SKIDAWAY ISLAND

LOCATION: 25 MILES EAST OF ENGLISH SCOTTISH BORDER

POPULATION: 4,384

92% ORIGINAL ISLANDERS 8% EXPATRIATES AND REFUGEES

Before

"Bring your torch. It's a dirty night."

It was advice, given to Howie Dearlove in the last eighteen minutes of his life, he would come to regret having taken.

The human mind holds fast to its surroundings when death is near. Clings to quick snatches of experience as a drowning man clings to wood. *The wind whipping about him, rain sheeting across the tarmac and cutting into his skin, the father holding his dead baby son hard against his cheek, the half-naked blonde woman screaming at the moon, the boy spitting at his feet with a look in his eyes that meant more than murder.* The tangled chaos of these moments raced and repeated across Howie Dearlove's brain as if played and replayed at double speed.

'I'll bring my torch. Mind if I use it to smash your clumsy face in?'

He'd been frantically copying numbers from a spreadsheet on the Company's computer onto the underside of a beermat, his markings barely holding shape, the ink spreading like oil through the mat's rough fibrous underside when fellow Company security guard, Alan Watson, snatched back the cloudy wet tarpaulin that separated the loading bay office from the outside world to peer in at him with a shady stare.

Five minutes on and they were battling the wind, Company issued oilskins clutched tightly under their chins, trudging their way, torches in hand, across the loading bay's bumpy blacktop towards the spot where the three great lorries were sounding their reverse alarms and backing into place.

The first lorry had opened with atypical routine, revealing nothing but a dense rectangle of black to face them in the night. Watson lifted the same industrial hook he had used to heave open the lorry's sliding back doors and bashed it against the inner walls. The cargo emerged cautiously from between the crates, as if the reverberating clang of the hook's metal was some impossible

to ignore dinner bell. They revealed themselves in the murky light and clambered down on weakened legs, falling into the arms of relatives in the waiting crowd where they would be gathered up like luggage, carried to cars to cross the final leg of their hellish journey into a stranger's cruel world.

The opening of the second lorry carried with it a sense of the horror that was to come. The cargo poured from it as soon as the doors were released like an unstoppable wall of water, wailing, sobbing, vomiting violently and collapsing as the damp air hit their parched throats.

"You people look alive in there!"

It was Watson bashing that obscene metal hook against the third lorry's dense walls. But the only answer returned to him from its abyss-like black mouth was silence.

"Move" Howie willed them in the quiet of his mind. "*Move*".

With a strengthless arm he lifted his torch to the side of Watson's head and saw, carved into the inner metal door, a succession of claw marks and pummelled fist indentations as dreadful and inevitable as the scratched walls of Auschwitz.

The realisation burst open in Howie's heart like a bloom of black roses.

Watson, was first to react; doubling over, reeling against the thick, gassy gagging smell of high-speed decay with a revolted groan "Oh my fucking Christ!"

It was enough to sweep panic through the crowd like a fever.

They had been waiting as patiently as relatives at an airport arrivals lounge. Now they surged forward in a stampeding mass to peer in at the carnage of fathers, sons, daughters, wives, brothers, friends; all of whom had met a wretched suffocating end. They lay together; a tangled mass of cadavers. Amid the twist of black shadows, arms emerged, frozen by death's permanence, still clawing for escape, or clutching at ruined throats, nails digging savagely into their own skin or that of others. Blind dead eyes bulged madly. Pale skin repainted crimson by the network of blood vessels, distended and erupted under its surface.

"Dearlove! Dearlove!!"

Over the roar of bedlam Howie could faintly hear his co-worker screaming his name. As if he could do anything more than join at his side and await the same abysmal fate. Fate in the shape of the once calm crowd rapidly turned to a lynching mob, closing in on the two beleaguered

men, their Company issued uniforms, their places within the organisation, their mere presence there that night, making them instantly guilty, responsible, receptacles for the swelling tide of hate.

Howie shut his eyes hard and turned away as they closed in, pressing one side of his face deeply into the lorry's cold metal door; a man groping back for his god.

Lightening split the sky to glass and the storm crashed through the night's ceiling, exploding above them like a bomb, hurling rain and thunder down onto the hate torn crowd below. The crowd below, where the final shards of sanity also split, and one man rained murder down upon another.

'I'm sorry Luke.'

He slipped away.

PART ONE

'What if I'm far from home?'

'Brother I will hear you call.'

Avicii

SKIDAWAY ISLAND

POPULATION: 3,972

71% ORIGINAL ISLANDERS 29% EXPATRIATES AND REFUGEES

One

One Year Later

Luke Dearlove squinted against the light and struggled to see up to the precipice of the chalky ragged bluff. At its ridge stood the shell of a half completed, long abandoned luxury housing complex, looking more like a crumbled ancient ruin, rotted with decay, than a multi-million pound project, now discarded and ignored. Huge wreaths of protective plastic, once wrapped around the building's metal skeleton had torn loose with time and floated in the high wind like the caught hems of ghosts that passed through its gaping firmaments.

And down in the world below the people of Skidaway Island seemed to be fleeing the structure as though it were an angry god. A volcano, waking and readying to burst. At the bluff's feet they gathered their belongings, grouped their families and packed out the ferry, leaving behind the only lives they'd ever known.

Luke knew these nameless strangers. He'd met them on other continents, countless countries around the world. The types who never travelled more than fifteen miles away from their own homes. They for whom progress was a hindrance, expansion; an interference to life's routine. Their roots belonged in farmhouses built two or three hundred years ago by trampling mud and straw, whittle and daub, ragged flint. They would have gladly stuck to televisions with three channels, phones that were anchored by cables and wires to houses, transport via horse and cart. And yet in their droves they lined up to leave their land for places where the world moved fast and forgave no one.

