

ELM BROOK  
MANOR

IWAN ROSS

# Chapter One

Coby leaned to the side, his eyes scanning the length of the line, taking in the bustling scene of eager readers. His stature was neither imposing nor insignificant, standing at an even 5'11". Yet it was his undeniable aura that drew eyes towards him. A crown of tousled dark hair sat upon his head, a hint of silver streaks peppered at his temples. He exhaled softly, a sense of relief washing over him, like a gentle breeze on a warm summer day.

His Scottish accent gave each word he spoke a comforting and captivating quality, like a beautiful melody. Only three more people stood before him, their presence a reminder of his impending task. With a stroke of his chin, he mulled over the words he would write when he finally signed the book. Ideas had eluded him for some time now, leaving him feeling a sense of emptiness.

Yet, he took solace in the fact that he had sold all his books, with the empty boxes standing as a testament to his success. A flicker of annoyance crossed his expressive face, the lines around his eyes deepening as he remembered his wife's promise to bring more boxes, a promise left unfulfilled. The mall buzzed with activity, a symphony of voices and footsteps creating a vibrant backdrop. Bargain seekers rushed from store to store, their presence akin to an avalanche of humanity descending on the shops.

In an effort to maintain order, the shop assistant had closed the doors of the bookstore, shielding Coby from the clamour outside. Lost in his thoughts, Coby's keen gaze remained fixed on the book before him, oblivious to the curious onlookers peering through the windows. Some of them contorted their faces and hurled insults, their words

bouncing off him like pebbles hitting a shield. The sound of their jeers filled the air as they called him "Scrooge," a mocking reference to his wealth and tightfisted ways.

Coby inhaled deeply, his senses tingling with anticipation. The taste of whisky lingered on his tongue, its rich, woody notes intertwining with his thoughts. Finally, he found the words he sought. With deliberate movements, he wrote, 'Dear Christie, Happy reading,' signing it with the initials M. Jones. As each person in line received their signed book, the line gradually dwindled until only one remained.

A fiery redheaded girl, her determination etched on her face, abruptly slammed a book down in front of Coby, startling him.

Nerves tinged his voice as he asked, "Who should I make it out to?"

The girl's eyes blazed with fury as she spat out the name, "Gordon Snape!"

Recognition flashed in Coby's eyes, sending a shiver down his spine. In an instant, the veil of time lifted, transporting him back to a haunted house. The echoes of laughter and the scent of death filled his senses. The flashback was so vivid, so real, that his present surroundings felt like a mere dream in comparison.

"Mister Jones!" snapped the young girl, her voice sharp and piercing, cutting through the quiet of the bookstore. Her eyes bore into him with intensity, fixing him with a gaze that seemed to penetrate his very soul. The fury in her expression snapped Coby out of his daydream, causing him to jump slightly in surprise. Without wasting a moment, he hastily picked up the pen and signed the book. His hand trembled slightly as he scrawled his name. 'Dear Gordon,' he began, 'I hope you find comfort in the pages of this book. My deepest sympathy, M. Jones.'

As Coby closed the cover shut with a soft thud, a sense of reluctance washed over him, as if the book held the key to his own redemption. The faint scent of aged paper and ink mingled in the air, reminding him of the countless stories trapped within those pages. The fiery red of the girl's hair stood out vividly against the dimly lit backdrop of the bookstore, adding a touch of vibrancy to the scene.

With determination, she clutched the book tightly, her fingers curling around the cover as she snatched it from his grasp. Before she left, her disdainful gaze lingered on him, a silent reminder of the pain

and regret he carried within him. His reputation as a 'Scrooge' seemed to weigh even heavier on him in that moment, a stark contrast to the joy and success of his book signing event. In that moment, his past surged back to haunt him, a familiar feeling that seemed to never fade away.

As the thick fog slowly unfurled over the misty Scottish moors, Coby McTavish wearily trudged back to his quaint stone cottage. The grey mist created an eerie ambiance, engulfing the surroundings in a haunting veil.

Inside, the cottage emanated a comforting warmth, a beacon of solace amidst the encroaching gloaming.

Waiting for him within was his wife, Elaine, a captivating presence whose beauty seemed as timeless as the rugged highlands themselves. Elaine was petite and delicate, with an air of frailty that belied her powerful spirit. Her auburn curls, soft and slightly wavy, framed her face perfectly, giving her an almost pixie-like appearance. Her eyes, a soft hazel, were large and expressive, holding a profound depth that was both comforting and mystifying to Coby. They spoke volumes of the understanding they shared, a silent testament to the years they spent entwined in their shared passion for weaving tales of the supernatural.

Her laughter, like delicate wind-bells, often echoed through the cosy home, casting a melodic counterpoint to the eerie silence that enveloped their world. Yet today, something felt amiss. Coby's unease heightened as he noticed the straw boater playfully perched on the side of Elaine's head, accompanied by white opera gloves. The sight gave him a foreboding sensation, as if she were preparing for a journey. The scent of vintage perfume lingered in the air, adding a nostalgic touch.

Coby's gaze shifted to Elaine's side, and there it was, her hand grasping the handle of a large suitcase. With a scoff, she lifted the suitcase and disappeared through the door, leaving Misty, her beloved Scoodle, behind. The proud canine stood poised, her hair adorned with a dainty pink ribbon, seemingly aware, or perhaps presuming, her regal lineage.

"You forgot your dog!" Coby called out, his voice filled with concern.

“It’s not a dog!” Elaine reminded him, her voice fading into the distance. The abrupt slam of a car door resonated through the foggy air as the engine roared to life, signalling her departure.

Resigned and with his shoulders slumped, Coby ascended the creaking stairs, his weary feet dragging along the worn wooden floor. A chilly breeze slipped through the cracked window, causing him to shiver involuntarily. As he reached the top, his eyes caught sight of a small rock lying on the floor, surrounded by shards of broken glass. He picked up the rock and tossed it outside, patching the resulting hole with an old, threadbare woollen jersey, its warmth providing some solace amidst the growing cold.

His eyes lingered on the pristine white envelope, its smooth surface reflecting the dim light of the room. Bearing only his first initial, C, for Coby, it exuded an air of mystery. With a mix of apprehension and curiosity, he tore the flap open, the sound of the paper tearing echoing in the stillness. Hastily unfolding the letter, he could almost feel the delicate texture of the paper between his fingertips.

Coby hesitated, his heart pounding in his chest, as he put the letter down beside his keyboard. Needing a moment to gather his courage, he fixed himself a double Scotch, the rich aroma of the liquor filling the air. With each sip, the warmth spread through his body, granting him the strength to face the cruel words that awaited him. As he finally brought the letter back into his line of sight, the first words leapt off the page...

The letter was short and succinct, written in Elaine’s unmistakable handwriting. As he read her words, he could almost hear her voice in his head, dripping with an eerie malice. A mix of anger and sadness washed over him, causing him to crumple the letter in his hand until his knuckles turned white. In a moment of defiance, he tossed it into the hearth; the flames casting a golden glow on his face, making his eyes sparkle with determination.

