
Opening Extract from...

The Malice of Waves

Written by Mark Douglas-Home

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The Malice of Waves

MARK DOUGLAS-HOME

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For Colette, Rebecca and Rory

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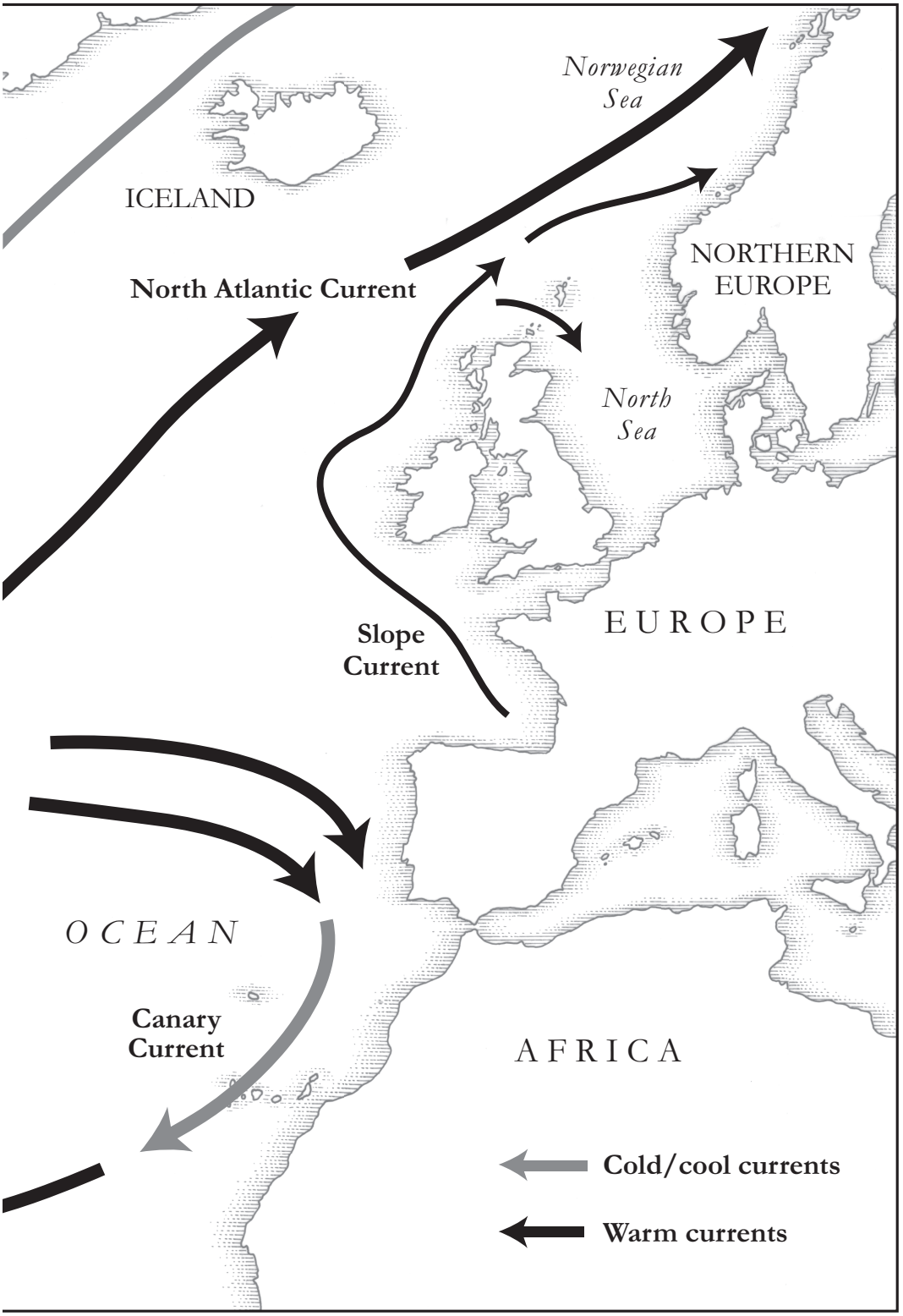
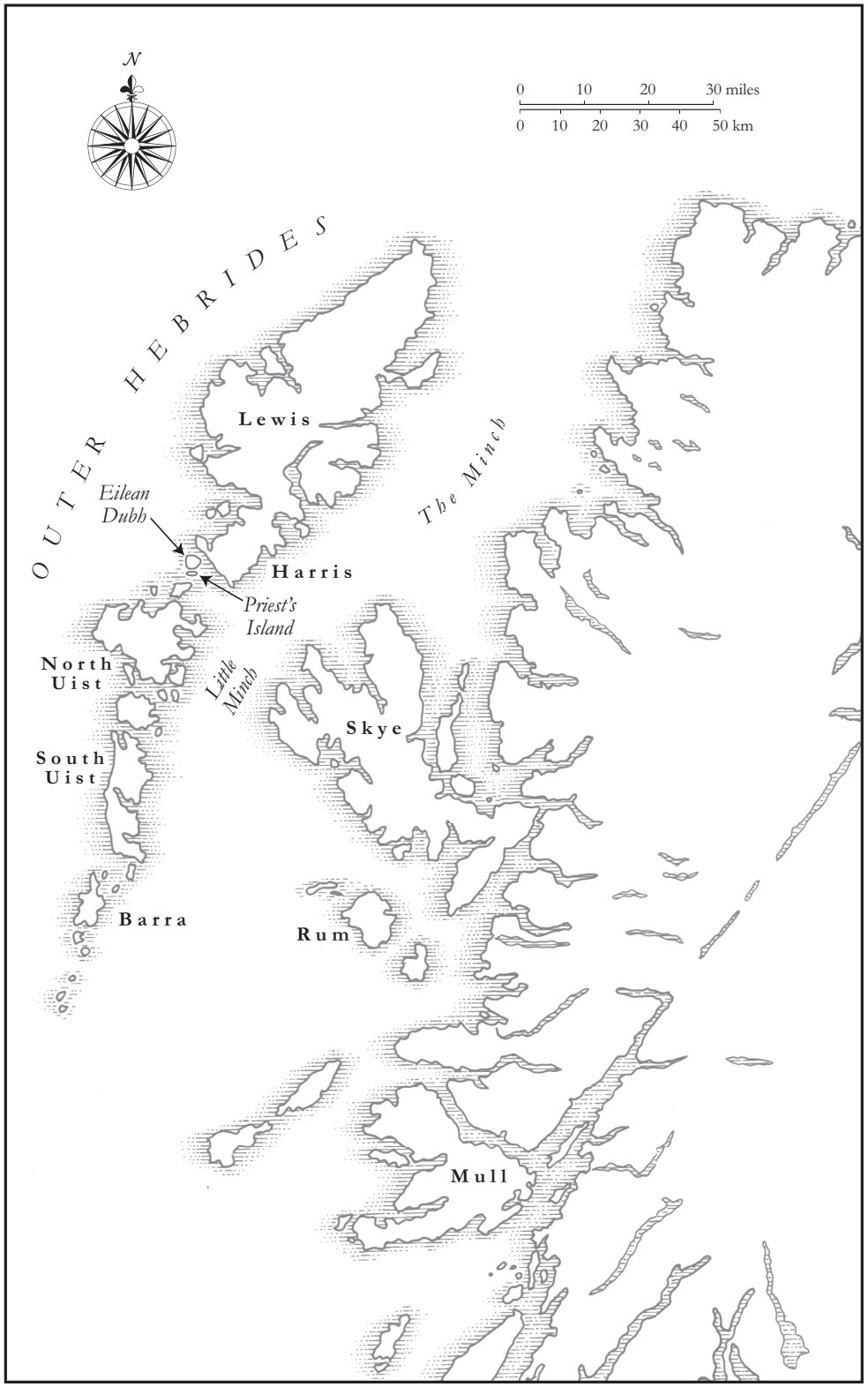
In my research, I read a large number of books. Among those that informed me were *Sea Room* by Adam Nicolson; *Atlantic* by Simon Winchester; *The Old Ways* by Robert Macfarlane; *The Scottish Islands* by Hamish Haswell-Smith; *The Raven* by Derek Ratcliffe; *The Birds of Scotland*, published by the Scottish Ornithologists' Club; the *Collins Bird Guide*; *The Egg Collectors of Great Britain and Ireland* by A. C. Cole and W. M. Trobe; and the Clyde Cruising Club's Sailing Directions to the Outer Hebrides. I also made use of the article 'Erythrism in the Eggs of British Birds' by The Rev. F. C. R. Jourdain and Clifford Borrer, which was published in *British Birds* in 1914.

