

You loved your last book...but what  
are you going to read next?

Using our unique guidance tools, **Love**reading will help you find new  
books to keep you inspired and entertained.

---

**Opening Extract from...**

# **The Ghost of Helen Addison**

Written by Charles E. McGarry

Published by Polygon

All text is copyright © of the author

This Opening Extract is exclusive to **Love**reading.  
Please print off and read at your leisure.

---

# The Ghost of Helen Addison

The First Leo Moran Murder Mystery

CHARLES E. MCGARRY

*Polygon*

First published in Great Britain in 2017 by Polygon, an imprint of Birlinn Ltd, West Newington House, 10 Newington Road, Edinburgh EH9 1QS

[www.polygonbooks.co.uk](http://www.polygonbooks.co.uk)

1

Copyright © Charles E. McGarry, 2017

The right of Charles E. McGarry to be identified as the author of this work has been asserted in accordance with the Copyright, Design and Patent Act 1988.

All rights reserved.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses, places, events and incidents are either the products of the author's imagination or used in a fictitious manner. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental.

ISBN 9781 84697 379 6  
eBook ISBN 978 0 85790 347 1

*British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data*

A catalogue record for this book is available  
on request from the British Library.

Typeset by Biblichor Ltd, Edinburgh

To my beloved mother

*When I say, 'My bed will comfort me,  
My couch will ease my complaint,'  
Then You scare me with dreams  
And terrify me with visions*

THE BOOK OF JOB 7: 13-14

## PROLOGUE

*The beast walks in the night, determined to destroy something that is pure and good, and full of promise and beauty.*

*Leo Moran walks alongside it.*

He awoke, his pyjamas soaked with clammy sweat.

The bedroom was a sick chamber, optimally arranged to soothe his influenza which in wintertime stalked him like a hunter. Water jug and beaker, paracetamol, Lemsip, hot water bottle, basin and flannel, Vicks Vaporub.

Flu invariably became a mental trial for him as well as a physical one. His customary pomposity waned as the fever tormented him, and all of his iniquities and inadequacies were laid bare and brought to the fore. The sensations of the virus – the high temperatures and the horrid flavours in his sinus – awakened unsettling ghosts of influenzas past, of long-ago eras when he had struggled to cope. Was it just he who experienced this? By God, how he detested being ill, and how he dreaded the end: ‘Please, Lord, allow me to expire peacefully in my sleep – either that or let a sniper’s bullet dispatch me with minimal fuss.’

Inevitably, the process would then descend into an existential crisis, his faith barely holding fast as the banality of modern life was rammed home by daytime television. ‘They’d be as well putting on the bloody test card,’ he grumbled, wondering why he had bothered to drag the abominable box from its closet berth.

As the day progressed his fever relented, and although his muscles still ached, they did so less painfully now. He gazed out of the drawing-room window and noticed that the weather had turned foul. He hoped last night’s episode had just been a flu dream. But in his heart he knew. He knew it was real. The thrusting blade, the gouts of blood were all too

convincing. He resolved to avoid the day's news bulletins; he wasn't ready yet. He was still too weak. He would digest it tomorrow, in the morning paper.

Then decide what to do about it.

I

LOCH DHONN



## I

LEO ordered a taxi to drive him from his splendid Glasgow apartment to the railway station and spent the minutes it took to arrive checking – for the seventh time – that the ashes in the grate were dead, gases were turned off and electricity plugs were disconnected.

The driver was an odious, high-pitched little character, who quickly broached the subject of immigration and spat a racist word into the conversation. Leo requested that he refrain from such language, then, before the man had a chance to respond, pretended to busy himself with his mobile phone, during which he made great play of jotting down the cabbie's name and number in his notebook. Upon arrival at Queen Street station Leo paid him exactly – no tip – and took inordinate pleasure in counting out a stack of grubby coppers as part of the fare.

He purchased his ticket and stowed himself and his considerable quantity of monogrammed luggage in the foremost carriage of the Oban train, which was empty of other passengers. He rubbed his gnarled hands together as he settled down at a seat with a table, and produced a felt-lined box containing a little gold-rimmed glass with harp and shamrock motifs etched on it, and a silver flask with beautiful Celtic knotwork relief. He polished the glass with a napkin, filled it with a shot of Scotch from the flask, took a swig, and settled himself down for a snooze. After adjusting his velvet-lined slumber mask, he fell instantly into an uncomfortable sleep.

*A slight jolt of the train is an explosion of light within Leo's dimmed consciousness, followed by a split-second rush of the shockwave tearing the air as it rushes towards him.*

He jerked, both in his mind and in the physical world, to avoid the impact, and snapped out of the uncharacteristically brief vision. He found

himself blinded by the blast. Panicked, he reached for his eyes and felt the slippery texture of his mask. He tore it off to reveal yet another level of altered reality: massive patches of blond sand deposited upon the embankments of the West Highland Line. He blinked several times, unable to compute this weird phenomenon. Was he still dreaming? Was he locked within an endless nightmare of hallucinations? Then he realised – it was *snow*. Of course – the Scottish Highlands in winter. Snow.