The fading posters of all that the housing complex could have been still adorned the brick walls and fences of the harbour. A perfect nuclear family standing outside an illustrated version of a castle in gleaming white, as gleaming white as the teeth of the widely smiling blonde haired mother waving joyously in the foreground; in all but one of the posters.

The placard that faced the line of passengers queuing up for the ferry had been desecrated long ago. Her right front tooth coloured over black to emulate a gaping hole and a cartoon bubble drawn from her mouth encapsulated with the words 'Bye Bitches!' making her huge smile and emphatic wave more of a mocking insult, adding the final touch of degradation to the original islanders as they trudged their one way journeys up the ferry's ramp.

Click.

It was strange – the things that fished the embedded deep-hidden memories that remained lodged within the fleshy folds of a soldier's mind back above surface.

For former Combat Army Medic, Lance Corporal Luke Dearlove, it was the simple click and snap of a shutter within the aged mechanisms of an old Polaroid camera as the twelve-year-old boy with the darkest of eyes, eyes darker than any twelve-year-old's should ever live to be, stepped up behind him, uninvited and unannounced to take his picture.

The memory unravelled like a filament. Not the recalls of bullets and death but of a boy, probably only a year or two younger than the one who had taken his picture, running along behind the back of their Warthog. He and fifteen other boys had taken to chasing their vehicle every time they crossed that stretch of sand where desert gave way to civilization six miles northwest of Lashkar Gah along the route to Camp Shorabak. He and his squad had theorized that soldiers from a previous tour had thrown sweets and soda out to the boys on similar crossings, their concept enforced by the boys' continuous shouts and jeers ranging from 'WHATTSUP MISTER CHOCOLATE' to 'FUCK YOU SHADDUP'. One afternoon Private Harvey Jackson, while on top-cover, had decided to wait till the kids were racing after them, right behind the Warthog, then signalled for the driver to slam on the breaks. It was the sound of the boy's face hitting metal, his bottom jaw broken apart that came back to Luke then, the rip and crunch of tearing flesh and splitting bone, the blood, the sand, the befuddled look in his eyes, just before he crossed them to try to stare down at the two halves of his jaw, opening up like a stag beetle's front feelers and allowing his tongue to flop out like a bloodhound's.

Luke's brothers, Howie and Tyler, both laughed when he'd told them about it. Apparently, they found Private Jackson as funny as the other soldiers on the Warthog had that day. They would have found him even funnier if they'd been back on the same route with him for the next three months where he progressed to throwing bottles of piss out to the boys, and, in time, homemade brownies, 'home made' in the truest of senses. "Sorry kid," Tyler, his oldest brother, had said,

trying to stifle a smirk, "I would have laughed too." Quickly adding when he sensed Luke's scorn. "That being said, what a dick".

"What a hilarious dick." Luke had agreed, making a mental note never to share the memories of his war with Tyler again. . . . Postcards from Afghanistan. Just one from his collective set.

From the assortment of memories war had stamped across his brain, there was always one monstrosity to top the last. They had all heard stories about those they were there to protect having their eyes plucked out while their families were tortured in front of them, the idea being that the last thing you saw was your wife and children being raped with white hot pokers so that singular image would be ingrained on your memory forever.

But damn if they didn't make the best chicken, pita and chickpea suppers.

"I give you good price. Five pounds. You pay me now." It was the boy again, thrusting the developing Polaroid picture into Luke's hand and demanding a fair wage for the service.

Luke wondered if the boy had noticed his flinch at the sound of the shutter clicking. Judging by the small smile sat on those roughly chapped darkly purple lips he guessed that he had. "You pay me now!" the boy repeated his demands in an English heavily pregnant with the accent of his Albanian homeland.

"Get out of here you filthy rodent!" They were Luke's thoughts but not his words. He looked to his right to see one of the only English traders still clinging to the ways of his forefathers; selling postcards, buckets and spades, inflatable rafts and seashells in a shop fronting the harbour, the remainder of the stores either standing empty or having been replaced by the foods and trades of east European and north African ethnicity.

The trader was bellowing at two scruffily dressed boys wearing rubber animal masks that encased their entire heads, a lamb and a fox, grabbing items from his shop front. The boys scampered, seizing bigger prizes as they bolted passed the line of islanders queuing up to board the ferry. They each grabbed a suitcase and fled.

"Steve, they're taking everything!" It was the wife of the last family in the queue for the ferry, her scream strangled with despair.

Steve, the husband, and a few neighbouring passengers, grabbed the fox boy's purloined case, their efforts evolving into a one-sided tug of war that the men easily won, prizing the case out of the boy's meagre grip, sending him to fall clumsily to his backside where one of the men slapped him heavily round the face. Several men of Eastern European extraction immediately forced their way in front of the boy, defying the islanders to swipe at them, as the fox and the lamb made their escape.

The thieves passed Luke. He grabbed the lamb boy with one hand, twisting his forearm until he dropped the bag and wailed his lament. Luke let go his hold and he tumbled to the ground, rubbing his arm, his mask falling from place and revealing a face hot and stained with tears.

