

PROLOGUE

I will begin with the end, for everything in here, as you will see, arrives at an inevitable consequence: death.

I have emerged from the dark and I cannot return without him. He looks at my canine form silhouetted against the moonlit backdrop of the harbour and says, "I'll see you away, you stupid mutt." He reaches into his car and pulls out a heavy looking spanner. This man understands his frailty, the possibility of attack, but not from the likes of me.

I slope closer to him and expel a deep growl. "Jesus, you are a big fucking pooch." It has dawned on him I am no ordinary 'pooch'. In the dim light I see his face drain of blood, his eyes widen as he takes in my deathly shape, my eyes of fiery embers. He girds himself and takes a swipe with the spanner. It strikes my snout but it makes no difference, I feel no pain. He kicks out at me, crashing into my middle: same thing, it only defers the inevitable. I leap and batter him, knocking him to the ground next to the car.

He reaches for the frame of the door to pull himself up. A normal hound would set about him, tear at his limbs, rip at his flesh. Me, I have one destination. I wrap my jaws around his head and, with the power of a hydraulic arm, I squeeze. I hear two things together, the crushing sound as his skull gives way under the weight of my teeth and his moan, now increasing in volume to a scream. I have no wish to prolong his agony as my final embrace cracks the skull and his brain sprays out through the gaps in my teeth. It tastes good. I have not had physical matter for such a long time and I enjoy the taste. I give a hefty twist and take his head from his body, spitting it out to within a foot of it. His eyes remain wide open, as if observing me in this task.

It is now time for me to deliver the duty for which I am destined. I reach into his chest and remove his soul. It comes easily as if it is pleased to be removed from a lifeless body. In removing his head, however, I have exceeded the mandate I was given lives ago. I have become a taker of life rather than the conveyor of souls. It is clear I can no longer be what I was destined to be.

CHAPTER 1

First, though, I will take you to Lochdarrach School, the day after the Samhuinn, exactly three months before. It is the midday break when we run together, the children and I. The playground is small and we cover its length with the lightness of youth and the freedom from age or concern. I meander between them, for they do not all see me, nor are they to know I am here for one of them.

I can tell you it is not John McLeod, this lad of ten winters, who will live to take over the croft as a young man; who, like his father Iain the croft, he will be seventeen years when I come for him.

And it is not Mary McNeil, the girl of eight years of the fair skin Viking folk who settled on these shores. She is slow to cover the ground due to a fall from the cliffs at Stoer when she was six, but *ma-tha*, she will survive into adulthood and become teacher of this school.

It is not John Sinclair, the fastest of foot, out of reach of the rest. I will take him on his twenty-second year when he is washed ashore, his boat sinking off Callaness point.

It is not Angus Stuart, from the Islands. A bold lad of nine, he will see his life out to be one hundred and three years and he will chronicle the events to occur here. An inquisitive boy, he is not concerned in using his energy in the playground. He is a *taibshears* and sees those who have left their worldly form to come with me, the *taibhs*. He has *an da shealladh* and can predict a passing. He is aware of me in his midst, though avoids me, like all *taibshears* do.

Nor is it Andrew Dewar, a boy of nine winters, who lives down *Bótha Dubh*. I took his alcoholic father last year, when he overturned his tractor while on the drams. Andrew will come to me in six years when he takes his own life.

The lad trailing Mary McNeil is a dark, swarthy child from the lowlands. He is new to these parts, but not to me. He will be mine soon. It is for him, I am here.

The teacher, Eileen McIsaac, claps her hands to herald the end of playtime and a return to the classroom. “*Am ri teachd ann,*” she calls out, for the ancient words are enjoyed here in this school.

The children filter in one by one as they march up the ramp and through the door of the schoolhouse. Each saying, “*Feasger mbath, Mrs McIsaac,*” as they pass the teacher. It takes seconds for them to go inside. I hesitate, taking in the scene. You will appreciate I do not follow, but there is a fine visage for me in a highland school, a place to foresee the inevitable from the very earliest days.

It is time for the *balaob*, Calum Rooney.

