

Alex
Gray
ECHO
OF THE
DEAD



SPHERE

SPHERE

First published in Great Britain in 2022 by Sphere

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Copyright © Alex Gray 2022

The moral right of the author has been asserted.

Lyrics to 'The Massacre of Glencoe' written by
Jim McLean, © Duart Music 1963.

Quote on p79 from 'The Waste Land' by T.S. Eliot.

*All characters and events in this publication, other than those
clearly in the public domain, are fictitious and any resemblance
to real persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.*

All rights reserved.

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a
retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, without
the prior permission in writing of the publisher, nor be otherwise circulated
in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published
and without a similar condition including this condition being
imposed on the subsequent purchaser.

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

ISBN 978-0-7515-8328-1

Typeset in Caslon by M Rules
Printed and bound in Great Britain by
Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

Papers used by Sphere are from well-managed forests
and other responsible sources.



Sphere
An imprint of
Little, Brown Book Group
Carmelite House
50 Victoria Embankment
London EC4Y 0DZ

An Hachette UK Company
www.hachette.co.uk

www.littlebrown.co.uk

This book is dedicated to John, Suzy,
Chris, Eloise and Blake with my love.
Keep climbing those mountains.

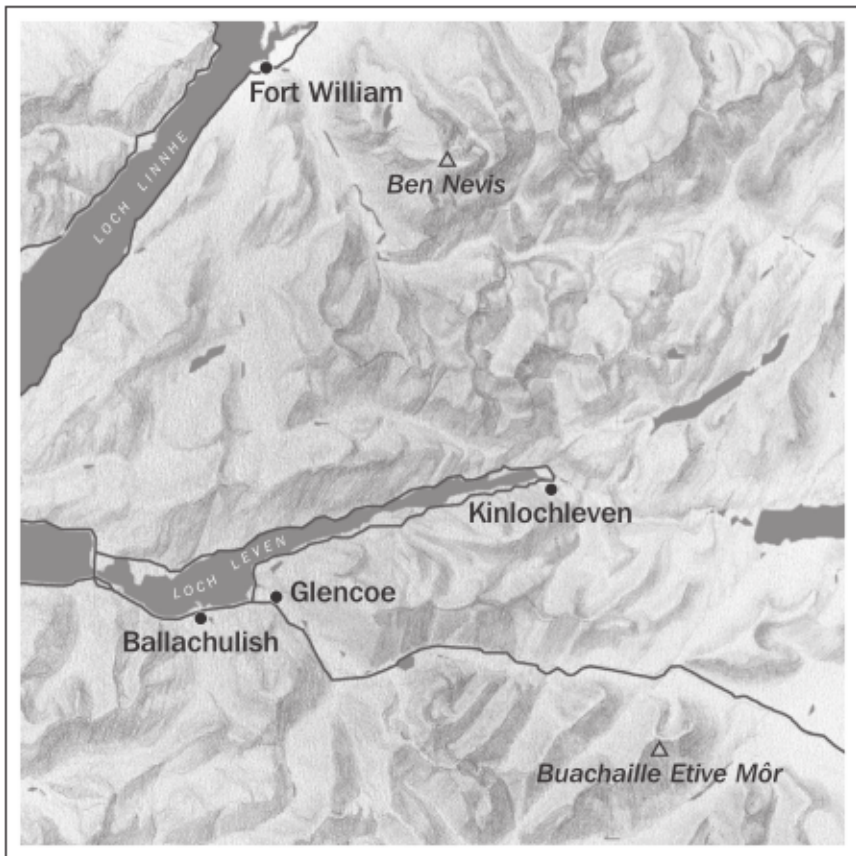
I will look to the mountains;
where will my help come from?

Psalm 121

'Oh cruel is the snow that sweeps Glencoe'

'The Massacre of Glencoe',

THE CORRIES



PROLOGUE

He closed his eyes and heaved a contented sigh, the taste of deer meat still on his lips. Sleep would come easily now, the food washed down not just with ale but generous glasses of their own *Uisge Beatha*, the water of life. It was distilled deep in a hidden cleft of their stronghold, dark and peaty, as warming as the embers still burning on the hearth. He had not begrudged giving it to his guests; they would be slumbering by now, replete after the feast the womenfolk had prepared.

Pulling the cover over his beard, MacDonald lay still, a soft smile upon his lips, the night drawing its dark shadows into the room, no sounds but for a whispering wind beneath the door and the hoot of an owl hunting under the stars.

If he had woken, he might have seen the flash of a blade, bright against the flickering firelight, but death took him even as he dreamed of summer days that would never come again. The knife stabbed through skin and sinew, the hand

that gripped the deadly weapon soon smeared with hot blood, the killer's face tense with fury.

There was little sound as the door opened and closed, simply a dull thud then footsteps disappearing into the night.

