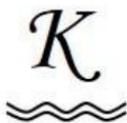


TARAN'S WHEEL

(Incomers: Book 1)

Jim Forbes



A Kinord Book

IT WAS A SHAME she had to die like this. On the other hand, old ladies have to die of *something*. She was almost eighty, with heart trouble, for goodness' sake. What had she to look forward to? At least she was in her own home, surrounded by her beloved possessions.

Ah, those possessions. Just one of them was what he'd asked her for, and she refused to part with it. She'd shown him it years before. Now he wanted it, had a *right* to it, even. But no, she said, after she was gone it would belong to the next Keeper. Bollocks! It sat in a box in that locked cabinet, never seeing the light of day. He, on the other hand, had found a good home for it and stood to make himself rich in the process. Still, it was a shame ...

The body was now limp and motionless in the armchair. But he kept the pillow over her face and didn't dare take his weight off it yet. She'd struggled surprisingly long, lashing out blindly with hands and feet, before that final convulsion, since when she'd been absolutely at peace. Soon he'd be able to relax, return the pillow to the guest bed – maybe change the pillowcase if need be – and then look for the key to the cabinet.

The apartment was strangely quiet. A clock ticked somewhere. Trees outside the window waved soundlessly in the wind. Footsteps and a muffled child's voice in the long hall outside the door momentarily broke the silence, but didn't alarm him. Nobody could come in.

Five minutes passed without any movement. Keeping one hand firmly on the pillow, he checked her neck and her wrist for

a pulse. He could feel nothing. Gently he removed the pillow and stood back, watching her open eyes for any sign of life. Finally, satisfied she wasn't going to rear up from the armchair, he took the pillow back to the bedroom. As it was surprisingly unsoiled, he simply fluffed it up, replaced it on the bed and put the shams on top exactly as he had found them.

In the kitchen he found a pair of rubber gloves, too small for him really, but he was able to pull them on. With a can of Pledge and a duster he methodically polished all the hard surfaces he remembered touching since he arrived. Then began the search for the cabinet key.

It took about twenty minutes to find it. Still wearing the gloves, he opened the cabinet, and saw at the back of a shelf the silver box that he knew contained the old lady's most treasured object. Reaching in, he noticed for the first time that his hand was shaking. God, it had been a stressful day, hadn't it? He controlled the tremor as best he could, but still managed to knock over a couple of ugly-looking silver goblets. No problem: after lifting out the box, he set them up again.

He allowed himself a deep breath of anticipation before opening the lid of the box to look inside.

I. THE PLEASANT VALE

1

THE WRONG DOOR

AN EVENING OF DINNER, drinks and chatter with three female friends in Boulder's best Indian restaurant was just what Delia needed, now that finals were over. It had been a hard few weeks. She could have taken exam preparation in her stride, along with getting her dissertation completed. But the break-up with Erik was so unexpected, so hurtful, it had knocked her off her customary even keel.

Erik the Jerk, she now called him. Angry though she was at his sudden coolness, she was angrier at herself for having become emotionally attached to him at such a crucial stage in her life.

'Ohmygod – I can't believe it,' one of her friends told her. 'You and Erik seemed such a perfect couple. He's a good-looking guy.'

'Yeah,' another said, 'he could've been a model. That thick hair, those nice teeth, the athletic build. Bet he looks really good naked.'

Delia knew exactly what Erik looked like naked, but wasn't going to be drawn into discussion on the matter. 'You want him, you can have him,' was all she said.

'I wish,' the third chimed in.

Each of the four young women at the table was attractive in her own way, but to any observer of the group Delia would have stood out. Though she was blessed with a fine figure and a pretty face, what drew attention was her sleek, shoulder-length hair in a dramatic shade of auburn with natural streaks that changed

subtly in hue under different lights. Since the age of five, she had faced ridicule, even occasional harassment, on account of her hair colour. To taunts of ‘ginger’ she had responded tartly that the correct word was ‘titian’. As she grew up she came to understand that such name-calling was motivated primarily by other girls’ envy and pubescent boys’ fantasies. She felt privileged to share a rare and attractive feature with only two percent of the American population.

Bidding her companions goodnight outside the restaurant, Delia set off walking back to her studio apartment. It was a fine evening, with bright moonlight glinting off the Flatirons, those foothills of the Rockies that rise steeply from the edge of the city. She found herself taking stock of her life. A master’s degree in environmental studies from the University of Colorado at Boulder would shortly be under her belt, but she had no job lined up. A couple of utility companies had offered short internships, but these didn’t excite her – and wouldn’t pay the bills. And, of course, the planned drive with Erik to the Canadian Arctic in a camper van after graduation was now off.

