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Well of the Winds

Written by Denzil Meyrick

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WELL OF THE WINDS

A D.C.I. Daley Thriller

Denzil Meyrick

Polygon

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To Mary Anderson, our neighbour and friend

'He who was living is now dead,
We who were living are now dying . . .'

T S Eliot, *The Waste Land*

PROLOGUE

Kinloch, 1945

He'd always known this moment would come. He reached into the deep pocket of his gabardine raincoat, feeling the reassuring heft of the blade, and closed his fist over the wooden handle.

Out on the loch, beneath the full moon, a dozen grey warships loomed, framed by the roofs and spires of Kinloch and the hills beyond that cocooned the town. Elsewhere, a bright night like this was dreaded: cities, towns and villages picked out in the moonlight, prey to waves of enemy bombers, or, worse still, the spine-chilling whine of the new super weapon: the doodlebug. Not so, on Scotland's distant west coast – here, there was a safe haven.

Crouched behind a boulder down on the causeway, he could hear the breeze tugging at the rough grass that fringed the rocky shoreline, and the hiss and sigh of the sea.

The stuttering engine of a car could be heard winding its way along the coast road from Kinloch, which skirted the lochside before disappearing into the hills. The headlights cast a weak golden beam, sweeping across the field behind

him. The engine stopped with a shudder and the lights flickered out as the vehicle pulled up to the causeway.

The man held his breath as a car door opened and then slammed shut.

It was time.

The beam of a torch flashed across the waves. A rat scurried away from the light. He inhaled the cool air, tainted by the stench of rotting seaweed. The footsteps were getting closer now, scuffing across the rocks in his direction.

‘Hello . . . are you there?’ The voice was deep and resonant with no hint of trepidation. For a heartbeat, he wondered how the end of existence could creep up so suddenly. Was there no primeval instinct at work, protecting frail flesh, bone and breath?

He stepped out from behind the boulder, shielding his eyes from the glare of the torch.

‘What in hell’s name are you doing here?’

Though the question was brusque, the voice was calm, almost uninterested. He watched as the man turned the beam of the torch back along the way he’d come and firmly pulled down his trilby when a gust of wind threatened to send it spinning into the waves.

Ignoring the question, he rushed him from behind, hooked his left arm around the man’s neck and snaked his right arm across the man’s waist. Up and twist, right under the ribcage, as he’d been taught – plunging into him again and again. There was only fleeting resistance as the sharp blade did its job. The man had been completely unprepared for the attack – just as they’d said he would be. His victim tensed, convulsed, and then went limp. A gurgle – a plea – came from the depth of his throat, as his life drained away.

Aided by his assailant, who took his weight, the dying man slipped gently to the ground.

He dragged the body behind the boulder that had been his hiding place, almost losing his nerve when a deep sigh – the last sign of life – issued from the victim’s gaping mouth. Leaving the corpse propped up behind the boulder, he got to his feet and took deep gulps of the tangy sea air.

He waited, with only the thud of his heart in his ears and the restless surf for company. It had been as easy as they’d predicted.

In what must only have been minutes, but seemed like hours, he heard another car making its way slowly along the causeway road towards him.

His job was done. The greater good had prevailed – the greater good must always prevail.

1

Gairsay, an island off the coast of Kintyre, the present day

Malcolm McAuley whistled along to the radio. It was his last delivery of the day and he was feeling cheerful. He collected the mail off the first ferry at seven every morning in his guise as the island's only postman. When he'd taken on the job, almost ten years ago, his task had been the delivery of letters, but now that his fellow islanders were taking advantage of online shopping, he delivered mainly parcels. With fewer than two hundred souls on Gairsay, an island just over five miles long and one and a half broad, his daily routine rarely took more than an hour.

It was how he liked it. McAuley had many other tasks to perform in the course of his day.

He turned the Royal Mail van onto the rough track that led to Achnamara, the farm belonging to the Bremners. He'd known the family all of his life, as he had most of the island's residents. He always remembered old Mr Bremner fondly. Though the man rarely spoke about his past, everyone knew he'd escaped the Nazis by the skin of his teeth. The rumour was that, with his wife, he had made the hazardous journey across war-torn Europe, before reaching safety and a new home on this tiny island off the west coast of Scotland.

Though they made little of it, ornaments and other religious paraphernalia in their home made it obvious that the family were Jewish. However, keen to play their part in the community, they soon began attending the kirk like everybody else, treating the services as more of a social event than an act of religious devotion. They were good, kind people, who had quickly become part of the tight-knit island community.