Leo then endured a brief crisis of hypochondria brought on by the fact that his left leg had gone to sleep during his fitful nap. Having convinced himself that he was about to suffer a fatal stroke, he popped a Mogadon, mumbled a prayer, and urgently proceeded to jot down the hymnal for his funeral Mass, regretting having put the task off thus far. The onus was unsurprisingly on the side of gravitas – Mozart and Fauré – but the sentimentalist in him couldn't resist 'Hail, Queen of Heav'n, The Ocean Star' and then 'Be Still, My Soul' for the exeunt to the hearse. That'll have them weeping in the aisles, he mused morbidly, before realising that the feeling had by now returned to his lower limb and that the magic bullet had calmed his anxiety with its soporific charm. Despite that, he wondered with trepidation what the turnout would actually be at his funeral; he had fallen out with so many friends and associates over the years. He tried to number those who loved him, and pictured one of those melancholy, pitifully attended affairs: a rainy November day, a few old acquaintances shaking hands in the porch of a cold church and murmuring uneasy platitudes for the deceased, politely promising to meet up for a drink one of these days, a white lie at the ready to excuse themselves from attending the wake. Too much gravy and not enough meat in the steak pie.

Leo popped a consolatory segment of Fry's Orange Cream into his mouth, put his earphones in and switched on the radio, but the mountains blotted out the signal. Suddenly, he regretted his parsimony in not having invested in an iPod. 'Join the twenty-first century,' he could hear his friend Stephanie Mitchell, a procurator fiscal, tease. His phone vibrated on the table with a text alert. Coincidentally, it was from Stephanie: 'I told DI Lang 2 xpect u at Loch Dhonn.'

Bloody decent of her.

His thoughts turned to the murdered girl. The picture the police had released to the media was one of a pretty, petite brunette wearing a graduation gown, proudly clutching her nursing certificate, smiling out at

the world, full of anticipation and hope. He read the newspaper story for the tenth time:

Police have named the Loch Dhonn village murder victim as 22-year-old Helen Addison. The body of Miss Addison, a recently qualified district nurse, was found early on Thursday morning by a local man. She had several knife wounds. It is not yet clear whether Miss Addison had been sexually assaulted. Police said they are questioning Miss Addison's boyfriend Craig Hutton, 21, at an unnamed Glasgow station and that Mr Hutton was 'voluntarily helping them with their inquiries'.

Speaking for the Addison family, Mrs Grace Dunn, the victim's aunt, said: 'Helen was a lovely young woman, a beloved and valued daughter, sister, cousin, niece and friend, who had returned to her home community of Loch Dhonn as a newly qualified nurse. Her career choice was testament to her caring, compassionate nature. Words cannot begin to describe the devastation Helen's mum Lorna, dad Stuart and brother Callum are experiencing at this time. Her wider family, numerous friends and everyone whose lives Helen touched have been profoundly shocked by this wicked act.

'Someone, somewhere must know who did this. Perhaps they suspect a loved one. No matter how hard it seems I urge you to go to the police. Whoever is responsible may do it again unless you act. Please, you have the power to stop another family going through this hell.'

Leo thought about how the remains of poor Helen Addison would soon be ensconced within an obscure little patch of Scottish clay. And how brutally the months and years would rush by for the people who had loved her, denied her presence at their triumphs and festivities as she was now denied her own triumphs and festivities. The pang of guilt endured at each mundane task, as though performing it in her absence was in some small way a betrayal, an act of forgetting her. And as they speculated forevermore upon what she would have been, the lettering on the gravestone would quickly fade with lichen and the weather, and the rest of the world would march on, blind to the void of her absence.

He recalled his conversation with Stephanie, which had ended in discord when she had visited him three days ago.

'I might as well tell you: I'm going up there.'

‘Where?’

He had gestured towards the day’s newspaper, which lay front page up on the *chaise longue*.

‘Why?’

‘I had a vision. If I get to the scene of the crime I might be able to work out who the bastard is. Being there might stimulate my senses.’

‘When are you going?’

‘I’ve yet to decide. I fear if I arrive upon the locus too soon after the event the police may spurn my advances.’

‘You likely won’t be made welcome, regardless of how long you delay it.’

