours. I hope it’ll be ready for midday, but I don’t fully understand how this oven works.’

‘Did you get any sleep last night, mum?’

‘Don’t, Luci, please don’t. Why don’t you go and open your present from your dad? He’s in the lounge waiting for you.’

Luci mooched into the front room. Thiassi was watching TV. He looked up at her.

‘So, you’ve deigned to join us at last. And isn’t this wonderful? Exactly how things should be: I have my two favourite people to keep me company, an old movie on the telly, your mum cooking a lovely roast dinner with all the trimmings, and some beautiful views of the sea. What more could a man want?’

‘Well, aren’t you going to open your present? Ida! Ida come and join us, Luci’s going to open her present.’

‘Just a minute ... I’ll be with you just as soon as I’ve done this.’

‘Leave it, Ida, this is more important.’

Her mum hurried in.

‘Here you go, Luci, Happy Christmas from me ... and your mum, of course. It’s from both of us.’

Luci carefully unwrapped the present he thrust at her. It was a pink cardigan. An expensive pink cardigan, with a designer label. ‘Thanks, dad.’

‘You don’t like it do you?’

‘It’s lovely, dad. Thanks, just what I’ve always wanted.’ She put it on. It was a bit big for her. She tried to ‘model’ it anyway, and smiled for him.

‘You’re spoilt, Luci. You should learn to be more grateful. I don’t know why I bother.’

‘No, really, dad, I love it, it’s just what I’ve always wanted.’

‘A lot of other kids would be pleased to get something like that at Christmas, you know. A lot of kids will be waking up today with no presents at all. Think of that, Luci, and how fortunate *you* are compared to all those other kids.’ He scowled at her then turned to her mum. ‘Ida, when will lunch be ready?’

‘I’m planning to have it on the table by just after midday.’

‘Right. Well, I’m going to watch telly until then, I’m sure you don’t want me in the kitchen getting in your way.’

\*\*\*

Half an hour later, all three of them were sat at the dining table trying their hardest to look festive. The TV was on in the background, churning out a medley of commercial carols.

Thiassi stood at the head of the table; he was armed with a carving knife and poised to dismember the roasted turkey on the plate in front of him. He cut a few slices of breast and arranged them on Luci’s mum’s plate.

‘That enough?’ She nodded. ‘You sure you don’t want some, Luci?’

‘Nope, I’ve got my nut roast.’

‘Suit yourself. You’re missing out on a treat here.’ He cut a few more slices and speared them onto his plate. The juices ran slightly red. ‘This isn’t cooked properly! I told you to put this in for at least four hours. Can’t you do anything right?’

‘It’s an unfamiliar oven ...’

Thiassi hurled the knife across the room and banged his fist on the table.

‘All I wanted was a proper Christmas, like other, normal families have. Without food poisoning. And I can’t even have that! It’s not much to ask, is it? Well, is it?’

‘No. Sorry, Thiassi.’

Both Luci and her mum were rigid, staring down at their plates. Luci didn’t dare look at her mum, or her dad.

‘So what are you going to do about it?’

‘I, I don’t know.’

‘You don’t know? You don’t know? You never bloody know, do you?’

‘I’m so sorry.’

‘Sorry? What good is “sorry”? Sorry isn’t going to get me a Christmas dinner, is it? And what about your daughter? Do you think “sorry” is going to stop her being hungry on Christmas Day?’

‘No. I’m sorry, Luci, love.’

‘S’all right mum.’

‘No, it’s not bloody all right. What bit of this entire situation has any semblance of “all right”? You stupid bloody woman.’

He stood and took his jacket off, carefully arranging it on the back of his chair. And then, just as thoughtfully, he raised his arm and hit his wife, full on, in the face.

Shocked, Luci’s mum fell backwards, off her chair, onto the floor.

He stared at her, sprawled on the floor, for a few seconds, then stormed into the kitchen where he started to hurl pans and plates around and to shout angrily. Luci reached over to his jacket and the inside pocket and removed his keys, stuffing them into the back of her jeans.

The kitchen was a mess and Thiassi came back to stand menacingly over them. His fists were clenched.