It is four beyond the noon and he waits for the mother to collect him from the school. She is late. He paces the entrance hall and peers out of the door checking if she has arrived to take him home. Fumbling with his backpack, tight on his back, heavy and uncomfortable, it nips the skin on his shoulders. Full of jotters and textbooks, it is his homework for the next day. With an empty lunchbox, he is anxious to get home for his tea.

The day is Tuesday, the first day of the eleventh month, sixteen years from the millennium, and three days to his eighth year. The days have turned, giving less daylight from an already darkening sky; the dark days, when the cold and mist combine in the glens and the waves crash against the rocks making foam on the beaches. Nothing fazes me. I do not feel the cold or the rain, nor fear the dark nor the task or the burdens or consequences before me. Nothing will defy my purpose: to take them away.

Befitting my presence and Samhuinn, the school is bedecked in spectres, witches, ghouls. Ghostly figures, these worldly emblems will be removed when the cleaners arrive later this evening. The souls have returned to whence they came; not, you will understand, that I have had respite; for once emerged I cannot return alone. As proper for the Cù-Sith, I give three howls to herald my arrival.

The *balaob* is the one to be collected this day.

The teacher is busy writing at her desk in the classroom, confident the boy will be picked up soon. She hears a car arriving outside the school with a couple of toots on its horn. *It will be the mother arriving to take him home*, she thinks. She will finish her reports and go out to say hello to her and goodbye to the boy, but she hears him call, “*Oidbche mbath, Mrs McIsaac,*” in soft, happy tones. How sweet he sounds.

She remembers the day the parents brought him to the school to meet her. It was almost Christmas of the year before. They were on a trip north to plan their move here. He impressed her as a confident child; with a police detective mother and a forensic psychologist father she thought she knew why. Previously of mixed faith, the father, a lapsed catholic and the mother, a never-practising protestant, viewed themselves to be faithless. However, the choice of the catholic gaelic medium school offered the best education for their son. They were enthusiastic about the school, and open about their previous divorce and reconciliation, which led to the adoption of the boy, and their plans for a new life in Achfara. Although they had ‘history’, they said, and would be older parents, they were keen to assure her, as they did the adoption agency, they were stable, *safe* parents.

The teacher calls back to the boy. “*Oidbche mbath, Calum, chì mi thu sa mhadainn.*” A few moments later, she peeks out of her window to see the rear red lights of the car heading off up Bhothe Beag, the small road leading towards the coastal road. This would mean the boy would be home within ten minutes. Content all the children are home safely, she returns to her reports.

A few minutes later, she hears another car arrive. *It would be her husband for her*, she thinks, and is surprised when the mother of the boy walks into the classroom. “I’m just in for Calum, Mrs McIsaac.” The mother is also surprised to find the boy is not there, nor outside in the hall waiting. She looks around the room. “Is he in the toilet again; have you ever known a child who goes as much as he does?”

The teacher rises from her desk, not concerned; another mother may have stopped by and collected the boy to drop him home. “He is just away, Jackie; I thought it was you picking him up.”

“No, not me.” The mother pauses only long enough to make the point.

“I wouldn’t worry; it will be Mrs McAlliog who stopped by after shopping in Lochdarrach to see if anyone needed a lift home. He will be waiting for you when you get back.”

“Strange, she’d normally phone or text to save me the journey.” The mother checks her phone.

“Jackie, you know what the mobile reception is like around here. Get along the road a bit and a text or a call notification will pop up I’m sure. It’ll be nothing to worry about.” The teacher returns to her desk.

“Aye, you’ll be right.” The mother seeks the words which would not make the teacher think she was questioning her. She wanted to say she should know who is picking up the children, but she has been in Achfara long enough to realise no one there worries about the children. If she had still been in Glasgow she would have been more pointed, like ‘now you listen to me, miss’. Well, she would have made her point, but “I’m sure you’re right, he’ll be making the tea with his dad by the time I get back,” comes out instead. “I’ll give you a ring then... just to put your mind at ease.” She questions herself for saying this; the teacher’s mind would not be troubled. This is Lochdarrach, and as safe as can be: the people here look out for each other, especially the children, and they did not expect me.

The teacher looks up from the depths of her work. “OK, Jackie, *oidbche mbath*.”

