

Ann
Cleeves

THIN AIR

MACMILLAN

Chapter One

The music started. A single chord played on fiddle and accordion, a breathless moment of silence when the scene was fixed in Polly's head like a photograph, and then the Meoness community hall was jumping. Polly had spent thirteen hours on the overnight boat from Aberdeen to Lerwick and when she'd first come ashore the ground had seemed to shift under her feet, and this was another kind of illusion. The music appeared to bounce from the walls and the floor and to push people towards the centre of the room, to lift them onto their feet. Even the home-made bunting and the balloons strung from the rafters seemed to dance. The band's rhythm set toes tapping and heads nodding. Children in party clothes clapped and elderly relatives clambered from their chairs to join in. A young mother jiggled a baby on her knee. Lowrie took the hand of his new bride, Caroline, and led her onto the dance floor to show her off to his family once more.

This was the hamefarin'. Lowrie was a Shetlander, and after years of courtship Caroline had finally persuaded him, or bullied him, to marry her. The real wedding had taken place close to Caroline's home in Kent and her two closest friends had followed her to Unst, Shetland's most northerly island, to complete

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the celebration. And they'd brought their men with them.

'Doesn't she look gorgeous?' It was Eleanor, crouching beside Polly's chair.

The two women had known Caroline since they were students; she was their voice of reason and their sister-in-arms. They'd been her bridesmaids in Kent and now they were dressed up again in the cream silk dresses they'd chosen together in London. They'd made the trek north to be part of the hamefarin'. They'd followed Caroline round the room for the bridal march and now they admired again her elegance, her poise, and her very expensive frock.

'It's what she's wanted since she first laid eyes on Lowrie during Freshers' Week,' Eleanor went on. 'It was obvious even then that she'd get her way. She's a determined lady, our Caroline.'

'Lowrie doesn't seem to mind too much. He hasn't stopped beaming since they got married.'

Eleanor laughed. 'Isn't this all such fun?'

Polly thought she hadn't seen Eleanor so happy for months. 'Great fun,' she said. Polly seldom relaxed in social situations, but decided she was actually rather enjoying herself tonight. She smiled back at her friend and felt a moment of connection, of tenderness. Since her parents had died, these people were the only family she had. Then she decided that the drink must be making her maudlin.

'They'll be setting out supper soon.' Eleanor had to shout to make herself heard over the band. Her face was flushed and her eyes were bright as if she had a fever. 'The friends of the bride and groom have to help serve. It's the tradition.'

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The music stopped and the guests clapped and laughed. Polly's partner, Marcus, had been dancing with Lowrie's mother. His dancing had been lively, even if he couldn't quite follow the steps. He came over to them, still following the beat of the music, almost skipping.

'It's supper time,' Eleanor said to him. 'You have to help put out the trestles. Ian's weighing in already. We'll come through in a moment to act as waitresses.'

Marcus dropped a kiss onto Polly's head and disappeared. Polly was proud that she hadn't asked him if he was having a good time. She was always anxious about their relationship and could tell that her need for reassurance was beginning to irritate him.

The men had set out tables and benches in a smaller room, and Lowrie's friends were handing out mugs of soup to the waiting guests. Eleanor and Polly took a tray each. Eleanor was enjoying herself immensely. She was showing off, flirting with the old men and revelling in the attention. Then there were bannocks and platters of mutton and salt beef. *Bannocks and flesh*, Lowrie had called it. Polly was vegetarian and the mounds of meat at the end of her fingertips as she carried the plates from the kitchen made her feel a little queasy. There was a sense of dislocation about the whole event. It was being on the ship for thirteen hours the night before and spending all day in the open air. The strangeness of the evening light. Eleanor being so manic. Polly sipped tea and nibbled on a piece of wedding cake and thought she could still feel the rolling of the ship under her feet.

When the meal was over she and Marcus helped to clear the tables, then the band began to play again

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and, despite her protests, she was swung into an eight-some reel. She found herself in the centre of the circle, being passed from man to man and then spinning. Lowrie's father was her partner. He had his arms crossed and braced and the force of the movement almost lifted her from her feet. She'd thought of him as an elderly man and hadn't expected him to be so strong. There was a fleeting and astonishing moment of sexual desire. When the music stopped she saw that she was trembling. It was the physical effort and an odd excitement. There was no sign of Eleanor or Marcus and she went outside for air.

It must have been nearly eleven o'clock, but it was still light. Lowrie said that in Shetland this was called the 'simmer dim', the summer dusk. So far north it never really got dark in June and now the shore was all grey and silver. Polly spent her working life analysing folk tales and she could understand how Shetlanders had come to create the trowes, the little people with magical powers. It must be a result of the dramatic seasons and the strange light. It occurred to her that she might write a paper on it. There might be interest from Scandinavian academics.