Luci grabbed her mum’s hand and dragged her away from her step-dad. She couldn’t believe he’d had the audacity to hit her mum, right in front of her. That was wrong on both counts. Her mum was crumpled, sobbing, a shell of a person, reduced in dignity and wholly passive.

‘Leave us alone,’ Luci screamed, putting herself physically between her step-dad and mum.

‘This is none of *your* business,’ he roared. ‘This is about adults, grown-ups, you wouldn’t understand, you’re just a pathetic child. This is between me and *my* wife.’

‘No, it’s not. You’re a bully. A big nasty bully. Taking out all your problems on her. Look at her – she’s terrified. Now, leave us alone.’

Suddenly Thiassi’s face dissolved from the redness of anger to the blotchiness of tears. He started to cry like a little boy. ‘I’m so sorry. What have I done? I didn’t mean to hurt you; I never meant to scare you. It was an accident. She was just sitting there doing nothing, like she was in shock, and I just wanted to slap her, to try to snap her out of it.’

‘It was a thump, not a slap.’

‘It was an accident, it was all an accident, I didn’t mean to. I’m so sorry; I promise I’ll never do it again.’

‘Too right, you won’t ever get the chance to do it again; we’re leaving now. C’mom mum.’ Luci’s mum moaned and hugged herself. She seemed to be trying to make herself smaller, more insignificant, less of a target.

‘No, don’t go, please, don’t go. Ida, you’re all I have, please, I’ll change, I promise I’ll change. I’ll give you anything, anything.’ Then he started to sob uncontrollably.

Luci stood between the two of them, both adults crying. She was forced into being the adult in the room, the one who had to take control. She couldn’t help but feel a wash of compassion for both of

them; both needy people with problems beyond her ability to fix. She looked at her mum, still terrified and rigid with fear; her skin starting to redden before it turned into bruises, her eye swollen. Then she looked at her step-dad. He had his face covered with his hands as he cried. Luci caught a glint, momentary between his fingers, that revealed his eyes were open – he was watching what she was doing, cogitating and manipulating. Even now, even at this desperate point, he was still trying to trick her into thinking he was contrite, whilst the whole time he was just calculating his next move.

Something in Luci clicked and she took control.

‘Mum, come with me now.’ Her mum was like an automaton, a lifeless rag-doll. Luci sensed that she’d given up her volition. Only Luci could get them both out now, her mum was beyond thinking for herself. Luci hoped her mum would respond placidly to any assertive order she made as she was forced to step into a decisiveness that was beyond her years and confidence.

Thiassi started to stand. Luci pushed him back: ‘No’, she barked, ‘you stay there. If you really love us, you’ll let us go. No!’ And she shoved him back until he toppled.

‘Mum, come on, quick. I promise I’ll never let this happen again but you must run. Keep up with me, grab your Ba, it’s by the door, and don’t let go of it. Whatever you do: don’t drop your Ba.’

Luci retrieved the keys from her pocket and started shoving keys into the lock of the front door; she found the one that turned and yanked the door open. She pulled her mum out with her; slamming the door shut behind her as she saw Thiassi start to stand and make to go after them. Fumbling, she locked the door behind, leaving the keys in the lock and ran along the corridor. She bundled her mum into the lift and furiously pressed buttons. As the lift doors shut, Thiassi came charging out of his flat, having knocked a hole through the door; he was swearing and bellowing as he saw the lift descend.

Luci turned to her mum grabbing her face in her hands and making her look at her. ‘Mum, listen, Frida sent this, as a Christmas present, for *you*. Frida, your friend, remember? It’s a falcon.’ She held the tiny falcon ornament close up to her mum’s face. There was the slightest hint of recognition and a remote smile on Oona’s face. ‘We’ve got a head start but it’s slight. He’s going to be bounding down the stairs right now, so, as soon as the lift opens, we have to run. It’s OK, I’ve sorted out an escape plan with Rodin; all you have to do is hold onto my hand and your Ba and run with me. Can you do that, mum? Mum?’

The lift came to a standstill and the doors started to open. Luci firmed up her grip on her mum’s hand and pulled her through the gap, pushing through the doors and out of the foyer and into the winter streets. Behind them they could hear running down the stairs, they didn’t stop to look back. Ahead they heard the Cathedral clock strike the quarter to the hour and they started to run towards it, along the Ayre, a narrow road that passed between a lake on the right and the sea on the left. They slipped and skidded on the icy flagstones of Kirkwall’s pavements but still they ran, on and on, turning east towards the Cathedral, following all the crowds of people making their own way more sedately.

