

Chapter 1

The landlord described Bernice's flat as small but quirky. The rent was fair for Glasgow city centre and the ideal location for her above the salon where she worked. The quiriness Bernice loved. The dinkiness meant a carpet of Bernice's shoes adorned the communal hallway giving rise to gossip of her attempt to put the local mosque out of business.

No two windows were the same shape. An Aga set into the wall replaced a baker's oven previously used to serve the community. Three half-moon stairs led to Bernice's living area. It was here she rested on an overstuffed sofa, confident of the success of the previous night's ritual at the beach.

Bernice wound a few strands of coppery curls around her fingers, and fell into a deep sleep.

She usually dreamt in colour, but this morning the palette bore shades of grey. She dreamt of the mother she knew only from photographs, a lone soul at the edge of the sea. Bernice wondered at the strength of the waves, the melody of surf brushing against the rocks. The contrast of water being both healing and fatal intrigued her.

She was comfortable on the sofa as her subconscious combed her imagination.

As she dreamt, Bernice was drawn to murky waters where her mother stood cradling an infant wrapped in a pale shawl. As Bernice approached with outstretched arms, the image faded. The waves grew higher, darker and more menacing as a cruel wind whipped the waters to frenzy. Bernice heard a muffled cry and felt herself falling.

She woke with a start, sticky with sweat and lying on her living-room floor. Hex jumped to safety the way cats do. Bernice sat upright. She shivered, content her son was safe.

It was time for Bernice to face her past. Bernice held a small angelite crystal in the palm of her hand. She closed her fingers over it for a few seconds and let her mind drift back to when she was eight years old.

It was a warm summer's day. Waving to Granny, Bernice skipped down the worn path outside the smallholding where they lived. She glanced around quickly making sure no one saw her and slipped quietly into the belly of the woods tracing a familiar path, past the burnt-out hollow of the big oak, across a carpet of bluebells, carefully stepping over the shallow stream towards her den. Four huge boulders lay embedded in the soil. Their humpbacked curves offering hours of adventure to the imaginative eight-year-old. This was her secret place.

Bernice felt safe. The silence broken only by the occasional rustle of leaves or twigs snapping underfoot as she busied herself creating the day's adventure. The secret place was ideal for her dolly's hospital. Bernice dropped her rucksack heavily to the ground.

A scrunched-up bag of "odd fellows" spilled over onto the damp grass. The pastel lozenges scattered like a rainbow jigsaw. She popped a bright pink sweetie into her mouth, luxuriating in pleasure as the clove flavouring trickled down the back of her throat.

Plunging deeper into the bag she rescued Uncle Ted, Miffy, and Lino the lion, along with a selection of small blankets and the dented biscuit tin with her first-aid kit packed inside. She treated Ted to a

crepe bandage turban whilst Miffy got off with a sticking plaster on each knee. Bernice tucked a small plastic thermometer under Lino's front paw and dabbed a cotton pad, moistened with spittle, at his fevered brow. So lost in her role as nurse the little girl didn't realise how late it was.

The sky grew darker to a mushy grey, like God forgot to put a coin in the meter. Bernice packed up her things and headed home. She didn't notice the stump of a tree trunk and toppled down a steep embankment. It all happened so quickly, she didn't have time to be scared. But she was afraid now.

"Jack and Jill went up the hill..." she whispered, focused on the expanse of water stretching out beyond her. Bernice was a regular visitor to the seaside but she never knew the sea reached all the way up here. Further along a cluster of woodland meant shelter.

She stumbled across the sands towards the protection of the trees. Bernice trundled on, keeping to the edge of the beach, the contrast of sand and soil merging, reminding her of the wonders of Mother Nature. The air was damp. It was getting darker now. Instinctively she pulled her cardigan tighter across her chest. Droplets of rain mingled with tears as branches scratched and clawed at her face. She frantically pushed them aside in her quest to find the way home. The sun struggled to penetrate the barrier of trees as they fought for space in the density of the woods. She would rest a while before retracing her footsteps back along the shore. Her ankle strained against the strap of her sandals as she tried cautiously to move forward. Twigs snapped underfoot. The trees loomed high above her head. The breeze slowed to a halt, Bernice dared not move. She leaned against a massive old Wyche elm and tried to catch her breath. Her feet were numb. Looking down at her bare toes she thought of snakes and wished she hadn't worn the red plastic sandals.

The soft mohair of her cardigan clung to her like a second skin. Damp from sweat, she felt light-headed and slid down to sit on the grass. The bark of the tree was rough. Slowly she turned towards it.

She vaguely remembered nature talks from school and wondered how old the tree was? How long was it stood here? A silent witness. Witness to what she wondered? An army of ants scurried nearby.

How easy it would be to wipe them out with one hard stamp of those red sandals. How vulnerable they looked. Totally oblivious they continued, meticulously manoeuvring a piece of crab-apple.

Bernice was surprised by her own cruel thoughts. She too felt vulnerable in the past but this was fear, nauseating fear. If she wasn't at the table when Granddad got home she knew she was in for real trouble.

Seeking shelter in the shade of the huge tree, Bernice wrapped herself as best she could in the dolly blankets. She reached for a small boulder and felt its weight in her hand, cool and smooth, her protection from anything bigger than ants. She was tired but knew she couldn't rest for long.

The rain was falling in cold sheets over her. She licked tears and rain from trembling lips. Glancing back, she thought she could make out a figure slumped at the edge of the beach. It lay motionless as the water lapped around. Soon the tide would rise, and the body would be washed away. Who knew how long it would take to find? Bernice rubbed at her tired eyes and tried to stay calm, hoping the increasing rain would extinguish her vivid imagination.