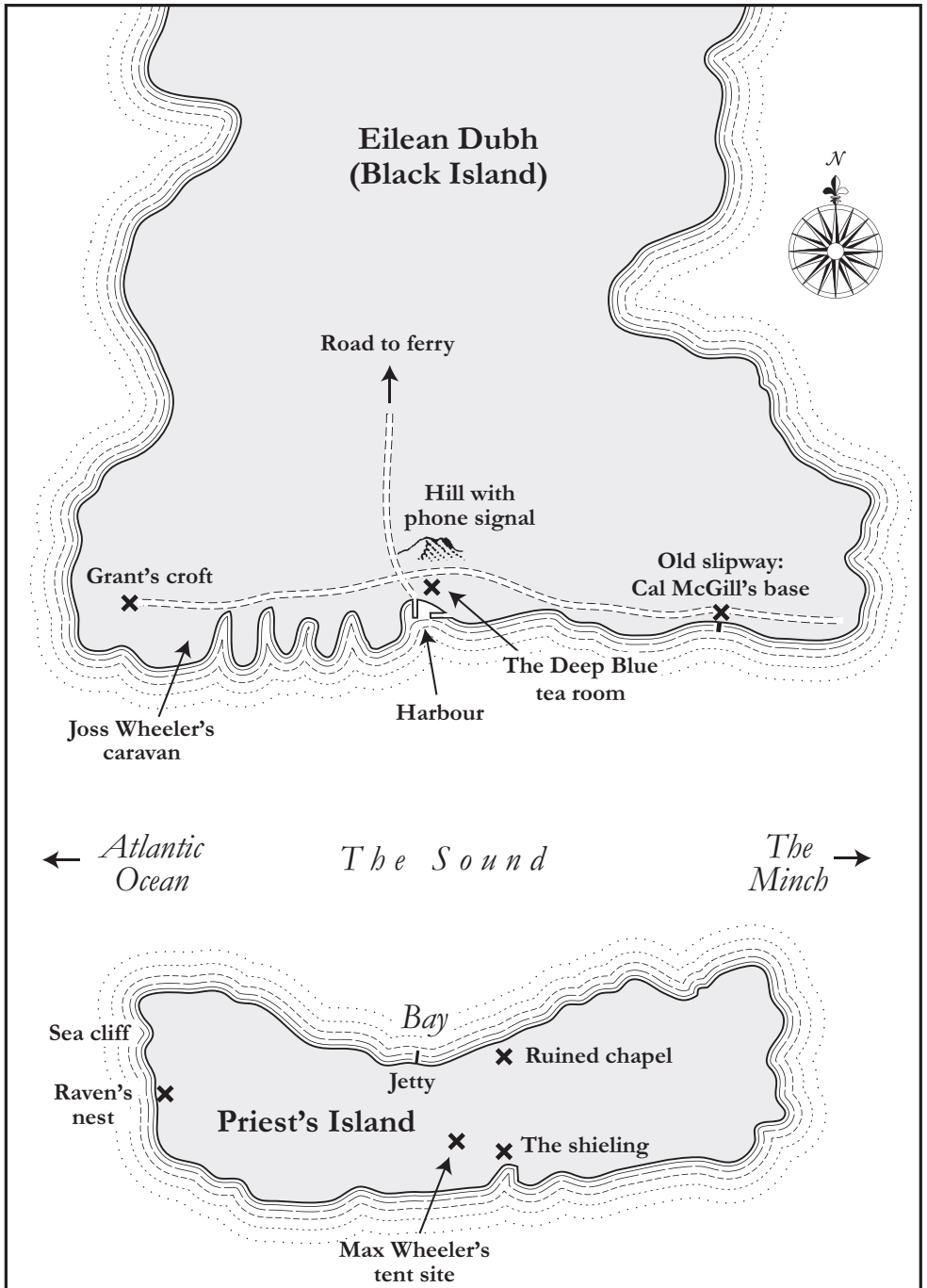
As with the previous books in this series, the places I describe are mostly fictional. That includes the two islands which feature in this story – Priest's Island and Eilean Dubh. Although there are other Scottish islands with similar names,

these are not them. My reason for inventing places is to avoid imposing a fictional plot on an island community that has a rich and interesting history of its own.