The mother smiles at the gaelic. She enjoys the language and is a learner herself. “*Oidbche mbath*, Mrs McIsaac, I’ll see you tomor-row no doubt – have a good evening.”

The teacher raises her eyes to just above her glasses to see the mother leave. Ten minutes later, she would get the call to change her life.

“Calum’s not here, Mrs McIsaac, he’s not here.” There is panic in the mother’s voice.

“Jackie, don’t worry, Mrs McAlliog will have taken him to her house and she’ll be about to call you to pick him up there.”

“I called her, he’s not there either. Did you not see the car, whose car was it? I need to know who picked him up.”

The teacher stops herself from saying something pointed. The mother had been a high-ranking police officer and a lowlander, both aspects which she thought might make her prone to an overreaction in this highland village, but she does not answer giving the right message.

“I’ll call some of the other mothers, just in case it was one of them who picked him up.” It is just as well the mother does not see the teacher shaking her head; she would have really got annoyed then.

Bloody hell, the mother thinks, *complacent or what up here*, then cautions herself against thinking those kinds of thoughts or voicing those words. She wants to make a go of it in this community and understands the sensitivity of the locals about incomers making outsider remarks.

Please understand I have known these people, their forebears, and their descendants, for ages. They are loyal to their faith and to their community, faithful to their beliefs and their highland views, but most of all protective of their culture and way of life – as am I.

I remember when they were cleared from the pastures to crofts on the seashore, to eke out a wretched existence, surviving on meagre crops and occasional fish. They are a proud and god-fearing community; always have been, even in the days of starvation, clan wars, and rebellion. They have faced me through hunger, war, disease and disaster, and met me with forbearance, coming to me as if they owed me a death for having lived.

They have particular names, made up of their forenames or what they are or where they are from. John the post, or ‘Post’, who followed his father and his father before him as the postman, trek-king over one hundred miles a day over rough terrain to deliver the mail. Annie McDonald: ‘*Cailleach*’, the ninety-two-year-old matriarch of the village. Douglas ‘Caber’, a McKinnon, who runs the post office but known more for his annual caber throwing at Achfara Highland games which he has consistently won, despite fierce competition from the young lads, since ‘76. Caber has a fierce tongue, notwithstanding an even fiercer right hook after a dram or few. An incomer is not accorded with such respect by being given a title, sometime only being referred to as the visitor or the lowlander, or even the *sasunnach*. There are others, however, I will introduce you to as I reveal the story of this place and the sad circumstances drawing me away from my destined duties.

I am the Cù-Sith or, as they refer to me, the ‘taker of souls’.

The mother and father got out of Glasgow. They had to: murder, injury, and self-abuse had taken their toll on the both of them. It was time to retreat to a quieter place, to heal, to live the peaceful life, to come to terms with the chaos of their lives.

After the inevitable divorce, separation and living apart, they came to the one reasonable conclusion: despite their obvious problems they were better off together, but only by seeking a new life and turning their backs on their old lives as partners in the crime. They were sick of crime in the city, the mob, the police, too many psychopaths, and they were tired of the likes of me.

Remarrying and adopting the boy made their reconciliation official and gave them the family they wanted and needed. The *balach* was encouraged to come here by his love of seashells and steam trains, both of which were available in the area, a place he had holidayed in a year before arriving. A promise of a dog sealed it. They took a pup from a local farmer, a border collie they called Lass. The local authority had removed the boy from parents who had succumbed to the drams and the drugs, neglecting his needs so much so he was released for adoption.

They sold up what they had, including an art collection and antique furniture, sold to a private collector; trappings from parallel lives of crime. The crime syndicate took back his house near the long western road; it was fortunate this was the only thing they took. His mentor and crime boss once said to him, “When you chose the life of a gangster there is nowhere else to go, you will live and die in the Family.” She sold her townhouse near the park by the river. All of this was enough to buy a farmhouse in the highlands.

They found the house in Achfara, this small north coast place, a few miles between the fishing village of Stoer and in the opposite direction the tourist village of Lochdarrach – my domain.