From the hall behind her came the sound of the band finishing another tune, laughter and the clink of crockery being washed up in the kitchen. On the beach below a couple sat, smoking. Polly could see them only as silhouettes. Then a little girl appeared on the shore, apparently from nowhere. She was dressed in white and the low light caught her and she seemed to shine. The dress was high-waisted and trimmed with lace and she wore white ribbons in her hair. She stretched out her arms to hold the skirt wide

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and skipped across the sand, dancing to the music in her head. As Polly watched, the girl turned to her and, very serious, curtsied. Polly stood and clapped her hands.

She looked around her to see if there were any other adults watching. She hadn't noticed the girl in the party earlier, but she must be there with her parents. Perhaps she belonged to the couple sitting below her. But when she turned back to the tideline the girl had vanished and all that was left was a shimmering reflection of the rising moon in the water.

Chapter Two

When the party ended they couldn't sleep. Caroline and Lowrie had disappeared back to Lowrie's parents' house. Polly, Eleanor and their men had booked a holiday cottage called Sletts within walking distance of the Meoness community hall, and now the four of them sat outside it on white wooden chairs and watched the tide ebb. No background noise except the water and their own murmured conversation. The occasional echoing splash of wine being poured into large glasses. Polly felt the dizziness return and thought again that she'd had far too much to drink. She turned back to face her friends and realized they were in the middle of a conversation.

'Did you see Lowrie's cousin's kiddie?' The envy in Eleanor's voice was palpable. 'Little Vaila. Only four weeks old.'

Eleanor was thirty-six and desperate for a baby. There'd been a late miscarriage, and the child would have been a girl. None of them knew what to say. There was a long silence.

'I saw something really weird when you were all out for a walk this afternoon,' Eleanor went on, obviously deciding to change the subject. Perhaps she understood that talk of babies embarrassed them.

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'There was a young girl dancing on the beach. She was all in white. A kind of old-fashioned party dress. She seemed a bit young to be on her own, but when I went out to talk to her she'd disappeared. Into thin air.'

'What are you saying?' Her husband Ian's voice was teasing, but not unkind. 'You don't think you saw a ghost?'

Polly didn't speak. She was remembering the girl she'd seen dancing on the sand.

'I'm not sure,' Eleanor said. 'I could easily believe in ghosts in a place like this. All this history so close to the surface. Some of the research I've been doing for Bright Star has been compelling. Really, I think a lot of the people I've talked to believed they've had a supernatural encounter.'

'I bet they were all weirdos.'

'No! Ordinary people who'd had extraordinary experiences.'

'You're on holiday now,' Ian said. 'You don't need to think about work, or the company or the new commission. You'll make yourself ill again. Just relax and let it go.' The others laughed uneasily, hoping that he'd dealt with the awkwardness and they could enjoy the evening once more.

It occurred to Polly that Ian had only agreed to come to Shetland because she and Marcus would be there. He couldn't quite face his wife on his own, even though her depression seemed to have lifted a little in the last couple of months. After the miscarriage he'd believed that she was unravelling, that he was losing her. Polly didn't know if he'd even wanted a baby. Perhaps he just wanted Eleanor back the way she was

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when they'd first met. Stylish and uncomplicated, full of pranks and larks. Fun.

Eleanor flushed. She'd been drinking since early evening. She worked in television and usually she could hold her booze, but tonight even she seemed a little drunk. 'Perhaps you think I'm going mad again, that I should be back in the loony bin.' She stared out at the water. 'Or perhaps you believe I'm inventing things. To get attention.'

There was another silence. For a moment Polly was tempted to speak, to say that she'd seen a child dressed in white dancing on the beach too, but still she stayed silent. A sort of betrayal.

'Only when you claim to have seen spirits from the other side.' Ian was dismissive. He was a sound engineer. A bit of a nerd. He clearly thought the whole conversation was ridiculous and he was feeling awkward, way out of his comfort zone.

It was as dark now as it would get and a mist was rising from the sea to cover the remaining light. Polly shivered. She was wearing a padded jacket, but it was cold. 'We should go in,' she said. 'I'm ready for bed.'

'You believe me, don't you, Pol?' Eleanor had been a beauty when she was a student, in a grown-up, voluptuous way that had made Polly look like a grey, malnourished child. Ian leaned forward and lit a fat white candle on the table. The light flickered and Polly saw lines under her friend's eyes. Stress and a kind of desperation. She was wearing a theatrical black evening cloak over her bridesmaid's dress. 'There was a little girl just outside the house here when I woke up from my sleep this afternoon. When

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you were all out walking. And then she disappeared. She just seemed to walk into the sea.'