As she reached her apartment, it occurred to her that she had a past and a present, but no clear future. It was a feeling very foreign to her. Friends said of her, ‘Delia always has a plan.’

Well, now she didn’t.

Checking her mailbox as she entered the building, she was surprised to find an official-looking manila envelope originally addressed to Ms Delia Cobb, 1215 Hickory Trail, Geneva, Illinois 60134, and redirected to her Boulder, Colorado address. On the top left corner of the envelope was printed:

Howard A. Levine & Associates
Attorneys at Law

with an address in Dearborn Street, Chicago.

She tossed the mail on her kitchen counter, took off her light jacket and kicked off her shoes. With a mixture of curiosity and dread she opened the envelope.

Dear Ms Cobb:

I am writing with sadness to inform you of the death of Grace Rosman on May 18 at her home in Glenview, Illinois. At her express instruction, given to me when she made her will some years ago, I cannot finalize funeral arrangements until I have contacted you and verified that you will be able to attend.

As soon as you receive this letter, please call me at the number below, so that we can set a date for the funeral. I will also be able to inform you of provisions made for your benefit in Ms Rosman's will.

Sincerely,

Howard A. Levine

Delia was stunned. The last time she had visited Grace in her Glenview apartment she had seemed in reasonable health and in good spirits, despite a series of heart problems over the last few years. They had talked on the phone several times since then, and there was no indication that anything was wrong. Just a couple of weeks ago Grace had sent her a chatty email wishing her well in her exams.

If there was one person in the world whose company Delia enjoyed above everyone else's, it was Grace. Theirs was a friendship that spanned two generations – Grace was old enough to be her grandmother – and had grown from a first chance meeting when Delia was only nine.

She had a vivid recollection of that first encounter. One Sunday, she had gone with her parents to visit Grandad Cobb in his apartment in Glenview, one of the many suburbs of Chicago making up what is known as the 'North Shore'. It was Girl Scout Cookies time, and Grandad, after signing up for the obligatory

two boxes, suggested she knock on Mrs Mies's door along the hall. Mrs Mies would surely take a couple of boxes. But to a nine-year-old, all the doors along the hall looked the same. She knocked on what turned out to be the wrong door.

There was a rattling sound – a chain being unlatched. Then, as the door opened, she came face to face, not with Mrs Mies, but with an elderly lady who looked at the little red-haired girl with the cookie sign-up sheet in her hand, and instantly froze. The woman's face turned ashen as if she'd seen a ghost.

Which, in a sense, she had.

Delia was frightened by her reaction, but something made her stand her ground rather than run back to Grandad's. 'I'm sorry, little girl,' the woman said, eventually. 'I didn't mean to frighten you. You see, I don't get many visitors. And none as pretty as you. What's your name?'

'Delia. Delia Cobb.'

'Ah, you must be a relation of Tony Cobb in number 307. His granddaughter, maybe?'

'Yes. Would you like to order some Girl Scout Cookies?' Delia asked boldly.

The lady laughed. 'Of course. Why don't you come in for a few minutes? I'll call your grandfather and let him know you're here. I'm Grace Rosman, but I'd love it if you just call me Grace.'

The visit lasted much longer than a few minutes. Grace was not like other 'old' people Delia knew. Not, for instance, like Grandad. Grace was fun to be with, easy to talk to. She was interested in stuff that was important to a nine-year-old. And she had a knack for making grown-up subjects interesting. Such as what the world was like long before Delia was born.

'So, Cordelia, tell me a little about yourself,' Grace said.

'I'm nine and I have no brothers or sisters. I have a cat called Audrey. My Dad named her after a film star he likes. I live in Geneva, Illinois. And my name's Delia, not Cordelia.'

A smile flickered across the woman's face. 'I'd like your permission to call you Cordelia. It's an ancient name, a regal

name. When you're older, you'll hear about another Cordelia. She's very famous. One day, you may be famous, too.'

'Are you famous? Does it frighten you when people recognise you in the street? Is that why you were so scared when you saw me standing at your door?'

Grace broke into a short laugh. 'No, I'm not famous, and that's the way I like it.' Her laughter faded to a wistful smile as she said, 'I'm going to show you something that might help you understand why I behaved so strangely when I first saw you at the door.'

She took down a framed photograph from a shelf that was cluttered with small boxes, china ornaments and other things that Delia couldn't put a name to. 'Look at this photograph, and tell me who you see.'