In earlier times, when they were first married, they came here on holiday and loved it. It seemed the perfect

place to settle. Here, they could put the past behind them and start afresh. The mother took early retirement from the police and the father had retired from his profession years before when alcohol and mental illness took a serious hold on him. With their pensions, the mother's part-time job in the local health centre, the father's in the local bar, the Small Isles, they had enough money to live their new life.

It was a good time to move for them. In the lowlands, the father led a crime syndicate, achieving notoriety impossible to sustain, far less protect himself or his family against. The mother was involved with the Glasgow underworld, but from the opposite perspective of law-woman, to obvious risk to herself, evident by a disability sustained by a car bomb attempt on her life.

With this irregularity, the family arrived in a place where there was no such thing, no such history, and no such danger.

CHAPTER 2

Their house is not the usual welcoming place for the father as he returns home. "Is he back, Jackie, in his room?" He hangs his jacket on a door peg.

The mother rushes to meet him. "He's not here, Rooney; obviously why I called you."

This does not stop him looking in the boy's bedroom. "You know I was in Invernevis. You pick him up on a Tuesday when I'm at my meeting."

"I know, but he wasn't there when I went for him. Do you think I would lie to you?"

The father checks his phone for anything he might have missed. "But I dropped him off this morning."

"I know you did." She turns to the window.

"Where is he then?"

Her voice rises to the level of the church choir. "Rooney, he wasn't here when I came home. I wouldn't have dragged you back otherwise; I know how important it is."

"Important?"

"To the both of us."

The stop for a moment; this was part of the deal: to keep the father off the drams.

"He could have got in himself. He knows the spare key is always in the shed." He looks at her. "And aye, I've checked, the key is there."

"Why do we lock the door? This is the highlands, not Glasgow."

"We lock the door, we agreed."

"He didn't go to the beach?"

"Rooney, Mrs McIsaac said he was picked up in a car, and before you ask no one else picked him up to my knowledge."

"Calum would have never got into a car with anyone he didn't know," he says to offer reassurance and control the panic setting in. "I taught him."

"Aye, so you did." She paces the floor, her stick clacking on the planks, occasionally glancing out of the window. "And it's been an hour since he was picked up by someone we don't fucking know."

The mother understands whatever the circumstances, the boy should be home. She called into Mrs McAlliog's house after the school; she seemed upset the mother thought she would pick him up and not contact her.

"What about the other mothers?"

"I called them all, Rooney, even though Mrs McIsaac said she would." With twenty-six pupils from fifteen mothers, it did not take her long to get around them. "No one saw him." They offered other possibilities, like Jan Legowski the priest, or John the post, or Teenie the taxi, all popping in to see if anyone needed a lift. "I've checked them all."

"McIsaac, the guy with the bus?"

"I think she would know if it was her husband."

"This is my biggest fear." The father drops to a seat at the table.

"I'm calling the police." The mother is aware in the event something has happened to her son time is important; his time as a forensic psychologist tells him the same.

"You do that."

She calls Stoer police station. John Broomlands, *the* police officer for the area, picks up the call right away. He knows of her and the boy, after much chattering in the office over their arrival, much of it due to her being the daughter of the chief constable of Police Scotland, Hubert Kaminski.

Broomlands spells out 'Ca ... lum Roo ... ney', as he writes out the name. He reminds her in the vast amount of cases the child turns up within a few hours, then asks what they had tried, all the while playing down any possibility of abduction. Never in the history of the three villages had there been such an incident, he says. Nevertheless, he would contact the area office in Invernevis where the register of local child abusers is held. He declines the possibility of a local search. "It is too early for that, Mrs..."

She casts her eyes upward. "Not Mrs, just Jackie... Jackie Kaminski."

"Aye, sorry, it is just your son, Calum Rooney?"

"Kaminski's a bit of a mouthful."

Only the surname of the chief constable, the boy's adopted grandfather. "Oh, right, thank you." The father shakes his head.

The mother put him straight on the surname, just another incomer habit – surprised they managed to adopt without being married, he would have thought.

"All procedures need to be carried out, constable. You'll know protocol in these matters."

I am not sure he does, but there is an authority in the mother's voice, which tells him he should, borne from her previous status as assistant chief constable in Police Scotland. Now retired, however, he is just as aware of her lack of actual authority. He is not going to be told how to do his job by an ex-policewoman who knows nothing about policing in the highlands.