GREENLAND
Hudson Bay
Labrador Current
CANADA
USA
Gulf Stream
ATLANTIC
North Equatorial Current


Norwegian Sea
ICELAND
NORTHERN EUROPE
North Atlantic Current
North Sea
EUROPE
Slope Current
OCEAN
Canary Current
AFRICA
Cold/cool currents
Warm currents


N
0 10 20 30 miles
0 10 20 30 40 50 km
OUTER HEBRIDES
Lewis
The Minch
Eilean Dubh
Harris
Priest's Island
North Uist
Little Minch
Skye
South Uist
Barra
Rum
Mull


Eilean Dubh
(Black Island)
N
Road to ferry
Hill with
phone signal
Grant's croft
Old slipway:
Cal McGill's base
The Deep Blue
tea room
Harbour
Joss Wheeler's
caravan
Atlantic
Ocean
The Sound
The
Minch
Bay
Sea cliff
Ruined chapel
Jetty
Raven's
nest
Priest's Island
The shieling
Max Wheeler's
tent site

I

A few hours: wasn't that what Dr Lipman said? Cal McGill checked the time. Midnight had come and gone and Millie was still floating. 'Sink,' he said, 'for God's sake, sink.' He let out more rope in silent encouragement. Rather than settling lower in the water, she drifted away. Her skin turned sparkly and silver in the moonlight, making her bobbing motion appear nonchalant, even defiant. As if she was enjoying the attention. As if she was putting on some kind of valedictory show. 'Millie, sink.' Cal spoke softly in case his voice travelled over the water. In case anyone heard him talking to a dead pig. In case he was caught breaking the rules for disposing of dead farm animals. Some things were hard to explain even if the purpose was research.

Waiting for the tug of the rope to announce Millie's descent, Cal allowed himself a moment's annoyance at having to skulk in the night like a Victorian body snatcher. How often had he read about other researchers being feted for their work using pigs as human proxies? For instance, there was that Montana study where pig corpses were left to rot on land – on the surface as well as in trenches. Since the animals had similar organs to humans and similar bacteria in their intestines, the findings were considered significant for forensic science. More recently, Cal had seen a report in a scientific journal about pig carcasses being submerged and tethered in the Pacific off British Columbia. The purpose was to study how quickly sea lice, crabs and other scavengers dismantled the corpses and to provide accuracy in estimating time of

death when human bodies washed ashore or were recovered at sea.

In Cal's opinion, there was other interesting work to be done, using pigs to measure how the rate of decomposition was affected by different wave and weather conditions and how rotting, bloating and predation affected speed or direction of travel. Since pigs were relatively hairless and their bodies often similar in size to human torsos, Cal thought they could be proxies in his area of investigation too.

The disappearance of fourteen-year-old Max Wheeler from Priest's Island in the Outer Hebrides was a case in point. According to the family's lawyer, the boy was small for his age. He was five-feet one and weighed in at one hundred pounds, give or take. So Millie was approximately right, at one hundred and fourteen. Anyway, at short notice, she was as near as Cal could manage. Available dead pigs of the right weight didn't come his way that often. Or ever before, come to think of it.

In life, Millie had belonged to Steve, a smallholder in Cromarty and secretary of a whale-watching group to which Cal emailed cetacean sightings. Occasionally, driving south from Sutherland, Cal would drop by with a load of beached timber for Steve's wood burner. In return he would be offered honey, bantam eggs or, in one unusual mid-morning barter, a muddy porcine corpse. Staring at it disconsolately, Steve described Millie as a good little pig and wondered if Cal might have a use for her in his research into how bodies travelled at sea. He'd prefer that to be Millie's fate than the knackers' yard or a maggot farm, two of the disposals ordered by regulation. Three and a half hours later Cal was back at his office-cum-bedsit in an industrial estate in Leith, the port district of Edinburgh. He had to eject various contorted and iced sea creatures from his chest freezer in the

storeroom to make way for Millie's stiffened corpse. Waiting for the opportunity to deploy her, he had time for further investigation into her usefulness.