He had gazed out of the window, watching the rain whirl in the orange glow of the streetlamps and fall upon the riverbank across the road. Drops tap-tapped irregularly on the pane. She was right, of course; he probably wouldn’t be welcome. Furthermore, he mused, it takes a lot of pluck, or perhaps foolhardiness, to approach the authorities with information pertaining to a case. He knew from bitter experience that knowledge of a crime (pertinently, knowledge bestowed by a vision) tends to place the bearer under suspicion. But he felt he had no choice. He could not bear a repeat of the tragedy that had occurred when he hadn’t spoken up.

Leo disembarked at the quaint railway station at Fallasky, which was approximately eight miles from the village of Loch Dhonn. He was the only passenger to get off. He waited for the locomotive to pull away, then teetered across the line with his cases. A minicab was parked near to the station house. Leo approached it hopefully, and the driver, an affable-looking, slightly unkempt man with oily black hair who wore sports slacks, a tired, brown leather blouson jacket and NHS spectacles, cheerfully announced he was indeed for hire, got out and stowed the luggage in the boot. Leo climbed into the rear and tried to disguise his distaste for an unhygienic faux-sheep’s-wool throw draped over the seat.

After a while they were on a single-track road, snaking through wooded countryside towards their destination. At one point they passed a stand of pines upon some raised ground to Leo’s right, and he could catch tantalising glimpses of the silver surface of Loch Dhonn flashing through the gaps between their poker-straight trunks. Further on, the branches of a hundred snow-coated firs protruded over the road like

robed arms, their ghostly fingers pointing. For some of the journey they were stuck behind an HGV rig with no trailer, which laboured up a series of narrow inclines, its airbrakes hissing violently. The rural taxi driver remained patient, evidently a more amiable species than his urban cousin.

‘Terrible business up here,’ he ventured.

‘Terrible, terrible,’ agreed Leo.

‘Are you with the papers?’

‘No. I’m here on holiday, believe it or not.’

‘Oh.’

Leo was seized by the sudden realisation that the driver might take him for a ghoul. ‘I had already booked it. I’m up for the fishing, as a matter of fact,’ he blurted, before realising that this claim was fatally undermined by his conspicuous lack of angling gear. Silence descended for the remainder of the journey, and Leo decided to browse a local guidebook he spied tucked in a storage net attached to the rear of the passenger seat.

Loch Dhonn was a narrow freshwater lake, situated just below the immense diagonal fissure that splits Scotland in two. Running for thirteen miles in a jagged slash roughly from south to north-north-east in Argyll, it was over three hundred feet deep in parts and approximately a mile in width. The northern reaches were dotted with several small islands, some of which bore evidence of prehistoric and medieval settlements. At the northernmost point sat a Munro, Ben Corrach, a giant, bleak sentinel which rose to three thousand seven hundred feet and watched over the loch’s entire length. The scattered settlement that took its name from the loch was small, with little more than seventy permanent residents, although this was boosted by the transient population of the Loch Dhonn Hotel, which dominated the place. Loch Dhonn village was one of fewer than a dozen hamlets sprinkled down the loch’s eastern shoreline, which boasted a slightly better road than the facing bank. Apart from the hotel, built around an ancient hunting lodge in the 1840s during the grouse-shooting boom, there was a general store, a small community hall rebuilt in the 1960s, a Presbyterian kirk and, just to the north, a lovely Episcopalian church, as though plucked from a green and pleasant English dale and plonked down like a little curio within this majestic and savage valley.

They passed through some lower, sheltered ground: an expanse of squat trees, naked but for moss, ivy and flaking bark, their gnarled branches reaching out like the limbs of prehistoric beasts petrified

instantly by some sudden catastrophe. One particularly ancient dying specimen bore a likeness to a dragon, which had been accentuated by an imaginative local wit painting on a sinister pair of red eyes. It seemed to guard the northern extremity of the village. They crossed a little stone humpback bridge, negotiated a final, twisting climb, before descending into Loch Dhonn itself.

The original buildings clung mainly to the east side of the undulating road, which at this point sat well above the water level and was set quite far back from the loch itself. The clachan was permanently shadowy due to the high arbour above the road and the steep law to the east side. Other, modern abodes, some of them luxurious and in the Scandinavian style, had been established amid the young birchwood and perennial shrubbery below the road, weekend homes for well-off Glaswegians, Leo guessed. Between them and the lochside was another half mile of land, mostly drab blanket bog, the rushes withered and brown, punctuated by the odd skeletal tree, like death's crooked hand, or where the soil was loamier tracts of meadow, some of it pleasantly stocked with mature woods. Leo consulted the little book again: the land above the road, which didn't rise much above five hundred feet, was largely part of the local estate. Cutting through this was Glen Fallasky, which ran roughly north-east towards the railway village where Leo had disembarked.