"I know, Ms... Kaminski. We've been trained in all necessary procedures." She should not worry too much, the boy will turn up, he tells her, and he would be in touch later, but she should call him back 'either way'.

Her face belies her anger over his indifference. "Listen, Broomlands, if—"

"Please, Jackie." The father rises from his seat, just in time to receive one of those stares which says 'don't Rooney, just don't'.

She ends the call there, saying, "I'll back in touch later, one way or other."

"Right, I'm going out to look for him." The father snatches his jacket from the back of the door. The mother reaches for hers. "No, you stay here by the phone," he says. "Someone may call, even Calum, and he might just walk in the door." She knows he is right. "I'll start in Lochdarrach and go to the school and take it from there." This would take him along the trunk road to Lochdarrach, onto the back road to the school, from there onto the coast road towards Achfara and on into Stoer and then back to the house. A circular course of around eight miles, it would cover all the main routes around there, apart from the dirt forest tracks and minor paths snaking out to remote areas, crofts, and bothies. "I'll take Lass. If he's out there she'll find him."

The dog leaps into the car as the father turns to look towards the house. The mother is at the kitchen window, the phone pressing against her ear. She puts her hand up against the glass, a gesture of oneness with him, but her eyes say she is scared. He knows she will be fastidious, contacting all and any friends and acquaintances, extending to just about everyone in the area. With around two hundred souls, this would take hours. She need not have worried, however, the jungle drums are beating. Teenie the taxi had been onto her extensive family and the news had spread across the village; her friends had done the same and they had been on the phone spreading the news even wider. "Wee Calum is missing," echoes across the phone lines.

The *coigreachs* arrived at the farmhouse at the end of February, in the twenty sixteen beyond the millennium. A cold and windy day, it took hours to get the AGA and the wood burning stove going enough to raise the temperature of the house. This was a far cry from Glasgow with its modern centrally heated homes. The *balach* loved it, especially the beach where he amassed a collection of seashells: queen scallop, pelican's foot, spoot and periwinkle. He ran around it and the farm courtyard as if he had been locked up for his whole life before then. Glasgow was like a prison for him in many ways.

The mother and father received threats from some of the criminal families the father had associations with, one of the reasons they spent a lot of time indoors down there. Then it was time for the boy to go to school, and they both knew this meant constant worry. The father had a mental illness too which did not help; his paranoia was crippling all of them. The authorities, MI5 and ISIS; often it was hard to separate fact from fiction.

It was clearly time to move from Glasgow and the first weeks in Achfara felt like they had been let out of jail. They spent hours on the beach, playing with the dog and paddling in the sea, even although it had only been around five degrees. They worked hard repairing and upgrading the farmhouse. The father, unaccustomed to working with his hands, developed a love of dry stone dyking, repairing old boundary walls. It was a 'metaphor' he said, for his

ailing body: while repairing the walls he was repairing himself. His physical and mental health improved with the repairing of the walls around their land. The mother for her part took a UHI course in business administration with the intention of a career change towards hotel management.

The *balach* was a friendly but quiet lad, preferring a solitary life, exploring rock pools and adding to his burgeoning shell collection. He detested being pushed into groups. He could have been 'autistic' the mother thought, although he had never been tested or confirmed to be so.

It was not hard to find him earlier standing on his own against the stone wall of the school playground. He did not take part in the game of chase. He would not run the length of the schoolyard nor the beach ever again. I studied him for a minute, wondering why one so young should be taken so early in life. But it was not for me to try to understand this; I know my calling and I have to do my duty.

The father searches for the boy. He has just turned into Lochdarrach when he sees Donald McDonald, also known as Inverbeg, having come from the isolated village of the same name, some twenty miles over the hill. He stops the car and winds down the window. "Inverbeg, you OK, you seen Calum?"

"I heard about Calum from Mary, Rooney; she called me." Inverbeg enjoys his walk at half past five every evening, to be back in time for the BBC Scotland news. He had been given a diagnosis of diabetes a few weeks earlier by Richard Black, the local doctor, who put him on a strict diet with a demand he lose weight. He would be mine soon. After the walk and the news, he will spend the rest of the evening in the local hotel bar, the Small Isles.