Achnamara, like the rest of the farms, had once belonged to the company who owned the island. In the main, they were benign landlords, though through a series of tough factors they made sure that the land they owned yielded all it could. Back in the forties, when old Alex Grieve and his wife – childless and worn out by years of hard toil – had become unable to work the farm to its full potential, they'd been quietly retired and a place found for them in a small cottage in Gairsay's main settlement, the village of Prien. The Bremner family had moved in to Achnamara, and had been there ever since, eventually buying the farm from the island's proprietors in the sixties.

Though similar offers had been made to other tenant farmers, they'd been unable to find enough cash, so the six other farms on Gairsay remained in the hands of the company, until the island was bought by its population in 1999, a landmark purchase in Scotland that heralded similar transactions by remote communities across the country.

Old Mr Bremner, big, strong and jovial had died in the eighties, but his wife Jan was still alive and thriving in her dotage. The work of the farm had long since been taken on by the next generation. Though farming was the family's main livelihood, they also fished for crab and lobster, using a small boat they kept tied up to a rickety pier by the shore.

The package McAuley was carrying today was addressed to Jan, so he looked forward to a chat with the old woman over a cup of tea and a slice of the delicious cake that always seemed to be in plentiful supply.

The main farmhouse was newly whitewashed and looked as pristine as ever. Unusually, there was no sign of life in the yard, though McAuley heard a cow lowing balefully in an outbuilding.

He collected the small parcel from the back of the van and rapped on the front door, which was painted bright red. As was his habit in almost every dwelling on the island when there was no reply, he turned the heavy brass knocker, engraved with the family name, and opened the door.

'Hello! It's the post. Is anybody about?' he called, expecting to be greeted by a family member. All was quiet, so he called again.

He looked into the large bright lounge, where, because of the chill of the March morning, a fire blazed in the hearth. However, nobody was there.

Down the hallway, he was sure he'd find someone in the kitchen, but, worryingly, though two plates of bacon and eggs were sitting on the large wooden table, the room was empty. A pan of milk had boiled over, and dark smoke was issuing from the range, filling the room with an acrid smell. Wrapping his hand in a tea towel, he removed the blackened pan from the stove, then placed it in the Belfast sink, sending clouds of steam into the air when he turned on the cold tap.

He almost tripped over a chair, pitched over on the far side of the table. He set it back upright and made his way out of the kitchen, calling again in the hope that someone would reply.

Nothing.

After climbing the stairs and checking the bedrooms, he thudded back to the ground floor and made his way to the back door of the farmhouse. He turned the old brass key in the lock and pushed the door open, scanning the fields beyond. The grass was a dull green under the grey sky, with only a few sheep dotted here and there on the pasture. An old mare whinnied at the sight of the postman and trotted expectantly to the fence.

It was as though the family had been in the house only minutes before his arrival, then vanished.

Across the fields was the bungalow where Jan's grandson and his wife lived. They ran the farm, so it was likely that some kind of meeting was taking place, he thought. After patting the horse, he set off quickly along the lane towards the dwelling, certain that he would find the Bremners there.

The Glasgow cemetery sprawled untidily over the hillside. Daley shivered as he made his way through ranks of grave-stones and other, more elaborate monuments to the dead.

Thoroughly lost, he stopped a maintenance man and asked where the most recent burials were to be found.

'Up there, big man,' he replied, jerking his thumb over his shoulder. 'The newest graves is on the top o' the hill.'

Daley walked slowly in that direction. He paused at a grave upon which a white teddy bear had been placed on top of some toys and a huge wreath: *Miss you for ever, Toby. Deepest sadness, Mum and Dad xx*, the card read.

He knelt down to read another tribute, written in a child's hand and placed in a clear plastic bag to protect it from the

elements. The rain had got in, blurring the ink, but Daley could still read it.

You were my wee brother, and I love you. You were taken away to heaven. Now you're an angel. Please watch over me.

The big policeman got stiffly to his feet and sighed.

He'd wanted to go to the funeral, but had been dissuaded from doing so by a phone call. 'I know what you did, and you're not welcome.' The words had echoed in his head ever since.

He watched a crow hop along the path ahead of him, then rise in flight, squawking as it came to land on a black marble headstone. The bird's cry, harsh and intrusive, echoed amongst the graves. Though Daley could see cars, factories, roads and people in the distance, none of the sounds of the city seemed to reach this place. Only the wind whining through the gravestones, punctuated by the cawing of the crow, filled his ears.

For no reason he stopped at a gleaming grey granite headstone, brand new and carved in the shape of a heart.

MARY ELIZABETH DUNN, TAKEN TOO SOON was all he could read before the breath caught in his throat.

In the weeks since her funeral, the sods of green turf used to cover the grave of DC Mary Dunn were still a patchwork, like squares on a chessboard. The winter had been cold, but spring was on its way. Soon the soil would seal her in the tomb in which she would lie for eternity.