The hotel's imposing Scots Baronial exterior was constructed from pale grey stone. The three-storey building had a grand portico, several crows-stepped gables, two turrets and a thin tower, all topped with steep conical roofs. The taxi couldn't pull up at the front doors because the driveway was choked with various police and media vehicles, and a brewery lorry obstructed a little lane which ran along the side of the building. Leo was deposited beneath a leviathan Wellingtonia, upon a forlorn little area of raw earth, which was the shade of cinnamon and dotted with patches of snow and ice. He paid the driver and was duly handed his luggage.

He surveyed the anaemic landscape, the colour bled out by winter's death. '*Et in Arcadia ego,*' he murmured. Yet, despite the land's dun seasonal garb there persisted a certain brutal handsomeness to the place. Leo gazed over towards the loch. A quintessentially Scottish scene. A ruined castle, wreathed in mist and clad in masses of gushing ivy, sat upon the largest island of a little archipelago. Spirals of vapour smoked off the braes on the facing bank, which were bearded by snowy

brakes of native timber and serried ranks of commercially planted conifers. A mile to the south, the height of these slopes crested to almost that of a Graham then abruptly plunged, cloven by a great pass, a gateway to the west coast. A thin cataract tumbled in silvery slow motion from this distant promontory. Momentarily, the sun blinked from behind a cloud, drenching the crown of Ben Corrach in light as though it had been painted in oils, and making the water which sat in its lap sparkle. Leo felt a surge of joy in his lungs as he descended the muddy incline towards the hotel.

He tottered awkwardly with his heavy luggage, taking care not to slip, watched by two amused uniformed policemen who were glad of this mildly entertaining interlude to the boredom of guarding the crime scene perimeter. Leo was aware of their stares. He was used to people finding humour in his eccentric attire and gait, but he prided himself on paying it no heed whatsoever. He was more concerned by what lay behind the young coppers in the near distance: an extensive thicket of rhododendron from within which sprouted the branches of bare elms and rowans. It seemed chillingly familiar to him. A sense of foreboding welled up within him.

At that very instant the beast, sitting alone in the darkness of its cellar, amusing itself with thoughts of its dire deed, opened its eyes wide, as though disturbed by an awareness of Leo's arrival. His coming had already been foretold in code by its dark ancestor on the other side, by means of the strange runes. It would observe its adversary carefully, and consider what steps need be taken.

Nothing was off limits.

The hotel lobby was splendidly furnished and presented a predictable Highland interior. Some logs burned cheerfully in the grate, dwarfed by a magnificent mantelpiece constructed from carved, varnished maple. A couple of newshounds sat in the lounge area, chattering loudly and unselfconsciously to their editors through their mobile phones. Leo walked to the unattended reception desk. He placed his cases down and pinged the bell with his open palm. The cold air from outside lingered in the folds of his coat like an energy. As he waited he noted a just-about passably decent rip-off of Landseer's *Monarch of the Glen*.

‘Do you like the painting, sir?’ came the voice of a man who had arrived behind the counter.

Leo turned to face the speaker, a friendly-looking fellow in his seventies. His socialist sensibilities were always offended by being addressed as ‘sir’ by an older person.

‘It has real character,’ replied Leo diplomatically.

‘It is by a locally based fellow. They have a kind of artistic community, just down the road.’ He reached out his hand. ‘Bill Minto,’ he said. ‘You must be Mr . . . ?’

‘Moran,’ replied Leo as he shook the hotelier’s hand. ‘Leo Moran. I telephoned earlier.’

‘Of course,’ said Minto, checking the book. ‘Apart from a few of the newspaper chaps you’re our only new guest this week. As you can imagine.’

Leo raised his eyebrows in acknowledgement.

The man glanced at Leo’s hands and felt a pang of sympathy. The melted skin reminded Minto of the burns on his torso, which he had sustained on active service.

‘How long have you had the place?’ enquired Leo, changing the subject. He didn’t wish to be drawn into a conversation about his reasons for being in Loch Dhonn. Apart from anything else, it would antagonise the police if he suggested to anyone that they had resorted to using psychics.

‘Since nineteen-eighty.’

‘It’s most impressive.’

‘Thank you,’ replied Minto gratefully. He had narrow grey eyes, an earnest smile, and his Borders accent had a slight whine to it. ‘It wasn’t always like this. When we arrived – you should have seen the state of it. The business was barely ticking over. A few more years of neglect and the whole damn structure would have perished from damp. Now we’ve got two hotels – we also own the Ardchreggan, on the opposite bank.’

‘How wonderful,’ said Leo.

‘Bill! Bill!’ rang out a disembodied female voice. A tall woman wearing a green woollen twinset and a pearl necklace, her greyish hair coiffured into a bird’s nest, poked her big face into the lobby from the back office. Irritation was written on her masculine features.

Gosh, thought Leo, she’d scare the weans.



‘Oh, I’m sorry, I didn’t realise you were with a guest. Welcome, Mr . . . ?’

