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Extract

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Chapter One

Twenty past one in the morning on New Year's Day. Magnus knew the time because of the fat clock, his mother's clock, which squatted on the shelf over the fire. In the corner the raven in the wicker cage muttered and croaked in its sleep. Magnus waited. The room was prepared for visitors, the fire banked with peat and on the table a bottle of whisky and the ginger cake he'd bought in Safeway's the last time he was in Lerwick. He could feel himself dozing but he didn't want to go to bed in case someone should call at the house. If there was a light at the window someone might come, full of laughter and drams and stories. For eight years nobody had visited to wish him happy new year, but still he waited just in case.

Outside it was completely silent. There was no sound of wind. In Shetland, when there was no wind it was shocking. People strained their ears and wondered what was missing. Earlier in the day there had been a dusting of snow, then with dusk this was covered by a sheen of frost, every crystal flashing and hard as diamond in the last of the light, and even when it got dark, in the beam from the lighthouse. The cold was another reason for Magnus staying where he was. In the bedroom the ice would be thick on

the inside of the window and the sheets would feel chill and damp.

He must have slept. If he'd been awake he'd have heard them coming because there was nothing quiet in their approach. They weren't creeping up on him. He'd have heard their laughter and the stumbling, seen the wild swaying of the torch beam through the uncurtained window. He was woken by the banging on the door. He came to with a start, knowing he'd been in the middle of a nightmare, but not sure of the details.

'Come in,' he shouted. 'Come in, come in.' He struggled to his feet, stiff and aching. They must already be in the storm porch. He heard the hiss of their whispers.

The door was pushed open, letting in a blast of freezing air and two young girls, who were as gaudy and brightly coloured as exotic birds. He saw they were drunk. They stood, propping each other up. They weren't dressed for the weather yet their cheeks were flushed and he could feel the health of them like heat. One was fair and one was dark. The fair one was the prettier, round and soft, but Magnus noticed the dark one first; her black hair was streaked with luminescent blue. More than anything, he would have liked to reach out and touch the hair, but he knew better than to do that. It would only scare them away.

'Come in,' he said again although they were already in the room. He thought he must sound like a foolish old man, repeating the same words, making no sense at all. People had always laughed at him. They called him slow and perhaps they were right. He felt a smile crawl across his face and heard his mother's words in

his head. *Will you wipe that stupid grin from your face. Do you want folk to think you're dafter than you really are?*

The girls giggled and stepped further into the room. He shut the doors behind them, the outside door which had warped with the weather and led into the porch, and the one into the house. He wanted to keep out the cold and he was frightened that they might escape. He couldn't believe that such beautiful creatures had turned up on his doorstep.

'Sit down,' he said. There was only the one easy chair, but two others, which his uncle had made from driftwood, stood by the table and he pulled these out. 'You'll take a drink with me to see in the new year.'

They giggled again and fluttered and landed on the chairs. They wore tinsel in their hair and their clothes were made of fur and velvet and silk. The fair one had ankle boots of leather so shiny that it looked like wet tar, with silver buckles and little chains. The heels were high and the toes were pointed. Magnus had never seen footwear like it and for a moment he couldn't take his eyes off them. The dark girl's shoes were red. He stood at the head of the table.

'I don't know you, do I?' he said, though looking at them more closely he knew he'd seen them passing the house. He took care to speak slowly so they would understand him. Sometimes he slurred his speech. The words sounded strange to him, like the raven's croaking. He'd taught the raven to speak a few words. Some weeks, he had nobody else to talk to. He launched into another sentence. 'Where are you from?'

'We've been in Lerwick.' The chairs were low and the blonde girl had to tip back her head to look up at

him. He could see her tongue and her pink throat. Her short silk top had become separated from the waistband of her skirt and he saw a fold of flesh, as silky as the material of her blouse and her belly button. 'Partying for Hogmanay. We got a lift to the end of the road. We were on our way home when we saw your light.'

'Shall we have a drink, then?' he said eagerly. 'Shall we?' He shot a look at the dark girl, who was staring at the room, moving her eyes slowly, taking it all in, but again it was the fair one who replied.