The photograph was of a girl who appeared to be slightly older than Delia, maybe eleven or twelve. Her hair was the same golden-red colour as Delia's, and her pale skin was freckled, especially across the bridge of her nose.

'She looks a bit like me, only bigger,' Delia said.

'Well, let me tell you, at the age of nine she looked *exactly* like you. She was my daughter Selena. When she was twenty, in 1987, she died in a boating accident. Seeing you at the door, I could have sworn for an instant you were Selena, though of course that was impossible. So maybe you'll forgive me for acting so peculiar.'

'You must have been very sad.'

'Yes, for a long time. I still get sad when I think of her – which I do, every day.'

There was a moment of silence. Delia looked around the room. Against one wall was a display cabinet on a cherrywood base with three doors. Another wall was taken up by a huge glass-fronted bookcase full of books of all sizes and colours. A big window looked out over trees and rooftops.

'Let's have some lemonade,' Grace suggested.

2

MEMORY IN THE ROCK

*FIRST TESTAMENT OF GRACE ROSMAN,
KEEPER OF TARAN'S WHEEL*

THE PLEASANT VALE WAS BORN in an episode of unimaginable violence. An asteroid with a mass of twenty to fifty million tons slammed into the Earth, gouging a crater where gathered a molten mixture of interplanetary and terrestrial rock. The crater was almost perfectly circular, about six miles across, at the focus of an area of devastation stretching for a hundred miles or more in all directions.

The lake of molten rock in the crater's bowl soon solidified there. But that didn't account for all of it. At the moment of impact, balls of fiery liquid, some as small as raindrops, some as big as grapefruit, were blasted into the sky, even into the coldness of space. There they quickly froze to form a kind of glass, composed of the asteroid's exotic elements thoroughly mixed with elements native to the Earth. Glass spheres, large and small, rained back down on the land, the largest ones falling closest to the crater.

The cataclysm was no recent event, even by any geological measure of time. It was the Jurassic era, a time before the Atlantic Ocean opened up between what are now Europe and North America, a time when the land that would eventually become Great Britain was a lush subtropical forest inhabited by great reptilian herbivores and their predators.

Living things, wiped out by the asteroid, gradually returned to the crater and the surrounding land, just as plants and animals colonise the initially sterile ash deposits and lava flows from today's volcanoes. But, in the fullness of geological time, forces larger than life reshaped the topography. At times, a rise in sea level inundated the land. At other times mountains were pushed up, and rivers and glaciers carved valleys in them.

Eventually the entire crater was worn away. A great river arose in mountains to the west and flowed over the exact site of the impact. Though the crater was long gone, there was memory in the rock that had once lain deep underneath and was now at the surface. Lines of weakness caused by the impact were exploited by the erosive forces of the river, forming a circular basin, an echo of the perfect circle once sculpted by the primeval asteroid.

That basin, six miles in diameter, lies in what is now a peaceful corner of Aberdeenshire in north-east Scotland, about thirty miles west of the city of Aberdeen. It's called the Howe of Cromar, and it's the Pleasant Vale of my story.

In the last million years or so, ice ages have taken their toll on the Vale. A vast ice sheet covered higher ground to the west, sending a tongue of ice eastward down the valley where once the great river flowed. Having no respect for bends in the valley, the glacier took a short cut across the southern edge of the Vale, which became a kind of frozen backwater, gradually filling with standing ice.

There's nothing new about climate change. Around ten thousand years ago, a dramatic rise in temperature saw the end of the last ice age. The glacier retreated and the now much straighter valley was reclaimed by its river – the Dee, bypassing the circular basin of Cromar it had earlier carved.

As the standing ice in the basin slowly melted, it left a deep glacial till which developed into a richly fertile soil. Large rocks brought by the ice from higher ground remained scattered across the landscape. Depressions that are now shallow lakes

or swamps mark places where the last pockets of ice finally melted.



The Howe of Cromar is readily visible from space. Now you know where to look, you'll find it quite easy to spot its circular outline on any satellite image of Scotland.

3

A HUGE SECRET

THE CLOSE FRIENDSHIP with Grace that began at their first meeting strengthened through the years as Delia became a young woman. Somehow Grace's insistence on calling her Cordelia didn't bother her at all. As she looked back on those years, Delia herself found it odd that she had been so accepting of the name, especially in view of the variety of redhead nicknames she had attracted at school, all of which she had hated. But Cordelia – that name with its overtones of ancient royalty and (as she eventually discovered) its frisson of Shakespearean tragedy – she rather liked. It was a private joke between her and Grace, part of the bond they shared.

