

**Praise for *The Ghost Hunters***

‘Surprising, serpentine and clever’

*Sunday Times*

‘Close the curtains pull up a chair, open a book –  
and prepare to be pleasantly scared’

*Metro*

‘A deft, spooky psychological drama based on a true story’

*Daily Mail*

‘Engrossing . . . a chilling English ghost story’

*Fortean Times*

‘Spring weaves a dark web of romance, deceit  
and a lingering curse’

*Metro*

‘I was gripped by the supernatural menace and the gradual  
revelation of mysteries and secrets’

*Fortean Times*

‘Genuinely spine chilling . . . an excellent blending  
of fact and fiction’

*Light Magazine*

‘A gloriously spooky tale, perfect for dark autumn nights’

Netmums.com

Neil Spring was born in south Wales in 1981. He started writing at the age of twenty-eight. Between 1999 and 2002 he studied philosophy, politics and economics at Somerville College, Oxford. In 2013 he published *The Ghost Hunters*, a paranormal thriller based on the life of Harry Price. *The Ghost Hunters* received outstanding reviews and has been adapted into a major television drama for ITV. Neil is Welsh and lives in London. *The Watchers* is his second novel.

Also by Neil Spring

*The Ghost Hunters*

*The*  
**WATCHERS**

**NEIL SPRING**

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This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses, organizations, places and events are either the product of the author's imagination or used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events or locales is entirely coincidental.

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For Guy Black, Baron Black of Brentwood.  
A dear friend and a great man.



## Note

This novel was loosely inspired by the UFO sightings that took place in Wales throughout the late 1970s. However, all the characters appearing in this work, as well as all details of the story itself, are entirely fictitious. Any resemblance to real places or persons (living or dead) is purely coincidental. For more information on the historical background of the sightings, please see the author note at the back of the book.







'We are a haunted species. The spectres are among us. They continue to come. They rattle their chains. Yet it is us who have chained them.'

Ralph Noyes, former MOD official



# Prologue



## *DELIVERY OF THE PARSONS REPORT*

BY JONATHAN HARRISON, FORMER  
SPECIAL ADVISER TO THE PRIME MINISTER

*Wednesday 22 May 1979, 10 Downing Street, London*

Perhaps it was the prospect of meeting the new prime minister that accounted for his ashen expression; perhaps it was the weight of history which lay behind that famous black door. Whatever it was, the young man looked fearful. I might even go so far as to say tortured.

Smiling, I gestured him forward. ‘This way please, Mr Wilding.’

Many visitors to 10 Downing Street react with something close to awe, but this shabby, unkempt gentleman was different. He was not taking in the grandeur of the entrance hall; he was focused on stepping carefully across its chequered black and white floor.

‘Is that it?’ I asked, eyeing the slim blue file in his hand.

He nodded without looking up, and I hurriedly guided him to the corridor that ran to the back of the house and up the grand stairs. He did not admire the gilded banisters. He did not eye the portraits of previous prime ministers. But when, as we reached the landing of the first floor, he glimpsed through an open door a vast oval table surrounded by vacant chairs, he stopped.

‘There?’ he said.

I nodded.

He stared into the panelled room, and I let him have a moment. It's not every day a former parliamentary researcher is invited to attend an extraordinary meeting of the National Security Council.

'You followed the instructions in my memorandum?' I checked.

'Yes.'

'You told no one of this meeting?'

'I told no one.'

'And you understand that—'

'That what is said here today remains a secret, yes,' he snapped, finally meeting my gaze.

'The prime minister is waiting,' I said, and I guided him along. I did not add that our new PM was not a lady to be kept waiting. Nor did I point out that he had just one hour to tell his story – to convince us – before the council members arrived. He did not look like he could take the pressure.

We arrived at the door to her study and I knocked once.

'Come in.' Her voice was calm but stern.

The prime minister looked up as we entered her office. I gestured Wilding to a chair before the desk, but before I could make the necessary introductions our guest had turned back towards the door I had just firmly closed.

'Mr Wilding, are you all right?' I asked.

He had gripped the door handle and was rattling it: once, twice, three times.

'Mr Wilding?'

He looked at me with embarrassed, apologetic eyes and nodded, yet proceeded to perform the exact ritual a second time.

In all my years as a private secretary in Downing Street I had

never witnessed a guest behave so peculiarly, especially before a prime minister. I was nervous to see her reaction – intrigued too, for this was only her second week in office.

After a third cycle of rattling, I ushered Wilding towards the chair once more. ‘Please, won’t you sit down?’

He did. Carefully. Perched on the edge of the seat as if ready to leap up at any moment.

The PM studied him. His hair was unruly, a shock of dark curls. His eyes too were dark and set deeply in a gaunt face. Haunted is the word that comes to mind. He looked haunted. And if the stories about him were true, that was understandable.

‘You are a difficult man to find,’ said the prime minister at last. ‘Two years?’

‘I needed to get away. I needed to recover.’

‘Remind me who you worked for?’

‘Paul Bestford. Member of Parliament for Pembrokeshire.’

‘Ah yes.’ She nodded, only once but her tone spoke volumes. ‘Paul’s loss of self-respect was sad to see. But his loss of self-control, *that* was unforgivable.’

The observation was cuttngly smooth. I wasn’t surprised when Wilding flinched. But his eyes remained locked on hers.

A beat passed, another, and still they stared. The silence was loaded with tension.

Finally, the prime minister began again. ‘Mr Wilding, I am so terribly sorry for your loss,’ she said with an empathy far removed from her public persona. ‘And so grateful for all you have done.’

‘Thank you,’ Wilding murmured. Quickly, he looked back over his shoulder to the door, then back at the blue file he was still holding in his right hand.