'We've brought our own,' she said. She pulled a bottle from the woven shoulder bag she'd been clutching on her knee. It had a cork jammed in the top and was three-quarters full. He thought it would be white wine, but he didn't really know. He'd never tasted wine. She pulled the cork from the bottle with sharp, white teeth. The action shocked him. When he realized what she intended doing he wanted to shout to her to stop. He imagined the teeth snapped off at the roots. He should have offered to open it for her. That would have been the gentlemanly thing to do. Instead, he only watched, fascinated. The girl drank from the bottle, wiped the lip with her hand, then passed it on to her friend. He reached out for his whisky. His hands were shaking and he spilled a couple of drops on to the oilcloth when he poured himself a glass. He held out his glass and the dark girl clinked the wine bottle against it. Her eyes were narrow. The lids were painted blue and grey and were lined with black.

'I'm Sally,' the blonde girl said. She didn't have the dark one's capacity for silence. She'd be one for noise, he decided. Chatter and music. 'Sally Henry.'

'Henry,' he repeated. The name was familiar, though he couldn't quite place it. He was out of touch. His thoughts had never been sharp, but now thinking took an effort. It was like seeing through a thick sea fog. He could make out shapes and vague ideas but focus was difficult. 'Where do you live?'

'In the house at the end of the voe,' she said. 'Next to the school.'

'Your mother's the schoolteacher.'

Now he could place her. The mother was a little woman. She'd come from one of the north isles. Unst. Yell, maybe. Married a man from Bressay who worked for the council. Magnus had seen him driving around in a big 4x4.

'Aye,' she said and sighed.

'And you?' he said to the dark girl, who interested him more, who interested him so much that his eyes kept flickering back to her. 'What do they call you?'

'I'm Catherine Ross,' she said, speaking for the first time. Her voice was deep for a young lassie, he thought. Deep and smooth. A voice like black treacle. He forgot where he was for a moment, picturing his mother spooning treacle into the mixture for the ginger cakes she'd made, twisting the spoon over the pot to catch the last sticky threads, then handing it to him to lick. He ran his tongue over his lips, became embarrassingly aware of Catherine staring at him. She had a way of not blinking.

'You're not local.' He could tell by the accent. 'English?'

'I've lived here for a year.'

'You're friends?' The idea of friendship was a

novelty. Had he ever had friends? He took time to think about it. 'You're pals. Is that right?'

'Of course we are,' Sally said. 'Best friends.' And they started laughing again, passing the bottle backwards and forwards, throwing back their heads to drink, so their necks looked white as chalk in the light of the naked bulb hanging over the table.

Chapter Two

Five minutes to midnight. They were all on the streets of Lerwick around the market cross and it was jumping. Everyone was steaming, but not fighting drunk, just mellow and you felt that you belonged, you were a part of the laughing, drinking crowd. Sally thought her father should have been here. He'd have realized then that there was nothing to get uptight about. He might even have enjoyed it. Hogmanay in Shetland. Like, it wasn't New York, was it? Or London. What was going to happen? Most of the people here she recognized.

The thud, thud of a bass came up through her feet and rolled around her head, and she couldn't work out where the music was coming from, but she moved along with it like everyone else. Then came the bells for midnight and 'Auld Lang Syne' and she was hugging the people on either side of her. She found herself snogging a guy and realized in a moment of clarity that he was a maths teacher from Anderson High and he was more pissed than she was.

Later, she wouldn't remember what happened next. Not exactly and not in sequence. She saw Robert Isbister, big as a bear, standing outside The Lounge, a red tin in his hand, looking out at them all. Perhaps

she'd been looking out for him. She saw herself sauntering up to him in rhythm to the music, hips swaying, almost dancing. Standing in front of him, not speaking, but flirting all the same. Oh certainly flirting, she was sure of that. She put her hand on his wrist, didn't she? And stroked the fine golden hair on his arm as if he was an animal. She'd never have done that if she'd been sober. She'd never have had the nerve to approach him at all, though she'd been dreaming of this for weeks, imagining every detail. He had his sleeves rolled up to his elbows although it was so cold and he wore a wristwatch with a gold bracelet. She'd remember that. It would stick in her head. Perhaps it wasn't real gold, but with Robert Isbister, who could tell?

Then Catherine was there, saying she'd wangled them a lift home, as far as the Ravenswick turning, at least. Sally was all for staying, but Catherine must have persuaded her because she found herself in the back of a car. It was like her dream too, because suddenly Robert was there too, sitting next to her, so close that she could feel the denim of his jeans against her leg and his bare forearm on the back of her neck. She could smell the beer on his breath. It made her feel sick, but she knew she couldn't allow herself to throw up. Not in front of Robert Isbister.