Tin-Tin, Luke's young photographer, and the fox boy scooped him up. The fox boy howling insults from behind his mask "Pink-arse! Cracker barrel! Fish belly!" Luke stared at them blankly as they disappeared into the crowd. He picked up the suitcase and handed it to the man who had made his way towards him. The man nodded quick thanks, too wound up with angst to extend any meaningful gratitude, he took the suitcase and marched angrily back towards his wife. He stopped suddenly, turned, and came back to Luke, leaning in, speaking quietly. "There's an infestation on this island. A cancer here. Stay at your own risk."

The man stepped away and returned to his sobbing wife, leaving Luke to come face to face with a tall man in a maroon suit flanked by two younger men wearing camouflage clothing and carrying hunting gear, watching him intently from an opened top jeep.

Finally, the tall man raised his head and threw a question in Luke's direction. "You on your own here son?"

Luke looked down at the Polaroid picture the boy had thrust into his hand, its square of white now developed into an image of him standing alone on Skidaway's shores. Luke opened his jacket. Within his inner pocket was a brown envelope, stuffed with beermats, napkins and various other folded or crumpled papers. Luke tucked the Polaroid picture inside to join them.

"For now." He answered and turned to walk towards a nearby café with a car rental sign in the window. He felt their suspicious stares follow his every step, watching him like snakes, snakes watching a bird, a silly little bird that didn't know the danger it was in. The tall man pulled out a mobile phone to make an urgent call.

Luke smiled.

It was beginning.

Two

The wolf baby sat in the first-floor window above the café, languidly fanning herself with that month's copy of the Company's news brochure and playing with a strand of her long blond hair while watching the little slice of beautiful who'd just landed on Skidaway's shores.

He'd already created quite the fuss. Defying Tin-Tin and his grotty little pals. Playing the hero for the self-pitying pink-arses. And now catching the attention of Skidaway hierarchy; Mason Hare and his two gormless sons. Mason Hare, in the same gaudy maroon suit he wore with peacock-esque pride, seemingly unaware of the fact it made him look like he'd just been clothes shopping on Idiot Street. Hare had quickly made an '*oh so important'* call on his mobile as the young man had turned away and begun walking towards her café, snapping his fingers and pointing at his youngest son in a demand for him to shut up while he spoke. Now, with the call complete, the three of them were swaying in unison like a trio of cobras, lifting their heads above the crowd as snakes would above grass, keeping wary eyes on their prey.

'I know you.' The thought tugged at the back of her mind as the young man weaved towards her through the crowd in the harbour below and his features became more easily examinable.

One of her strong smooth legs was bent up in the window frame in front of her, the other lolled casually outside for the entire world to see. *Look but don't touch you worms!* She kicked her stilettoed heel against their sign, SKANDERBERG CAFÉ, in a subconscious attempt to attract his attention. Eva Skanderberg attracted all men's attention, and most women's, and she did not like being ignored, especially not by someone as delectable as this.

In truth The Skanderberg Café was more than a café; it was a coffee shop, bar, car rental, pawn shop, unofficial money lender, and, when the rest of the island slept, drug emporium for the migrant community, and any of the island's other denizens who liked their nightlife on the dangerous side of darkness.

The Skanderberg Café sign was crudely nailed over the sign for the fish and chip shop which had preceded it; the oh so wittily named, *The Codfather*, by the family who had run it for ten years. Clearly, they'd done their best to keep up with the tradition of the neighbouring shops along that row with plays on names they'd assumed to be somewhere in the realms of clever and charming. She never could get her head round British humour, especially in the form of their silly puns. The Codfather, for instance, had been set among the various establishments; *Curl Up and Dye*, the

hair dressing salon, *Sellfridges*, suppliers of refrigerators and kitchen appliances, the *Woofs-a-Daisy*, pet groomers, *Back to the Fuchsia*, the florist, *Spruce Springsteen,* the cleaners and the low brow removals company; *Jean Claude Van Man . . . oh you guys*.

They'd been the first, *but by no means the last*, of the drifters to have had one of the harbour fronted establishments practically given to them as a gift. The middle-aged couple that had run the Codfather were a meek and mild pair. Their breath, seemingly unbeknown to them, had become so permanently infused with the smell of plaice, rock, haddock and crab that you had to lean back from the waist when speaking to them. But they were as polite and dignified as gentry when Mason Hare and his sons had come to evict them. So much so that even her normally robust and hard-boiled cousin Luan had been soft as a kitten with them, helping them out with their belongings until it formed a tower of cardboard boxes on the cobbled street.

Mrs Codfather had handed the key over to Mason Hare with a sad smile and held back tears long enough to politely ask Luan what he and his family were going to call their new coffee shop when it opened, and whether they would keep up the tradition and name it with a wordplay witticism.

"Yeah," Eva had answered for him, sloping in the doorway. "We're calling it Fuckoffee." She looked at them without the trace of a smile and bit deeply into a dark red apple.

With that Mrs Codfather's face collapsed in tears and Mr Codfather had no choice but to drag his eyes from Eva's endless legs and help his wife back home where they would pack their things and leave the island the next morning.

She wanted to whistle as the young man got closer. The sight of her was normally enough for a man to fix his eyes upon her as if glued. But this little minx kept his affixed straight ahead, focusing on the café door as he strode towards it.

What mission you here on gorgeous?

She thought about repeating one of the obscene catcalls the labourers had thrown her way when the housing complex was still under construction, looking down lasciviously from the lofty heights of scaffolding as she passed. Unfazed by them, she'd relished in the power, treating them to an overwhelming eyeful of arse cleavage courtesy of her low-slung shorts as she strolled on by.