As the fiery tongues licked the side of the letter, a crackling sound filled the room, accompanied by the faint scent of burning paper. The flames devoured the contents of the letter, releasing rising embers into the air, a symbol of the remnants of their shattered relationship.

Coby’s gaze locked with Misty’s, their eyes meeting in an intense moment. She panted heavily. The sound resembling a roaring locomotive as she lay next to the crackling fire. A thin smile formed on

her lips, sending a shiver down his spine. It felt as if the black-coated creature took pleasure in his misfortune. Ignoring the dog, he shifted his focus back to the familiar sight of his keyboard, a source of comfort and peace. His fingers gently rested on the cool keys, his eyes fixed on the blank document before him. The story he had in his mind seemed to slip away, elusive. His thoughts kept drifting to the memory of the fiery young red-headed girl from the bookshop, her harsh words still stinging in his mind. He could almost feel her anger enveloping him, radiating hatred. Coby shivered and shook his head, trying to push those thoughts away.

Like a scanner, his eyes swiftly scanned his emails until he spotted it. RE: ELM BROOK MANOR – PROPOSAL FOR SALE. Excitement surged through his veins, a newfound freedom energising him. With a decisive click of the reply button, he typed out his message, his fingers dancing across the keys. The offer he made contained enough zeros to make anyone's jaw drop. After hitting send, he strained his ears and heard the satisfying swoosh sound, feeling a sense of accomplishment. Rubbing his hands together, he couldn't help but shoot a mischievous glance at the dog, who observed his every move.

"Who's laughing now, eh?" he asked, his tone dripping with sarcasm.

Coby carefully lifted the frameless, all-glass tailgate of his Volvo P1800 ES, marvelling at its sleek design. He tossed his few belongings into the spacious hold, the metallic clinks echoing in the quiet garage. The car's robust build, clear in its sturdy body, gave him a sense of security as he prepared for the journey ahead.

As he placed his laptop on the passenger seat, he couldn't help but notice the cool touch of the leather against his fingertips. He carefully tucked it under a soft towel, ensuring its safety during the trip.

Negotiating with two enthusiastic boys, their voices filled with excitement, Coby secured his prized desk onto the roof rack of the car's extended roofline. The weighty thuds of the desk hitting the metal rack served as a reminder of the task at hand. In the end, their eager help came at the cost of all his loose change, the jingling coins slipping through his fingers.

Examining the desk, he couldn't help but notice how its legs were rigid, pointing skywards like a lifeless creature. The sight sent a shiver down his spine, a strange mixture of fascination and unease.

Before departing, Coby placed a heartfelt letter on the console table, its surface smooth beneath his touch. It was a message to his wife, a loving greeting mixed with an explanation of his whereabouts. He knew she would disapprove, her previous warnings about the risks involved with the manor still fresh in his mind. But he couldn't ignore the pull he felt towards the mysterious estate.

His mind wandered to the looming manor, its ancient stones exuding an aura of mystery and foreboding. It was a place that seemed to hold secrets, its dimly lit corridors inviting him to explore their depths. Lost in thought, he conjured up the subtle aroma of mustiness, a fragrance that whispered tales of the past.

Coby was determined to uncover the hidden stories within those walls, his fingertips tingling with anticipation. The manor's haunted embrace beckoned him forward, a chilling sensation that thrilled and chilled him in equal measure.

He embarked on the lengthy journey filled with bubbling anticipation, his lips vibrating with a cheerful melody. A heavy, sombre grey curtain veiled the heavens, ready to unleash its wrath upon the world. Before long, it released torrents of rain, cascading down in relentless sheets. Coby swiftly silenced the radio, his grip on the steering wheel tightening, causing his knuckles to pale under the

pressure. Each fat raindrop violently hammered against the windshield, while his desk securely clung to the roof. The monotonous swishing of the windshield wipers added to his growing frustration. He cast a scowl towards the gloomy skies, muttering curses under his breath.

Many long and solitary hours passed by agonisingly slow, like a snail inching along. The relentless rain intensified the feeling of loneliness inside the car as it drowned out the rhythmic chug of the engine. While he patiently waited on the narrow road for a flock of sheep to leisurely pass, he meticulously examined his worn-out map. The scent of dampness filled the car, mingling with the scent of the old leather seats. He had never quite grasped the concept of modern navigation systems, even though his sleek smartphone supported it. Frustration tugged at him as he traced the twisting blue line that snaked its way across the map, leading from his former sanctuary to his eagerly awaiting abode. Judging by his estimation, he was only an hour's drive away from his destination.

Coby carefully folded the worn map and tossed it into the cluttered glove box. The incessant baaing of the sheep gradually faded into the distance, replaced by the distant sound of the herder's commanding whistle and the occasional bark of his two loyal border collies. With a quick wave at the herder, he eagerly lunged forward, the engine purring beneath him. It always irked him when people failed to wave back after he greeted them, a sense of disappointment settling in his chest.

He followed the winding road, the lush green scenery stretching out before him under the ethereal glow of the clear blue skies. As he approached a junction, a contented smile played on his lips, the corners of his mouth tingling with anticipation. And there it was, the weathered road sign proudly displaying the name 'Serenity Falls,' accompanied by an arrow pointing left. The soft click of the indicators filled the car, blending with the gentle hum of the engine. Without hesitation, he obediently followed the direction showed by the arrow, his hands gripping the steering wheel with a mix of excitement and relief.

Nestled deep within the Highlands, where the echoes of ancient tales mingle with the pulse of existence, resides a town veiled in a



mysterious serenity. Serenity Falls, it's called, a name that rolls off the tongue as soothing as the lilting melodies of a lullaby. Here, time seems to slow, as if the universe itself has paused to take a breath, its pulse echoing in the gentle babble of brooks and the soft sigh of the wind.

This is a place where shadows dance with the light, where the ordinary mingles with the extraordinary. Nestled amidst emerald hills and silver streams, Serenity Falls is cradled within the verdant arms of age-old woods. These woods, they stand sentinel, their gnarled branches reaching out like spectral fingers, their leaves whispering tales of yore in the hushed, sacred silence.

Here, the air is heavy with the scent of pine and wet earth, a heady perfume that weaves an intoxicating spell. The sky overhead, a canvas of ever-changing hues, reflects in the shimmering surfaces of the brooks, painting portraits of the heavens in the heart of the earth. Coby carefully navigated the twisted, serpentine path that wound its way through the eerie, foreboding shadows cast by the towering hemlock trees. His intense gaze fixated on each bend, desperately trying to commit the route to memory. Over a year had passed since he had fortuitously stumbled upon the captivating stronghold. Deep in contemplation, his forehead creased with furrowed concentration, while his eyes strained against the blinding rays of the descending sun.

And there was Elm Brook Manor. It rose, abruptly and imposingly, from the tranquil landscape like an ancient monolith. A monument to a bygone era, it loomed over Serenity Falls, casting long, creeping shadows that merged with the twilight. Its stone walls, weathered by time and tempered by history, stood resilient against the elements, every groove and crack a silent testament to tales untold.