Even after her grandfather died, Delia continued to visit Grace on a regular basis. By that time she was old enough to ride the trains on her own. Sometimes they would meet in downtown Chicago and go to the Field Museum, the Shedd Aquarium, the Art Institute or any of a dozen lesser-known attractions of the city. A particular favourite of Grace's was the Adler Planetarium, where she introduced Delia to the stars and the movements of the sun, moon and planets through the circle of twelve constellations forming the zodiac.

But Delia's fondest memories were of the times they spent together at Grace's home in Glenview. Every visit brought a new experience. Sometimes Grace would select a book at random from her huge collection, and tell Delia a little story about the book or read from its contents.

Grace had inherited an antiquarian book business in downtown Chicago from her father Eli Rosman, and had run it for twenty years. She had made a comfortable living and could indulge her passion for books. When she turned sixty, she decided to retire. Unable to find a buyer for the business, she simply closed it and brought home a selection of books from its extensive stock.

One year on Delia's birthday, August 19th, Grace gave her a rare early edition of Charles and Mary Lamb's *Tales from Shakespeare*. Some years later, they read some of the Bard's original work together. *King Lear* was a particular favourite. One point they discussed at length was the mindset of Lear's daughter Cordelia when, early in the play, she believes her father will see through her two sisters' insincere expressions of love and decides not to join in their flattery.

What shall Cordelia do? Love, and be silent.

'You know,' Grace said, 'the *real* Cordelia survived to become queen of the British people. One day I'll tell you much more about her.'

On other visits, Grace would introduce Delia to her collection of small objects, old and new, from cultures around the world. One that Grace particularly treasured was a small earthenware jar in the shape of a bell. 'My ancestors in Scotland, long ago, were Beaker People, so called because when they died they were buried with bell-shaped beakers like this. I feel a connection across thousands of years to those people. When I die, I want this to be buried with me, though it's just a modern replica.'

'Grace, do you have anything really old, handed down from your ancestors?'

There was silence for a moment before Grace confided, 'As a matter of fact, I do. Not from the time of the bell-shaped beakers, though still a long time ago. I'm going to share a huge secret with you, Cordelia. This will be just between us.' She left

the room for a few seconds and came back with a small key, with which she opened the middle door in the cherrywood unit – the hutch, she called it – below her display cabinet. A set of four silver goblets were arranged in a line at the front of the hutch, and partially hidden behind them was an oval silver box that Grace said was a tea-caddy.

‘These four cups – are they very old?’ Delia asked.

‘What they represent is very old, but the goblets themselves, the cups as you call them, are not. I bought them at a place called Glastonbury in England on one of my trips over there. See, bring out the one at the far left and let’s look at it.’

Embossed on one side of the silver goblet was a naked bearded male figure, resting one hand on a six-spoked wheel and with the other hand releasing a lightning-bolt. This was the traditional representation of the Celtic god Taran, sometimes called Tar or Taranis. Images of Taran were always accompanied by a wheel and a bolt of lightning. The lightning symbol was easy to understand: Taran was a thunder-god, a counterpart of the Scandinavian god Thor. But the wheel was more mysterious. Some representations of Taran’s wheel showed eight or more spokes, but on this goblet the wheel had exactly six, typical of the particular branch of Celtic culture developed by Grace’s ancestors. Six was a magic number in that culture.

The back of the goblet bore an unmistakable representation of a bull. A symbol of masculinity to be sure, but with additional significance. ‘Is he Taurus the bull, from the zodiac?’ Delia asked.

‘Indeed he is. Take a look at the engraving on the base of the goblet.’

Delia read the word ‘*SAMHAIN*’ and said it out loud: ‘Sam Hain’.

‘It’s pronounced “saawan”,’ Grace corrected her. ‘One of the four great annual festivals of the ancient Celtic peoples. It was celebrated in early November, traditionally on the night of the

full moon. And the full moon at that time of year is always in which sign of the zodiac, do you suppose?’

‘I’m going to guess Taurus.’

‘Yes. The full moon in Taurus had great significance. It was the union of female, as represented by the moon, and male – the bull. The festival of Samhain was celebrated with fire, and with sex.’ Grace saw that the girl was not in the least embarrassed, and went on: ‘Samhain was regarded as a propitious time for young women to give up their virginity and for couples to conceive a child. A baby born in August, having been conceived at Samhain, was often said to be a child of Taran. You, Cordelia, have an August birthday. You are in a sense Taran’s child.’