‘I want to reassure you that a full investigation into what

happened in the Havens has been under way for some time,' the prime minister said. 'And the guilty parties are being sought.'

Wilding nodded. A gesture of reluctant acceptance, or grief perhaps.

'Help me understand,' she said, 'what compels a man to act as your grandfather did?'

Wilding looked distressed. Dropping the blue file onto her desk, he said, 'This. The recurrent power of evil.'

She didn't reach for the document immediately, just eyed it steadily. 'You have no idea,' she said, drawing a breath, 'for how long the intelligence services have sought this information. Beyond the Vatican Library, only a few copies exist, and we had no lead on any of them. Until now.'

But Wilding was no longer paying attention. The high windows that overlooked Horse Guards and St James's Park were like a magnet to his eyes. *What on earth is he looking at?* I wondered. Finally he tore his gaze away, pulled in a deep breath.

'Has Dr Caxton arrived yet?'

'He is expected shortly,' the prime minister answered. 'We are in desperate need of his assistance. Yours too. Now go on. Tell me, please, Mr Wilding, how did you come by this document? From the beginning. Leave nothing out.' She gave me a quick glance. 'My secretary will take notes.'

'I . . . I don't know where to start.' He paused, then added, 'Prime Minister, I think the questions you really want to ask are, "Did those things actually happen? *Could* they happen?"'

She tilted her head to the side, just as she had during my briefing to her earlier that morning on the plague of phenomena that had occurred two years ago in the distant community of the Havens, St Brides Bay, in west Wales, an area the newspapers were calling the Broad Haven Triangle. The events had

made national headlines: mutilated animals, tormenting poltergeists, dancing lights in the sky, unidentified flying objects and menacing silver-suited figures watching, watching.

Wilding hesitated. 'What now? I mean, what happens to me?'

'We will establish a unit to investigate these matters.'

'Yes, but will I be safe?'

'That rather depends upon you, Mr Wilding.' The prime minister gave that noncommittal smile that I would live to see her give many more times. Her gaze dropped to the title of the blue file before her: The Parsons Report. 'This document couldn't have come to us at a more important time. The Soviets are hell-bent on world dominance, and they are rapidly acquiring the means to become the most powerful imperial nation the world has ever seen. They are among us. And this could make all the difference.' She paused. 'I want to hear your story. There will be time afterwards for you to write it down.'

Wilding leaned forward and rested his tented fingers on the desk's dark leather surface. 'Prime Minister, there's something I'd like to know before I begin.'

'By all means.'

'Do you believe we are alone in the universe?'

Margaret Thatcher's eyes widened. 'Mr Wilding, my national security advisers inform me that it is no longer a question of belief.'

Wilding released a troubled sigh. It was hard to tell whether he agreed with her or not.

'Well then,' he said, leaning restlessly back into his chair, 'my story begins in west Wales sixteen years ago. At a place called Ravenstone Farm.'



# Robert Wilding's Statement



I

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# Secret State

*'The Earth is a farm. We are someone else's property.'*

Charles Fort





— 1 —

*Friday 6 December 1963, Ravenstone Farm, west Wales*

I remember the first time I laid eyes on the farm, rocking and jolting in the back seat of Grandfather's truck, struggling to ignore the overpowering stink of damp dog fur as we passed down a narrow potholed lane bordered on both sides by skeletal trees.

We had travelled some ten miles from my family home in Brawdy, across St Brides Bay, near the military base where my father had been posted, and as the truck laboured through the many winding lanes and huddled coastal villages to bring us here, I watched the sun sink ever lower to the horizon and felt my spirits drop with it.

My parents had died in an accident and I was to be taken in by my grandfather, a man I had met only a handful of times. Mum and Dad had never brought me to the farm, even though we'd lived only a few miles away. Now, as we made our way down the narrow lanes towards the house, I couldn't help wondering why.

'Well, boy, here we are,' said Grandfather, trying his best to be cordial with a grandson he hardly knew. 'Home.'

The word sounded painfully hollow. I already knew that nowhere would ever feel like home again.

Hanging from the rear-view mirror: a small silver cross, attached to a beaded chain. I looked past it, through the dirty windscreen and saw the gloomy lane open into a small clearing, saw the wide fields slope down towards the cliff edge beyond. Directly ahead were dilapidated cattle sheds of corrugated iron, brown with rust, and immediately to the right, behind a low crumbling stone wall, the farmhouse. It had stood here at the edge of the Atlantic for hundreds of years, he told me. Once, perhaps, it had been gleaming white. Because I was a child I never thought to ask why my grandfather might be living somewhere so lonesome: miles from anywhere, in a place without road names, shops, a pub or even a phone box.

His truck crunched to a halt on the gravel next to a grey Hillman Hunter that had seen better days. I climbed out, feeling an odd pang of nervousness. Looking doubtfully around me, I scrunched my nose against the stench of manure. Listened. Somewhere beyond the fields the ocean roared, and from behind the farmhouse a bull groaned as if in pain.

'Don't mind 'im,' Grandfather muttered, his rough voice offering scant comfort as he climbed down from the driver's seat and opened the back of the truck.

Despite his age – mid-fifties – he was a strong man; he had to be to manage the chores of Ravenstone Farm alone. He had a fresh scar, jagged, on his left cheek, which caught the eye, and he was tall with a quiet confidence about him. Though on that crimson evening he inspired little confidence in me.

'You like swings, boy?' he asked awkwardly.

I didn't but I nodded yes. Grandfather was staring to the side of the farmhouse, where rising from the overgrown weeds

there was a slatted wooden seat suspended by two twists of rope on a rusty frame.

'Your mother used to love playing on that thing.'

A sudden memory: me in my school uniform, eating breakfast in our kitchen, watching Mum in her jeans kneeling over a placard emblazoned with the slogan BAN THE BOMB.