Finally, Coby turned into the rising driveway of his new sanctuary. The gravel crunched under the weight of his tires, sending a satisfying sound that echoed through the quiet air. A sense of pride washed over him like a crashing wave, filling the air with a subtle feeling of accomplishment. The sun bathed the scene in a warm glow, casting long shadows across the driveway.

His face beamed with pride, a wide smile spreading across his lips. The fresh scent of cut grass mingled with the earthy aroma of the

nearby trees, creating a pleasant fragrance that filled his nostrils. His eyes gleamed with joy, reflecting the excitement and contentment he felt in his heart.

Under the strain of the rising incline, the engine chugged noisily, its rumbling sound blending with the symphony of nature that surrounded him. The chirping of birds and the rustling of leaves added a melodic backdrop to the scene, creating a serene ambiance. The aged, moss-covered stone walls of a quaint cottage emerged from the dense forest, wisps of smoke dancing from its chimney. Against the backdrop of beige stone, a woman's silhouette stood, diligently hanging laundry on the line. As she glanced at the newcomer, the wind whispered through the trees, carrying the scent of pine and damp earth. Ignoring Coby's friendly wave, she kept her attention fixed on her task.

The sight of the manor captivated Coby, his eyes inevitably focusing on the left wing wrapped in scaffolding. Construction work was obvious in the air, as tools clinked and hammers thudded intermittently. The scaffolding rose all the way to the mansard roof with its dormer windows, creating a striking visual against the blue sky.

In his mind, Coby imagined Rapunzel appearing at one of the dormer windows, her long, golden hair cascading down. However, his fantasy was shattered as he saw workers clambering down the scaffolding, resembling a busy army of ants. They wore worn-out overalls and dusty boots, their tired faces showing the signs of a hard day's work. The sight brought a smile to Coby's face, appreciating their dedication to completing the renovations.

Amidst the workers, a long ladder extended across the rooftop, leading a man who was busy fixing a dish to the roof. The clinking of metal against metal accompanied his every move as he meticulously adjusted the equipment. It was a reassuring sight for Coby, knowing that the new internet service provider was diligently installing their equipment.

In front of the entrance, a group of branded vans were parked, their engines occasionally humming and emitting a soft rumble. Each van bore the distinct insignia of the companies they represented, showcasing the diverse range of services involved in the renovation process. The air in the manor was a blend of fresh paint and the subtle

aroma of gas, a testament to the various trades at work.

Just like the real estate agent promised, Coby made a mental note to write her a thank you note and reward her with a bunch of vibrant flowers. The anticipation of settling into his new sanctuary grew stronger as the sights, sounds, smells, and feelings of the scene enveloped him, making him feel even more grateful for this new chapter in his life. He didn't mind the inconvenience of workers surrounding him, their loud voices echoing through the old house. The sound of hammers and saws filled the air, drowning out the silence he used to share with Elaine and the ever-arrogant Misty. And, Coby was certain, Elaine would also agree that the old house was better with him out of the picture. His mind drifted back to the previous evening, the memories now distant and hazy.

There was a persistent annoyance that plagued him throughout the entire journey. And now, finally, he knew what it was the distinctive scent of Elaine's alluring perfume. A delicate floral fragrance that always lingered when she went out with her lover. She openly admitted to an affair, and Coby wondered which one of his friends it could be. For some reason, the name Niall Preston shot into his mind, and the premonition sent an icy shiver down his spine.

"You sneaky little bugger," Coby whispered, his breath forming a cloud in the chilly air. His head shook involuntarily, as if trying to physically dislodge the mental image of Elaine and Niall entangled in a lover's embrace. Slowly, the memory flooded back to him, enveloping him like a thick fog.

"Yes!" he exclaimed, his eyes widening as realisation struck him like a bolt of lightning. One late night, as he waited for Niall at the dimly lit bar, the scent of that same perfume wafted towards him, mixing with the faint aroma of alcohol and stale cigarette smoke.

## Chapter Two

Coby's anticipation grew as he neared the entrance, and he could feel a tingling sensation spreading through his veins. The two lion head sculptures, carved with intricate detail, stood proudly beside the towering wooden doors of the grand entrance. The faint scent of age wafted from the rusty knocker, a testament to the manor's long history. He had heard whispers of the manor's enigmatic past, of ethereal apparitions that roamed the halls and spectral voices that reverberated in the stillness of night. But his insatiable curiosity pushed him forward, undeterred. Holding his breath, he pressed against the freshly painted arch-shaped doors, feeling the coolness of the wood against his fingertips. The creak of the rusty hinges pierced the silence, casting an eerie echo down the empty hallway.

Within the walls of Elm Brook Manor, secrets whispered in the corridors, hidden in the nooks and crannies of its majestic architecture. The manor's opulence was undeniable, with ornate chandeliers casting dancing patterns of light and sweeping staircases that seemed to beckon him further. But it carried an air of mystery that captivated all who dared to enter.

With each step, the aged floorboards groaned, their timeworn voices urging him to delve deeper into the mysteries that lay ahead. The manor seemed to possess a life of its own, its history interwoven with the very essence of Serenity Falls.

A wave of nostalgia washed over Coby, as though he had walked these familiar paths in a previous life. The portraits adorning the walls appeared to come alive, their eyes following his every move. The echoes of laughter and tears seemed to linger in the air, as if the spirits

of the past were still present. He could sense their presence, a tingling sensation at the back of his neck. However, he couldn't accurately determine their exact number. Only time would reveal the truth. While exploring the space, he caught fleeting glimpses of their elusive forms. Their shadows swiftly disappeared behind bookshelves, doors, and into dusty cupboards. They trailed behind him, their curiosity ignited by his unfamiliar arrival. Their existence was so palpable that he could feel their whispers brushing against the back of his neck, causing goosebumps to rise and a knowing smile to dance on his lips. Continuing his exploration, he meticulously examined every nook and cranny, searching for the places where their presence felt strongest. Little did they know, he was well aware of their presence and could sense them with every fibre of his being. Their hushed whispers penetrated deep into his bones, creating an indescribable sensation within him.

He stumbled upon a dusty library, the scent of aged paper and leather filling the air. The shelves, lined with books that had withstood the test of time, beckoned him closer. Running his fingers along the spines, he could almost hear the stories they held, patiently waiting to be unravelled.

After hours of meticulous exploration, Coby finally stumbled upon the perfect spot to set up his workstation. An old, desolate room greeted him, adorned with towering windows that provided a breathtaking panoramic view of the outside world. Sunlight streamed in, illuminating the room and casting dancing shadows on the worn floorboards. The air held a hint of mustiness, a testament to the room's abandonment.

Through the open doorway, he gazed upon the vast hallway adorned with two grand staircases that gracefully swept upward. The sight was awe-inspiring, a testament to the stately home's former glory. From this vantage point, he knew he could catch a glimpse of anyone who dared to approach from any direction.

However, a sense of disappointment washed over him as he realised that his new office was in the west wing, where maintenance work was still ongoing. Undeterred, he enlisted the help of a window washer, who diligently aided him in transporting his desk inside. With determination, he carried the rest of his meager belongings himself.