'Of course I believe you.' Polly wanted to show her support for Eleanor, to stop her talking about children and embarrassing herself. She paused. 'I probably saw her myself this evening, when I left the hall to catch my breath just after supper. She was playing out on the beach. I don't think she was a ghost, though. Just a local child dressed up for the party, and this afternoon she probably ran home up the track.' Polly didn't say that the girl *she'd* seen during the hamefarin' had also disappeared while she was looking away. That would have encouraged Eleanor in her fancies, and she wanted her friend back too. The closeness they'd had. The laughs and the silliness.

She stood up and carried the glasses into the house. The men followed. She wondered what Marcus was making of all this. He was Polly's new man – newish at least – and she was still amazed that they were a couple. She felt like a giddy teenager when she thought about him. He'd agreed to the party immediately when she'd tentatively asked if he fancied it. 'Shetland in midsummer? Of course.' With the huge schoolboy grin that had attracted her in the first place. 'And if we're going north, where better than to go to Unst, the *furthest* north it's possible to be and still be in the UK.' For him, it seemed, life was nothing but new experiences.

Through the kitchen window Polly saw that Eleanor was still sitting outside. The mist had slid as far as the house now and the image was blurred. It was as if Eleanor was made of ice and was slowly melting. Polly went to the door and shouted out to her.

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'Come in, lovely. You'll catch your death.'

Eleanor waved. 'Give me a few minutes. I'll be there very soon.' She blew out the candle.

Turning to go to her room, Polly thought she caught sight of a white figure dancing along the tide-line.

Chapter Three

Jimmy Perez walked Cassie down the hill to Ravenswick School. Some days he let her go by herself, but then he watched from the house, picking out the red Fair Isle bonnet knitted by his mother and worn by Cassie whatever the weather, until it disappeared inside. His paranoia was the result of guilt and the fact that Cassie wasn't his child. He'd been charged to care for her and he felt the duty like an honour and a burden.

He was on late shift, so he walked slowly back to the converted chapel that had once been Fran's home, and thought again that he should do something with his house in Lerwick. He wasn't sure that he could bring himself to sell it, and besides he had it in his head that it would provide some sort of security for Cassie if anything should happen to him. Her natural father always seemed to have money, but Perez thought he was feckless. The Lerwick house would see Cassie through university perhaps or give her the deposit for her first home. Properties in town fetched more than those in the country. But it seemed criminal that it should be lying empty when folk needed places to stay and, with nobody living there, it would soon get damp. He decided to call into an estate

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agency in the street before he started work, to see about getting it rented out. When Fran had died the year before, small tasks like that had seemed insurmountable and he felt a stab of pride that he could consider dealing with the business now.

He was opening the door when his phone started ringing. Sandy Wilson, his colleague. It was only recently that Perez had started thinking of the man like that. Before that he'd seen Sandy as a boy to be instructed and protected.

'There's a woman gone missing in Unst.' Even now, it seemed, Sandy was incapable of giving detailed information without being prompted.

'What sort of woman?' A couple of months ago Perez would have been angry and would have let his irritation show. He could still get moody. Late at night when he couldn't sleep, eaten away by grief and guilt, he hated the world, but when he made breakfast for Cassie he had to be sane. And, like everything, sanity came more easily with practice.

'A tourist. Name of Eleanor Longstaff. Aged thirty-six and from Battersea.' A pause. 'That's London. She was staying in a holiday let in Meoness with her husband and another couple. They'd been at Lowrie Malcolmson's hamefarin', then went back to the cottage for a few drinks around midnight. The others left Eleanor sitting outside when they went to bed, and when they woke up this morning there was no sign of her. She'd disappeared into thin air.'

Perez considered. 'Her husband didn't notice that she hadn't come to bed?'

'I did ask that.' Sandy could be touchy; he was always thinking he was being criticized. 'He's a heavy

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sleeper. And, like I said, they'd all had a bit to drink.'

'Could she have slept in a spare room? On a sofa? And just gone out this morning?' In which case there was no reason to panic. Even if they couldn't find Eleanor in Unst, the ferries would be operating by now. Perhaps she'd just felt the need to be on her own, or the wild hadn't suited her and she'd run back to the city. Perhaps there'd been a row with the husband. But if she'd disappeared late at night there would be no ferries; no escape from the most northerly island in the UK. In the early hours of the morning a woman who'd been drinking could wander away from the path and lose her way on the cliff. The strange light of the simmer dim could be almost hallucinatory.