Grandfather's voice jolted me back to the present.

'That'll be your room.' Hunched in his shabby greatcoat, he was pointing with a hand that was red raw from the cold to a narrow window directly over the small arched porch that led into the farmhouse. 'There's quite a bit of damp. I'll sort it.'

But I wasn't thinking about the damp. I was thinking about the thick iron bars fixed over the glass. They weren't just on my window. They were on *every* window.

'This way, boy.'

I followed him into the narrow hallway, where the lingering animal odour was even stronger, the carpet hard and brown, and the wallpaper so cloudy yellow you could almost taste the cigarette smoke. Hanging next to the front door, a camera and a brown leather binocular case, and leaning very near this, in the corner, a double-barrelled shotgun.

Grandfather's eyes fastened on me. 'You're not to touch that. Not ever!'

His face had turned stony. He watched carefully as I shuffled down the hall and peered into the small front room, where an enormous bookcase was filled with musty tomes. His study.

I took a deep breath, filling my lungs with the stale air. I was intrigued by the newspaper clippings that plastered the walls, partly because I had never seen such a thing before, mostly because of the many black headlines screaming about 'mysteries in the sky'. And that wasn't all. A great picture hung over the

mantelpiece, da Vinci's *St John the Baptist*, immersed in shadow. An enigmatic smile touched the great saint's lips as his right hand pointed skyward.

I gasped as a dark shape suddenly sprang from the shadows towards me. But it was only a spirited black Labrador, alert and lovable as he pushed his nose against my leg, tail beating furiously.

'What's his name?'

'Jasper.'

'Can I take him out, Grandfather?'

'Not now . . . It'll be dark soon.' His hooded gaze shifted to the window and the purple sky beyond. 'Upstairs now. Unpack.'

Waiting for me in the shadows that lingered strangely at the bottom of the rickety staircase was the small trunk my parents had given me the previous Christmas. Packed inside: history books and my new school uniform but none of the toy guns and army uniforms I used to play with. My childhood dream to be a soldier had died with my father.

'Hurry up, boy!'

I did as Grandfather instructed.

God help me, I went upstairs.

That evening, as I lay on the steel-framed bed under woollen blankets that made my skin itch, I longed for sleep while unfamiliar sounds kept me from my rest: creepy, insistent, croaking rhythms that might have been frogs in the pond, high-pitched shrieks that might have been the cries of prowling foxes and, just to the side of the house, another sound, riding on the pitiless wind – *creak-squeak creak-squeak*.

Perhaps Mum had come to hate the farm where she grew up. She had certainly never mentioned it, and whenever I had

asked her about her childhood her answer was always the same: *Better left in the past*. The memories brought stinging tears to my eyes and churned my stomach. These days I'd often wake up crying, and I had been dreaming a lot about my parents and all the things we'd never do.

My knees were tucked up to my belly as I stared at the ceiling, at the rough wooden crucifix nailed over my bed. Downstairs, I could hear Grandfather moving about, singing a hymn to himself, pleading for the souls of 'unbelievers'. I closed my eyes and felt myself hardening against him. Against the undeniable fact that this man was all I had left in the world.

I woke to the birds' dawn chorus chirpily greeting a new day and the distant rumble of a tractor. Grandfather was in the kitchen, leaning over an enormous Aga.

'We're going for a walk this morning,' he said without turning. His attention seemed divided between the latest edition of the *Church Times* and the sizzling bacon in the blackened pan. 'Down to the coastal path. I want to show you something.'

I had been hoping he might ask me how I was, how I had slept.

The truth was I'd slept badly. Since my parents' deaths I'd been haunted by the same strange dream about a dark-haired girl with an oval face and a lighthouse throwing its yellow beam across the sea. Pulsing. I'd woken shivering with fear, too scared even to try to sleep again. But now, in the light, it all seemed very distant.

After breakfast we set off with Jasper down a muddy rutted track across the fields which surrounded us for miles. I sighed, wondering why I already felt a closer bond with the dog than I did with my own blood relative. But the truth was Jasper

calmed me in a way that Grandfather did not. I would grow to love that dog, really love him. On a desolate farm far from anywhere, Jasper was one of the greatest gifts that a lonely little boy could hope for.

I could smell the sharp salt of the tide. As we reached the lower fields, near the cliffs, Grandfather quickened his pace, regularly glancing over his shoulder as if to check we weren't being followed. Or watched.

Then, suddenly, he stopped.

'Grandfather?'

His lead-coloured eyes were fixed on a large rocky outcrop half a mile offshore.

'Stack Rocks,' he whispered. 'This is the nearest point. You're not to come down here, not ever.'

'But why?'

I felt his reproachful eyes on me. Something else was there too. Was it fear? Why should he be afraid?

'Stack Rocks,' he said again. 'Sometimes the kids in the village ask the fishermen to take them out. But you must *never* go there – you stay away!'

My gaze followed his. The outcrop was barren except for a ruined fort on its highest point. Grandfather told me that in the last century the squat structure had been built to defend the shore. Later it had been abandoned and left to decay.

'It is a dangerous place, boy. You understand?'

I didn't, but I nodded anyway, and an uncomfortable shudder crept over me as I watched him, for his eyes were now prominent and strained. Hunching forward to drop a hand on my shoulder, he continued speaking in a voice not much more than a whisper. 'Our planet is haunted. And there are those who would do us harm.'

Suddenly, a distant memory – burning rubber. A yellow beam cutting through the darkness.

'I don't know what you mean?' I said. 'Why are you looking at me like that?'

'The forces of darkness are forever present. You must not hunt them or seek them. Understand? You must *never* invite them in!'

He was standing close. So close I felt suddenly overwhelmed by his presence, by his fierce and rapturous face. 'Please, I want Mum and Dad.'