Opting for a modest, small bedroom on the lower level, he marvelled at the furnishings left behind by the previous owners. They had lovingly adorned the entire manor house. The bedroom stood as a silent testament to their hurried departure, with only the faint echoes of their footsteps lingering in the air. But white sheets draped over the furniture had preserved them from the ravages of time and dust. As he removed the sheets, he could almost smell the faint scent of history, mingled with a touch of nostalgia.

Rumours about the former owners' mysterious disappearance swirled through the air, shrouding the estate in an air of intrigue. The most plausible explanation, whispered amongst the townsfolk, was that they fled because of the eerie whispers of haunting spirits that seemed to linger in the air. But questions continued to haunt him: Why had they abandoned their cherished possessions and never come back? It was this enigmatic puzzle that fuelled Coby's irresistible urge to purchase the estate. To uncover the truth hidden within its walls. Drawing upon his past experiences as Mister Jones, he was determined to embark on a journey of discovery once again.

With a crystal-clear double Scotch whisky by his side, the rich amber liquid shimmering in the soft light, Coby powered up his sleek silver laptop. He plugged in the password and connected to the new wireless internet, feeling an immediate sense of relief wash over him. Finally, he could catch up with his work undisturbed, free from the constant hindrance of Elaine's incessant chatter and Misty's distracting presence.

His publisher had been nagging him for a sample of his work, a looming deadline that had been hanging over his head. Yet somehow, he always managed to find an excuse, a way to postpone it. Deep down, he knew that something significant was on the horizon, a momentous event waiting to unfold.

Bringing up a vivid map of Serenity Falls on his screen, the vibrant colours and intricate details filling his vision. Coby familiarised himself with the layout of the town, the various shops and establishments that lined the streets. The liquor store conveniently nestled beside the old-fashioned barbershop, their close proximity catching his attention.

His eyes skimmed the map, tracing the intricate pathways, until he spotted it – the local pub, aptly named the Stag's Head Inn. The sight of

the name sent a ripple of anticipation through his body, his stomach growling in response. Glancing at his watch, he realised that there was still ample time to visit the pub. A chance to indulge before his fiftieth birthday arrived. An occasion he had no intention of spending alone.

Before he left, he felt a surge of determination as he carefully crafted a questionnaire, eager to address his most burning inquiries. The clickety-clack of the keyboard echoing in the room. It would serve as his excuse to strike up conversations with the strangers at the pub, a way to gather valuable information. After all, pubs were renowned for being a treasure trove of local knowledge. A hub where the residents shared their secrets and insider tips. They would surely have the inside knowledge to guide him to exactly what he required.

In the peaceful Serenity Falls, the Stag's Head Inn stood as more than just a pub. It embodied a sense of community, radiating warmth and camaraderie amidst the rugged surroundings. Its weathered stone structure, adorned with glowing windows, exuded a humble charm. The lively melody of a fiddle resonated through the air, enveloping Coby in the joyful sounds of traditional Celtic tunes. The enchanting strains of a classical Scottish lullaby called to him, drawing him closer to the quaint pub's entrance.

Underneath the wooden sign of the Stag's Head Inn, a symbol of the noble animal that has roamed these lands since time immemorial, Coby stepped into a world steeped in tradition and camaraderie. The stag, revered in local lore for its wisdom and strength, seemed to cast a protective aura over the inn and its patrons, making it a haven amidst the rugged beauty of Serenity Falls. The burning peat in the fireplace mingled with the aroma of hearty food being prepared in the back, creating a comforting olfactory symphony. Laughter and animated conversations filled the room, forging a joyful connection among the patrons. Local residents and weary travellers alike gathered around worn wooden tables, their faces bathed in the soft glow of antique lamps.

The fiddle player, a talented musician with nimble fingers, continued to serenade the crowd. The enchanting melodies carried the weight of tradition and the echoes of distant lands. Coby found himself captivated by the music, transported to a world where time

stood still, and worries melted away.

Behind the bar, the skilled publican poured generous measures of whisky, his practiced hand conveying a warm hospitality. His eyes crinkled with a friendly smile as he engaged in pleasant banter with his customers. In one corner, a group savoured plates of traditional Scottish fare – haggis, neeps, and tatties – providing nourishment and comfort against the chilly night. A distinguished gentleman, his greying hair matching the hue of his immaculate white suit, sat solitary at a table. His polished top hat rested on the chair beside him. The ominous gleam in his eyes exuded an aura of superiority. His lips, forever poised in a subtle, enigmatic grin, hinted at a wealth of knowledge.

Coby's eyes scanned the room, and a smile spread across his face as he spotted an inviting empty chair. Hastening to the bar, he settled into the welcoming seat. Taking in his surroundings, he assessed the potential for connections. One peculiar observation stood out – the absence of a dartboard. Furthermore, he noticed the lack of women, save for the buxom barmaid, whose vivacious presence enhanced the atmosphere. With her infectious laughter and playful interactions, she charmed and entertained the patrons. It became clear to Coby that this establishment was more than just a pub; it was a sanctuary, a haven where stories were shared, friendships were forged, and lasting memories were created.

He took pleasure in the silky smoothness of his whisky and relished the mouthwatering local delicacy – bangers and mash – as the lively conversations swirled around him, tickling his ears. The name Elm Brook seemed to be on everyone's lips, accompanied by the typical pub rumours surrounding the new owner. Amidst the chatter, a story caught his attention: the new owner, a Yank rockstar, had supposedly acquired the estate as a secret love nest for himself and his mistress. The rumours brought a mischievous smile to Coby's face. Although tempted to reveal himself, the delectable food held him in his seat, its flavours captivating him. He labelled the evening as a 'slop,' a term commonly used in the game of darts. Despite not hitting the target, he found solace in the delightful flavours of the food and the exquisite taste of the local whisky. Settling his bill with a generous tip, he firmly believed in leaving an impression as a good tipper. As he walked away that night, under the watchful gaze of the stag on the sign, Coby



knew he would return. After all, he was understanding the wisdom of the stag – to observe, to adapt, to find strength in solitude. And above all, to enjoy the journey.

## Chapter Three

With the avalanche of maintenance workers arriving, Coby embarked on a shopping spree, frantically grabbing items off the shelves. The absence of a refrigerator took skilful planning, but the anticipation of his online order arriving soon filled him with excitement. He visited the barber, Niamh, a young woman with a vibrant smile and the scent of freshly cut hair filling the air. There, amidst the buzz of conversation, he gained valuable information about his new town and its influential people. From the barber, he ventured to the liquor shop, the inviting aroma of aged whiskey greeting his senses. Then to the bustling grocery store, where the vibrant colours of fresh produce beckoned him. Finally, he reached the veggie market, its earthy scent mingling with the sounds of haggling and laughter.

To his surprise, nestled within the town, stood a charming little bakery named 'Sweet Serenity.' Inside, the warm fragrance of baked goods filled the air, and a friendly, sturdy lady behind the counter greeted him with contagious laughter, especially when money changed hands. Coby couldn't resist and ordered a mouthwatering chocolate birthday cake.