They ran, darting in and out between the hundreds, even thousands, of people all being drawn towards the cathedral. It was as if the building itself were a gigantic lodestone, exerting a powerful magnetic pull on everyone from miles around. Behind them they could still hear running and shouting, Thiassi seemed close on their heels, catching up even, but still they ran. People seemed to get out of their way, albeit at a dodder. At one point they nearly ran into Hugh and Mani who were standing together blocking the pavement. Both men stepped back to let them pass and must’ve swayed back together and directly into Thiassi on purpose because Luci heard them complaining as they were pushed to the ground.

Panting for breath and with their hearts pumping in their chests, they turned east up St Magnus Lane. Directly ahead they could just see the Mercat Cross and crowds of people gathering. Still they ran. Behind them they could hear swearing and insults being hurled at their backs, and people being knocked out of the way. From the sounds coming from behind, they seemed mere seconds ahead of Thiassi, but Luci clung to the hope that Rodin had a plan, surely he must have a plan, oh please, Rodin, have a plan ... and that Rodin would keep to it.

Luci prayed they wouldn't be too late, she could see Rodin standing at the Mercat Cross, Ba in hand, scanning the crowds, looking for something, someone, perhaps them. She could see the clock face from here, it was one o'clock already. The Ba was always thrown up at one o'clock. Rodin would not be able to stall for long, mere seconds, no more. Then a sudden, unbidden thought occurred to her: the bells hadn't struck yet. The clock was working but the bells were not. Everyone was still waiting. How had Rodin managed that? The Ba Committee members huddled around Rodin, checking their watches, exchanging glances with each other nervously and looking confused. The game hadn't started yet. Luci shouted out to Rodin and put on a last burst of speed. She felt her mum stumble and almost trip over, but she pulled her up and along. They might still make it.

Luci's legs hurt and her heart hammered in her chest and her lungs sucked in icy air, but still she kept running.

Together they burst out of St Magnus Lane and straight into an atmosphere of palpable tension. To their right was massed a crowd of Uppies, to their left, the Doonies. Both teams should have been the pride of Kirkwall's menfolk but Luci despaired to see that it was just a bunch of tired old men, unstable on their feet and milling around. Then, as she and her mum ran between both teams, there was a sensation, like a tangible wave of brute strength, male hormones, and Christmas aftershave, which washed over the Ba players; it hung in the air and their years fell away.

Now each side was ready to clash with the other, just waiting for the clock to strike one and for Rodin to throw the Ba up, tensely facing each other off with menaces. Everywhere around were spectators, shouting and jostling; lots of children, lots of youths, the kirk green was crowded, whilst people climbed walls and hung out of windows to improve their view.

Luci ran stumbling forward, pulling her mum after her. She knew this was dangerous, she knew that if the teams clashed together now, there would be nothing to save her from injury. The whole time she focused on Rodin, hoping he would notice them, and then he did, immediately throwing his Ba up and over their heads with considerable force.

The two sides dashed for the Ba; all around and behind them, players surged forwards. Luci and her mum continued to run towards Rodin, more of a stagger now, their heads down. They got to the wall, and were hauled up by the Committee members, to stand by the Mercat Cross. They bent over, almost nauseous with the exertion. Finally they turned to watch the scrum.

'Where's my step-dad?' Luci gasped.

'He was right behind you,' Rodin explained, 'he nearly had you, but I threw the Ba right at his head, it hit him, and he'll be in there somewhere.' He nodded at the surging pack of Ba players. The two sides had smashed together now, as the players tried to take possession of the Ba. Luci was astounded by what she saw: several hundred men, young, fit and strong, mostly wearing old rugby shirts and jeans, had formed a scrum which swirled like eddies in a surging river. The noise was incredibly as each player pushed and shoved, swore and shouted directions. Sweat evaporated off the players and formed a cloud of steam above their heads, blurring the action even further. Neither Thiassi, nor the Ba which Rodin had just thrown up, were visible.