'Your father?' His tone turned bitter. 'The mistakes he made will cost us dearly.'

'But . . . but he was my dad!'

'He was a monster!'

My heart was pounding. I wanted to strike him for talking about my father like that, but I didn't dare.

'The Book of Revelation tells us that fallen angels would strike thrice between the eyes and cause great suffering.' He looked broodingly across the fields, the sea, and at Stack Rocks, then gave me a look so dark it made me shiver. 'You must be protected, boy.'

Protected from what? From whom? We weren't likely to have visitors at Ravenstone Farm – it was too isolated. I hadn't even heard the telephone ring.

'From the forces of darkness and the tricks of the Lawless One,' he shouted above the rising wind. 'From the fires in the sky and from the heat below.'

The cold seemed to rise from the sea and strike at my face.

*Someone help me, I thought. He's gone mad.*

Suddenly, as if in answer to my plea, a figure passed into view on the coastal path. A man in farmer's clothes. He raised a hand in a gesture of hello.

Grandfather's eyes held my gaze for a moment or two, then, ignoring the walker, he crossed himself, turned sharply and strode back towards the farmhouse.

I'm pretty certain it was at this precise moment that I decided I couldn't trust my grandfather, couldn't trust anything he told me.

The months dragged by. I enrolled at the secondary school in Haverfordwest but made few friends. I felt different to the other children. Not only were they oblivious to what life had dealt me, I also knew that none of them would be welcome at the farm and I would be ashamed to take them there. Grandfather never fixed anything or cleaned, so the farmhouse fell ever further into neglect, until even the television gave up the ghost. After school and at the weekends I was forced to create my own entertainment. So I began to explore. And what child isn't intrigued by what is out of bounds?

I quickly found a favourite spot: down to the lowest field, through the barbed-wire fence and into the tangled bracken overlooking Stack Rocks, the best viewpoint over the Atlantic Ocean and RAF Brawdy.

I was scared of what Grandfather would do if he knew I went down there, but curiously not scared of the place. On the contrary, I felt strangely drawn to the spot. Connected somehow.

Stack Rocks Island pulled my gaze. Held it. Rising from the waters in three humps, the large outcrop resembled a mythical creature. None of the fishing boats went near, nor any birds. None I ever saw. Sometimes it seemed as though even the rain itself didn't touch those rocks. And there was something odd about Ravenstone Farm itself, I had come to realize. Not the isolation of the place, but the way it *felt*, the way the air, even

on the coldest days, warmed the skin, the way it pricked and crackled and made the hairs stand on end.

*My mother and father were arguing again in our house on the base. Screaming at one another as I sat hunched at the top of the stairs wishing they would just STOP!*

*The perspective changed, and suddenly I was cold. Freezing cold and hunched in darkness, screaming to get away. But get away from what?*

*Suddenly, in the distance, across the rough sea, a pulse of yellow light: flashing, flashing.*

*A lighthouse.*

I woke with a jolt. The first thing I heard was the window rattling against its bars. And when my eyes adjusted to the early dark, the first thing I saw was the wooden crucifix above my bed.

An uncertainty flowed through me for a moment, irresistible and overpowering, and then hardened into a single concern: the front door – was it locked? Grandfather always locked it; he locked all the doors when we came in. But perhaps he'd forgotten. I would go and check for him.

I had one foot on the rough bare floorboards when a low earthy drone filled the air. The hairs on the back of my neck shot up and blood pulsed in my ears. At that instant I heard it: *thud thud thud*. A visitor at this time in the morning? I knew something was wrong the instant I crept downstairs into the shadow-haunted hall. Something was amiss in Grandfather's study.

I went in, flicked on the light.

'Hello?' I whispered. 'Anyone there?'

No one I could see. And yet clearly someone had been there because the thick brown rug that should have been in the

centre of the floor was rolled to the side, all the way back to the enormous bookcase packed with ancient texts. Yet the furniture that rested on the rug – the wide desk, the rickety armchair – remained in its proper place. Then I noticed the picture over the mantelpiece, the one of St John the Baptist pointing enigmatically at the sky. It had been turned on its nail, one hundred and eighty degrees, so that it was hanging upside down.

Again: *thud, thud, thud*. It was coming from the front door.

I went back quickly into the hall. Fumbled with the lock chain, opened the door.

‘Hello, young man. Are your parents at home?’

I was looking up at a tall, spindly man in a black suit, probably in his late twenties. My stomach tightened with fear.

‘Umm, I think my grandfather is here . . . He’s asleep.’

The stranger looked at me steadily. ‘Not your parents?’

His square black glasses gave him a studious air and an easy authority. But there was nothing sincere in his sharp smile and nothing genuine in his pointed, gaunt face. And why, I wondered, would such a young man colour his hair that brilliant shade of white?

‘They’re not here.’ My right hand went instinctively to my wristwatch, fumbled with it. ‘They’re . . . they’re dead.’

‘Dead?’ His head tilted slowly, and when he spoke again it was without a trace of sympathy. ‘How inconsiderate of them to leave you behind. Alone.’

Those words were like a knife in me. Yet I felt a sudden strong impulse to invite him in. I felt dazed by his eyes . . . eyes that remembered midnight. And his skin . . . waxy white, smooth like a child’s, though there was nothing childish about him. A shiver ran up my spine.

‘May I come in?’

'I'm not supposed to talk to strangers,' I answered, watching my words turn to frost on the air and suddenly wondering why his did not. 'I ought to get Grandfather.'

The Black-Suited Man's face hardened. 'Your grandfather won't thank you for waking him.' He leaned forward. 'Please, let me in.'

As I was about to step aside, the stamp of feet above made me swing round. A shock of relief shot through me as Grandfather, in his dressing gown, launched himself down the staircase.