Returning home, he unloaded his shopping bags, feeling the weight of the items in his hands. The window washer, always reliable, assisted him as usual. His presence brought a sense of calm and reassurance to the task. They carried everything to the oversized kitchen, which had only one appliance – a rusty old kettle sitting on the gas hob.

Wasting no time, Coby hurried to his office, the click of his footsteps echoing in the empty hallway. He settled in front of his computer, the

blank screen staring back at him, its glow casting a pale light on his face. With a deep sigh, he rested his fingers on the keyboard, feeling the cool touch of the keys beneath them. A moment of hesitation passed before he wrote, the soft tapping of the keys filling the silence. 'The early days at Serenity Falls,' he typed, the words forming a visual image on the screen.

His mind kept drifting to Elaine as he wrote, her presence lingering in his thoughts like a vivid memory. He couldn't help but recall her connection with Misty, her loyal companion. Now, however, Coby couldn't escape the image of her and Niall Preston, her lover, entangled in his mind. The memory of shaking Niall's hand after winning a darts game against their opponents sent a pang of bitterness through him. The thought of that very hand caressing Elaine's body, their passionate moments together, sent a chilling shiver down his spine.

Suddenly, a loud clatter from above startled him, jolting him out of his contemplative state. The sound reverberated through the room, breaking his concentration. A furrow formed on his brow as he assumed it was a maintenance worker dropping a hammer, their presence a constant reminder of the repairs needed in his new home.

The air abruptly grew colder, sending a shiver down Coby's spine. He knew what was coming and braced himself. His heart raced with anticipation, yet he refused to look away from his screen. Suddenly, an ethereal figure materialised before him, her monochrome image slowly fading into view like a gentle mist. Her lips formed a tight line, and her fingers twitched by her side, aching for connection. The vibrant, dark curls cascaded freely down her exposed shoulders, pulsating with life that mirrored her spirited nature. Each movement of her hair created a graceful symphony of waves, adding a touch of untamed elegance to her persona. Her bangs, perfectly straight and precise, framed her face like a carefully crafted portrait, drawing attention to her delicate features.

Overwhelmed by her captivating allure, Coby's lips parted in awe, yet he restrained himself, not wanting to startle her. She stood there, her sorrowful gaze fixed on him. The urge to meet her eyes consumed him, but he fought it with all his might. Her attire harmoniously blended elegance with practicality. Clad in a fitted bodice of muted tones, its high collar and long sleeves paid homage to the modest

fashion of the era. A wide belt, crafted from dark leather, cinched her waist, contrasting beautifully with the soft hue of her dress. The skirt, a cascade of fabric adorned with a rich tartan pattern, swirled gracefully around her ankles. Her leather boots, worn and weathered, whispered secrets of the countless miles they had journeyed.

Coby's fingers danced across the keyboard, magnetically drawn to its touch. The rhythmic clacking filled the air, as if composing a symphony of words. With swift precision, he captured the ethereal beauty of the young creature before him, his fingers flying across the keys. He had christened her the 'dark angel,' her name still unknown. Pausing, he stole a glance at her, his eyes distant and longing. Her brow furrowed with curiosity, and she rose on her tiptoes, her presence captivating.

The room seemed to buzz with an electric charge, as if the very air around him crackled with energy. A sudden realisation struck him like a crashing wave – she had never seen a computer. The sleek, modern device intrigued her, its silvery form sparking her curiosity. Inspiration surged through him, a powerful force. Tilting the laptop screen, he framed his face in the camera app and took a picture. Sending it to the printer, he watched as it whirred to life, slowly producing a printed image. The apparition darted towards the printer, her eyes fixed on the paper, wide-eyed with awe. Her parted lips revealed her sense of wonder. Unfazed, Coby continued typing, knowing the image would captivate her. Sneaking a glance at her, he saw the amazement lighting up her once sombre face.

But amidst the fervour of his creative surge, a sudden thump shattered the atmosphere, jolting Coby from his trance. His head snapped towards the sound, his eyes narrowing as he spotted the fallen candlestick. A knowing smile tugged at his lips, a hint of mischief dancing in his eyes. He had sensed her presence all along, an invisible force observing his every move. With unwavering confidence, Coby met the apparition's gaze, his voice filled with conviction. "I know you're there," he declared, the words carrying a weight of certainty.

The apparition's jaw dropped, and a gasp escaped her lips, whispering like a hiss. She retreated into the shadows, fading away like a wisp of smoke. Coby's lips curled into a mischievous smile, his eyes gleaming with a sinister twinkle. He knew she had only slipped

away from the view of people, leaving behind an empty space.

“See you later,” he sang, his voice taking on a high, lilting tone. He rubbed his hands together, relishing in the anticipation of what was to come. Silence filled the room as the air grew still, interrupted only by the rhythmic tapping of his keyboard. The words flowed effortlessly from his mind to the screen, each keystroke resonating with a sense of purpose. His fingertips held a newfound power, a testament to his abilities. His heart raced in sync with his thoughts, the adrenaline surging through his veins. A bead of sweat formed on his brow, a testament to the intensity of his inspiration.

Without hesitation, Coby swiftly poured himself a generous serving of smooth, amber-hued whisky. The rich aroma of the golden elixir wafted up, enticing his senses. It was a moment of triumph, the culmination of his investment in this place finally paying off.

With his vast experience and a track record of success in dealing with apparitions, Coby pondered his encounter with the enigmatic ‘dark angel.’ As contemplation filled his mind, he cast a thoughtful gaze outside. And there, once again, he caught sight of the chubby ginger-haired boy who had been surreptitiously observing him through the windows ever since his arrival.

Startled, the boy emerged from his hiding place behind the thick, overgrown thicket and swiftly darted into the safety of the surrounding woods. Coby furrowed his brow in deep concentration and resolved to inquire about the enigmatic boy.

A sudden chill permeated the air, causing a shiver to run down his spine. Even after all these years in the trade, the mere presence of these apparitions never failed to give him goosebumps.

From the ethereal shroud of shadows, the dark angel materialised before him, accompanied by two equally captivating, otherworldly beings. Their monochrome appearances took Coby’s breath away, the absence of vibrant colours only adding to their mystique. As his fingers hovered over the keyboard, he felt an unexplainable pull, as if he was being drawn into an enigmatic trance.

‘A tableau of women,’ he began typing, his words flowing effortlessly as he described them. ‘Each one unique, radiating an allure that is distinctly her own. Amidst the whisper of silk and the gentle rustle of wool, the glimmer of jewellery and the vibrant hues of fabric, their individuality shines through.’

Pausing for a moment to appreciate the awe reflected on their ethereal faces, Coby continued his description. 'One woman's dress, adorned with delicate lace, showcases her refined tastes, the intricate patterns a testament to her elegance. The other embraces boldness, her tartan skirt a riot of shades that speak of her vibrant personality. And then there is the dark angel, standing out like their personal Florence Nightingale. Their dresses bear a striking resemblance, hinting at an era between the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.'