Faded red roses lay at the foot of the stone. *Love you for ever, Angus x.*

Daley had a bouquet of yellow roses. Through his tears, he could make out the message he'd written on the card: *For what should have been.*

He wasn't sure how he'd expected to feel. But, in the end, the emotion was the same as the last time he'd gone to place flowers on his mother's grave: emptiness – the absence of being, a void where once had been the warmth of love. Despite himself, he thought of the bodies he'd had to watch being exhumed in the course of his duties as a police officer. The thought of the beautiful, fresh-faced woman he'd loved so much rotting away under his feet almost made him scream out loud.

It was really over. Something in him now, silently, reluctantly, accepted she was gone. The pain in his heart brought more stinging tears to his eyes and he wanted to sink to his knees and sob.

He turned and walked away from the grave, tossing the flowers into the first waste bin he came to.

The block of flats stood near the centre of Milngavie, an upmarket area to the north of Glasgow. As he parked in the street Daley looked up to the second floor, his destination. Should he do this? He felt he had to.

He trudged up two flights of stairs, feeling his age, feeling more than his age. In the last few weeks, he'd barely been able to function. Everything in his life had changed. All the things he'd felt were certain and permanent had disappeared in an instant. Though he found it hard to give his feelings voice, he felt as though he wanted to give up, to put an end to it all. As was his way, though, he kept quiet and let silent cries fill his head, cries that were slowly driving him mad, sending him spiralling into a pit of despair.

The nameplate on the door read MRS G DUNN. He rang the bell and stepped back. As he heard movement inside

the flat, a voice in his head screamed at him to run, to flee this place. Despite this, he stood his ground, swallowing heavily as he heard a key turn in the lock.

The woman was in her late fifties, slightly built, with shadows under her blue eyes. Daley saw the echo of her daughter in her face, and was instantly lost for words.

At the same moment, the woman realised just who her visitor was and crossed her arms tightly over her chest, looking at the ground at Daley's feet and frowning.

'What do you want?' She gave each word its own space, as though she was speaking to a person for whom English was a foreign language.

'Can I come in?'

She hesitated for a moment, shook her head and stood back from the door, opening it just wide enough to admit her visitor.

At the end of the hallway, Daley could see the lounge door ajar, so headed automatically towards it.

'Not in there. Here,' she snapped, directing him into the kitchen. 'I need a coffee.'

He stood awkwardly as she boiled the kettle and deliberately filled only one mug. 'What do you want from me?'

'I couldn't leave things the way they were,' said Daley, shuffling from foot to foot like an errant schoolboy in front of the headmaster. 'I had to speak to you face to face. Do you understand?'

'For what reason? So that you can explain to me why you took advantage of a young woman who was in your charge? So that you can tell me why you made her life a misery, running back and forward to your tart of a wife while she pined for you? Wasting her life, what there was left of it. So

you can feel better about yourself?’ She paused. ‘Mary should have been having the time of her life with a young man of her own age, instead of mooning after a fat, selfish, washed-up excuse for a human being like you.’

‘That’s not how it was.’

‘Oh, really, just *how* was it, then?’

‘I loved her.’

‘You used her. She was young and pretty, and you used her. Don’t give me your midlife crisis shit. I had a husband just like you. Instead of being a father to his daughter, he spent his time chasing girls not much older than her. It’s pathetic!’

‘I just had to come and say I was sorry.’

‘Sorry? To hell with your “sorry”. She meant the world to me. She was my life, you bastard!’ She slammed the coffee mug onto the kitchen table, slopping the contents over her hand.

‘It was an accident, Gillian. You can’t blame me for that.’

‘An accident? The way I understand it, she’d just left her boyfriend’s after telling him their relationship was over. The roads were treacherous, she’d been working all night, yet she decided to pick that moment to finish it with a clever young man who would have made her happy. I wonder why that was?’

‘I shouldn’t have let her go, I know that. But she wanted to be honest with him . . .’

‘What do you know about honesty?’ Gillian Dunn slumped onto a chair and held her head in her hands. ‘We had no secrets, you know. She told me everything . . . everything about *you*.’

‘Well, you’ll know that we’d decided to make a go of it.’

‘You bastard! Do you know how you sound? Like a little boy – a stupid little boy. If she’d gone home and stayed there

that morning, she'd still be alive. Instead, to please you, she took her car out in the ice and snow to tell poor Angus that it was over. You don't have to be a fucking detective to work out *how* things worked out.'

'I'm sorry. I am so sorry. I've thought of nothing else for weeks.' Daley walked towards the woman and tried to touch her shoulder, to do something – anything – to ease the situation.

'Get your hands off me, you creep. In fact, get out. Get out before I call your colleagues and have you flung out.' Daley was momentarily rooted to the spot. 'Get the fuck out of my house!' she yelled, flinging the coffee mug at him.