"You'll be worried." The father grits his teeth and nods his head. "I'll look out for him and I'll ask in the bar. If anyone's seen him, I'll give you a call."

"Right, thanks. Oh, Inverbeg?"

"Aye, Rooney?"

"Could you tell Maggie or Magnus I won't be in tonight?" The father would normally start his shift behind the bar at eight.

"Of course, hope the wee man turns up soon."

The father intended going into the bar anyway, but is relieved not to; his time would be taken up with answering their questions, hearing their concerns, receiving their offers of support. Talking to them is a distraction. He just wants to get on with it, to find the boy. The bar is the centre of the community and accepted as the best place to circulate information, or obtain any, but this night Inverbeg would be happy to do spread the word. It will give him an excuse to talk to anyone approaching the bar while he is standing there. The father had worked in the Small Isles for eight months, a bit of a risk for an ex Glasgow drinking man – he understood a few drinks would take him over the edge into a binge which at best would inflame his mental illness or at worst kill him. Immersing himself in a drinking culture honed his defences against it, reminding himself of the dangerous relationship he had with the *nisge-beatha*. He knows Magnus Stuart, the owner, would not be expecting him, not this night.

He drives through the village at speed as a range of possibilities arrives in his mind, notably the boy has been taken or *they*, from Glasgow, had caught up with them. All he knows is the boy got into a car, or maybe he had not got into any car, but had decided to walk home thinking his mother would pick him up on the way. An independent boy, this was something he would have expected of him. He may have decided to cross the moors and had become lost in the dark. The teacher might have assumed he got into a car having seen one going away from the school up the road, where it may have been just passing by. He knows the car is important as the driver may have seen the boy.

The light is on as he reaches the school. He thinks about going in to talk to the teacher, but knowing the mother would have questioned her decides against it. Time is not his friend as it has been nearly two hours since the boy left there. He cannot phone the mother because of the lack of a signal there, but knows by then she would be 'pressing all the buttons'. He will continue the search on his own in the meantime. Working as a team, her inside, him out, they would find him. He parks in the school car park, lets the dog out of the car, collects a torch, and walks up the road at pace in the direction of their house, two miles away, following the route the boy would have taken to go home.

He travels along the deserted single-track road, panning the torch light from side to side. It is bright, giving a fine illumination of the countryside. There are pine martins in the area of his house and, given they have a few hens, he bought the torch, capable of covering the seven acres of their field into the trees. He hopes he would be able to see any moving creatures that could harm the hens, and scare them away.

Walking along the road like a moving lighthouse, the *athair* heads towards the shore at Claigan. It has become dark, a cloudy night with minimal moonlight and without the torch, he would not have seen a yard in front of him. He hopes the boy has not decided to walk into this darkness. He approaches the shore; the sound of the waves slapping the beach create a whoosh, whoosh sound, as the clouds part to allow the moon to give some light on the coast. He switches the torch off, trying to decide if the boy had been out there somewhere whether he would have

been able to see his way home.

Just then there are books and a bag at the side of the road, a Hogwarts bag, light grey. "It's Calum's." He picks it up. "Hufflepuff, it's definitely Calum's." He looks for the dog, but she has disappeared from his side. Then he hears her barking from the beach, next to the water's edge.

It is there, rocking with the lapping waves, he sees the *balach*.

I had found him earlier. His eyes were wide open, looking up at the moonlit sky, or at something as life left them. His face was like a shiny porcelain doll, angelic, glistening from the light of the moon. His arms were stretched out like he was about to embrace someone; though his hands were clenched fist-like, like he had been in a fight in the school playground. His legs were together, bent at the knees, a ninety-degree angle, as if had you raised his body onto them he would be kneeling. With his arms splayed and his eyes looking upward, he looked like he was in church looking towards his heaven or his god.

I reached into him and felt the warmth of his life, cooling steadily with the chill of death invading him. The young soul felt good, it invigorated me, energised me. It pulsed with energy not known to me, like the heart that no longer beats. The ones I normally take are tired and done. But this one fought me, a defiance also not known to me. It confused me, it rattled me.