‘Moran, dear,’ said Bill Minto, finishing the woman’s sentence.

She glared momentarily at him. ‘Well, I’m Shona Minto, Bill’s wife,’ she said, proffering her hand to Leo. She shook with a hearty, almost crushing, grasp. ‘Sorry for interrupting, my husband has forgotten to unlock the cellar trap for the drayman. Again.’

‘Excuse me, sir. My wife will see to you,’ said Minto, smiling apologetically before scurrying away.

Shona’s affected accent grated on Leo as he completed the formalities of registration. He had the feeling that she was less interested in the reason behind his visit than the fact that his credit card hadn’t expired. He insisted on finding his own way to his room, slightly anxious that she was going to offer to carry his luggage for him in her manly grip. She would have been a farm girl originally, Perthshire stock perhaps, a big, strapping lassie able to hold her own with the menfolk before she headed to Edinburgh and worked on her diction. Leo speculated that in her earlier days she had doubtless been a Girl Guide leader, adept at camp, her strong arms unrolling canvas and hammering in pegs, her watchful eye lingering a little too long on the lassies in their bathing costumes as they emerged from the river.

Leo’s room was suitably grand: dark-stained furniture, a high double bed, an en suite bathroom. He noted approvingly the neat pile of logs in the hearth. A framed series of watercolours of local wildflowers and fauna decorated the walls. He placed his luggage at the foot of the bed. His window looked northwards over the loch; he glanced down at the police activity below, noticing with a shiver the thicket of rhododendron. He drew the heavy curtains. It would be dark soon, and he wanted to seek out Stephanie’s detective. Leo felt slightly nervous; he had an ambivalent view of the police. He recognised that there were many excellent, well-intentioned people in the ranks, but he distrusted their increasingly militaristic training and could never forgive their being deployed as an arm of the state against organised labour and the disturbing relish many coppers seemed to take in assaulting decent working men. Also, Leo worried excessively about the pervasive influence of Freemasonry within the police. Furthermore, he had good reason to know that certain officers would

enthusiastically mount anyone who remotely fitted within the frame. And then hang them upon the wall.

So before setting off he took an immodest swig from his hip flask, then sprayed a jet of cinnamon-flavoured breath freshener into the back of his mouth.

## 2

OUTSIDE, the police had rigged up some arc lamps which illuminated the increasingly gloomy surroundings as the brief winter dusk fell. Leo strode over to the crime scene tape and addressed the constables who had been amused by his arrival earlier.

‘Excuse me, gentlemen. I wonder: could you enquire if Detective Inspector Lang is available, if you may be so kind?’

‘He’s busy right now, sir,’ replied the shorter of the two. Leo could remember when the Glasgow polis wouldn’t recruit a fellow under five feet eight, and had to draft in big Hieland laddies from the country who weren’t undernourished like their city peers. ‘Who should I say wanted him?’

‘My name is Moran, Leo Moran. I believe he’s expecting me.’

‘Just one moment, please, sir,’ replied Constable Shorty dubiously. He turned away and made a call into the shortwave radio that had been clipped to his utility belt, then turned back to face Leo. ‘You’re to come through, sir. I’ll walk you over to the incident room.’

The taller cop was clearly surprised at Leo’s admittance, but politely lifted the tape in order that he could pass underneath.

Lang came out of the Portakabin before Leo and the constable reached it.

‘Sir, this is the gentleman who asked to see you,’ said Shorty.

‘Mr Moran?’

‘How do you do. Please, call me Leo.’

‘Detective Inspector Lang,’ replied the cop as he performed a perfunctory handshake. He was a quiet-spoken, straightforward, tired-looking Ayrshire man in his late forties, whose once red hair had been washed to a sandy grey by the passage of time. ‘Good journey?’ he asked automatically.

‘Fine.’

‘Let’s get away from here,’ said Lang as he ushered Leo in the opposite direction from where the press pack were milling around, obviously not wanting to stir their interest with his eccentric new acquaintance. They strolled along some shadowy red-blaes paths flanked by rhododendron thick with shiny green-leather leaves. They rounded a corner and Leo clasped his shooting coat around him tightly, feeling an inexplicable surge of cold. He stopped.

‘This is where it happened, isn’t it?’

Lang deliberately narrowed his eyes at his companion and flashed him a knowing smile; even in the dying light Leo could easily have guessed the locus from the plethora of forensic kit dotted around. In fact, the twine that had been pegged out on the soil where Helen Addison’s body had been found was visible from where they stood.

‘Look, it’s just a formality, but would you mind telling me where you were during the early hours of Thursday?’