“Shadows. Shadows. Trick of the light,” she convinced herself.

She must have dozed off, because the next thing she knew Granddad was shaking her arm roughly.

“Bloody pest, how many times have we told you not to go wandering off?”

Granny stood behind him, twisting the gold band on her finger. “Thank God she’s safe wid ye?” The old woman fell to her knees in front of Bernice and began rubbing the child’s arms briskly, to get her circulation going. “Cuddle into me, Bernadette.”

Bernice snuggled her tiny frame under the big crocheted blanket Granny used since she was a baby. Squares of surplus wool from the many fine garments Granny knitted over the years. The magic blanket believed to cure all ailments. Granny wrapped the blanket around her like a shawl and scooped her granddaughter into her arms. Bernice rested her chin on Granny’s shoulder.

Was that a woman standing by the shore?

Granny stopped briefly, realising how close they were to where Bernice’s mother was found almost a decade earlier, tangled in the seaweed, dragged her to her death.

Granny shivered, at the memory of losing her daughter, thankful Bernice was in her life. The old woman tightened her grip and clung to her tremulous frame as the child looked over her shoulder, mesmerised by the lights from the retreating sun, flickering off the canvas of the sea.

The woman was gone.

Hex scratched at an envelope on the mat. The note was lying behind Bernice’s front door. The writing was childish. Large print on a crumpled envelope. The pencilled words were scrawled in an awkward angle across the back.

“I know where your son is.” A post office box number was scratched beneath the cryptic message. First instalment to be sent and more information would follow.

‘It says what?’ Maggie’s voice croaked as she answered Bernice’s phone call. She rubbed at sleep and mascara to unglue her eyes.

‘Someone must know something.’

‘Or someone is playing a sick joke.’ Maggie sat up quickly.

‘Or maybe their conscience has held the secret for long enough?’

‘But who else would know where the baby was buried? You tried the Registrars and got nothing.’

‘He must be somewhere. I’d have somewhere to go, to be near him. It all makes sense.’

‘Bernice, if your granddad never registered the birth, he is hardly likely to have registered the death, it’s a sick hoax. We’ll talk later.’

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Taking a notepad and pen, Bernice let the words tumble from her heart to the page. Many moons had passed since Bernice moved to Glasgow but still she wrote. One day Granny would reply.

Then Bernice would go back.

Chapter 2

In a cottage in the Scottish Highlands, Dermott Flannigan sat staring at his hands. He held a small bundle of unopened letters. Rain battered the single sash window behind him. Despite the sender's name being clearly written on the back of each envelope, the letters were never addressed to their intended recipient.

He scratched his chin and sighed. 'Ach, Bernadette, Jeez.'

The undertaker explained what paperwork was needed to register the death; make the arrangements. Presuming the next of kin was too overcome with grief, the task was suggested to Dermott to deal with.

Dermott tucked the letters back under the lid of the rusted biscuit tin he'd found them in and shoved it behind an old wooden trunk.

A voice bellowed from below. 'What is yon eejit doing up there! Get the fecking thing and let's get this sorted! Even now the auld besom is keeping me from me business.' An old man was struggling to stand, pushing a wheelchair away from him.

'Please take the chair. You're not fit...' His companion flushed, grabbing the chair. 'At least take this.'

'Out of me way, Robbie,' the old man growled. He leaned heavily on the chair and clung to the stick being offered. 'I'll decide whether I'm fit or not! I make the fecking decisions around here! Put a roof over your heads didn't I! Raised you like my own! Ungrateful pair of gob-shites!'

Dermott watched from the attic window. The old man looked towards the skylight.

'Get a move on, eejit!' The voice from the yard sounded stronger than the body it came from.

The journey was short, conversation sparse. They pulled the car into a driveway. A man's legs poked out from the cab of an elegant hearse, clouds of smoke escaping from within. He quickly stubbed out his cigarette and waved at the air above his knees before producing a chamois leather and rubbing aimlessly at the ink-black paintwork.

'Ah, gentlemen.' The chamois was left on the car's bonnet as the trio were escorted inside.

'Right, let's get it over with,' the old man rasped.

'Ah, thank you for being so prompt, may I offer you tea? Something stronger?'

'I'll have the something stronger. Why I need to be here at all I don't know.' The old man accepted a tumbler of whisky. He drained the glass.

'Ah, refill? Yes, this is a very difficult time for you.'

'Sort him out, Dermott.'

Dermott laid a sheaf of documents on the funeral director's desk. 'I think it's all here, what your man put on the list like.'

'She had a good innings then.'

'Lazy good for nothing, sucked the life out of me I'll tell you.'

Poor stock her family. I married the runt of the litter and it only got worse from there on in,' the old man slurred.

'Date of death...I need a signature here...and here...'

The old man scrawled his name twice and banged the tumbler down. 'Enough then? All done?'

'She was an angel.' Robbie snuffled into a handkerchief.

'Fecking witch I tell you.'

'I'm sorry.' Dermott apologised as Robbie helped the old man out to the car.

'No problem, grief affects people in many ways. You've sorted the service?'

Dermott nodded. 'And the music, she loved her music.'

The undertaker took Dermott's hand in a firm grip and patted his back. 'You've done well. She'd be so proud. Go easy on your father.'

The car horn sounded.

'He's not my father.' Dermott walked towards the car.

END.