The word ‘propitious’ was new to Delia but she got its meaning right away.

Replacing the goblet, Grace mentioned the efforts of the early Christian church to replace what it called ‘pagan’ festivals with feast days in honour of saints. Samhain became the feast of All Saints, but its pre-Christian origins remain to the fore in the celebration of Hallowe’en.

‘What about the other three goblets?’ Delia asked. ‘Do they have gods on them too?’

The second goblet from the left showed a female figure, the Celtic mother-goddess whose Scandinavian counterpart is Freya or Frida. Some Celtic peoples called her Brytha, Brigta or Bride, and considered themselves to be her direct descendants. They were proud to call themselves ‘Brythonic’ or ‘British’, after Brytha.

On the back of the second goblet was a lioness and engraved on the base was the word ‘*IMBOLC*’. Imbolc was a festival of music and a celebration of home and hearth. It was observed in February, when the full moon was in Leo. To those who worshipped Brytha, Leo was always a she-lion. Early Christians borrowed Brytha’s name and repackaged her as a saint – St Bride or St Bridget – with a feast day on the first or, more commonly, the second of February.

‘Groundhog day,’ Delia said.

‘Yes,’ Grace nodded, ‘or, in Britain, Candlemas.’

Picking up the third goblet, Grace pointed out the embossed image of the sun-god Bel on the front and an eagle on the back. The base was engraved ‘*BELTANE*’. She explained that the constellation we call Scorpio was known by some ancient peoples as the eagle. Britain had no scorpions, and people there tended to name the constellations for more familiar animals or things.

The figure of Bel had tree branches in place of arms, reaching up to a sun symbol. According to Grace, the ‘Green Man’ or ‘Jack-in-the-Green’ featured in spring festivals still observed in many towns and villages in England was an incarnation of Bel. In the pre-Christian tradition, Beltane marked the new growing season with a celebration involving dance and nakedness. Men and women had their entire bodies painted. Beltane has persisted as the Mayday holiday and, in Germanic cultures, as Walpurgis night.

The fourth and final goblet bore an image of the god Luath, sometimes known as Lugus or Lugh, and, on the opposite side, a pitcher or water-carrier. The word engraved on the base was ‘*LUNASA*’. This was the festival of Luath, observed when the full moon lay in Aquarius, an August occurrence. A festival of plenty, it was celebrated with an abundance of food and drink. After the coming of Christianity Lunasa became Lammas, but few people celebrate it any more.

Interested though she was in the goblets and what they stood for, Delia was growing ever more curious about the tea-caddy behind. ‘And what about the silver box? What’s in there?’

Handing it to her, Grace suggested, ‘Why don’t you open it and see for yourself?’

Inside, nestled in styrofoam packing material, was a solid glass sphere, about the size of a baseball. Delia carefully removed it from the box. It reminded her of the ‘crystal ball’ she had once used as a prop in a school play.

A late afternoon sun was shining through the large window. When Delia held the object up to the light, refraction produced a curious effect. The circumference was more brightly illuminated than the rest of the sphere, except for six bluish rays of light that emanated from the centre.

‘It’s beautiful,’ Delia said. ‘What is it?’

‘What does the pattern of light remind you of?’

‘I dunno. A Trivial Pursuit board?’

Grace laughed. ‘If I told you it was really old, from a time long before there was Trivial Pursuit, what do you think people would have imagined as they looked at the bright circle and six rays?’

‘A wheel?’

‘Exactly. This ball has a name, in a language that was spoken long ago in the north-east of Scotland. It’s the *Drogan Taranish*.’

‘Drogue and tarnish? What does that mean?’

‘*Drogan* is a wheel. *Drogan Taranish* means “Taran’s wheel”.’

Delia held the *Drogan* for five or ten minutes, turning it slowly in her hands and observing how the six bluish rays rotated, just like spokes of a wheel.

‘That glass sphere, Cordelia, has great cultural significance, and it’s steeped in mythology. It has been handed down through many generations, and I am its present Keeper. If Selena had lived, she would have become the Keeper of Taran’s wheel. Before I get too old, I will have to find the next Keeper.’

Grace’s eyes moistened, and she fell silent for a minute. Delia continued to hold the glass ball up to the light, marvelling at the bluish glow of its six ‘spokes’. At length, Grace said, ‘Remember the number six, because it’s an amazing number that I’ll tell you about another day.’