The father did not see me taking him, or what they describe as his soul, to what they also describe as the afterlife. But this did not happen in the way I intended. I would leave this dead boy with his soul, for the meantime. Something told me not to take him; something powerful challenged my death given duty. He would remain an undead, until I could reason why I feel this way about him, this death over the countless others. And, for the meantime, the circumstances in which the boy died will remain with me. You will understand, I have no concerns as to the means or consequences of death. It happens eventually to all. It is an inescapable occurrence: all living beings die.

I am called many things. In these parts I am the Cù Sith, the fairy dog; in other places the Dullahan, or the Malak al-Maut, the Angel of Death, or for many the Grim Reaper. Unlike, Charon the ferryman of Hades, no one pays me to carry souls across the river of death; I do it because it is my duty. We are spirits, angels; deities in many religions, whose sole responsibility is to convey souls to where there are destined to go. Our role is neither to judge nor question, but to provide safe passage. We could be described as death, though death is the condition, and heaven, hell or wherever, the destination, where we are the escort.

Maha, where they go, is of no interest to me, you will understand. The faithful folk around here aspire to heaven, others else-where to nirvana or paradise. They fear the other place, mostly called hell. Some believe they will be reborn, recreated; but they are wrong, this is a one-way road and I bring no one back. Many believe death is not the end – though it is of course the end of the body, the spirit may remain, however.

I am inevitable; believe me, you too will come my way, one day. On this matter, there is nothing I have not seen, and my knowledge on the subject is infinite. The means by which you and most people die, normally by natural causes interests me less than those caused by a human hand. With a natural death, there is me and there is the deceased. With a murder, there are three of us: the deceased, the slayer, and me, an unnatural relationship not of my liking, but a death is a death, and even the murderer will be mine one day.

The boy's circumstance is of particular interest to me, however, because within it exists the possibility of more coming my way.

You will understand death by old age, illness, or accident bores me; death by one's own hand confuses me, but death caused by another's hand interests me. In my patch, death is generally by the former and increasingly the latter; but the last, before the boy, just does not happen here. So when it does, I raise my head, prick up my ears, and howl with all my might at the anticipation of it. Ha, how I relish the opportunity of murder.

The constable, John Broomlands, is home; it is beyond six. His wife, Mary, has just put out the soup when he receives the exasperated and broken phone call from the father. It suffers from the poor signal in these parts, but he catches all he needs to hear. "Calum is dead ... Claigan beach." It was shortly after the mother called to say the boy remained missing.

"I'm coming," he says, immediately contacting 'control' at Invernevis, who passes the call straight through to a detective chief inspector Euan Boyd. "Protect the scene," he tells the constable. "I'll come right away."

The constable arrives at Claigan beach in minutes to find the father cradling the boy in his arms, the waves lapping his legs. "He is dead," he says. The constable crouches over him and tries to take the boy from him. The father refuses to give the boy away. The constable takes a step back. He will wait for the doctor to arrive before demanding the boy.

The constable had called the doctor, Richard Black, on route; not so much to give the boy medical help, it is too late. The doctor needs to confirm the death as a suspicious death, so much so for him to set up a crime

scene around the boy's body, as the inspector demands. The doctor arrives shortly after.

"He found his boy. I couldn't separate them," the constable says.

"He is his boy."

"He keeps saying he 'squeezed the boy, like he was trying to squeeze the death out of him'."

"People say all sorts of things, at times like this."

It takes determined persuasion from the constable to get the father to release the boy's body as he tries to carry it farther up the beach and away from the waves. "He has to stay here, Mr Rooney, it is important." The father lays him gently on the sand, the waves almost covering him. The doctor examines the body as the father moves to the top of the beach, where he sits on a rock in the machair. His face is white as new snow, despair written all over it, as he looks out towards the west.

The inspector arrives and immediately goes to the father. "Mr Rooney, my name is Euan Boyd, Detective Chief Inspector Boyd. "I am so ... atishoo," he sneezes. "Sorry, I have a terrible cold."

The father gets on his feet. "You shouldn't be out on a night like this."