Another couple was crushed into the back of the car with them. She thought she recognized them both. The lad was from South Mainland somewhere and was away in college in Aberdeen. The girl? She stayed in Lerwick and was a nurse in the Gilbert Bain. They were devouring each other. The girl was underneath, the lad lying on top of her, nibbling at her lips and her

neck and her earlobes, then opening his mouth wide as if he intended to swallow her piece by piece. When Sally turned back to Robert, he kissed her, but slowly and gently, not like the wolf from Red Riding Hood. Sally didn't feel that she was being eaten up at all.

Sally couldn't see much of the lad who was driving. She was directly behind the driver's seat and all she could make out was a head and a pair of shoulders clad in a parka. He didn't talk, either to her or to Catherine who was sitting beside him. Perhaps he was pissed off about giving them a lift. Sally was going to chat to him, just to be friendly, but then Robert kissed her again and that took up all her attention. There was no music playing in the car, no noise at all except for the engine which sounded really rough and the slobbering of the couple squashed beside her.

'Stop!' That was Catherine. It wasn't loud, but coming out of the silence it shocked them all. Her English voice jarred on Sally's ears. 'Stop here. This is where Sally and me get out. Unless you want to give us a lift down to the school.'

'No way, man.' The student broke away from the nurse just long enough to comment. 'We're missing the party as it is.'

'Come with us,' Robert said. 'Come on to the party.'

His invitation was seductive and meant for Sally, but Catherine answered. 'No, we can't. Sally's supposed to have been at our house. She wasn't allowed into town. If we're not back soon, her parents will come looking.'

Sally resented Catherine speaking for her, but knew she was right. She mustn't blow it now. If her mother found out where she'd been, she'd go ape. Her

father was reasonable left to himself, but her mother was crazy. The spell was broken and it was back to the real world. She untangled herself from Robert, climbed over him and out of the car. The cold took her breath away, made her feel light-headed and euphoric as if she'd had another drink. She and Catherine stood side by side and watched the tail lights of the car disappear.

'Bastards,' Catherine said, with so much venom that Sally wondered if something had gone on between her and the driver. 'They could have given us a lift.' She felt in her pocket, brought out a thin torch and shone it on the path ahead of them. That was Catherine for you. Always prepared.

'Still,' Sally felt a soppy smile spread over her face, 'it was a good night. A fucking good night.' As she slung her bag over her shoulder something heavy banged against her hip. She brought out a bottle of wine, opened, with a cork stuck in the top. Where had that come from? She didn't even have a fuzzy memory. She showed it to Catherine in an attempt to lift her gloom. 'Look. Something to keep us going on the way home.'

They giggled and stumbled down the icy road.

The square of light seemed to come from nowhere and surprised them. 'Where the shit are we? We can't be back yet.' For the first time Catherine seemed anxious, less sure of herself, disorientated.

'It's Hillhead. The house at the top of the bank.'

'Does anyone live there? I thought it was empty.'

'It belongs to an old man,' Sally said. 'Magnus Tait. He's daft in the head, so they say. A recluse. We were always taught to stay away from him.'

Catherine wasn't frightened now. Or perhaps it

was just bravado. 'But he's there, all alone. We should go in and wish him happy new year.'

'I've told you. He's soft in the head.'

'You're scared,' Catherine said, almost a whisper.

I am, shit-scared, and I don't know why. 'Don't be dumb.'

'I dare you.' Catherine reached into Sally's bag for the bottle. She took a swig, replaced the cork and handed it back.

Sally stamped her feet to show how ridiculous this was, standing out in the cold. 'We should get back. Like you said, my folks will be waiting.'

'We can just say we've been first-footing the neighbours. Go on. I dare you.'

'Not on my own.'

'All right. We'll both go.' Sally couldn't tell if this was what Catherine had intended from the beginning, or if she'd boxed herself into a position she couldn't escape from with her pride intact.

The house was set back from the road. There was no real path. As they approached Catherine shone her torch towards it and the beam hit the grey slate roof, then the pile of peats to one side of the porch. They could smell the smoke coming out of the chimney. The green paint on the porch door rose in scabs over bare wood.

'Go on then,' Catherine said. 'Knock.'

Sally knocked tentatively. 'Perhaps he's in bed, just left the light on.'