She back kicked the sign again, harder this time, small crumbs of plaster breaking free from behind the sign and raining down in a little mini cement waterfall, but still it wasn't enough to snatch his stare. For a moment she thought of raising her arms, tapping her long fingernails on the upper part of the window frame. If the sight of her plentiful breasts gliding upwards like two large round moons wasn't enough to snare his attention, then the thick dark tufts of body hair growing wildly from her armpits would be. They'd shocked many a man of Skidaway into stiff silence. The first, a lithe and darkly tanned outdoorsy type who unpacked crates at the port, until that job went to Dalmat Xhoi who'd come over on a lorry the same night as her, but not her lorry, *not her womb and tomb*.

He'd gawped at her with such open-mouthed shock and wonder that for a second, she thought it was the first time he'd seen a pair. Soon enough she realised it was her curly brushes of pit hair making him gawp like a bug-eyed fish out of water. "Fuck me!" he'd exclaimed as he peered closer at them. She pushed him backwards onto her bed and did so.

The talk of her unshaved body made her something of a legend on the island from there on in. She liked that. What she didn't like was the island's new arrival making it all the way inside the Skanderberg Café without noticing the wolf baby up on the first-floor window above, watching him intently and calmly smacking her chops.

Where the fuck do I know you from beautiful?

Then it came to her, like a suddenly escaping pocket of trapped gas. She flipped open the Company's newsletter to its centre spread. His face was there, handsome and refined, wearing full military dress and staring unemotionally into the camera.

Above him a headline in block capitals proclaimed. WAR HERO TO BE HONOURED IN THIS YEAR'S 'CHAMPIONS OF BRITAIN' AWARDS. She snapped the brochure shut with a sense of victory.

Now something else in the harbour below would take her attention. Jed Burke, the sly old fox, he never stepped out into the light unless life, *or death*, would beckon it. Yet here he now was, out among the minions. Suddenly it made sense. It was Jed Burke, who Mason, his brother-in-law, had called with a message of such urgency and importance that the bat had left the cave, the lion his den, the sly old fox his hole. And now he and the Hares were making their way through the jostling crowd towards the café.

She slid off the window frame. This was something she needed to see.

“Pyesni atë se sa njerëz është vrarë. Pyesni atë se sa njerëz është vrarë. Pyesni atë se sa njerëz është vrarë.”

The six-year-old boy in the plastic cowboy outfit rocked back and forth on his heels repeating the same nagging demand to cousins Tariq Skanderberg and Luan Palaciki. Clearly gun obsessed, the boy had been pointing a silver plastic pistol at various objects and people around the café, shooting at them and emanating irritating little ‘pow’ noises. A large bunch of brightly coloured balloons were tied to the same board which sat on the café’s counter inscribed with rudimentary and misspelt English ‘YOU RENT CAR – TOO I.D.s – FIFY POUND DEPOSITS’. The balloons had attracted the boy, easy targets, and more compliant than the people he’d been mock shooting at, they swayed and bobbed for him as if struck. But the boy’s attention soon turned to Luke. The whole café’s attention had turned to him in fact; such was the rarity of white skinned English strangers on the island. The patrons’ eyes followed his every move as if attached to him by invisible threads; all the while they nodded and glanced, whispering to each other about him in their native tongues.

It was when the boy had got wind of Luke’s military background that his inquisition had begun. Luke had handed over the obligatory two I.D.s to Tariq. Luan, sweating and grease stained from a recent oil change to one of the cars, had leant over his cousin’s shoulder and together their scrutiny had gone from Luke to the I.D.s and back to Luke, as wary and suspicious as passport controllers of a country operating under an oppressive regime studying the entry papers of an investigative journalist.

They kept their discussion about Luke to clandestine Albanian. Luan, nodding at Luke’s first I.D.; “Ai është një njeri i kompanisë. (He’s a Company man.)”

Tariq, switching to the second; “Ai është një ushtar (He’s a soldier).

Luan ran a greasy finger under the expiration date of Luke Military I.D. “Ai ishte një ushtar, që është skaduar. (He was a soldier, that’s expired.)”

With that the boy’s excitement picked up and he began his repetitive jabbering demand. Luke spoke no Albanian but had a strong idea what it translated to. It was also when the blond woman emerged from the back stairs of the café’s ‘staff only’ area.

Tariq handed Luke's rental agreement form and his I.D.s to her. She sauntered over to an outdated photocopier in skyscraper high heels, the slide of light from the copier illuminating her shape. Luke found himself staring.

Noticing the stranger's eyes skating over his sister's body, Tariq pierced his pen nib into one of the balloons beside Luke. Luke jumped at the resulting explosion and the eyes of the café crashed in on him again, studying his reaction.

Eva came back from the photocopier, put the copies and originals down onto the counter and slid into Tariq's lap, slinging one arm around his neck. Tariq swayed his sister lightly back and forth on his knee, she smiled a small sultry smile and pressed her nearest breast into his chest.

The boy turned his plastic gun up to Luke now and began his mock battle fire and the accompanying 'pow' noises, punctuating his actions with the same insisting plea to Tariq. "Pyesni atë se sa njerëz është vrarë."

Finally, Tariq translated, nodding at the military I.D. as he slid it and the Company I.D. back to Luke. "The boy's asking how many people you've killed."

Luke let out a thin sigh. "How long on the car?"

Tariq looked back at Luan who shrugged and mumbled. "Pesë."

"Five minutes." Tariq translated.

"You have three." Luke responded coldly.

Luan, who needed no translation, glared indignantly at Luke, threw his oil-stained rag down on the counter, grabbed a set of keys from a hook on the wall and walked out to the back.