Leo stiffened, momentarily reliving his adolescent trauma when cops, piqued by his knowledge of a certain serious (although non-fatal) crime, had grilled him mercilessly, thinking him an accomplice. He hoped that Lang didn’t suspect him regarding Miss Addison; he probably just wanted to assert the power dynamic between them at the outset. In truth, the detective had only reluctantly agreed to entertain this oddball because there were no strong leads in the case. He was a pragmatic man at heart; however, the canteen chat about Leo’s astonishing insights at the time of the Monday Murders case had intrigued him, and he was open to the slim possibility that certain people possessed unorthodox powers as yet unexplained by science. He had consulted his colleague Carolan, who had led that investigation and whose judgement Lang trusted, to vouch for Leo before he acceded to Stephanie’s rather left-field request that he speak with him.

‘That’s easy – I had taken to bed with influenza.’

‘Can anyone corroborate that?’

‘No.’

‘Would you be willing to take a DNA test?’

Lang’s breath was stale, that of a man who had worked hard for a considerable period of time without enough food. Leo timed the rhythm of his breathing so as to avoid inhaling the worst of it.

‘Certainly.’

Lang smiled thinly. 'There was no alien DNA. Neither were there any prints or anything else of forensic interest.' He produced a packet of cigarettes from his gabardine and offered Leo one.

'No, thank you.'

'Do you mind if . . .' began Lang, already lighting up.

'Go ahead. Passive smoking is one of my few pleasures in life these days,' said Leo, slightly disingenuously, considering his fondness for a good cigar.

They walked on.

'So, this . . . power of yours, how does it manifest itself?'

'I see images, when the mind is in an unconscious or semi-conscious state.'

'When you're dreaming?'

'Usually. But also when my mind is idling in an alpha state, during daydreams, meditation, spiritual contemplation, general reverie. Or sometimes an idea can just bubble up into the conscious mind, as clear as day. My peepers needn't be shut. The vision can be of an event past or present, and it may recur, oft-times with different details or from a different perspective.'

'What about seeing the future?'

'Yes, there are certain visions that I have experienced that I believe were of things yet to come. Precognition, as it is known.'

'And with this case?'

'It came to me in a dream.'

'What did you see, precisely?'

'First I was walking through a dark wood, as though alongside the killer. Then I saw a black-gloved hand thrusting a blade into a white nightdress, again and again. There was a great deal of blood.'

'Anything else?'

'Apart from that initial vision, just some random images when I was in church, none of them obviously helpful.'

'Such as?'

'A dark figure standing by a loch, upon which was an island.'

'Can you give me a description of the individual?'

'No. It was just a dark figure in the middle distance. Except . . .'

'What?'

'It was wearing some sort of robes. And oddly-shaped headwear; it was a bit crooked, and came to a point.'

‘What else?’

‘I saw a smith working at a furnace. I had the sense of two young men, their features obscured, wrongly suspected of the crime. One of them was in a police station; the other one, slightly older, possessed not the wits to cope with his predicament.’

‘It’s not much to go on,’ said Lang, sighing out a stream of cigarette smoke.

‘I’m afraid not,’ replied Leo, a look of disapproval flashing across his face as Lang casually cast his fag end to the ground. He had to resist the urge to stoop down and bury it. ‘The visions are usually oblique, their content often symbolic. The trick is reading between the lines, detecting the gist, working out what Providence is trying to impart. For example, the solitary dark figure suggests we are only looking for one man. Look, Detective Inspector, I realise that this sounds outlandish, but I believe that Helen wants me to help her. And she deserves my help. I’m hopeful that my being here at Loch Dhonn will stimulate my powers. In the meantime I must beg of your forbearance.’

‘I’ve checked you out. Carolan said you were of some help with the Monday Murders. Although if you ask me anyone could have worked that one out.’

‘Nonetheless, Detective Carolan will also have told you that there were details I had knowledge of, details that no one – not even the killer – could have possessed.’

‘Carolan said something else about you.’

‘If it regards charges brought against me for lying down in front of a lorry on the M8, that was a peaceful protest against the invasion of Iraq. I take the view that rather than breaking the law I was supporting it – international law.’

‘No, not that.’ For a dreadful moment Leo thought that Lang was going to dredge up his interrogation from 1976. He needn’t have worried – all police memory and record of the teenage Leo’s interviews were long-since lost, not least because his inquisitors had in fact become convinced of his innocence. Instead, Lang said, ‘He told me that you drink far too much.’

‘I have taken more out of alcohol than alcohol has taken out of me,’ quoted Leo.

‘Well, get this – if you wish to remain around here then know that I will permit no drunkenness. The whole of Scotland’s fixated on Loch Dhonn at the moment.’ Lang stopped and gazed distractedly into the sky. ‘Although this case would drive Samson to drink. As a detective you become somewhat hardened to violent crimes – a wee bitty callous even – but some . . . some stay with you for ever. You wouldn’t be human otherwise.’

‘And this is one?’