'He's not. I can see him in there.' Catherine went into the porch and thumped with her fist on the inner door. She's wild, Sally thought. She doesn't know what she's messing with. This whole thing's crazy. She

wanted to run away, back to her boring and sensible parents, but before she could move there was a sound from inside and Catherine had the door open and they stumbled together into the room, blinking and blind in the sudden light.

The old man was coming towards them and Sally stared at him. She knew she was doing it but couldn't stop herself. She'd only seen him before at a distance. Her mother, usually so charitable in her dealings with the elderly neighbours, usually so Christian in her offers to go shopping, to provide broth and baking, had avoided any contact with Magnus Tait. Sally had been hurried past the house when he was outside. 'You must never go there,' her mother had said when she was a child. 'He's a nasty man. It's not a safe place for little girls.' So the croft had held a fascination for her. She had looked across at it on her way to and from the town. She had glimpsed his back bent over the sheep he was clipping, seen his silhouette against the sun as he stood outside the house looking down to the road. Now, this close, it was like coming face to face with a character from a fairy tale.

He stared back at her and she thought he really was like something from a picture book. A troll, she thought suddenly. That's what he looked like, with his stumpy legs and his short, thick body, slightly hunch-backed, his slot-shaped mouth with the teeth jumbled and yellow inside. She'd never liked the story of the Billy Goats Gruff. When she was very small she'd been terrified to cross the bridge across the burn to get to her house. She'd imagined the troll living underneath, his eyes fiery red, his back bent as he prepared to charge her. Now she wondered if Catherine still had

her camera with her. The old man would make some picture.

Magnus looked at the girls with rheumy eyes which seemed not quite to focus. 'Come in,' he said. 'Come in.' And he pulled his lips away from his teeth to smile.

Sally found herself chattering. That was what happened when she was nervous. The words spilled out of her mouth and she didn't have an idea what she was saying. Magnus shut the door behind them, then stood in front of it, blocking the only way out. He offered them whisky but she knew better than to accept that. What might he have put into it? She pulled the bottle of wine from her bag, smiled to appease him and carried on talking.

She made a move to stand up, but the man had a knife, long and pointed with a black handle. He was using it to cut a cake which had been standing on the table.

'We should go,' she said. 'Really, my parents will be wondering.'

But they seemed not to hear her and she watched in horror as Catherine reached out and took a piece of cake and slipped it into her mouth. Sally could see the crumbs on her friend's lips and between her teeth. The old man stood above them with the knife in his hand.

Sally saw the bird in the cage when she was looking round for a way out.

'What's that?' she asked abruptly. The words came out of her mouth before she could stop them.

'It's a raven.' He stood quite still, watching her, then he set the knife carefully on the table.

'Isn't it cruel, keeping it locked up like that?'

'It had a broken wing. It wouldn't fly even if I let it go.'

But Sally didn't listen to the old man's explanations. She thought he meant to keep them in the house, to lock them in like the black bird with its cruel beak and its injured wing.

And then Catherine was on her feet, dusting the cake crumbs from her hands. Sally followed her. Catherine walked up to the old man so she was close enough to touch him. She was taller than him and looked down on him. For an awful moment Sally was afraid that she intended to kiss his cheek. If Catherine did that she would be obliged to do it too. Because this was all part of the same dare, wasn't it? At least that was how it seemed to Sally. Since they had come to the house, everything had been a challenge. Magnus hadn't shaved properly. Hard, grey spines grew in the creases in his cheeks. His teeth were yellow and covered in saliva. Sally thought she would rather die than touch him.

But the moment passed and they were outside, laughing so loud that Sally thought she would piss herself, or that they would collapse together into a heap of snow. When their eyes got used to the dark again they didn't need the torch to show them down the road. There was a near-full moon now and they knew the way home.

Catherine's house was quiet. Her father didn't believe in new year celebrations and had gone to bed early.

'Will you come in?' Catherine asked.

'Best not.' Sally knew that was the answer she was supposed to give. Sometimes she could never tell what

Catherine was thinking. Sometimes she knew exactly. Now she knew Catherine didn't want her going in.

'I'd better take that bottle from you. Hide the evidence.'

'Aye.'

'I'll stand here, watch you to your house,' Catherine said.

'No need.'

But she stood, leaning against the garden wall and watched. When Sally turned back she was still there.