

White Nights

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Extract

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Prologue

The passengers streamed ashore from the cruise ship. They wore light jackets and sunglasses and jerseys tied around their shoulders. They had been told that the weather was unpredictable this far north. The ship was so big that from this perspective, looking up at it from Morrison's Dock, the town beyond was dwarfed. Row after row of windows, each with its own balcony, a floating city. It was midday in Lerwick. The sun was bouncing off the still water and the great white hull was so bright that you had to squint to look at it. In the car park, a fleet of buses waited; the tourists would be taken to the archaeological sites in the south, to see the seabird cliffs to photograph the puffins, and for a guided tour of the silverworks. At some point there would be a stop for a Shetland high tea.

Waiting at the foot of the gangplank was a performer. A moving piece of art or street theatre. A slender man, dressed like a Pierrot. A clown mask on his face. He didn't speak, but he acted out a pantomime for the visiting travellers. He made a lavish bow, one hand held across his stomach, the other sweeping towards the floor. The tourists smiled. They were willing to be entertained. To be accosted in a city was one thing – a city housed beggars and disturbed people and

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it was safest to turn away, not to catch the eye – but this was Shetland. There could be nowhere more safe. And they wanted to meet the local people. How else would they have stories to take back home?

The clown carried a bag made of red velvet and sewn with sequins. It glittered as he moved. He wore it slung across his body, the way elderly women, worried about street theft, carry their handbags. From his bag he took a handful of printed flyers which he began to distribute to the crowd.

Then they understood. This was an advertising stunt. Perhaps this place wasn't so different from London, New York or Chicago after all. But they kept their good humour. They were on holiday. And they took the brightly coloured paper and read it. They had a free evening in Lerwick. Perhaps there was a show they might take in. There was something about this guy that had appealed to them. He made them smile, despite the sinister mask on his face.

As they climbed into the buses, they watched him disappear down a narrow lane into the town. He was still handing out his leaflets to passers-by.

Chapter One

Jimmy Perez glimpsed the back of the street performer as he drove through the town, but it didn't register. He had other things on his mind.

He'd just landed at the airstrip in Tingwall after a short break in Fair Isle, staying on his parents' croft. Three days of being spoiled by his mother and listening to his father complain about the price of sheep. As always after a trip home, he wondered why he found it so difficult to get on with his father. There were never arguments, no real antagonism, but he always left feeling an edgy mixture of guilt and inadequacy.

Then there was work. The pile of paper he knew would be waiting on his desk. Sandy Wilson's expense forms, a day's labour in themselves. A report to complete for the Procurator Fiscal about a serious assault in a bar in Lerwick.

And Fran. He'd arranged to pick her up at Ravenswick at seven-thirty. He'd need to get back to his house to grab a shower before then. This was a date, wasn't it? The first real date. They'd been knocking around together for six months, friends, but now he felt giddy as a teenager.

He arrived at her house dead on time, his hair still wet, uncomfortable in a new shirt which had a

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starchy, stiff feel to it, faint creases down the front where it had been folded in the packet. He was always nervous around clothes. What did you wear to a party to celebrate the opening of an art exhibition? When the woman who haunted your dreams and distracted your days was one of the artists? When you hoped, that night, to take her to bed?

She was nervous too. He could tell that as soon as she climbed into the car. She was dressed up in something slinky and black, looking so sophisticated that he couldn't believe he'd have a chance with her. Then she gave that quirky grin that always flipped his stomach, made him feel he'd just spent three hours in *The Good Shepherd* in a westerly gale. He squeezed her hand. He wanted to tell her how stunning she looked, but because he couldn't think how without seeming crass or patronizing, they drove all the way to Biddista in silence.

The gallery was called the Herring House: once they had dried fish here. It was at the end of a low valley, right on the water, on the west coast. Further along the beach there was a small stone pier where the fishing boats had pulled up to unload their catch; a couple of men still kept boats on the beach. Walk out of the door and there'd be the smell of seaweed and salt. Bella Sinclair said that when she'd first taken over the place there was still a whiff of the herring in the walls.

Bella was the other artist exhibiting. Perez knew her, as almost everyone in Shetland knew her. To chat to at parties, but mostly second-hand, through the stories that were passed around about her. She was a Shetlander, Biddista-born and -bred. Wild in her youth,

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they said, but now rather unapproachable, intimidating. And rich.

He still felt flustered after the rush from the plane and by the sense that this was his one chance with Fran. He was so clumsy with people's feelings. What if he got it wrong? When he held out his hand to shake Bella's he saw that it was trembling. Perhaps too he'd picked up Fran's anxiety about how her paintings would be received. When they began to circulate among the guests, to look at the work displayed on the bare walls, he felt the tension building even more. He could hardly take in what was happening around him. He talked to Fran, nodded to acquaintances, but there was no real engagement. He felt the pressure build against his forehead. It was like waiting for a thunderstorm on a warm, heavy day. It was only when Roddy Sinclair was brought on to play for them that he could begin to relax for the first time. As if the rain had finally come.

Roddy stood framed by light in the middle of the space. It was nine in the evening, but still sunshine came through the windows cut into the tall, sloping roof. It was reflected from the polished wooden floor and the whitewashed walls and lit his face. He stood still for a moment, grinning, waiting until the guests started to look at him, absolutely sure he would get their attention. Conversation faltered and the room grew quiet. He looked at his aunt, who gave him a smile which was at once indulgent and grateful. He lifted his fiddle, gripped it under his chin and waited again. There was a moment of silence and he began to play.

They had known what to expect and he didn't

disappoint them. He played like a madman. It was what he was known for. The show. That, and the music. Shetland fiddle music, which had somehow caught the popular imagination, was played on national radio, raved about by television chat-show hosts. Impossible to believe – a Shetland boy in the tabloids for drinking champagne and dating teenage actresses. He'd hit the big time suddenly. A rock star had named him as his favourite performer and then he was everywhere, in newspapers and on the television and in glossy celebrity magazines.

He hopped and jigged, and the respectable middle-aged people, the art critic from the south, the few great and good who'd driven north from Lerwick, set down their glasses and began to clap to the rhythm. He fell to his knees, lay back slowly so that he was flat on the floor and continued playing without missing a beat, then sprang to his feet and still the music continued. In one corner of the gallery an elderly couple were dancing, surprisingly light-footed, arms linked.

The playing was so furious that the watchers' eyes couldn't follow his fingers. Then suddenly the music stopped. The boy bowed. The people cheered. Perez had seen him play many times before, but was still moved by the performance, felt a jingoistic pride in it, which made him uncomfortable. He looked at Fran. Perhaps this was too sentimental for her. But she was cheering along with the rest.

Bella walked from the shadow into the light to join Roddy. She held out an arm, a self-consciously dramatic gesture to acknowledge the performance.

'Roddy Sinclair,' she said. 'My nephew.' She looked around her. 'I'm just sorry that there weren't more

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people here to see him.' And in fact the room only contained a scattering of people. Her comment made it suddenly obvious. She must have realized that because she frowned again. Clearly she wished she hadn't mentioned it.

The boy bowed again, grinned, raised his fiddle in one hand and his bow in another.

'Just buy the paintings,' he said. 'That's why you're here. I'm only the warm-up act. The pictures are the main attraction.'

He turned away from them and took a glass of wine from a long trestle laid out against the one bare wall in the room.