By the time Luke turned away from the counter the four men were waiting for him. Mason Hare in his maroon suit. Calum and Damien Hare, hovering at their father's side, feral grins stretched over their toothy mouths. And the fourth man. The one that commanded the most attention. This man was Jed Burke.

He was a rough-edged man of powerful physique, deep voice and grave manner, with sun cracked skin and weather ruined hands. The uncompromising stare from his cold eyes was heavy enough to punch through another man's guts, sharp enough to sever an artery. The kind of man who left the taste of himself in one's mouth, hours after he'd left the room.

All four had entered the café unnoticed. Luke wondered how they'd managed it. His training wasn't that far behind him, his skills not that rusty. He still knew how to sense the smallest of movements, danger coming from any direction. Maybe it was the blond woman consuming his attention as few things ever did who brought about the momentary weakness.

They had grouped into a formation around him. He could have barged through them quite easily. Not that there should be any need to. There was no crime in him coming to their island. Any more than there was any crime in four men coming into a café to form a loose semicircle that blocked your exit path. But Luke knew, in the turn of his guts he knew, they were here for a reason. They were here for him.

It was Jed Burke who spoke first, sitting at one of the café's tables and staring at its dirty plastic surface so intently Luke glanced at it to see if he was reading something. A bucket of dead rabbits sat on the floor beside his boots, boots caked with thick mud. One of the rabbits within the jumble appeared to be clinging to life and twitching feebly, despite its cut throat, a throng of flies danced around them, diving for an easy meal. Dried blood and earth was incrusted under Jed's nails and he scraped at it continuously with a gut hook knife, but made no real progression towards getting them clean. His hunting cap was pulled down so low that his eyes were set in shadow, and when he turned them towards Luke they were nothing but tiny robotic dots of light, making them seem like eyes that weren't living, weren't real.

"A man could get killed, groping around a place he don't know." Jed Burke's voice was as thick with dirt as the ridge between his skin and fingernails.

"I guess that's the danger." Luke answered calmly, as if nothing about the man's imposing presence bothered him at all.

Mason Hare chipped in, more ebullient and direct than his counterpart. He straightened his spotted tie and smoothed down the lapels of his maroon suit as he spoke. "No more cheap deals on land, if that's what you said you were doing here."

Luke, "I didn't since you ask."

Damien, the oldest of the Hare boys butted in. "We had a bunch of out of towners here two years ago thinking they could build that." He pointed with his eyes to a copy of the Company's poster of the Housing Complex pinned up on the café's wall. From the many tiny holes in the blond mother's skin, like a smattering of acne scars, it was evident the poster was used many times as an impromptu dartboard. "Left us with that." He nodded his head back to the half-

finished rusting skeletal version of the build the Company had started and abandoned, just visible through the café's steamy windows.

"And a bunch of other ugly eyesores!" Calum, the youngest and most inarticulate of the Burke-Hare family added, smiling at his own wit, and nodding towards a group from the migrant community sitting nearby.

Two men from the group got angrily up, coffee cups spinning on the table with the sudden movement, they puffed their chests and retorted heatedly in Albanian, moved to confront Calum, their wives and girlfriends grabbing their arms and pulling them back.

Calum offered them a smug smile which still carried traces of his breakfast, strings of bacon fat stuck out obscenely from the gaps between his teeth; teeth, which were hopelessly crooked and jutting, like a row of dried corn.

Jed scraped the gut hook knife round the tender skin surrounding the half-moon of his thumbnail. "Could have saved themselves some trouble if they'd asked us before diggin'. We could o' told them the ground here's rotten." He stopped his barbaric manicure and looked up at Luke. "You want to save yourself some trouble boy?"

The café's front doors rattled open and Luan entered, holding a key on his index finger towards Luke.

Luke straightened up, ready to leave. He nodded down at Jed. "Sometimes you just gotta let a man dig."

Jed shoved the bucket of rabbits out in front of him and put his foot defiantly up on the rim, cutting off Luke's path and trapping him on the spot. The cloud of flies turned in crazy squares in the air till they caught scent of the rabbits again and moved over to them in one buzzing black cloud.

"What do you want here?" Calum called out in the in whiniest of voices.

It seemed not only the Burkes and Hares, but also Tariq and Eva Skanderberg, their cousin Luan and all the remaining patrons of the café wanted an answer to this question for a low whispering hush fell about the place and all eyes anchored in aggressively on Luke, awaiting his response.

Luke stood quietly in his imprisoned spot.

Mason cleared his throat, glaring at his youngest boy before turning to Luke. "*What my son means is*, can we help you with something?"

Luke surveyed the many eyes that peered at him like wildlife in woodland at night. He came back to Jed's dead eyes. Dead eyes in the most expressionless of faces. He decided to give them what they wanted and take Mason up on his offer.

"Can you tell me where Howie Dearlove is?"

What was a low whispering hush immediately became a sharp cold silence, as if someone had pressed a TV's remote control's mute button on the place.

Luke waited within the silence and only spoke when, as expected, slow seconds passed, and no answer came. "Then you can't help me." He stepped over Jed's leg and headed towards Luan at the door.

He reached for the key on Luan's fleshy index finger. Luan snatched it back from his grip in mid-air and loomed above him, all six feet seven inches of machine-like muscle daunting and impenetrable as a reinforced wall.

Finally, Luan spoke, keeping cold eyes on Luke. "Jini të huaj të kujdesshëm në këto brigje. Demoni pret në qoshet e errëta."

pausw

Eva's voice called out from behind the counter. "A little saying from our homeland sir." Luke turned to look at her and her mesmerizingly fierce beauty. "Be careful stranger on these shores." she translated "The demon waits in dark corners."