Would Millie's fat content and distribution make her more buoyant than a human body? If they did, the carcass would sit higher in the water and the wind would have greater influence on where she drifted. Exactly how Millie would float was another concern. Humans usually lay on their front, heads hanging and filled with blood from the pull of gravity. Were pigs the same? Cal searched the internet for pictures of dead pigs and found dozens showing bloated carcasses in the Huangpu River in China. They were lying on their sides. The sight of so many muddy-pink bodies stretched drum-tight prompted a further question, about bloating. After death, humans typically floated for a while, sank and resurfaced with the gases of decomposition. Would the same apply to pigs and in roughly the same time frame? He found the name of the researcher leading the British Columbia study, a Dr Ruth Lipman. A search of her institution's website yielded her email address. Cal sent a list of questions and, for academic credibility, also mentioned his PhD, attaching an abstract of his dissertation. It described his research into currents in the North-East Atlantic and the computer program he had devised for tracking flotsam, including bodies.

She replied promptly and briefly. 'I don't think pigs would behave in the water exactly the same as humans – due to body shape and distribution of fat – but it's hard for me to say since that's not my area of research. Pigs do float at first – there's a lot of fat in the butt area that holds them up. They sink after a few hours and, depending on depth, will bloat and refloat. When I've been working in shallow water I tether them so I don't lose them. In my present work, though, the depths are too great for bloat and refloat.'

Cal read the email again after the lawyer's call about Max Wheeler and studied charts of the sound between Priest's Island, 170 acres of uninhabited hill, bracken and rock, and its larger, inhabited neighbour to the north, Eilean Dubh or 'Black Island'. Driving to the ferry, the dead pig unfreezing under a tarpaulin in the back of his pickup, Cal decided he would start off by tethering Millie too. Given what the lawyer had said about the possibility of the Wheeler boy being weighted down, Cal would wait for Millie to sink then let her go. Otherwise, considering her buoyancy and the tidal forces in the sound, she could drift a long way on the surface before sinking. From what he'd read about the one-kilometre wide stretch of sea separating the two islands, currents of three knots were commonplace. At the biggest tides, called spring tides because they spring or rise up, they could reach five or even seven knots where there were constrictions. According to the historical data, spring tides occurred the night Max Wheeler disappeared.

Studying the charts, Cal saw constrictions and obstacles everywhere. He'd consulted a book of Hebridean sailing directions which warned against 'unwary yachtsmen being tempted by the prospect of a scenic interlude'. Not only were the sound's tidal streams prone to being diverted at right angles because of reefs, rocks and other obstructions, but there was also the danger of choppy seas or worse – large, standing waves – caused by the wind blowing against the tide. Apparently, this was a routine risk in the sound since the flood flowed into both ends almost simultaneously. If the wind was either easterly or westerly, difficult and often dangerous conditions could be encountered at one or other entrance. Afterwards Cal read a diver's blog for an underwater perspective. According to its author, the stretch of sea north of Priest's Island was unlike anywhere

else he had experienced. Instead of the tidal stream increasing slowly, the flood started at full strength with the change of tide. Bang. One moment there was calm, the kelp upright; the next it was horizontal with boulders tumbling along the bottom. 'Not to be advised, especially when visibility is almost zero from the scouring of the sea bottom,' the diver reported.

Since it was night when Max Wheeler disappeared, Cal decided to put Millie in the main channel leading to the harbour at the southern end of Eilean Dubh. The current would be least obstructed there but it was also a likely place for a killer making an escape to have disposed of the teenager's body. At night, the channel was the safest and quickest route to navigate. According to the lawyer, Cal should work on the theory that Max's body was discarded in the panic of the moment and with materials to hand. He suggested the boy might have been wrapped up in netting filled with stones and tied with rope or some other improvisation. Cal said nothing but wondered if he should fit Millie with a tracker. On balance, given the legal situation, he decided it was better the pig didn't lead back to him. Trouble seemed to find him anyway. Wasn't waving it hello unnecessary?

Instead, he attached a small orange buoy to Millie's girth on twenty-five metres of rope. So long as she stayed in the relatively shallow water of the sound, Cal would be able to see where the underwater currents and eddies took her before she bloated; where, too, they might have taken Max's body. Cal expected Millie to experience the marine equivalent of being in a pinball machine, her pink body ricocheting from one obstruction to the next.