‘Yes. This is one. For certain offences, extreme ones such as this, well, I’d have the scaffold, quite frankly.’ Lang eyed Leo and punctuated his next words with jabs of his index finger. ‘You can have no official capacity in this case whatsoever. The press would have a field day. As far as everyone is concerned you are simply a tourist staying in the local hotel, here to enjoy the scenery. If we happen to converse from time to time then let’s keep it discreet. If they identify you as a soothsayer I’ll disown you as a crank and have you removed. Understood?’

‘Understood.’

‘And you are not to go near the family.’

‘Why not?’

‘Because they’re upset enough without finding out we’ve had to enlist the services of Mystic Meg.’

‘So, what happened?’

Lang sighed. ‘The murder took place in the middle of the night, approximately between the hours of two and four according to the pathologist who attended the scene. No one knows why the victim was out, no one knows why she was clad only in her nightdress on a cold night. There were no late-night text messages summoning her from her bed, or calls to her mobile or the family’s landline, nor did anyone hear shouting or knocking for her. According to her parents she had occasional bouts of sleepwalking during childhood, but not, as far as they were aware, during adolescence or adulthood, and there is no record of mental illness or any recent upset within her personal life.’

‘It seems extraordinary that she was abroad in the dead of night, almost as though she was summoned to her doom under some vampiric influence,’ interjected Leo.

‘She lived with her parents and teenage brother up in the village. She was last seen by her parents, bidding them goodnight and going up to her

bedroom at just after ten the previous night. She was a the new district nurse at the local surgery, enjoying her job, enjoying being back home.'

'And enjoying her romance with Craig Hutton?'

'Yes. He's being questioned in Glasgow.'

'He didn't do it. I suspect the boyfriend was one of the innocent young men from my second vision.'

Lang didn't reply. He was a good man, but in many ways a typically suspicious, world-weary cop. Yet his cynicism didn't extend to treating the world and his brother as a suspect, and he disliked the groupthink that pervaded the force. It wasn't 'them and us', he believed; it was criminals and everyone else – or rather, serious, violent criminals and everyone else. Lang couldn't help but like many of the fly men he had encountered earlier in his career. He would process them diligently and help put them away if required – that was what the law demanded – but he wasn't about to get high and mighty about people who often stole only to feed a desperate addiction, or because they fell hopelessly into bad company and bad habits. Craig Hutton was innocent, he felt sure, and he was slightly ashamed of the way his fellow officers had bullied and manipulated the lad when he had been brought in to be interviewed. They were lacking in compassion and devoid of either intelligence or instinct.

'The modus operandi smacks of someone who knows the area well, but we have to keep an open mind as to the perpetrator being an outsider who could be miles away by now,' said Lang. 'There was no evidence of a pursuit, which suggests the victim wasn't initially frightened at meeting the murderer, and probably knew him. There was no sign of a struggle on the ground at the murder scene; neither did the victim's hands show any evidence that she had fought back. She was struck on the head with a blunt instrument – probably first, and which may, hopefully, have knocked her unconscious – then stabbed twenty-three times to the chest and abdomen. All the wounds were inflicted by the same long blade. It was a frenzied attack, with lots of blood on the immediate surroundings. Some must have splattered onto the killer, and we found a couple of droplets nearby where it must have dripped from his hand or garments or the weapon. The body hadn't been moved. There was rowan bark residue in the victim's hair, and contusions to her throat consistent with the grip of a large, gloved left hand; we reckon the killer pinned her upright by the neck against a tree while using his other hand to stab at her. There were



abrasions and a couple of the victim's hairs upon the tree. Neither weapon has been located, despite an extensive search.'

'Was she sexually assaulted?'

Lang raised a finger. 'This is the bit we've held back from the press so far, so if it gets out, I'll know it was you. She was violated with an as yet unidentified hard cylindrical object, probably metallic, very possibly the same item that she was struck on the head with. Now this part of the attack was very brutal, and post-mortem. It seemed almost ritualistic. We ran a nationwide cross-comparison of the entire MO but there were no matches. This is someone with a profound hatred of women.'

'You said there was no DNA?'

'There was the boyfriend's DNA – he says they were together the evening before and there are witnesses to that fact. And that of two patients, both elderly and housebound. If the perpetrator wasn't the boyfriend he was extremely careful not to leave a particle of evidence on the victim or the crime scene.'

'So he was probably someone local, who knew he would be swabbed, or someone on a database.'

'Maybe.'

'Did you use bloodhounds?'

'We brought a couple of tracking dogs up from Pollok, but they failed to pick up a precise trail from footprints we found at the murder scene which we believe belong to the killer. The rhododendron paths are well used and the whole area would be awash with scents, especially after two dozen polis swarming all over the place. Also, a breeze had picked up and time had elapsed because the dogs were delayed getting here, neither of which would have helped. By the way, there was a distinct scarcity of clear footprints due to the compacted blaes used on the paths around here.'