'Well, hello again,' the visitor said. His lips pulled back over his teeth. 'I've come to collect. Where is it?'

'Oh God!' rasped Grandfather, still in motion. He grabbed my shoulder roughly. 'Get back, Robert!'

To see my grandfather, always strong, so desperate at the sight of this man with plastic skin, wasn't just surprising, it was terrifying.

He slammed the door on the visitor and shot the chain.

'The Black-Suited Men, messengers of deception, harbingers of death,' he whispered. He sounded afraid, he sounded insane.

Slowly his head swivelled towards the open door to his study. He saw the carpet rolled back, saw *St John the Baptist* hanging upside down. He lunged for me, dragged me after him into the study. There, still clutching me, he stared into my eyes. I would *not* disobey him, he insisted. For my safety and for his, I would do as he said, and the good Lord would keep us safe. But I didn't feel safe; I just felt confused and scared to death as he righted the painting, then yelled at me to get down on my knees and pray before it.

'Grandfather, no –'

Something struck the back of my head, and I pitched forward, stunned. The shock was worse than the pain, shock as I

realized that he had actually thrown his Bible at me, shock that now he was towering over me, crossing himself.

‘Hear, Holy Father . . .’

After what felt like an eternity he got off his knees and looked warily at his desk lamp. It was flashing on and off, on and off.

‘You’ve been down to the lower fields. Haven’t you, boy?’

I wanted to explain that from there I could see the hangars at RAF Brawdy across St Brides Bay, to see where we used to live, to see the watchtower that Dad used to love. But I was too frightened to say anything, so I just nodded with a slowness that felt exaggerated.

‘I told you to stay away from the cliffs,’ he said after a long moment. The naked lightbulb on his desk was flickering harsh light across his expression. ‘Do you know why?’

I shook my head.

‘There are giants in the ground there. Watchers.’

It seemed such a peculiar remark for a serious, intelligent man. But I could tell that he believed what he said and was keen that I believe it too. ‘Their existence flickers on the edge of this world. Mischievous, dangerous beings.’

‘Why are they dangerous?’ I asked, wide-eyed. ‘What do they want?’

‘To open the mind of man . . . and flood it with horror.’ When he continued he spoke softly, as if he feared being overheard. With every word, my heart pounded harder. ‘The Watchers were judged by God and bound for seventy generations. Their faces are made of shadows, and those who look upon them shall die.’

I kept thinking, *He believes this, he actually believes this. Is that why Mum never mentioned her childhood, why she never brought me here to Ravenstone? Had Grandfather scared her away with such stories?*

'You trust me, don't you, boy?' A keen Atlantic wind rattled the window, and as I looked upon his saturnine face, my eyes pulled to that angry scar, a shiver ran through me.

'Because one day, boy, the giants will return. Doesn't the Lord's good book tell us so?' He nodded with the fervour of a fanatic. 'And there will be wars and rumours of wars between nations . . . signs in the heavens –'

'That man at the door,' I interrupted, 'who was he?'

But the question I really wanted to ask was, *What had he come to collect?*

Suddenly, the desk lamp, still flashing, exploded with a shower of glass.

And again came the knocking. Not knocking, pounding. A terrible noise that shook the house – shook us.

One.

Two.

Three.

'Grandfather, what's happening?' I was trembling all over.

From outside a hum of voices. Trampling feet crunching over ice and gravel.

That was when I saw them through the parted curtains: five or six men swaddled in thick dark coats, cameras and binoculars looped around their necks. One man carried a map. Another a shotgun.

Grandfather ignored the men outside, his whisper so low I could barely hear him. 'The Watchers appear at times of change. At times of danger. They are returning, boy. And we must be ready.'



– 2 –

*Friday 4 February 1977, Westminster, London*

It was just gone six thirty in the morning when the jangling telephone in the hall dragged me from the depths of sleep.

‘Get that, would you, Robert?’ Selina called sleepily from her bedroom across the hall.

Only half awake, I saw in my mind my hand reaching for the phone. I had a vague idea who it was, that this call was important.

My eyes snapped fully open. I sat upright, rubbed the nightmares from my eyes. This was it – the penultimate day of the select committee evidence sessions. My stomach twisted with anxiety as I thought of the shit storm that was coming.

‘We’re going to be fine,’ Bestford had said the night before as we were leaving his office in Parliament.

But I knew my boss was wrong. No amount of preparation could be enough because the future of the British government depended on what happened today.

‘Robert, the phone!’

Somehow getting out of bed at that moment was easier than usual. But it was the window that held me back from going out into the hall to the phone.

'Robert!'

'Just a second.'

I did try to resist the urge to check the window, like I tried every day, but it was too strong. My gaze focused on the catch, making sure it was still in place. Then I tapped the frame, left side first, then the top, and finally the windowsill. It had to be done strictly in that order, otherwise I'd get as far as the bedroom door before going back to do it all again. And again.

*Ringgg . . . ringgg . . . ringgg . . .*

I padded across the wood flooring of our narrow hallway, taking care to avoid Selina's half-unpacked suitcase, and plucked the telephone from its cradle on the wall.

'Hello?'

The line crackled. No one spoke.

'Hello?' I said again.

The muffled static sound continued for another five, perhaps ten, seconds before three loud clicks sounded and the line went dead.

Three clicks.

*Good. That means he wants to see me.*

'Who is it?' Selina asked from her bedroom.

'No one,' I answered.

I went into the living room and sat down in the semi-darkness on the small yellow couch Selina's parents had given her before she had rented me her spare room. Everything about the flat was yellow and orange and brown, and though I hated the modern decor and the claustrophobic feel of the space, its location – Vauxhall – was perfect for work, and to share with Selina, even just as flatmates, was its own pleasure.