Luci could barely make out the individual faces in the scrum, although Thorfinn was recognisable in the middle of the fray, holding his own against the tide despite being tightly wedged in. His face had a look of concentration that Luci had not seen before and it was clear he'd recovered his strength as he waded towards where the Ba seemed to be. Around the pack, older veterans of the game got up on walls to shout encouragement and advice to the current generation of players.

Mingling amongst the non-players were First Aiders, strolling around in their florescent yellow jackets. Spectators milled around, keeping a careful eye on the pack, ready to get out of the way when, and if, it broke or moved.

'It's OK, lass, it'll be like this for a while now. The pack'll wedge itself up against the Town Hall, see, and won't move for a bit. This year's Ba is in there somewhere, as is your step-dad. The lads've got instructions to keep him down, as long as they can, nothing serious, but after a bit, when they move, the rest of us'll pick him up and escort him from Orkney. We might let a First Aider take a look at him

first but he won't come back. And now we'll get you, your mum, and your Ba away from here. We'll get you both back up to Valaskjalf, you'll be safe there, Frida's waiting with the kettle on and the whisky bottle open. Thorfinn will get his Ba if the Uppies win, so you can wait up there for the party.

'We've got the missing Ba back.' He cradled it in his arms and tapped it gently. 'Thank you. Now there's nothing for either of you to worry about any more. There's going to be a lot of changes from now on, for both of you, positive ones. Welcome back to Orkney, welcome home.'

Then he looked up to the top of the cathedral, as if momentarily distracted, and muttered: 'Some things, of course, will never change.'

## Interlude

‘My master wants to know why you’re celebrating the second of October on Christmas Day.’

‘The second of October? Celebrating? What on earth makes your master think that?’

‘The way you’re in fancy dress.’

‘But I don’t look any different from any other day. What has my appearance got to do with the Memorial of the Holy Guardian Angels?’

‘Does knowing that go with the kirk franchise? That’s not what he was thinking of, oh no. What else happened on that date? He’s thinking more 1869...’

‘Ah, Mahatma Gandhi’s birthday, celebrated as a public holiday in India.’

‘And your fancy dress is perfect for the occasion; rather ethnic.’

‘I’m still not following, Ratatoskr.’

The squirrel cleared his throat: ‘My master says to tell you that you’re doing one of the best impressions of a chicken shish kebab he’s ever seen.’

‘No, I’m ... and you can tell your master that shish kebab actually originated as a Middle Eastern dish ...’

# Background

The premise of this novel is simple: the Norse Gods are alive, they are living in Kirkwall, and they play the Ba game.

Ba probably derives from *ball*; the word refers to both the game and to the ball itself. The Ba is a handmade leather ball, filled with cork. Each Ba weighs about 1.5 kgs (about 3 lbs) and is about 70 cms (28 inches) in circumference. The leather is stitched in such a way to form alternative strips of dark and light leather.

Ba games originate in medieval mob or village football games; they used to be common throughout the British Isles but now there are just a few remnants left. One of the most famous is probably Derbyshire's Shrove Tuesday Shove. In Scotland, Ba games are still played in Duns, Jedburgh, Roxburgh, Scone and Kirkwall. The games are usually played around Christmas and New Year. History documents that in Orkney, until the last century or so, similar games were played on some of the outer islands, in Stromness, and St Margaret's Hope, but now only the Kirkwall game remains.

There are four games played every year in Kirkwall. A Boys' Ba starts at 10am on Christmas Day with a Mens' Ba starting at 1pm. Then on New Year's Day, the Boys' Ba starts at 10am and the Men's Ba at 1pm again. The starting point is always the Mercat Cross outside St Magnus Cathedral, where it is considered a great honour to be asked to throw the Ba up – usually this is done by a previous Ba winner, local dignitary, or Committee stalwart.

Whilst described loosely as 'street football', spectators need to forget anything associated with FIFA. These games are more akin to rugby, with the ball being handled (as well as kicked), usually in a moving scrum. Often spectators, and most of the players, won't see the Ba whilst in play, nor know where it is, but it will be somewhere in the middle of a heaving mass of men, all pushing and shoving the entire pack towards either of the two goals. In Kirkwall the goals are the Basin (the Victorian harbour) and the wall of Mackinson's Corner (the site of the town gates before they were removed).