'I don't know about that,' Sandy said. 'I spoke to the husband, Ian. He said she hadn't been herself lately. She'd been depressed. Something about losing a baby.'

'He's thinking she might have committed suicide?'

'He didn't say that, but I think it's on his mind. He sounded upset. He wanted us there straight away.' Sandy paused. 'I told him we'd be with them as soon as we could. It's Mary Lomax's patch, but she's away south, so I've asked the coastguard to start a search. Was that OK?'

'Perfect.' Perez was thinking it was a good day for a trip to the North Isles, clear and still. 'Book us onto the ferries and I'll pick you up in Lerwick on the way through.'

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The ferry was already at Toft when they arrived and theirs was the second car in the booked lane, waved aboard almost immediately. They drank dreadful coffee from the machine in the passenger lounge, and Perez watched the fulmars flying low over the water. It felt like a day off. Truanting. He looked at his phone and asked Sandy to check his. Reception came and went here, so they might not hear even if the woman had turned up. He hoped that when they arrived at Meoness she would be there. He pictured how she would be, offering them coffee or lunch to make up for their inconvenience. Embarrassed to have caused so much fuss. A little angry with her husband for overreacting. He and Sandy would turn round and drive back to Lerwick, with only half a day wasted. But even when they arrived at Yell and the phones were working again there was still no news. Perez drove north across the island very quickly, feeling a strange sense of urgency. When they got to Gutcher a ferry was pulling out from the pier and they had to wait for the next one to arrive. He could feel the tension mounting in his forehead and across his shoulders. Fran had been thirty-six when she had died.

When they landed at Belmont in Unst a group of children was waiting to board the ferry south. He thought they must be on their way to Lerwick for some end-of-term outing. Some of them were in fancy dress. They giggled as they boarded the coach to take them to Shetland mainland. Perez was going to ask Sandy if he knew what it was about – Sandy read *The Shetland Times* as avidly as a gossip woman – but the sergeant had a map open on his knee, concentrating

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on getting them there, and Perez thought it better not to interrupt.

The holiday house was long and low and white-washed, and sat right on a beach with a crescent of sand and pebbles at its back. Once perhaps it had been a croft house with a byre attached, but the renovations had been well done, with the holiday market in mind. There was wooden decking between the house and the beach and a couple sat there, waiting. Perez looked at them as he got out of the car. The woman was skinny and pale. An interesting angular face, which Fran would have wanted to draw. Long hair tied back at her neck. Jeans and a cotton jumper. She walked out to greet them. 'Is there any news? Ian has taken the car out to look for her, but that was ages ago and we haven't heard anything since.' Her eyes were grey and slanted like a cat's. She had a faint north-of-England accent.

Perez introduced himself.

'Polly Gilmour. This is my partner, Marcus Wentworth.'

'And you were staying here with Mr and Mrs Longstaff?'

'Yes, we came for Lowrie and Caroline's wedding party. The four of us thought we'd make a holiday out of it, a kind of retreat.' The eyes were almost unblinking.

'Did Mrs Longstaff need a retreat?' Perez had reached the deck and took a wooden chair on the other side of the table from Marcus. Sandy leaned against the wall of the house and tried to look inconspicuous.

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There was a silence. Perhaps it wasn't the sort of question they were expecting.

'I mean,' Perez said, 'was there any reason why she might have taken herself away? If she'd been going through a bad time?'

Polly hesitated. 'She had a miscarriage late in pregnancy,' she said. 'She's been a bit low lately and had a spell in hospital. Ian thought it would help her to get away from London.'

For a while Perez didn't speak. He'd been married before he met Fran, and his wife had suffered three miscarriages. He'd been devastated by each one, but determined to hold himself together. Sarah had thought him uncaring and had walked away from the marriage.

'Is Eleanor still seeing a doctor for the depression?'

Polly shook her head. 'She signed herself out of hospital and has refused treatment since. She said it was natural to feel sad at the loss of a child; you'd be ill if you didn't. And she's been much better recently. Almost back to her old self.'

There was another silence. Perez could sense Sandy's impatience. It seemed Marcus was unnerved by it too, because he stood up. 'Coffee? It's a long drive from Lerwick. I don't think I realized the scale of the place before we arrived – how much distance there is between communities.' He sounded easy, confident, a man who'd been to a good school and expected to get what he wanted.

'Coffee would be grand.' Perez waited until he'd disappeared into the house and then turned again to Polly. 'Tell me about Eleanor.'

Now the woman did blink. 'We're friends. Really

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close. There are three of us: Eleanor, Caroline and me. We met on our first day at university. Eleanor took me under her wing. You could tell that she would do well, even then. She was always beautiful, of course, and that still helps, doesn't it? Especially if you want to work in the media.'