There, before me on the coffee table, next to two empty wine

glasses, was the thick file of local newspaper cuttings Selina and I had discussed before bed.

*We're getting reports every day now, Robert. Twenty-two in just twelve months. All from around St Brides Bay. Even the coastguard doesn't understand . . .*

I opened the file. The lurid headlines screamed up at me: SCIENTISTS BAFFLED BY MYSTERY RUMBLINGS . . . EXPERTS PREDICT MORE SIGHTINGS.

I tossed the cuttings aside, unfazed. During my time on the Defence Select Committee I'd become something of an expert on military activity in our skies. Balloons, unusual plane manoeuvres, aircraft observed in unusual atmospheric conditions; so many prosaic explanations for 'unexplained aerial phenomena'. I could still remember my grandfather's voice warning me about dark forces, fires in the sky. I hadn't yielded then to his fanatical paranoia that mischievous beings were watching us from above, and I sure as hell wasn't about to do so now.

I switched on the radio; Johnny Rotten's voice filled the room. The Sex Pistols were singing that Britain had no future, and I was wondering if they might have the right idea. I snapped it off and went instead to the television: crowds demonstrating outside nuclear power plants, Jimmy Carter addressing the United Nations on mounting tensions with the Soviet Union. Nothing but wars and rumours of wars, missile proliferation, arms treaties. The new US president was going to have his work cut out.

We all were.

'It can't have been no one, Robert. At this hour?'

I looked up to see Selina framed in the living-room doorway, slender as a willow, a blue towel rather disappointingly covering her breasts, though the sight of her still-damp thighs was pretty gratifying.

I said, 'Wrong number, that's all,' not seriously expecting her to accept that answer but knowing I had to say something.

'But that's the fourth call this week.'

'We'll sort it. Selina, listen, there's something I need to ask –'

'You think it's intentional?' she interrupted, going to the kitchen counter. 'Someone making trouble?'

She looked straight at me as she flicked the kettle on, working her jaw slightly, the way she always did when something was bothering her. I gave her my best smile, which she usually met with her own wonderfully calming one, but not today. Concern lingered on her face, and there was an unfamiliar glimmer in her eyes.

I heard myself say, 'We mustn't forget to lock the flat when we leave today, OK?'

'OK.'

'But really, we must lock the flat.'

'I know, Robert.'

I managed to swallow the third iteration. She saw my tight jaw and looked away. Sorry for me or just weary of me?

*Shit.* I wanted to punch myself. I wanted to tell her how traumatizing it was, to convey some sense of the isolation never being certain about something as simple as locking a door or window caused. Doctors had used all sorts of words to describe the way I was – words like obsessive and compulsive and paranoid – but no matter how hard they searched for some reason, some trigger, they could find none.

Even if there was a trigger, I wasn't sure I wanted to know what it was.

What I certainly did want was to make Selina, anyone, understand. It didn't matter how long I searched through my mind for reassurance or how long it took me to carry out my checks,

the answers would never satisfy my uncertainty. It was like suffering from bowel cancer but only having the vocabulary to describe a mild stomach ache.

'I'm sorry,' I said gently.

'Take a break when the evidence sessions are over, please. You need to let out the frustration. Trust me, I know.'

Selina had a job interview in the City today. I wished her well, of course, but I'd miss her terribly if she got it. We had worked together for Paul Bestford, chairman of the Defence Select Committee and MP for Pembrokeshire, since leaving university. And during those three years I'd come to rely on her calm common sense and support.

'What time's your interview?'

'Three o'clock.'

'But you'll miss the start of the committee session.'

'This is *your* crusade, boyo.' A playful attempt to remind me of my Welsh connections. 'You don't need me. You'll be fine.'

I wasn't so sure. There was only one thing worse than dealing with unreliable witnesses: an unreliable committee chairman whose relationship with the bottle was becoming the subject of whispers in the Palace of Westminster's many bars. In Parliament the gossip flowed as freely as the wine, and I could tell from the way the other researchers muttered about our boss that they thought his time was limited. And I needed Bestford.

It was easy to remember the first time I met him. He'd come to our school after the 'Great Flood' and given a talk about all the reinforcements to the sea walls that would make the Havens safe again. I carried that memory with me into adulthood. And by the time I had left university at twenty-two, he was chair of the Defence Select Committee. I got the job as soon as I applied. Partly because I understood the constituency and

its issues, mostly because I was passionate about scrutinizing defence policy.

‘Call in afterwards, if you have time. Please?’

‘I’ll try my best. Robert,’ she said after a pause, ‘do you think I’m making the right decision?’

I nodded and said encouragingly, ‘It’s your time to move on,’ even though I felt the opposite.

I saw her now with me: the countless hours together on the campaign trail in Broad Haven, pounding pavements, knocking on doors. She’d had that natural way with people that made them smile and talk about their problems as though they really believed we could help. Her entire life was politics, no doubt about that, but on those doorsteps she had so easily shown interest in television chat shows, music and supermarkets. Me, I dealt in facts, numbers and statistics, and the Campaign for the Accountability of American Bases. It had come to divide us: Selina was afraid Bestford was losing touch, that the Cold War and his work with me on the committee was two steps too far from the rugged realities of country living for farming folk to demonstrate their understanding at the ballot box.

Still, today was a very important day. And still we were a team. We had to be. Parliament was an odd place, perhaps not quite the madhouse you saw on television, but certainly the only environment where you might catch an MP throwing a punch at a bar or happen across the prime minister dabbing a coffee stain from his tie. I’d grown sick of the smiles and handshakes that concealed hidden agendas and the constant tensions about the issues bringing the country to its knees. After the late-night votes you would overhear MPs in the bars muttering glumly about the forthcoming ‘collapse’. I was tired of hearing that too. It wasn’t just the picket lines and fear of

the country's lights going out again; it was something more profound. We had lost our way.