While Cal waited for Millie to sink, he made a bet. Three days, perhaps four, then she'd bloat and float and be washed ashore. In an area of sea like this, with islets, skerries and

rocks, she'd find it hard to escape even with such strong currents. Why, he wondered, hadn't that happened with Max Wheeler? In shallow coastal waters, it was unusual for bodies to disappear, even those that had been weighted down. The reason was simple. From what Cal had read – his experience too – murderers and suicides underestimated how buoyant bodies became once decay set in. Stones dropped into pockets or even boulders put into sacks and tied to a victim's ankles would often be ineffective after a while. In the case of the stones, they might not be heavy enough once bloating began. With a sack or sandbag tied round an ankle, they could become detached by a process called disarticulation – not just the feet, but hands, even the head coming loose with decomposition. Then, having shaken off its ballast, the body would float and probably be washed on to land. Which made Cal wonder: since Max Wheeler was never found, why was the lawyer so certain he'd been dumped at sea?

The rope tightened and ran through his hands. Cal checked the time: another half an hour before the tide reached its low point. 'Good girl,' he said into the blackness where Millie had slipped out of sight without so much as a farewell gurgle. Cal held on to the rope until he heard the lazy slap of slack water against the RIB. It sounded like applause for Millie's good timing – knowing that just before the start of the next flood tide was when she was supposed to leave the stage. 'Brava, Millie,' Cal said, dropping the remaining rope and marker buoy overboard. 'Brava.' And, taking up the rhythm of the sea, he clapped.

The cold kept Cal awake. A north-easterly breeze penetrated the pickup's ill-fitting windows. He drank coffee for warmth and listened to a download of a radio programme from a series

called 'Stranger than Fiction'. It concerned an incident that had happened three months after Max Wheeler's disappearance. A party of kayakers had visited Priest's Island and pitched their tents in the shelter of the ruined chapel beside the bay on the north shore. 'But they slept uneasily,' according to the programme's narrator, 'and, next morning, they paddled across the sound between Priest's Island and Eilean Dubh to visit the Deep Blue tea room by the harbour, where they asked Bella MacLeod, the owner, about a disturbance in the night.'

The oldest member of the group, a retired professor, recalled their conversation. 'Ha, ha, yes, I remember feeling rather awkward trying to describe the odd noise we'd heard. I think I called it "eerie" and my two companions, also retired academics, said something like "ethereal" and "rhythmic, kind of weird". You see, we didn't want to ask Bella outright about ghosts or whether the chapel had a reputation for being haunted because she might think we were drunk, mad, or, worse still considering our university backgrounds, superstitious.'

According to the narrator, Bella pressed them for a better description while she took their orders. 'Eerie, you say?'

'Yes, very,' the retired professor replied.

'Going louder and softer . . . vibrating . . . some squawking?'

'Exactly that,' said the professor.

Then Bella herself took up the story. 'Well, I recall saying, "No one's ever mentioned storm petrels being on Priest's Island before, but they're the only creatures that make a noise like that at night".'

The professor remembered 'my relief that rationality as well as ornithology had provided a solution.'

The narrator continued, 'After bringing coffee and orange cake, Bella returned with two guides to British birds, open at

the relevant pages. She proceeded to read out excerpts.' Then Bella's voice cut in: '"Only comes ashore in the nesting season and under cover of darkness . . . lays its eggs in burrows, among rocks or crevices of ruined buildings . . . makes a purring sound with interposed grunts, like stomach rumbling."

'When I put the books on the table for the men to read for themselves, the oldest of the three, the retired professor, asked me about the bird's size and I traced a circle with my index finger of my left hand on the palm of my right. I said a storm petrel was no bigger than a house martin and its plumage was similarly dark and with a white rump.'

'What did you do next?' the narrator inquired.

Bella had tapped the illustration. 'I said, "I think you'll find that's your ghost".'

After a pause, the narrator said, 'The kayakers departed to explore islands further north but, the following week, talk in the Deep Blue tea room turned again to storm petrels and superstition. Waiting for the mobile bank to make its weekly visit to the car park outside, Bella was talking to Ina Gillies, at seventy-nine the township's oldest inhabitant and self-appointed keeper of its history and folklore. Bella mentioned storm petrels being on Priest's Island . . . and this was Ina's reply.'