There is no pitch – the game is played in the streets of Kirkwall and can go anywhere. Historically the Ba has gone through a hotel, a shop, and through people's gardens – with the players in pursuit. Hence the wooden barriers which go up over doors and windows about mid-December each year – in midwinter, Kirkwall does indeed look like a town under siege. Visitors to Kirkwall at other times of year will be able to see little holes around all the doors and windows in Kirkwall, ready for barriers to be attached in winter, although some derelict buildings keep their barriers up all year around. It is not unusual for property to be damaged whilst the game is in progress, usually smaller things such as garden walls or metal railings, but the Ba Committee will always ensure that any damage is made good.

There are no rules – although there is a 'code' of acceptable behaviour. A single goal has to be scored and play continues until it is, no matter how long that takes. The Ba can be kicked, carried, thrown, passed, run with, and smuggled (this is when the Ba is hidden under a jumper). Players often try to create false 'breaks' in the hope that the other team will follow the wrong players so that the Ba can be sneaked to the goal. A couple of years ago, the Ba was transported in a car, but this was considered not to be in the true spirit of the game and is unlikely to happen again – although it was picked up and carried by horseback several times in past centuries. The game is rough and players do get hurt – usually bruises and cracked ribs – but tempers and 'inappropriate behaviour' are not tolerated.

There are no set teams – there are unlimited players on each side, indeed the game is sometimes won by strength of numbers. With no set teams there is no uniform, no team kit, nothing to distinguish one

team from the other – this is probably the reason why this remains a game predominantly for Orcadians, not incomers, you know who else is on your team, because you already know every player.

The two teams are called the Uppies and the Doonies. The Uppies are ‘Up-the-Gates’, whilst the Doonies are ‘Doon-the-Gates’. ‘Gate’ derives from the Norn word *gata* meaning ‘path’ or ‘road’. (Norn was the language spoken in Orkney before Scottish; Orkney was never Gaelic speaking. Norn derives from a combination of medieval Norse and Scots. The unique Orkney dialect and accent derives from Norn.)

The Uppies and the Doonies refers to a time when Kirkwall was divided into two areas, of rival factions: the Laverock and the Burgh. The Laverock was the southern area, slightly uphill, and was controlled by the Bishop who had his palace Up-the-Gates. The Burgh was the northern area, down by the harbour, and was controlled by the King’s Earl who had his castle Doon-the-Gates. Whether an individual was an Uppie or a Doonie used to depend on which side of the Mercat Cross they were born, although nowadays it’s the side of the Mercat Cross that is approached when entering Kirkwall for the first time. With most Orkney babies born at Balfour Hospital or Aberdeen nowadays – rather than at home – some families have been known to make tortuous routes home to ensure that their newborns inherit the correct family allegiance.

Each Ba game starts when both teams make their way through the streets of Kirkwall and menacingly stare each other out on Broad Street, just outside the west end of the cathedral. There will usually be thousands of spectators crammed onto the kirk green, jostling for the best view of the game. Then, as the cathedral clock strikes 1pm, the Ba is thrown up and both sides clash together and the Ba disappears from view. The noise from the players is that of an incredible roaring and, given it is Orkney in the middle of winter, a cloud of steam issues off the pack as they shove and push.

The game can be raw and brutal. The winner is not the man (or boy) who scores the winning goal. Instead, at the end of the game, a lengthy argument erupts as the Ba is awarded to a popular winner. This will usually be someone who has played consistently well for a minimum of 20 years, boy and man, and may even have been decided before play commences.

A women’s Ba game was played twice, in one year, just after WWII. Apparently the game got ‘spiteful’, with the players using hatpins and knitting needles; history records that play was generally considered to be ‘unladylike’. The men were so against this game that at one point they stole the Ba and hid it in the cathedral kirkyard.

Folk tales relate that the game may originally have been played with a human head. Also, a Doonie win is meant to foretell a good harvest for the fishermen in the summer, whilst an Uppie win is meant to foretell a bumper harvest for the farmers – this would suggest that the game may have origins in fertility rituals.