Selina looked straight at me. 'You could leave too, you know. Pursue a proper career.'

I smiled at that even as I was trying not to remember Mum saying the very same thing to Dad when we lived at RAF Brawdy. She had hated everything the military stood for, not just the wars, weapons and lies but the injustice. It was an era when America kept nuclear weapons on British soil, just in case the Cold War turned hot. She argued that criminal activities were taking place on our own soil, that American bases in the UK were accountable to no one but the Pentagon. And these days I mostly think she was right.

'I mean it, Robert. Perhaps it's time for us both to get out.'

As Selina waited for me to say something in defence of our dubious profession, I found myself staring at the photo of my parents on the mantelpiece, a family snapshot, creased and faded. All at once I was a child again.

The photograph had been taken outside RAF Brawdy's main gate. Dad's face was stonily set as he frowned at the middle distance, behind the photographer. I was distracted by something in the sky. Mum, meanwhile, was wearing a smile that did nothing to conceal her defeat. Her anger. She was also wearing a patch that covered her left eye.

On the morning of Thursday 8 February 1963 – ten months before Mum and Dad lost their lives in the Havens Great Flood – peace activists surrounded RAF Croughton, a US Air Force base and CIA relay station in Northamptonshire, and cut through the perimeter fence. Their mission? To draw attention to the deadly nuclear arsenal they believed was illegally stored on the base. RAF Croughton was one of the most important bases in

NATO, and though my father had known Mum was attending the protest, he hadn't known what she and the others intended to do. Had he known there's no way he would have allowed her to go. Trespassing was still trespassing, even if the protesters only wanted to plant a peace flag. Except something went wrong. Something terrible. I remembered Mum leaving the eye department at the hospital in Haverfordwest. Back when the Beatles were top of the charts. I remembered her complaining for months about nausea, vomiting, diarrhoea and weakness. She used to say her eyes were burning, as though they'd suffered sunburn. By the time December came, painful blisters were forming on her skin, and she had lost clumps of hair.

What had happened at Croughton? There were rumours of an incident on the base that night, an explosion of some sort, and Mum, along with the others, was arrested for criminal damage. Precisely what had happened remained a mystery, partly because Mum didn't remember, mostly because the British and American governments hadn't accepted the need for an official inquiry. They were stonewalling. They had been stonewalling for fourteen years, and I still wanted to know why. I wanted to know why Mum's medical records from that night had gone missing. I needed justice.

It was what I had been working towards all this time – since Ravenstone, since I was old enough to believe I might make a difference – finding out something about that night that others had missed. Today was the day I might finally get to the bottom of it.

'Selina, I need your advice.'

She nodded, smiled.

'Remember those military expenditure figures I mentioned?'

'You mean the classified figures?'

I nodded and watched her eyebrows draw together. It was the same look she gave me whenever I suggested us drafting a politically bold – which meant risky – speech for Bestford.

‘I’m thinking of using them today in the session. Taking Colonel Corso by surprise.’

She shifted uneasily. ‘Robert, I don’t know where you got them, but those figures are highly classified. Inadmissible.’

*But still evidence*, said a voice in my head.

‘Thirty million spent on upgrading security at RAF Croughton since the protests! Something called Project Caesar. I don’t know what it is, but it’s some sort of black operation – has to be. It could help me find out what happened that night. They’re hiding something. Selina, I need to know what it is.’

Her smile had vanished. I think it was starting to dawn on her that I might never let this drop.

For weeks Bestford and I had rehearsed the questions he would put that afternoon to Lieutenant Colonel Conrad Corso, the last in a very long line of American military witnesses who stood accused of covering up whatever had happened at RAF Croughton in February 1963. For reasons of ‘national security’ the inquiry had been delayed again and again. Any longer and we might never have discovered the truth. But now we were finally making progress. If we were lucky, the secret memo in my possession could be the smoking gun we needed.

I tried to make her see. ‘Without those figures, all we have to go on is rumour and speculation. Mum would have wanted me to do this. I need to know why she was injured, Selina. I have to prove they were keeping nuclear weapons on the base!’

‘Where did you get this document, Robert?’

I held my tongue as she stared at me.

‘Does Bestford know you have it?’

‘No.’

‘Well, you need to be damn sure he has your back! No risks. Remember, you signed the Official Secrets Act.’ She considered me for a long moment with an expression somewhere between frustration and admiration, all the while fingering the delicate silver crucifix around her neck. ‘You do a lot for him. More than you should – you know that?’

I felt a need to acknowledge the ongoing issue to which she was referring – Bestford’s shaky appearances on the floor of the House; his raging moods when he woke from his drunken sleeps – but there was nothing I could add that Selina didn’t already know.

‘You can’t allow his behaviour to go on for much longer, Robert. The risks to you and the party are enormous.’

She was right. Problem was, I didn’t care much for the party, a ramshackle collection of loud, aggressive old union men. I didn’t feel part of a group, not in Parliament, not anywhere. I was in this for answers, that was all.

Suddenly I felt my heart pound, and deep within my brain the distracting rhythm of another thought began to beat: *Did you lock the office door before you left yesterday?*

Yes, I answered. *I remember doing it.*

*But you might be wrong,* came the cruel taunt.

Once again that awful, familiar frozen feeling in my head made me doubt myself, to imagine the worst. What if I hadn’t locked the door? What if someone had broken in, stolen all our files? What if? What if? What if?

‘Robert, are you all right?’

Was I? I wasn’t sure. I squeezed my eyes shut and returned to Selina’s concerns about Bestford’s drinking. I knew our boss was far from perfect and wanted to help him if I could. There

weren't many MPs who would tolerate my doubts and anxious distractions. He had been good to me.