4

OTHER PEOPLE'S WASH

AS THE ICE DISAPPEARED from the Pleasant Vale, vegetation re-established. People began to arrive from the south, following the plants they gathered and animals they hunted into new territory.

Initially nomadic, the group of hunting-gathering people who discovered the richness of plant and animal life in the Vale soon settled there. With only crude stone tools at their disposal, any cultivation of the soil was minimal; instead they continued to subsist on the fruits and beasts of the forest that clothed the land. Like their contemporaries in other parts of Britain, they left their mark on the landscape by the building of stone circles, though these were more modest than the great circles and avenues of Stonehenge, Callanish or Stenness. Their task was made easier by an abundant local supply of large boulders left as erratics by the melting of the ice.

Particularly large rocks were needed for a portion of each circle that faces the south-west. Here, a horizontal stone (archaeologists call it a 'recumbent') is flanked by two tall upright stones. Nobody knows exactly how the recumbent was used by the stone-age circle builders. Some have suggested that it formed a kind of altar on which sacrifices could be offered to their gods; others that it provided a frame for observing the movement of the sun, moon and stars.

The circle builders were small in stature. This alone would probably not have greatly handicapped them in an encounter

with taller, stronger incomers. But a little under four thousand years ago, their fertile basin was invaded by a new race of people who not only were taller and stronger, but possessed a new technology that totally outclassed the stone tools and weapons of the circle builders. That technology was the making and working of bronze.

The incomers who brought the bronze age to the Howe of Cromar were Beaker People. Their arrival coincided with a change in the climate, which became cooler and wetter. Trees died in the forests that the hunting-gathering circle builders had relied on for their food and shelter. The hardier Beaker People further accelerated deforestation in the lower parts of Cromar, using their bronze tools to clear the land and work the fertile soil.

Mark Twain wrote in his 1897 book Following the Equator:

All the territorial possessions of all the political establishments in the earth consist of pilferings from other people's wash. No tribe, however insignificant, and no nation, however mighty, occupies a foot of land that was not stolen.

There is no doubt the Beaker People stole the land they occupied from the neolithic circle builders – the Little Folk, as they called them. But, like tribes around the world that have believed in a Promised Land and driven others from it, the Beaker People believed they had a god-given right, in their case a right guaranteed by their great thunder-god, to the circular basin of Cromar.

He, after all, had made the circular basin, the Pleasant Vale as it came to be called in the Beaker People's language. And it was for them he had made it. The Little Folk who went before worshipped strange gods and spirits and knew nothing of the thunder-god. Clearly, the Pleasant Vale had not been made for the Little Folk. They were merely temporary occupants until the Beaker People arrived to claim it.

Tall, heavy-boned and muscular people live in and around the Howe of Cromar to this day. Their hardiness and no-nonsense work ethic quite possibly derive, just like their physical appearance, from their Beaker ancestors.

Like most cultures, the people of the Pleasant Vale had a creation myth that passed from one generation to the next. The thunder-god, so their myth went, stood on a hilltop at Samhain, just before dawn. Turning his back on the brightening sky where soon the sun would rise, he watched the full moon go down, then unleashed a huge thunderbolt, directed at the place where the land had just swallowed the moon. When the smoke and dust had cleared, he saw that he had created a beautiful circular vale that would be a homeland for his chosen people.

The Beaker tribe who settled in the Howe of Cromar built three great stone cairns. One was on the hilltop some distance from the Howe where they believed the god had stood when he launched his thunderbolt. Another marked the very centre of the Howe, the point where they believed the thunderbolt had struck. That point is on the summit of a low ridge now known as Drummy. And a third lay at the rim of the Howe, on the flank of a hill called Craig Dhu, where according to tradition the first Beaker People entered their new homeland.

The earliest Beaker settlement in Cromar was around the great central cairn on Drummy. Traces of huts and animal enclosures can still be seen there. But spirits of the Little Folk haunted the place, so the Beaker tribe moved to a new location a short distance away on the other side of running water, which they believed the spirits were unable to cross. That became the cultural centre of the Pleasant Vale. It was their Eden.

On a still night, they would look from the safety of their Eden towards the marshy land across the stream, and know that the spirits were abroad. They could see their eerie, fleeting glimmer. The land across the stream became known as the Ghost Meadow. Older children told younger ones gruesome tales of the Little Folk and their ghosts, just to frighten them.

5

MORE THAN A FEELING

IN HOWARD LEVINE'S OFFICE in the Chicago Loop, the attorney filled Delia in on the details. Grace had been alone on the afternoon of Sunday May 18th when she died of a heart attack; her cleaning girl had found her dead in her living room the next morning. A memorial service would be held on the 27th ('That's tomorrow,' Levine reaffirmed) at the Northbrook Hilton, followed by cremation of the body.