'What was her work?'

'She did drama at uni and found work in television as soon as she left, first as a runner, then as a script editor. Recently she's set up her own TV production company. Mostly documentaries for Channel 4 and the BBC.'

'Sounds stressful.' Perez gave a little laugh. He couldn't imagine what it must be like to run a company or live in London. Through the open door into the kitchen he smelled coffee. Good coffee still reminded him of Fran.

'Nell thrived on the stress. It was what made her feel alive. And, as far as I know, the company was doing well. But not getting pregnant was different. Outside her control. And I think it was the first time she'd ever failed at anything.'

'Do you think she's killed herself?'

The question seemed to stun her, but the response was immediate. 'Not for a moment. Nell's a fighter. She wouldn't give up. She's in the middle of a project at work and she would never leave anything half-finished.'

'What's the project?' Perez felt that he was out of his depth. He knew nothing about the media and only watched TV with Cassie. CBBC or Disney.

'A film about ghosts. Contemporary hauntings.'

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That's why she was delighted when I told her the story of Peerie Lizzie.'

'How did you know it?' Perez hadn't realized that anyone outside Shetland had heard of the ghost of Peerie Lizzie.

'I'm a librarian,' Polly said. 'I specialize in folk stories, British myths and legends.' She paused. 'Nell never stops working. I guess she's kind of obsessive. She thought that while she was here she could interview people who'd seen the girl. She even brought a digital recorder with her.'

Peerie Lizzie was a little girl who was supposed to haunt the land around Meoness in Unst late at night. It was claimed she was the spirit of a child, the daughter of the big house, who'd been drowned close by in 1930. The child had been especially precious because the parents had been middle-aged when she was conceived, and some stories had it that her appearance foretold a pregnancy. Perhaps that was why Eleanor had been so interested. Perez was a sceptic. Most people who reported the sightings were young men with a few drinks inside them, or attention-seekers looking to get their name in the paper. As far as he knew, nobody had got pregnant as a result.

He had the sense that Polly was going to say more, but she turned away and looked at the beach, so he resumed the conversation.

'Do you think she might have wandered up the road last night in the hope of seeing the ghost?'

Marcus appeared with a tray, a pot of coffee and four mugs. Polly waited to answer until he'd set them on the table.

'It's more likely than a notion that she would have

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killed herself.' A pause. 'As I said, she was obsessed with the idea of the documentary, so yes, it's just what she might have done.' The woman looked up at her partner. 'Don't you think so?'

'I didn't know her. Not like you did. A couple of supper parties and then a night together when we came up on the boat from Aberdeen . . . But I certainly wouldn't have had her down as a potential suicide risk.'

'Do you have a photo?' Perez still couldn't get a handle on the missing woman and thought that a picture in his head might make her more real for him. 'It would help, if we need to widen the search.' He'd show the boys who worked on the ferry to Yell. If she'd been out early in the morning, and on foot, they'd have noticed her.

'Not a print,' Polly said, 'but there are some on my laptop. I took some pictures on the boat from Aberdeen, so they're recent. The house has Wi-Fi. Come inside.'

The interior of the house was tasteful and simple. Only the sheepskins in front of the wood-burner and the prints of puffins and gannets on the walls reminded visitors they were in Shetland. And the spectacular view from the window. Polly's laptop was open on the coffee table and she switched it on. With a few clicks she'd reached the file of photos.

Eleanor Longstaff was dark-eyed. Long hair was being blown by the wind away from her face. She could have shared ancestors with Jimmy Perez, whose forebears were shipwrecked off Fair Isle during the Spanish Armada. The photo had been taken on the deck of the NorthLink ferry. Eleanor was dressed in a

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waterproof anorak and was leaning back against the rail. She was laughing. No sign here, at least, of stress or depression.

'I can email you a copy, if that's any good,' Polly said.

Perez nodded and handed her his work card with his contact details. He'd get the photo printed in Unst's small police station. Mary Lomax, the community police officer, might be away, but Sandy had brought a key to the building.

Polly's narrow fingers were tapping on the keyboard when she stopped suddenly and looked round at them. She seemed paler than ever. Horrified. 'I've had an email from Eleanor. It arrived this morning. Sent at two a.m., so not that long after we went to bed. It must be from her iPhone.'

'Open it!' Marcus was looking over her shoulder.

She looked at Perez for permission. He nodded and moved so that he had a better view of the screen. Polly double-clicked on the message and it opened.

No greeting and no sign-off, not even the obligatory x. Just one line. *Don't bother looking for me. You won't find me alive.*