Once again, Coby paused to take in the mesmerising sight before him. The ethereal trinity stood poised, their unique hairstyles catching his attention. Coby's eyes focused on the dark angel's hair, which cascaded in stunning curls that framed her face with an air of mystery. The second apparition's preference for extravagant updos, decorated with ribbons and flowers, stood in stark contrast to the third apparition's neatly braided tresses. The practicality of the latter hinted at an attitude that left no room for frivolity.

Filling the air, the rhythmic clacking of the keyboard created a symphony of sound. The dark angel leaned in close, her delicate hands cupping her companion's ears as she whispered softly. Even though Coby knew they were watching him, her gestures implied that she thought he could also hear her. In unison, the ethereal trinity rose on their tiptoes, their graceful movements reminiscent of ballerinas preparing for an elegant pirouette.

Understanding the message she had conveyed to them, Coby tilted the screen, framing his face. Their eyes widened in astonishment as the camera flash illuminated his features. He swiftly sent the captured image to the printer, which whirred into action, filling the air with a gentle hum. The ethereal beings hurried to the printer, their whispered gasps creating an ethereal melody. They studied his likeness, their faces filled with a mixture of wide-eyed excitement and reverential awe.

Their swift return to their positions was a display of seamless grace, akin to a synchronised performance. They struck elegant and graceful poses, their bodies poised like works of art waiting to be immortalised. The mere sight of them ignited a fiery desire within Coby. The gleam in his eyes testified to their otherworldly divinity. An impish chuckle escaped his lips, and he felt compelled to explain himself.

"I cannot take your picture," he said, his voice filled with regret. "A camera works by capturing light, and you, my ethereal friends, do not reflect light." With their hands still on their hips from their previous poses, they scowled at him, urging him to capture their likenesses. Yielding to their requests, Coby turned his laptop so that the camera faced them and took a picture.

Yet, when he sent the image to the printer, it only displayed the entrance, with the grand hallway behind them, failing to capture their ethereal elegance. Disappointment replaced their once-beautiful expressions, and they retreated into the shadows, disappearing like a wisp of smoke.

And that is when Coby noticed her, sitting all by herself on the cold marble staircase. A fourth apparition, not as enchanting as her counterparts, but still intriguing, somewhat sinister. The soft glow of the chandeliers illuminated her face, casting a warm, ethereal glow upon her delicate features.

With her dark hair cascading down her shoulders, she wore plain clothes that seemed to blend into the background, as if she belonged to a different time. The stark contrast between her companions' pristine footwear and her worn, tattered shoes was hard to ignore. Coby couldn't help but feel that she belonged to a different social class, which explained her solitude.

Enchanted, he slowly rose from his chair, the floorboards creaking beneath his weight, and approached her cautiously, his steps measured and deliberate. The air carried a faint scent of old books and forgotten memories. Her fingers moved with grace, tracing intricate patterns on the stairs that were covered in a fine layer of dust. Her lips parted slightly, and a gentle hum resonated from her throat, like a distant echo from a forgotten realm. The melody, a hauntingly familiar Celtic tune, weaved its way through the air, whispering tales of ancient lore and timeless love.

Vibrations from the melody created a symphony of emotions rippling through the silent hallway. The sound of the weary maintenance workers' labours blended into the background, drowned out by the peacefulness of the surroundings. The melody acted as a magnet, drawing Coby closer, and he absentmindedly reached out, his fingers hovering just below her face. As if trying to touch the

ephemeral beauty of the moment.

But as if startled by his presence, the harmonious serenade abruptly ceased. With a gasp, she rushed up the stairs, her footsteps so quiet they could be mistaken for a whisper. With a quick, mysterious gaze over her shoulder, she receded into the veil of shadows, disappearing like a wisp of fog before the brilliance of the rising sun.

Coby christened her 'the siren,' mesmerised by her ethereal voice that danced through the air like a delicate melody. Hurrying back to his office, he sought solace in his plush leather chair, pouring and swiftly downing a neat whisky to calm his racing thoughts. The room exuded a sense of comfort, with the scent of aged wood mingling with the subtle aroma of leather. With the memory of their encounter still vivid in his mind, he painstakingly captured every detail, from the way she looked to the heavenly timbre of her voice.

With each keystroke, the temperature in the room seemed to drop, sending a chilling sensation down his back. A hauntingly alluring fragrance, reminiscent of vintage perfume, wafted through the room. The intoxicating blend of pepper, lotus flowers, and a hint of saffron hinted at the presence of the enigmatic dark angel. Ignoring the urge to glance behind him, he succumbed to her magnetic pull, her presence hanging over him like an enchanting force. His fingers hovered over the keyboard, poised to continue expanding on the allure of 'the siren's call,' the enchanting serenade still echoing in his memory.

However, a surge of inspiration crashed over him like a powerful tidal wave. Saving the document as 'the siren,' he opened a new blank page, selecting a large font size. The word 'Hello' sprawled across the page, its size nearly consuming the entire length. He waited, his gaze fixated on the blinking cursor, hoping for a response. His fingers rested on the keys, and he typed out the words 'My name is Coby McTavish.' The intoxicating fragrance of her perfume grew stronger, filling the air around him, amplifying her presence. Yet, the cursor continued its relentless blinking, urging him into stillness. 'What is your name?' he typed, leaning back in anticipation. Time stretched on, but no response came. Though her scent lingered in the air, and he knew she was there, nothing happened.

He rose from his worn leather chair, the creaking sound echoing through the dimly lit room. With deliberate movements, he poured a



generous amount of amber liquid into a crystal glass, the scent of aged whisky filling the air. His eyes were fixed on the frosted window, where the unmistakable silhouette of a red-headed figure caught his attention, peering through the tangled thicket. A sly smile tugged at the corners of his lips, and he shuffled back into the comforting embrace of his well-worn chair.

Lost in thought, he absentmindedly stared at the flickering screen, his fingers tightly gripping the glass. Just as he took a long, throat-burning sip, Coby's throat convulsed, causing a wet cough to erupt. The sound filled with the struggle to breathe. Startled, he glanced down at the screen, where garbled letters formed an undeniable word beneath his name. Tilting his head from side to side, he tried to decipher the ethereal message: 'Sine.' Recognition sparked in his eyes, assuming she had observed him typing earlier. With a simple response, he typed, 'Siren?' because he believed she enjoyed the sound of it. But nothing happened.

Disappointment settled over him like a heavy cloud, causing his brow to furrow in confusion. Starting anew, he greeted her with a simple 'hello' and inquired about her name. This time, the dark angel's response came swiftly, the word 'Sine' appearing on the screen. An urge to shout at the screen welled up within him, but he restrained himself, knowing better. Coby's gaze intensified, fixated on the monotonous blinking cursor as he recalled every detail he had learned about these apparitions. Their numbers, hairstyles, shoes, and clothing.