Tariq began swaying her on his lap again as the silent patrons slowly restarted their chatter. She gave Luke the strangest and most indecipherable of looks, then smiled, adding. "That one's for free."

As Luke left and the door rattled shut behind him she got up from Tariq's lap and the strange smile fell from her face leaving behind the cold hard stare of a murderess.

Three

Luke Dearlove was no stranger to death. He knew its shocking suddenness, its permanence, its irreversibility, its sights and sounds, its slices and cuts.

And he knew its smell.

With the windows of his rental car open, that most recognizable of odours surrounded him now. The whole of Skidaway Island stank of it.

It was as though a giant rat, the size of an elephant, had lumbered into some looming hiding hole and laid down and died; its demise leaving the scent of festering decay to seep through the granite rock of mountains, the tangled limbs of dense woodlands, the soup-thick waters of swamps. To permeate an entire island with the stench of ruin.

Luke turned the rental car onto the rutted rock-strewn road that carved a pathway of hairpin turns through the marshes. The entire island could be circumnavigated in two hours, around the encircling coastal road; serene and picturesque on the south side where waters of lagoon-like blue encircled the shores, fierce and unforgiving on the north; all hard-edged savagery, blind corners and deadly falls where the cliffs suddenly gave way to nothingness, nothingness that was, until you hit the razor-edged rocks and cruel waters of a cold sea two hundred feet below.

Taking the road through the marshes, which twisted like intestines through the island's midst, would shave his journey time in half. It wasn't pretty, in fact the scenery was grim. But picture postcards and charming sights were not the reason he had come. He had come to face whatever truth the island presented to him, and he knew before he'd arrived that that was no doubt going to be ugly.

He had two options to try. Two thin hopes. He could have gone straight to the fisherman's shack on the north side shores. It was more accessible, also more exposed.

So instead he'd opted for the lockups Howie had mentioned in passing the last Christmas he'd been home. They, along with a never completed hotel, penny dreadful style museum amusements and small restaurant, were the discarded legacy of a rich nineteenth century industrialist. Legend had it he had been first attracted to Skidaway's spectacular shores, then, seemingly seduced by her dark heart. He'd opted to build an empire there in her slimy midst on the other side of the swamps at the spot where the rocks that began the great white bluff met the

waters of Lake Woebegone. But he, like the Company over a hundred years later, would be thwarted, by nature, or by the island's mystical intent, and ultimately forced to abandon what he had begun.

As Luke stepped out of the rental car and looked up at the Victorian brick buildings he knew he'd been right to try this place first.

Above the buildings the sky was pregnant with gloom, seemingly permanent sagging rainclouds hung directly overhead as though they'd taken up residence, waiting, watching. A heap of rotting trees, branches and deadwood had been blown over the rocks' edges in some long ago storm and created a daunting maze which required guts as much as navigational skills if you really wanted to try for a pathway and gain entry.

If Howie had hidden his secrets anywhere, it would have been here.

Luke shut the rental car door but didn't bother locking it. No need. There was no other soul but himself in this baleful place. He checked that the thick brown envelope was safe inside his inner jacket pocket and began traversing the dead branches.

One of the problems with having suffered a considerable psychological injury was that, even when '*cured*' its symptoms remained, intermittently manifesting, occasionally revealing themselves, but always lurking along the corridors of a man's interiors, forever '*there*'. A wounded animal that simply will not die.

Another major problem being that the mind could no longer trust everything the eyes presented to it.

Luke had no need to mistrust what his eyes had shown his mind within the lockup so far, even with the dubious lighting; quickly flickering shafts from a naked bulb on a worn and faulty overhanging cable, accompanied by the glow from his mobile phone. Together they set the building's interior in an ethereal pulsating silver-blue.

Once through the maze of deadwood he'd only been able to push the iron doors to the building open a small gap. The two stone he'd lost since leaving the army came in handy for once and he was able to squeeze through, even if he did carve up his back on its rough steel edges in the process.

Once inside, he'd headed straight to the small kitchenette; the cups, the kettle, the paper towel dispenser and the toaster were modern, probably all less than three years old, even if they were

covered in a sheath of cobwebs and dust so thick Luke could peel it back in one entwined piece like a lace tablecloth with tattered fraying edges.

No matter how hungry he may have been for toast, how in need of a caffeine injection, it was the paper towel dispenser he made the avid beeline for, pulling off a sheet and examining it. He then emptied the contents of the brown envelope from within his jacket onto the counter. Those contents were made up of various other envelopes of smaller sizes, menus, bus tickets, receipts, several beermats and one paper towel; along with the most recent addition; the Polaroid photograph 'Tin-Tin' the boy with the dark eyes, the purple lips and the thick greasy black hair had taken of him at the harbour. Each of these items, other than the picture, contained hand scribbled notes and several lists of numbers. Luke placed the newly acquired paper towel and the one from his envelope buff up against each other in the flickering light. The perforated edge of the new towel was made of large round curves, bulging at one side, like a row of waves in a child's crayon drawing. The paper towel from his envelope, with Howie's handwriting all over it, by contrast, displayed an edging of sharp triangles which were prominent, like a row of shark's teeth. Luke ran a finger across them, just to be sure he could trust what his eyes were showing his mind.

As he returned the paper towel and other transcripts to the envelope, re-deposited it in his jacket pocket and turned away, he saw the figure waiting, silently watching him from the inky blackness of the far side of the building's interior.