'I told her about my husband Neil's respect for the birds.' Ina's voice trembled with nerves and emotion. She cleared her throat before carrying on. 'He's no longer with us – God rest him – but whenever he came across storm petrels while out fishing he would stop what he was doing, raise his cap and say a few words. Storm petrels, he always used to tell me, were the wandering souls of sailors lost at sea. And then I said to Bella, "It would make you wonder why there are petrels on the island now when there haven't been any

before . . . whether it's not the soul of that missing boy Max returning."

'Bella said she didn't think Max could be thought of as a sailor, but I said, "Indeed he was. Didn't the boy sail to Priest's Island with his father all the way from the south of England?"'

After another dramatic pause, the narrator told how a visiting expert on seabirds gave sustenance to Ina's theory later that summer. Investigating new storm petrel territories, he went to the island and reported only one occupied nest site in the ruined chapel. It was deep within the seaward wall, close to where the kayakers had pitched their tents. The expert, a Dr Harry Livesey from Edinburgh University, spoke with scientific precision, clearly as worried as the kayakers about appearing susceptible to Hebridean superstition. 'A solitary nesting pair is atypical for the species. Storm petrels usually nest in colonies, often hundreds if not thousands strong.'

The narrator again: 'The Deep Blue tea room was abuzz with the news. After one of the biggest police searches ever conducted in these far-flung islands, had Ina, guardian of the township's folk history, stumbled on a clue to the fate of young Max Wheeler? Could one of the nesting petrels – also known as water-witches – have been the boy's returning soul and did that mean he had not been murdered on the island, as the police believe, but had died accidentally at sea?'

Cal let the concluding music play out before switching on his torch. He poured more coffee from the flask and began to flick through a file of newspaper cuttings. He stopped at a first anniversary feature about the 'Max Murder Mystery' published in the *Daily Mail*, with a subsidiary heading: 'Boy's Fate Lost in Hebridean Fog'. Underneath was a report from the Deep Blue, 'the gathering place for the scattered township at the

southern end of Eilean Dubh'. The writer described how the story of Max Wheeler's soul returning to neighbouring Priest's Island was dropped into tea room conversation 'as a matter of routine whenever strangers appeared'. It suggested the locals were 'naive, gullible or being wilfully obstructive'. But from Cal's reading another interpretation was likely. It was that the inhabitants had latched on to the only explanation available which pointed to the boy drowning and to his disappearance being a tragic if preventable accident. The alternative was to believe one of their own responsible for his death when, to a man and a woman, they thought culpability lay with the sea and, by extension, with the negligence of the boy's father. One anonymous regular at the tea room was reported as saying, 'What was David Wheeler thinking, allowing Max to spend the night alone on such a barren and wild place as Priest's Island? In all likelihood, the boy lost his way in the dark and stumbled over a cliff or took fright and tried to swim back to his father and sisters sleeping in the boat moored in the bay. Whichever it was, considering how fast the currents run in the sound and how cold the water is in March, it would have taken a miracle for him to survive. A miracle . . .' Another tea room interviewee in the *Scotsman* hinted at David Wheeler's southern ignorance of Hebridean conditions even though he owned Priest's Island. 'Thank goodness,' she said, 'the three girls had the sense to spend the night on board the boat. Heaven knows what disasters there would have been otherwise.'

Such township opinions, Cal discovered, were reported more briefly and grudgingly as time went on. The media fell in line behind the theory posited by the police and David Wheeler that the boy's disappearance and probable death were caused by criminality, not some unforeseen accident; a cold-blooded murder motivated by envy or unjustified grievance about land rights or a combination of the two and

stoked by alcohol. Every cutting carried a photograph of Wheeler's thirty-foot boat, the *Jacqueline*, and of Max with his blond hair. The stories, captions and headlines described him as 'tragic golden boy', a catch-all reference to his colouring, looks and the death of Jackie, his mother, in a car accident when he was eleven. The *Jacqueline* was named after her.

By the time the kayakers arrived for late breakfast in the Deep Blue three months after Max's disappearance, the media had judged the inhabitants complicit in murder. Reading the stories, Cal understood why the township had turned in on itself – behaviour which was portrayed as a conspiracy of concealment. If he had lived there, Cal would have become hostile too. Every one of the twenty-seven houses scattered around the southern tip of Eilean Dubh had been searched. So had garages, cars and boats, some more than twice and, on occasion, in the middle of the night or at dawn, as though the police had been tipped off about the boy's body being moved or some other incriminating evidence being hidden. Dogs and mountain rescue teams had hunted hill, bog and coast. Divers had searched the many islets and skerries in the sound. Local men, including Donald Grant, the last tenant to graze his sheep on Priest's Island, and his teenage nephew Ewan Chisholm, had been taken in for questioning. B&B bookings had been cancelled. Eilean Dubh was consistently referred to in media reports by its English translation, Black Island, as though the historic name foreshadowed the later dark deed of its inhabitants.