'Cremation?' Delia queried. 'Didn't Grace specify burial? She always had the idea of being buried with a bell-shaped beaker in the manner of her ancestors.'

'She expressed no preference in her will,' Levine responded. 'And I've been in touch with her closest relatives, who are coming in from England. Her cousin, Mrs Woods, assured me that Ms Rosman would have chosen cremation. In any case, everything is arranged.'

Grace rarely spoke of her English relatives, and seemed not to care much for them. Delia recalled mention of Loretta Woods, her husband and four sons, only one of whom ever visited. She remembered his name because it was a little unusual. Cato. He travelled to the U.S. on business sometimes and, when in the Chicago area, would drop in, usually unannounced. She had seen his photograph but had never met him.

'Well,' Delia said, 'I suppose the beaker could be interred with Grace's ashes.' She felt uncomfortable that Levine was

taking too much account of the cousin's advice, but decided to leave it at that.

'Yes, that could be arranged, I'm sure. Now, Ms Cobb, turning to the subject of the will, you'll be pleased to know that Ms Rosman's entire estate, except for a small bequest to her cleaning maid, goes to you. It will all have to go through probate, of course, but I see no reason why you can't use Ms Rosman's apartment in the meantime. Here are the keys.'

Within the hour, Delia was at Grace's door. She steeled herself as she turned the key in the lock, but as soon as she entered the apartment, tears came to her eyes. The full reality of Grace's death hit her for the first time. That she would inherit essentially all of Grace's worldly possessions was totally unexpected, but brought her little comfort at that moment.

She began to look around the apartment. It was very tidy. The carpets had been recently vacuumed and there was a faint smell of furniture wax. There was no milk or other perishable food in the refrigerator, but the freezer was well stocked. A few dollars and some loose change lay on the kitchen counter, on top of some items of mail that had been awaiting Grace's attention.

In the living room a reclining chair faced the window, as always. Grace had loved to sit in that chair. The young Delia, on her frequent visits, would pull up alongside her, and the two of them would talk for hours about every subject under the sun. A more formal rectangular arrangement of sofa, loveseat and armchair occupied the centre of the room, but the only time Grace ever sat there was when entertaining company. Delia wasn't 'company' in that sense. She had always been welcome to share Grace's private space by the window.

The wall of books, the displays of ornaments and other knick-knacks – all seemed as Delia remembered. The cherrywood hutch, where Grace had kept Taran's wheel in its silver box, had always been securely locked and the key hidden in another room – even Delia had never found out where. But she was surprised to notice a key in the lock.

She opened the door of the hutch. There was the set of four silver goblets with their symbols of the four ancient Celtic festivals and their associated gods. And behind them, the oval silver tea-caddy. Carefully she lifted it out. Even before she opened it she knew from its weight that it was empty.

At first she did not feel unduly concerned that the *Drogan* was not in its place. Perhaps Grace had put it with other valuables in a safe deposit box at the bank, or hidden it somewhere in the apartment. She surely wouldn't have sold it or given it away. Unless, of course, she had identified the next Keeper of Taran's wheel and passed it on. Though if she had, wouldn't she have mentioned it? Setting the empty box back in its place, Delia noticed that the goblets in front weren't perfectly aligned the way Grace had always liked them to be. She straightened them up.

But something gave her an uneasy feeling. It was not just the key in the lock of the hutch, nor the silver box being empty, nor the unequal spacing of the goblets which should stand like soldiers on parade, guarding the box behind them.

Grace had always arranged the silver goblets in a particular order. Taran, then Brytha, then Bel, then Luath. This was the order of the annual festivals honouring each of these four gods in turn – Samhain in November, Imbolc in February, Beltane in May, Lunasa in August. A few years earlier, Delia had once polished them and replaced them in the wrong sequence, and Grace had made it very clear that they had to be repositioned correctly.

Yet the Brytha and Bel goblets had swapped position. Someone other than Grace had moved them. The someone, no doubt, who had found the hutch key and left it in the lock, and might now be in possession of Taran's wheel.

As she pondered this disturbing thought, she heard the apartment door open. A young woman with long black hair came in. Suddenly seeing Delia gave her a start.

'Lupita! Hi ... I'm Delia. Remember me? I met you once when I was visiting Grace. Maybe a year ago?'

‘Yes ... now I remember. I’m so sad Grace has passed away.’