He closed his eyes hard, opening them again, hoping the figure would disappear in the blackness, as a sleepwalker who's crossed to the other side of town in his pyjamas might close his own eyes, hoping to open them and find he's back in bed and able to write the somnambulistic excursion off as a dream. But for Luke it was no dream, the figure's undeniable silhouette remained.

"Who's that?" Luke demanded, accidently taking in too much air thick with dust, and coughing sharply.

The figure only waited, inspecting him like a silent black panther. When the broken light flickered on, Luke could pick out more details, the outline of unkempt hair, the hunched shoulders, the hands with fingernails like claws. "Who are you?" Luke called out, trying to sound in control, as he slowly began crossing ground towards it.

Two feet away Luke lifted his phone and turned the full bright torchlight onto it. The figure, in Victorian dress, looked blankly at him with lifeless eyes, a doll's eyes. Luke reached out and rapped his knuckles on the figure's hard cheek.

He looked down at the floor beside it and saw a succession of limbs, torsos and disembodied heads. He had seen such things before, on roadsides, the handiwork of machete wielding guerrillas and fanatics out to make themselves a name. The disembodied heads on those occasions trailed with thick tatters of flesh and severed spinal cords; the grim legacy of hastily hacked beheadings, the eyes bulging, staring aghast at nothing as if still outraged by their own murders.

But the heads on the floor beside him were calm and the limbs and torsos bloodless, the lines of their severed joints perfectly neat and sterile.

Luke wiped his hand through an inch-thick layer of dark grey dust on a crate to his left and read across the top of it a sign in fading colours; SKIDAWAY ISLAND WAXWORK IMPORIUM EST. 1898.

Luke looked again at the figure, one of the only waxworks intact; the representation of some infamous nineteenth century murderer.

As he turned back, readying to search the remainder of the building's interior he came upon the reflected faces of two of his cohorts from his years in service, Corporal William Castlebridge and Sergeant Jim Harper. He stared at them in the dull mirror. It was thick in patches with dirt as dark as dried paint, but the faces of his two buddies were there without question.

Castlebridge was the first to speak, shouting out his nickname, "Oi-oi Little Sexy!"

Luke spoke back to their reflections. "What are you two doing here?"

Harper replied, "What are we doing here? Dawson, what are you doing here? Thought you'd still be home sucking on mum's chebs."

Luke hadn't noticed Private Tim Dawson till now; he was squat on the floor beside them, crouched in a pose with his rifle rested on one knee. "S-Screw you Harper, screw you C-Castlebridge." He stuttered. In service there was always one in the squad who suffered the worst of the banter and a side helping of bullying, always someone who couldn't run as fast, didn't want to go out drinking, didn't know how to talk to girls, couldn't get the simplest things such as polishing their boots quite right. For them it had been Private Dawson.

"Go home and tell it to the RSM." Castlebridge barked.

"After you make him a brew and laugh at his jokes while he gives you a good shoeing." Harper added.

"Screw you." Dawson piped up with uncharacteristic gusto, which only served to encourage Castlebridge and Harper.

"And if that don't work tell it to your daddy." Castlebridge retorted. "Wait a minute. Harper's your daddy."

"I would have been. If the crack smoking wannabe gangster boy who cleans the toilets at Kandahar Airport hadn't beaten me up the stairs."

Luke turned around to them, "Shut your cock-holsters you three, I'm . . . "

Luke's face dropped.

In the spots where his three friends should have stood were another three waxworks, soldiers, dressed in uniforms from the Crimean War, pinched plastic features and tidy moustaches that were typical of that era.

". . . thinking." Luke finished his sentence sadly when he realized he was alone.

He'd had enough of the place now. Some inner sense told him that whatever secrets it may have held none were Howie's. Nothing here needed his attention. The whole placed served only as a tomb to remind him of all he'd lost. He wanted out. Immediately.

Taking a pathway through the darkness at speed had been a mistake. He tripped over something, probably one of the disembodied limbs of the waxwork figures, and landed heavily on the cement floor, sending up a cloud of dust. That was when he saw it.

He knew it didn't make sense. Somehow, he also knew, it was real. A tumbledown mind may play tricks on the last few shards of a man's sanity. But still those brittle shards manage to come together and form something, something with substance, something real.

Luke crawled towards it for a closer look in the sooty light.

The pair of shoes were in a row with several others. They sat between the scuffed boots on the waxwork legs of a farmer, representative of those known from photographs of agriculturalists at the turn of the penultimate century, and the outsized red huge-toed boots of a clown.

The shoes which had caught Luke's attention were seated on a figure between the farmer and the clown. They belonged to no exhibit from the 1800s. Luke knew this as he owned a pair just like them. Their style and shape, if not the same, were like shoes popular not more than a year or two ago. But what was more recognizable, and more disturbing, was the red stripe that ran up the side of the trouser, trousers worn only by the Company's fleet of security guards.

Howie's voice came to him in the darkness. "Brother, my brother. How selfish was I? While you seemed to struggle I sat idly by."

Luke looked in the direction of the voice, but knew he would find nothing but the twist of swirling shadows in the spot from which it came.

He rose slowly, keeping cautious eyes on the figure wearing the security guard trousers and modern shoes. It was covered in a cotton sheet; a shroud. Luke summoned his strength and whipped it back in one swift movement.

The figure seated before him was no waxwork. It had once been real. He had no need to distrust the tricks his eyes played on his mind to know that. Luke Dearlove had seen his share of death. Enough to easily recognize when he was in the malodourous presence of fetid corpses.