The inspector looks at the father, his pained face, heavy eyes, trembling lips. "I am sorry for your loss." He goes on to say, though the father understands this, the boy has to remain there to be examined and he must ensure 'nothing is disturbed'.

The doctor confirms the boy's death as unexplained and the constable sets about securing the area, fearful of others who may tread on the sand around the boy. From what I understand this is now a 'crime scene' and the boy's body is part of an 'investigation'.

The boy is confused, as most, regarding what will happen now. He looks at me as if he knows I have to assist him. I will, but I am in no hurry with him. I need to decide *his* time.

The father arrives home and the mother is waiting outside for him. "Where have you been? I've been frantic. It's been over two hours since you left." She looks into his face, drained of blood and white with shock. "Have you found him, Rooney, where is he?" She pushes around him to see if the boy has followed him along the path.

He reaches for her, grabbing her, almost taking her breath away. "Jackie—"

"You have found him?" She seeks a 'yes, he's safe'. "Haven't you, Rooney, for god's sake tell me?" She brings her arms up inside his and tries to wrestle herself free.

"Jackie..."

"Just tell me he's OK?" She pushes him back an arm's length.

"I found him."

"If you've found him, where is he?" He does not answer, he does not need to; he is with me, of course. "I need to know where he is. I need to go to him."

"An Inspector Boyd is there. He said no one is to go near."

"I don't give a fuck what he says; I am going to my son."

"Jackie." The father grabs her once more. "You are going no-where. I won't let you." He almost carries her inside and closes the door.

"You fucker, Rooney, you fucker." She rushes into the boy's bedroom. "He's Calum, my boy, my wee boy." She pulls the bedroom door closed behind her.

It is nearly fifteen minutes before the mother comes out of the boy's bedroom, her eyes swollen from crying. The father is sitting at the kitchen table, the telephone in front of him. "He's been murdered, hasn't he?" His empty look confirms this. "How do you know?"

"Jackie, I saw him. The constable is there, and this inspector, a DCI from Invernevis."

"Where is he, Rooney?" He looks at her dispassionately. She holds up her hands pleading. "Where the fuck is he?"

"He was on the beach, at Claigan."

"How'd you find him?"

"I found his books on the road, they went down to the sea, and there he was."

"What was he like?"

"Jesus, Jackie."

"I want to know."

"He was just lying there, his arms out."

I had not expected this, but the boy is there, as if he has just arrived in from school. Like me, he appears wherever he needs to be. I allow this; it is his home after all. He reaches for the mother as if he hopes she will reach out to him and lift him into her arms. She turns away from him. He appears upset at this, moving around her; she moves away once more. He follows her through the kitchen, she avoids him. I have seen this before in the young

dead; they do not have the understanding of death. I move to him. He seems to warm to me, like I am a friendly pet. He turns to his real dog, which moves away and cowers under the table; she will have none of me. Gradually, he seems to appreciate something has changed and nothing would ever be the same.

The *máthair* drops into a seat across from him. "Was he clothed?" The boy looks down at himself.

"Jackie."

"I want to know."

The boy moves to stand in front of her, as if to say 'of course I am'.

"Yes, he was."

"Was he ... did he, look ... battered?"

"No, not that I could see, apart from some blood around his nose."

The boy puts his hand to his nose. His living body may have still bled, but not anymore.

The mother looks down at the floor almost looking at the boy. "My poor wee mite, what did he ever do to deserve this, apart from being adopted by us?"

"He did nothing, and he deserved none of this."

"Did you see anything ... anything material?"

"Jackie, I am not a police officer."

"You said you found his books; where was his bag?"

"It wasn't there."

"It wasn't there?"

"No ... I didn't see it."

"Rooney, you need to tell them everything. He was fully clothed, shod, nothing missing except his bag. Everything at the scene has a bearing on the success or otherwise of the outcome. You know that."

"Jesus, doesn't take much to trigger the copper mode does it?"

"Rooney, this is murder, our son's murder, some sick bastard's killed him." The boy turns his head to me; murder, what is murder, on his face.

I am drawn to these people, to this boy, you will understand. I do not feel emotion, but I have an interest in their circumstances. I will align myself with them. Not though I have done this before; but *maha*, would a herring fisherman refuse a salmon?