Suddenly, a revelation struck him like a bolt of lightning from the heavens. He swiftly typed the word 'Sine' into the search engine, discovering its mathematical function. Correcting himself, he added 'Sine, Gaelic name meaning,' into the search bar. And there it was, right in front of him. Sine, Gaelic for Jane. Excitement coursed through his trembling fingers as he typed, 'Hello Jane, I am so very happy to meet you.'

In a fleeting moment, Jane, the enigmatic dark angel, materialised before him, her radiant smile illuminating the room, before vanishing like a wisp of smoke.

With a triumphant smile, Coby reached into the top drawer and pulled out his sleek silver Dictaphone, its cool metallic surface glinting under the soft glow of the desk lamp. With his finger on the record

button, he felt a rush of anticipation, causing his arms to break out in goosebumps. The room filled with the sound of his voice, capturing the heartfelt message. "Contact made," he announced, excitement lacing his words. He meticulously recorded the sights, sounds, and smells around him, as well as his strategic plans to tame the ethereal trinity.

## Chapter Four

That night, Coby's dreams transported him to a realm of enchantment. In his mind's eye, he watched Jane gracefully dance, her body moving with a serpentine fluidity that wove an intricate tapestry of desires. The ethereal music accompanied her every movement, filling the air with a symphony of enchanting melodies. The dream unfolded, and Coby could almost sense the delicate scent of lotus flowers, blending with the intoxicating fragrance of passion. Suddenly, the loud thuds and thumps reverberated through the house, jolting him awake. The sounds of the maintenance workers reverberated through the walls, filling the space with clanging and banging.

Cradling a steaming cup of bitter black coffee in one hand and a crispy, buttery rowie in the other, Coby meandered through the grand hallway towards his sanctuary – his office. His footsteps echoed against the marble floors, creating a rhythmic symphony that reverberated through the expansive hall. He paused momentarily at the grand staircase, his eyes scanning the surroundings on a quest for 'the siren.' She was absent, yet her sweet, entrancing serenade echoed within the chambers of his mind, a symphony of ethereal notes that haunted his senses.

Humming the alluring tune under his breath, he quickened his pace, drawn towards his office by the enticing aroma of ancient perfume. The moment he stepped inside, a cold sensation crept down his spine, and the room emitted an uncanny sense of serenity. His eyes couldn't resist being pulled towards his laptop, where the spectral trio had gathered, creating an eerie luminescence with their ethereal images.

Their eyes remained fixated on the screen, completely engrossed in the captivating digital spectacle. The room held its breath, shrouded in a cloak of anticipation.

“Good morning, ladies!” Coby greeted, his voice brimming with enthusiasm. Their eyes remained glued to the screen, oblivious to his greeting, that was swallowed by the silence. Jane’s hands moved fluidly, like a serpent dancing to the beat of an unseen drum. Her voice, a soft hiss, was reminiscent of a gentle summer breeze whispering through the leaves. With unwavering focus, their eyes stayed locked on the screen, immersing themselves in the content. Coby’s curiosity flared up, pulling him into their circle. His eyes locked on the empty screen, eagerly awaiting any supernatural activity.

He listened attentively, entranced by the captivating melody that flowed from Jane’s lips. Each word she uttered was akin to the soft rustle of heather swaying across the highlands, a sound that resonated with the very essence of the earth beneath his feet. The consonants twisted and turned, mirroring the gnarled branches of an ancient oak, while the vowels flowed like the ceaseless rhythm of a babbling brook. It was as if he could discern the whisper of the sea in every ‘s’, the caw of a raven in every ‘r’, and the sigh of the wind in every ‘h’. The words, like threads in a tapestry, carried the weight of time and bore witness to the collective heritage, creating a sense of unity beyond his comprehension.

Coby sank into the plush, supple embrace of his worn leather chair, revelling in its comforting touch against his skin. He reached out and pressed the power button on his sleek laptop, its soft hum filling the air. As a blank document appeared on the screen, he eagerly began typing the word ‘Hello Sine,’ watching the letters sprawl across the white canvas.

Raising his gaze with anticipation, Coby hoped for a flicker of recognition, a sign that he wasn’t alone. Instead, he found himself greeted by the inquisitive gazes of the ethereal trinity, their eyes twinkling with otherworldly wisdom. Their presence lingered in the centre of the room, almost tangible. They struck poses, their bodies poised and ready, waiting for him to capture their likeness.

Amusement bubbled within him, a joyous chortle escaping his lips as his face illuminated with inspiration. Urgency propelled him out of

his office, navigating the labyrinthine corridors until he reached his bedroom. Returning moments later, he cradled a full-length mirror in his hands, its cool surface glinting in the light. Carefully, he positioned it against the back of his desk, facing the trio.

With animated gestures, Coby signalled that something magical was about to unfold. "Now look," he exclaimed, pointing at the mirror. Stepping in front of it, he watched as his image reflected from head to toe before stepping back with a sense of satisfaction. The spectral threesome gasped, their whispers reminiscent of hisses, as they mimicked his movements. However, they did not see their own reflections. Instead, they drew their gaze to the grand hallway behind them, which mirrored what they saw within the looking glass.

Suddenly, the mirror caught a bright ray of sunlight, transforming into a radiant beacon that rivalled the gleaming windscreen of a passing car. Curiosity piqued, Coby stole a furtive glance outside, spotting a sleek charcoal Range Rover ascending the steep driveway. He furrowed his brow, pondering the identity of its occupant.

The magnificent spectral trinity followed his gaze, their faces etched with awe, as the car came to a halt near the front doorway. Slowly, the door swung open, revealing a man with meticulously groomed silver hair neatly combed back. His bright red tie, flawlessly aligned, added a vibrant splash of colour against his crisp, white suit. A matching white top hat rested on the chair beside him, while a slick black walking stick with a polished brass knob completed his ensemble.

With the grace and poise of a debonair on a first date, the man placed the hat atop his head, its brim casting a shadow over his piercing grey eyes. Retrieving his walking stick, he firmly closed the car door and ascended the staircase leading to the entrance, exuding an air of authority that demanded attention.

Coby exchanged a fleeting gaze with the apparitions, his wide eyes brimming with unspoken inquiries. Their piercing stares remained fixed on the grey-haired man, their eyes betraying a profound sense of dread.

"Sassenach!" Jane exclaimed, the word slipping out like a venomous whisper, reverberating against the cold stone walls. A shrill, ear-piercing shriek sliced through the air, only to fade away as the spectres retreated into the enveloping shroud of shadows, vanishing

like a phantom ship in the mist. An eerie silence settled in the wake of their departure, leaving Coby lost in his contemplation, his gaze drifting into the distance.

A thunderous knock on the door shattered Coby's thoughts, jolting him back to the present. He hurried across the grand hallway, the sound of his footsteps echoing against the polished marble floors, and swung open the imposing wooden doors. The man in the immaculate white suit lifted his hat upon seeing Coby, his voice filled with a mix of surprise and familiarity.

"By Jove," the visitor exclaimed, "If it isn't the esteemed Mister Jones himself." He extended a weathered hand, adorned with gleaming golden rings.

"Coby McTavish," Coby corrected him, his voice tinged with a hint of frostiness as he clasped the man's chilly hand in his own.