The cause of the man's death didn't require Luke's medical training for identification. There was a hole in his skull the likes of which occurs when a stone is thrown from some distance through a window. The smashed open dent in his cranium was large enough to put your first through.

The creeping smell of a year's decay wafted towards Luke and he stumbled back, forcing a hand under his nose. He turned the torch light from his phone onto the cadaver and skated it about, examining its features. The bloodless shrivelled lips were wrinkled back from the teeth. Its eyes, like deep gorges, seemed suddenly alive in the glow of the phone's electric light. A cockroach, disturbed by the unexpected fuss, scurried out of the mouth, breaking free the last shred of skin that held the lower jaw in place. It broke, dropping the mouth into a sickly gaping grin. Luke turned away and made a frantic stumble for the door.

"You want to be sure, don't you?"

"We all . . . want to be sure."

Luke sighed. The two policemen had been questioning him for half an hour. The decrepit body from the lockup was now sprawled on a table in the Company's island headquarters; an impromptu mortuary slab, a tablecloth serving as a second shroud.

Exhausted from repeating himself Luke told them for what felt like the thousandth time. "That man was in his sixties, at least. My brother is thirty-seven."

"We just want to be sure." The policeman with the ginger beard repeated. The wiry layers of his curly red facial hair, Luke knew, were masking a grin.

The second policeman, with, for some reason, only one eyebrow, from, Luke guessed, the drunken handiwork of mates who thought it hysterical to shave it from their sleeping friend's forehead the night before he reported for duty.

'One Eyebrow' and '*Ginger Beard'* gave each other knowing looks and picked up the corner of the tablecloth, beckoning with their eyes for Luke to make an identification.

"I keep telling you. I don't know who that man is, but he is definitely not . . . " Luke's firm voice gave way to a brittle whisper "my brother."

Ginger Beard had whipped the tablecloth back, leaving Luke to face the waxwork figure of the Victorian murderer, which they'd placed on the table-top slab.

One Eyebrow had no thick brush of red fuzz to hide his smirk and crammed his hand to his face, barely holding the bubble of juvenile laughter in.

Ginger Beard nodded, and they stood in front of the table, arms folded, the weight of their stares bearing down on Luke.

Ginger Beard began it. "Is it true you served out in Afghanistan sir?"

One Eyebrow took over with what Luke knew only too well would follow. "Did you . . . kill a lot of people while you were out there?"

Luke closed his eyes.

Ginger Beard again, "Had to spend some time in Belleview when you came back didn't you sir?"

"All got a bit much for you did it sir?" One Eyebrow threw in for good measure.

"Alright you two that's quite enough." The voice, full of command, demanding respect, had come from Detective Ackerly Standing.

Luke opened his eyes to see him scowling at his two subordinates. He was a handsome black man in his early fifties; a non-uniformed officer with a certain grace and elegance, combined with a powerful physique, smooth voice and earnest disposition. Something about his eyes let Luke know he didn't like to see anyone being bullied and would take his stand for the underdog. Luke had met his type many times before in service. They quickly rose through the ranks, became majors, progressed to the SAS and other elite organisations. Luke suddenly felt awash with great comfort.

"This way Mr Dearlove shall we please?" The detective said to Luke while holding the door open for him, but still glaring at his underlings.

As Luke got up to move One Eyebrow chipped in, "Aren't you going to tell him?" Both Luke and Detective Ackerly Standing turned to him with a questioning stare.

It was ginger beard who explained for his foil, nodding at Luke. "They found his brother after all."

Luke kept to the slow measured pace of a funeral director as he walked the winding corridors of the Company's long deserted headquarters.

Ackerly Standing and the two police officers kept a similar stride behind him at a respectful distance. Luke stopped, bringing them to a sudden halt.

Around the next bend a man was waiting, sitting on a hard bench and playing with his hands as if wound up in some considerable tension. But what brought Luke to the standstill was his attire. The trousers. They were the same. Black and made from stiff polyester. *Well it was cheap and didn't need ironing.* And down one side the distinct tell-tale mark of a Company security guard's uniform, the thick red style-less stripe.

Luke held his breath, barely able to believe it. Surely it wasn't going to be this easy. Or this perfect.

It wasn't.

Tyler Dearlove, Luke and Howie's eldest brother got up and slowly crossed the corridor towards him. He had a vehement non-negotiable look in his eye, like a man coming at you for a bar fight.

"You stupid prick."

The words formed a kinder greeting than the one Luke had been anticipating from him.

"Lance Corporal Dearlove I presume!"

These words, in the flowery clipped accent, had not come from his still scowling eldest brother. Luke knew the owner of them immediately and felt every muscle in his body constrict.

Francis Grayson flounced by him, swivelling like a ballet dancer executing a demi-point pirouette and eyed Luke sardonically.

"Two days into your annual leave and here we have you, causing quite the commotion on the banks of Lake Woebegone. Tedious, tedious, predictable at best."

Francis Grayson, the Company's CEO opened the door to the former boardroom, its rusting hinges emanating a grating groan. He held it wide open for the Dearlove brothers and invited them to enter in an icy tone, "Shall we?"

Luke and Tyler remained, facing each other in tense silence.

Grayson entered the boardroom without them, calling back to Luke. "And none of your flim-flam. As we both know I am more than capable of sniffing out the fartish waft of a lie."

The policemen passed them, entering behind Grayson.

After a painfully long minute Tyler nodded at his youngest brother and ordered him into the boardroom with his eyes.