Those readers who know their Norse mythology will have already worked out that this novel is a retelling of the myth of Iduna: the Goddess who tended the magical apples which kept the Gods of Asgard eternally young; with apples having been substituted for the Ba.

For those readers who don’t know their Norse mythology, I hope this novel will inspire you to go and research the myths for yourself: for these tales are easily as rich as the Greek, Roman and Egyptian myths ... but to assist in the interim, here follows the story of Iduna, retold briefly:

One day Odin (the father of the Gods) and Loki travel away from Asgard and, being hungry, catch a cow, which they proceed to cook over a fire. No matter what Loki does, the beef remains raw. An eagle taunts Loki and tricks him into being captured and carried off. When the eagle reveals himself to be the giant Thiassi, Loki bargains for his freedom by promising to bring Iduna and her apples to Thiassi.



Loki persuades Iduna to leave Asgard with her apples, whereupon Thiassi snatches her away to his stronghold. Her absence causes the Gods to age rapidly and, realising that Loki is to blame, Loki is forced by the Gods into promising to get Iduna, and her apples, back.

Loki borrows the Goddess Freyja's cloak so that he can turn into a falcon; he finds Iduna, and flies with her back to Asgard. Thiassi turns himself back into an eagle and gives chase.

The Gods build a pyre in Asgard; Loki flies through the pyre, just ahead of the eagle. The Gods light the pyre and, unable to stop, Thiassi is consumed in the fire. Iduna and her apples are returned to Asgard and all is well once again for the Gods.

Loki is a fascinating character in Norse mythology. Usually considered to be male (he marries and fathers many offspring), he can also change into female form (and when he does he later gives birth to other offspring). There is something transgender about Loki, neither one thing nor the other; he is a shape shifter. Likewise, Loki belongs neither to the Aesir nor to the Vanir. Furthermore, he is sometimes the Gods' hero, at other times their downfall; ultimately Loki will bring about Ragnarok, the end of the Gods and of the world. He may not even be a God at all, he may originally have been a fire spirit – the etymology of his name may derive from Norse *logi* meaning 'flame' – or a shaman or trickster figure elevated to deity status.

With all these contradictions, Loki becomes Luci, a teenage girl – she is just as confused and confusing as Loki. Luci is both a 'cool' way of spelling Lucy plus a shortening of Lucifer – and all these names derive from the Latin *lux* meaning 'light'.

There is a lot of my own character, and my childhood, in Luci. Growing up I was just as selfish as her (I hope I have changed, at least a bit), and my father was as controlling as Thiassi. Of course, it wasn't called 'domestic abuse' in those days and violence between family members was more or less accepted as normal.

Domestic abuse is still ruining lives, whatever form it takes; if it affects you, or someone you know, please do seek help.

Thank you for reading this book, I hope you enjoyed reading it as much as I enjoyed writing it.

Helen Woodsford-Dean

## About the author

Helen Woodsford-Dean was born and lived for most of her life in southern England where she lectured in archaeology, specialising in the prehistory of the British Isles. In her early 40s she decided to move to Orkney because she thought it would be lovely to get away from the 'rat race' and live on a remote Scottish island. It is lovely, but Helen would be one of the first to admit that life can also be difficult and dark in winter.

Helen is one of the Scottish Pagan Federation Local Representatives and Interfaith Officers for Orkney; she is also their Regional Co-ordinator for Northern Scotland, an elected officer, and a Pagan celebrant, able to perform legal weddings in Scotland. As well as providing open ceremonies to celebrate the turning of the year at the stone circles in Orkney, Helen also provides life rituals such as namings, relationship blessings, and funerals on request.

She is an active member of the Scottish Green Party and the Orkney Greens. Helen believes in justice for the environment, society, and the individual. She believes that politics and spirituality need to be interlinked to be fully effective and ethical.

Her main work is tourist guiding and she specialises in providing tours for those visitors to Orkney who come on spiritual pilgrimage. She can provide a unique insight to Orkney through sharing her own spiritual experiences and combining this with the knowledge she gained as a lecturer in archaeology.

Helen writes during the winter months, when there are not so many tourists in Orkney; she finds it is an excellent way to combat the difficult darkness.

She can be contacted via her web-site at [www.spiritualorkney.co.uk](http://www.spiritualorkney.co.uk)