'Robert?'

I nodded and tried to smile. *She must think I'm crazy.*

'You know, sometimes I think you need something else to care about, something other than your work. You could get away for a while, go back to the constituency?'

I shuddered, remembering with a chill the loneliness and isolation, the indefinable feeling of danger, of being watched. Even though I had not been back to the Havens since I left my grandfather's farm at eighteen, I saw it clearly. That lazy seaside community, the green hill which sloped down to St Brides Bay, the cluster of houses stranded around the choppy steel-grey waters, serpentine roads clogged with fog, fishing boats tethered in a tiny cove. And, in the distance, a mile or two out to sea, Stack Rocks rising menacingly from the waters.

Selina had given up and was again sifting through the newspaper cuttings strewn across the coffee table. My gaze touched her bare shoulder again, the blue towel, her necklace, before skimming over the sensational headlines. One from late December read, *YOUNG MOTHER AND CHILD IN FLYING FOOTBALL PERIL*. 'Not exactly your typical constituency casework, is it?' I said, picking up the cutting. Hoping the article would lighten the mood, I scanned down to the body of the story.

A single mother described yesterday how she and her daughter were followed for more than a mile by a 'flying football' in the latest in a spate of UFO sightings in west Wales.

Ms Araceli Romero, proprietor of the Haven Hotel, said she was driving near Little Haven when her ten-year-old

daughter Tessa spotted a light dropping from the sky towards their car.

Ms Romero accelerated under the falling object. But Tess, watching through the back window, saw it stop and then charge at the car. She described the phenomenon as a yellow ball, about the size of a football, with a torch-like beam coming from its base . . .

'I was petrified, we both were,' Ms Romero told our reporter Frank Frobisher.

'It's a scam,' I said, laughing. I expected Selina to laugh as well. She didn't.

'You seem very sure.'

How many wild stories had I heard about flying saucers? Publicity seekers or people who were just too keen to believe, zealots like my grandfather deriving pathetic self-importance from fantastic tales. 'Trust me. This woman's just trying to drum up some bookings for her hotel.'

That seemed likely. The Haven Hotel was a converted fortification stranded on the cliff above St Brides Bay and looked like a place of nightmares. The children at school used to say it was haunted by the ghost of the White Lady, that ancient smuggling tunnels ran from its basement through the cliffs down to the beach below. But to me the greatest mystery was why anyone would want to stay in such a grim establishment. Run by a strange Italian woman who didn't mix with the villagers, the building, with its dusty Gothic windows, some of them broken, didn't look anything like a hotel; it looked like the newest residence of the Addams Family.

I studied the cutting again. The photograph beneath the headline showed a sad-looking young woman with a narrow

face and long dark hair. She was holding the hand of a thin girl with terrified eyes.

*Something about that woman . . .* A memory almost sparked, connected to the lighthouse from my dreams. Its yellow beam pulsing, pulsing before the image slipped away. As it always did.

‘Well, this Araceli Romero wants our help,’ said Selina. ‘Phoned the office twice this week.’

‘And she expects Bestford to do what, exactly? Demand the aliens pay landing fees?’

‘She’s in a state, and so are many of the locals. There’s been a whole spate of reports about lights in the sky and strange things appearing out of nowhere. Not helped by this reporter, Frank Frobisher.’

‘Never heard of him.’

‘He’s with the *Western Telegraph*,’ Selina said. She rose and stood beside me. ‘And when you think about it, the locals have had their fair share of uncertainty after what happened with the Jacksons.’

I nodded absently. I didn’t know much about the disappearance of the English couple who had stayed in the area last summer. Only that dealing with correspondence on the issue had become an almost full-time job for Selina.

‘Any developments on the case?’

‘Don’t get me started.’

According to the police report, Thomas and Glenda Jackson were gentle churchgoing wildlife enthusiasts who knew the Pembrokeshire coast intimately. On the day of their disappearance, beneath the morning’s honeysuckle heat and the bluest sky, they’d set off from their caravan park for a walk along the coast to a remote beauty spot on a footpath running over the cliffs of St Brides Bay. They were never seen alive again.

Selina sighed. 'If I get this job, you'll have to stay close to the police investigation.'

I had no wish to stay close to the case. 'My grandfather lived near that caravan park. Ravenstone Farm,' I said quietly.

I'd had no contact with the man since the day I left home. Dead or alive, wherever he was made no difference to me.

'You've never spoken about him,' she probed gently.

'No . . .' I trailed off. The truth was, I'd blocked out much of my time at Ravenstone Farm. And I was thankful for that.

'What sort of man was your grandfather?'

*Cruel. Extremely paranoid.* Those were the words that leaped to mind. *A man of nightmares.*

'He had religion bad,' I said, remembering the rosary in his truck, remembering the shock as his Bible struck the back of my head. 'He thought there were hidden dangers everywhere.'

'What do you mean?'

I hesitated. How much to say about the guardian who had raised me to be the man I was? 'As a young man he was in the air force. He quit, became a farmer.'

She nodded encouragingly. Smiled

'When I lived with him he would scare me with fairy tales about fires in the sky and giants in the ground, watching us. He said their faces were made of shadows.'

Selina's smile vanished. 'What else did he say?'

And suddenly, from long ago – the worst time – I could see the wild contempt in my grandfather's eyes as we stood together on the cliffs overlooking Stack Rocks; could see him crossing himself; could hear his rusty voice: *Your father was a monster!*

Dad had deserved better. Much better.

I stood up abruptly.

'Robert?'

'I'm sorry. I need to focus. Big day!'

Before I could reach the door, Selina grabbed my arm and said, 'You take care of yourself when I'm gone. Promise me.'

A sort of prophecy. I see that now.