'Who found the body?'

'James Millar. Forty-year-old loner. He lost his wife suddenly a few years back, and has had psychiatric problems as a result. Since then he's stayed way up the glen in a little but 'n' ben. He found the body just after five a.m. He was one of the victim's patients.'

'What was this fellow doing strolling around so early?'

'He's something of a night owl. Apparently, it's not unusual for him to go for nocturnal walks. And the body was quite visible from the path. It was a bit misty over the loch, but the cloud was broken and there was a

full moon.’ Leo raised his eyebrows. ‘Aye, he’s a suspect, sure. We’re keeping tabs on him,’ said the policeman.

‘Was the killer definitely a man?’

‘We believe the footprints and the angle of the wounds indicate a strong male, between five foot nine and six foot one, acting alone. Right-handed with a size nine shoe. The trouble is, that description, give or take a shoe size either way, fits numerous men living around here, including Millar. It does, however, pretty much rule out the victim’s father and brother, and the GP with whom Helen worked.’

‘What about the hotel guests?’

‘They’ve all been interviewed, but I couldn’t keep them prisoner any longer and they were understandably keen to get home. I’m fairly satisfied that our man wasn’t among them. With it being off season the hotel was quiet. There was a young professional couple from down south, a middle-aged couple from Aberdeen and a young family from Ayrshire. Oh, and an elderly couple from the States.’

Leo suddenly raised his left hand to silence the detective and used his right to smother three violent sneezes. He then plucked a monogrammed Irish linen handkerchief from his pocket with which to blow his nose; an extended, dissonant trichord. He lowered his left hand and replaced the hanky.

‘Forgive me. Do continue.’

‘The only remaining guest is a bachelor who you’ll no doubt meet around the hotel at some point. I gather he’s virtually a permanent resident. As for employees, they’re all female apart from the chef and the barman. They were both on their days off, and we’ve verified that they were in Glasgow partying the night away. Everyone else’s alibis are somewhat less watertight: they all claim to have been asleep in bed. Apart from Millar, of course. It’s a pity these trusting rural types don’t seem to believe in CCTV; we might’ve picked something up.’

Lang withdrew a business card with his name, mobile phone and land-line numbers printed on it, and handed it to Leo. ‘Text me so as I have your number. And get in touch if you come up with anything. It’s nearly dark – come on, I’ll walk you back to the hotel.’

They set off. The policeman, who had set quite a brisk pace, fell into a sullen silence. At the edge of the grounds at the rear of the hotel he stopped.

‘This is as far as I go.’

The men shook hands.

‘The perpetrator of this crime will face justice,’ said Leo, sensing the detective’s despondency, ‘and one day the awesome judgement of God. Evil does not have the final word in human affairs. Good will always prevail. In the end.’

‘Well, let’s hope it prevails before the bastard decides on a second helping.’

‘Evil has a way of obscuring the truth, but things will become clearer.’

‘So, you believe in evil, do you, Leo?’ enquired Lang, who had lit a cigarette. ‘As an actual, living force?’

‘On the contrary, I take the Augustinian view that evil is precisely the absence of an actual, living force – the absence of goodness and the rejection of God’s will; a kind of void, if you will. That may all sound rather neutral, but within that void, when man becomes his own god and gives in to lust, envy and the unrestrained pursuit of power, terrible things can happen, even torture and genocide. However, concerning the dark metaphysical host wandering the world engaged in the proliferation of that void – primary evil – I believe in that as profoundly as I believe in sound waves or sunshine or electricity or love. I believe in it because I’ve stared it in the eye.’

Lang was unimpressed by Leo’s potted theology lesson. ‘You work in this job long enough you find out that convenient labels of good and evil just don’t wash. Most murders I’ve investigated have involved a scared-shitless, drunk teenager from a dysfunctional background, a few words of bravado, a blade and a lifetime of regret.’

‘Precisely my point; horrendous things happen when the conditions are conducive.’

‘So, you’re a churchgoer, Leo?’

‘Yes, I am a professing Catholic.’

‘Ah, a Holy Roman.’

‘You gotta believe in something,’ replied Leo, rolling with the mild jibe.

‘I don’t,’ said Lang as he exhaled smoke. ‘Apart from the law. But I still envy you religious lot, having that certainty.’

‘Faith doesn’t work like that. Show me a man who has certainty and I’ll show you a fool, and a dangerous fool at that. Even I, who has oft-times been confronted by the legions of darkness, have been assailed

with doubt as to the existence of the forces of light. But there's one thing I remember, Detective Inspector, even during those dark nights of the soul. That as a society we've got ourselves into a whole mess of trouble precisely because we've lost sight of the difference between good and evil.'