Lupita had done cleaning and other housework for Grace over several years. They got on so well together that Lupita’s twice-weekly visit became almost like a social occasion. Grace would practise her Spanish with her, learning to speak the language with Mexican idiom and intonation.

Delia explained that she was to inherit the apartment, though at that moment she had no plans to live there. She told Lupita she would like her to continue coming in, maybe once a week. ‘The place is very fresh. You must have done some cleaning after they took the body away.’

Lupita burst into tears. ‘Yes,’ she sobbed, ‘I did it yesterday. And I did the laundry too. You know, her bed linen and so on. I just came back to iron and put it away.’

‘That was very thoughtful of you. And I know you did some dusting and polishing. I smelled the furniture polish when I came in.’

‘Yes. It was a job Grace must have started before she ... before she became ill. She had done some of the surfaces, but not everywhere. The door handles too. It was a job she usually left for me. Anyway, I finished it for her.’

Delia gave Lupita a hug. After a moment’s silence, the young Mexican said, ‘You know, I’m the one who found her ... dead.’

‘Yes, I heard. It must have been such a shock for you.’

‘At first I thought she was having a nap. But when I tried to wake her ...’ Lupita’s voice trailed away.

‘Was she there in her favourite chair by the window?’

‘No, over on that armchair.’ Lupita pointed to the formal seating area.

Now Delia had *more* than a feeling. Someone must have been here with Grace, maybe shortly before she died ... or maybe even at the moment of her death. If Grace was in the formal seating area, it meant she had company.

‘Lupita, do you know if anyone called on Grace that day?’

‘I saw no one.’

‘When you found her, was there any sign that she’d had company? Maybe coffee cups on the table or on the kitchen counter? Or a little gift someone brought?’

‘Why do you ask these things? You think someone came here and killed her?’ Lupita became distressed again. She crossed herself.

‘I don’t know what to think, Lupita. All I know is, Grace wouldn’t have been sitting over there unless she had a visitor.’ Delia paused. ‘How about the hutch? Did you do any cleaning inside there?’

‘Oh no. Grace always did that herself. I never got to touch it. When I was dusting yesterday, I saw the key was in the lock, and I thought that was strange. But I didn’t look inside.’

Delia suddenly had another thought. When Grace was alone in the house, she always fastened the security chain on the inside of the apartment door. Lupita found her body, yet how had she been able to get in?

‘Usually I knock, and she takes the chain off to let me in. But last Monday, she didn’t come to the door when I knocked. I guessed she was out and the chain would be off, so I used my key. As soon as I came in, I saw Grace in the armchair.’

It was all starting to make sense, in a way Delia didn’t like. Maybe Grace had a visitor, somebody she allowed into her apartment, somebody she knew. Somebody who left her dead in that armchair. Somebody, it occurred to her, who may have taken the trouble to do some polishing of door handles and other surfaces to avoid leaving fingerprints.

As Lupita began ironing in one of the bedrooms, Delia called Glenview police. Within minutes, Sergeant Nolan arrived. He was sceptical about the evidence of the out-of-order goblets and the location of the body. However, he agreed it was curious that the safety chain had been unfastened at the time of Grace’s death.

‘I’ll have forensic over to take a look in the next day or two,’ he said, writing a few lines in his notebook. ‘It’s best if you

vacate the apartment.’ He then had a few words with Lupita before taking his leave.

‘Sergeant Nolan,’ Delia called out as he made for the door, ‘another thing. The funeral is set for tomorrow. The body is to be cremated.’

‘I don’t think so,’ Nolan said. ‘We’ll have to put a hold on that.’

Howard Levine was not surprised to receive Delia’s call, having already heard from the police. ‘I suggest,’ he said, ‘we go ahead with the memorial service at the Northbrook Hilton. People are already on their way from England. The cremation can wait.’

Lupita left without finishing the ironing, as Sergeant Nolan had requested. Delia took one more look around before locking up the apartment, then checked into the Hampton Inn at Old Orchard. Later, she received a call from Nolan. ‘Can you come to police headquarters on East Lake Avenue? We’d like a DNA sample.’

‘Surely I’m not a suspect?’

‘We have no suspects at this time. But your DNA will be in the deceased’s home. The cleaning girl’s too. And of course Ms Rosman’s own DNA. We need to see if there’s evidence of someone else visiting around the time of her death. It may be too late, especially as such a thorough job was done of cleaning the apartment after the body was removed.’

‘I’ll be there in half an hour,’ Delia promised.