The boy's disappearance blighted the township and continued to do so five years later. This was largely thanks to David Wheeler marking each anniversary with a memorial service on Priest's Island and commissioning a series of experts to review the evidence and to pursue fresh lines of inquiry since the police investigation had fallen dormant

from lack of leads. According to the newspapers, this was Wheeler's way of letting the township know he would never give up and that his resolve to find his son's killer or killers was greater than theirs to keep him, her or them hidden. At first the experts excited renewed bursts of publicity but in the last two years they were limited to brief mentions of the person's identity.

There had been a retired chief constable from England; a US private detective referred to as T. C. Clancy; a forensic archaeologist who dug holes everywhere and was found in one of them, according to a mischievous diary piece, drunk and singing late at night. Then there was a botanist who studied both of the islands for unexpected plant growth or patches of fertility, and, last year, a former French intelligence officer whose speciality was taking and analysing high resolution aerial photography. His helicopter had clattered over the islands for days.

The last cutting Cal read was the most recent and longer than some. It was half a dozen paragraphs and tucked away on page eight of the *Herald*. It said that this year the inquiry would be conducted by Dr Caladh McGill, a thirty-year-old oceanographer with 'expertise in tracking objects at sea'. There was the usual complaint from the township about unwarranted persecution as well as linked speculation about Wheeler's worsening financial situation and whether this would be the last investigation. The family's home in Southampton was being sold to keep creditors at bay; his boat hire business in Southampton had gone into receivership with little prospect of resuscitation given the economic climate. According to an anonymous employee, the inattention of David Wheeler – 'his blind obsession with his son Max' – was to blame for the company's downfall. The remark exuded bitterness, implying Wheeler's

duty was to the living and their families, not to the disappeared or dead.

Cal woke to the sun shining weakly through the opaque fug of the Toyota's windows. He yawned, stretched and upset the file of papers on his chest which set off an avalanche. A map, his laptop and torch slid on to the pickup's floor, joining discarded food wrappers and his wet boots. Cal swore and opened the door, his unintended and uncomfortable pillow during the four hours he had been sleeping on the pickup's back seat. His head fell into the gap. Outside, the air was fresh and still; the sky a hazy blue. Staring upwards, Cal wondered what time it was: ten, maybe eleven. Remembering the empty flask of coffee, he groaned and pulled himself up. His left hand gripped the headrest of the front seat while the right found his binoculars. Reversing out through the open doorway, he stretched one leg then the other. He squinted again at the sun. More like eleven, he thought, as he climbed on to the Toyota's back to get some height before scanning the sound. Although it was calm, Cal noticed flares of white water and swirls of turbulence which told of submerged rocks or reefs as well as of a restless energy, as if the sea could barely restrain itself from causing havoc, even on such a gentle spring day.

Cal spotted the orange buoy which was attached to Millie east and north of where he had left her during the night. She was still within the sound, between two skerries, and now probably sheltered from the ebb tide that was more than three hours old. Moving his binoculars along the coast of Priest's Island his attention was taken by a boat moored in the bay. It must have arrived that morning since nothing had been there the night before. The craft had a single mast and a covered

wheelhouse. Even at that distance, the disrepair was evident. Cal saw dents and scrapes on its hull as well as paintwork damage, including the name. The tail of the 'q' and the final 'e' had all but disappeared from 'Jacqueline'. While he watched, a figure appeared at the entrance to the wheelhouse: a man. There was something about the way he held himself, a tension, which revealed his emotional torment. Like the sound itself, with its flares and eddies, he seemed scarcely able to maintain control. He stood for four maybe five minutes while Cal watched. Suddenly, he put his head back and his mouth opened into a gash extending across his face. Cal was too far away for any noise to carry but, a moment later, he heard a gull's call, a poignant sound; as if the bird was copying the anguished cry of a father making his annual return to the scene of his son's death. It was Cal's introduction to David Wheeler.