"Sinclair, Alistair Sinclair's the name. The pleasure is all mine," replied the grey-eyed man, a sinister glimmer dancing in his eyes, his words laced with a chilling undertone. Coby's gaze was fixated on the golden wedge that adorned the space where Alistair should have had a tooth. "Where are my manners?" Coby asked, gesturing for him to enter.

Alistair's cane tapped rhythmically against the marble floor as he followed Coby to his office. Coby could feel his pulse quicken, the rhythmic thumping echoing in his ears. The flickering fireplace cast dancing shadows on the walls, filling the room with an eerie ambience that mirrored the unease in Coby's heart. Coby made a beeline for the sideboard, the scent of aged Scottish whisky wafting through the air, filling the room with its rich aroma. He reached for his prized bottle, its label bearing the marks of time, offering a drink to his guest. Alistair paused momentarily, his eyes drawn to his own reflection in the mirror leaning against the desk. His face contorted into a smug smirk as he adjusted his tie.

With a resounding double tap of his cane, he remarked, "Ah, such exquisite taste," his head nodding in approval of the fine liquor collection, the rich aroma filling the room.

Coby poured two generous shots into crystal glasses, their weight and clarity a testament to their craftsmanship, and motioned for Alistair to take a seat, his hand trembling ever so slightly. A sense of unease settled in the pit of Coby's stomach, causing it to churn with

anxiety. He felt suffocated by the palpable tension in the atmosphere, which grew more oppressive. The room felt suffocatingly small, as it seemed to close in around him. Coby forced himself to take a deep breath, to steady his nerves as he prepared to uncover the truth behind Alistair Sinclair's unexpected visit.

But despite the physical discomfort, Coby maintained a facade of composure. His face remained stoic, betraying none of the turmoil raging within him. He knew he had to tread carefully, to navigate the treacherous waters that lay ahead. Alistair Sinclair may have appeared friendly on the surface, but there was something about him, something ominous and unsettling that Coby couldn't quite put his finger on.

"So, what brings you to my humble abode?" Coby asked, his voice trembling with a palpable quiver.

Alistair fixed Coby with a penetrating stare, his eyes as cold and grey as a winter storm over the North Sea. They concealed more secrets than a crypt. He raised his glass, the clink of ice against crystal resonating through the room, and took a mouthful of the golden elixir. With a sip, he put on a fake charming smile, his teeth dazzling in the low lighting.

"It is quite simple, you see," he began, his voice smooth and calculated. "What an extraordinary turn of events has led our paths to cross."

With a furrowed brow, Coby challenged Alistair's gaze, his eyes narrowing with suspicion. "What events?" he asked, his tone tinged with curiosity.

"Your amazing stories!" exclaimed Alistair with a chuckle, the sound echoing in the room. "What else?"

The air seemed to grow colder, as if an icy breeze had swept through the room. Coby felt a shiver run down his spine, his skin prickling with goosebumps. The intoxicating scent of saffron wafted through the air, hinting at Jane's presence. Her spectral image materialised, flickering in and out of sight, like a ghostly flame. Her gaze, full of scorn, locked onto Coby, her eyes ablaze with fury. With a long, bony finger, she pointed menacingly at Alistair Sinclair. Coby shifted uncomfortably, feeling trapped between two worlds. His eyes nervously shifting between the flickering image of Jane and Alistair, who sat there with his trademark smug smirk.

"And how did my stories make our paths cross?" Coby asked, his voice trembling with nervous energy.

"You are a man of many questions, Mister McTavish," Alistair replied, a mischievous glint in his eyes.

"Writer's habit," Coby defended, his tone sharp and frosty.

A pensive silence hung in the air, the only sound being the faint crackling of the fireplace. Alistair tore his gaze away from Coby and took in the breathtaking scenery, his eyes wandering to the ornate mirror leaning against the desk. It seemed to fascinate him, as if he found something captivating within its depths. Perhaps it was his own reflection that intrigued him, Coby wondered. Jane's apparition had vanished into the shroud of shadows, leaving a lingering sense of unease in the room. Coby contemplated her actions, determined to find a way to ask her about it. Without warning, Alistair forcefully slammed his empty glass onto Coby's desk, the resounding thud startling Coby. Without a word, he abruptly stood and headed for the door. Coby leaped up from his chair and trailed behind him, his heart racing as he swung open the imposing wooden doors.

"Beware the shadows, my dear scribe," said Alistair with a lift of his hat, his words carried away by the whispering wind. He stepped outside and slid into his car. The engine roared to life and echoed against the distant sounds of the maintenance workers.

Coby felt a knot tighten in his stomach as he watched Alistair's car fade into the distance. The weight of unanswered questions hung heavy in the air, causing his pulse to quicken and his palms to grow clammy. The encounter had left him with a mix of anticipation and apprehension, his mind swirling with possibilities.

He turned back towards the room, and the deafening silence swallowed him whole. The once welcoming ambiance now felt tinged with an eerie unease. Coby's footsteps echoed through the silence as he returned to his desk, his fingers tracing the edges of the ornate mirror that had captivated Alistair Sinclair moments before.

The mirror's surface reflected a distorted image of Coby, his face etched with a furrowed brow and eyes filled with determination. He wondered if there was a connection between Jane's sudden disappearance and Alistair's cryptic warning. It was as if the room itself held secrets waiting to be unveiled, secrets that intertwined



their lives in ways he couldn't yet comprehend.

With a deep breath, Coby gathered his thoughts and resolved to seek answers. He glanced at the empty glass that still bore the imprint of Alistair's forceful gesture, a reminder of the tension that had permeated the room. The intensity of the moment had left him momentarily shaken, but his writer's instinct pushed him forward, fuelling his determination.

Leaving the confines of his study, Coby ventured out into the cool morning air. The rising sun cast a soft glow over the estate, its ethereal light casting elongated shadows across the landscape. With each step he took, he couldn't shake the feeling that the forest was alive, whispering secrets that only it could understand.

The distant sounds of maintenance workers gradually receded, making way for the gentle symphony of leaves rustling in the wind and the occasional melodic chirp of a bird. Coby's steps quickened, his heart pounding with a mix of trepidation and curiosity. He needed to think, to untangle the truth behind Alistair's unexpected visit and the enigmatic connection it held to the secrets of the stately home.

The further he ventured into the woods, the stronger the nagging feeling grew – as if someone or something was silently observing his every step. Shadows danced at the corner of his vision, whispering secrets just beyond his reach. A chill ran down his spine, but he pressed on, determined to unravel the mysteries that entwined their lives.

The wind carried Alistair's warning to his ears once more, a haunting reminder of the dangers that lurked in the shadows. Coby's steps faltered for a moment, uncertainty gnawing at his resolve. But he shook off the fear, his writer's curiosity burning brighter than ever.

Beneath the watchful gaze of the sun, Coby forged ahead, his path illuminated by the glimmer of uncertainty and the flickering hope of discovery. The shadows may have been lurking, but he was ready to face them head-on, armed with nothing but his words and the burning desire to understand the intricacies of their intertwined fates.