One small draught from that door and the last flame on the fire guttered and died, all light extinguished.

CHAPTER ONE

Lorimer's words were still ringing in his ears as Daniel pulled his backpack from the boot of the Lexus. The story of that massacre in the glen was so vivid that he had glanced across Rannoch Moor several times as if to expect the sight of bloodthirsty Highlanders careering over one of the dark ridges, even though the scene of that historic event was still some way ahead. They would drive through Glencoe itself after today's climb, Lorimer had promised; *it's well worth the extra few miles*, he'd told Daniel. Then he'd begun a tale that had made the man beside him stare towards the mountains, imagining the events from over three centuries ago.

The massacre of Glencoe had taken place on a cold February day, Lorimer told him, when men in that part of the world were ruthless bandits, marauding the settlements of other clans and carrying off their livestock. It put Daniel in mind of the Matabele tribesmen in his homeland of Zimbabwe, notorious for their warlike ways against their

more peace-loving Shona neighbours. Yet this story had an edge to it that made Daniel Kohi shiver. The MacDonalds of Glencoe had welcomed the Campbells into their midst – Highland hospitality being one of their foremost traits – only to have these visitors gather during the night and slaughter them. There was much more to the tale, Lorimer had said, giving Daniel a wry smile as he navigated the road winding over bleak moorland, and he would tell him the rest as they drove through Glencoe itself.

Now the mountain he had seen from afar rose above them.

‘Buachaille Etive Mòr, the big hill of the Etive shepherd.’ Lorimer grinned. ‘Or maybe it’s the hill of the big Etive shepherd, whoever he was. Anyhow, that’s a rough translation from the Gaelic name.’

‘It’s certainly big,’ Daniel admitted, tightening the straps of his pack and taking a deep breath of the fresh morning air. There it was, this mountain as a child might draw it, the topmost peak thrusting into a clear blue sky. Winter was still clinging to this place, gullies filled with snow and a deceptive sun promising more warmth than it actually gave.

‘Couldn’t have chosen a better day for a climb,’ he added, ‘and other people evidently think so, too.’ He nodded towards a couple of vehicles over where Lorimer had parked the Lexus.

‘Aye, but remember this is Scotland. A change can happen pretty quickly and there’s no guarantee we’ll make the summit if a mist comes down. You’ve got plenty of spare warm clothes in there?’ Lorimer nodded towards Daniel’s pack.

‘And some of Netta’s scones.’ Daniel grinned, referring to

his elderly neighbour who had adopted him when he'd first arrived in the city.

'Right, that's ten o'clock now,' Lorimer said, looking at his watch. 'We've enough daylight to make it up and back by mid-afternoon so long as the weather holds. I'd love for you to see the view from the top and also Crowberry Tower, a favourite ridge of rock climbers.'

Daniel followed the tall figure as he set off along the trail that would lead to the best ascent of the mountain. Superintendent William Lorimer was an experienced hill climber and Daniel was happy to stay behind him, watching the way he stepped over boulders and skirted muddy patches as if he did this every day of his life.

The temperature was a few degrees above freezing and although there was no wind chill here, sheltered as they were by the flanks of the towering mountain, both men had come prepared with thick gloves and fleece-lined hats pulled over their ears. Lorimer had brought crampons and an ice axe, too, though he hoped not to need either on such a still, calm day.

Mid-March could be notorious, he'd warned his friend, turning from conditions like these into a sudden blizzard with little warning. They'd taken all the precautions, of course, consulting forecasts and making sure others knew their destination. Too many climbers came to grief by lack of preparation, Lorimer explained, and Daniel was glad to defer to the man who was marching steadily ahead of him.

Straw-coloured winter grasses and russet bracken covered most of the terrain but here and there clumps of early primroses peeped shyly from under mossy banks. In the weeks

ahead he would see a lot of change, Lorimer had promised, as the hedgerows began to green, and bare-branched trees came into leaf. It had been a cold November day that had heralded Daniel's arrival in Glasgow, and he was yet to experience any season other than winter, but even he could feel a change in the air as he inhaled the fresh sweet scent of bog myrtle.

As he looked up, Daniel saw a figure ahead, descending the track, the red jacket and dark trousers steadily coming closer until it became a man making his way downhill with the aid of two narrow sticks. Had he already made the top of this mountain? Daniel wondered, rather in awe of anybody setting off at the crack of dawn to tackle the climb.

'Grand day,' Lorimer called out as the man came into earshot, but there was no reply, merely a nod acknowledging their presence as fellow climbers.

Daniel paused and looked back as the fellow walked swiftly away. If he'd made the summit already, then he did not appear to be suffering any ill effects. He was of average build, maybe in his late thirties, a thin determined face under a dark hat with ear flaps. Most people observing a passer-by would take scant notice of such details, but Daniel Kohi possessed that rare quality, a memory that stored every little thing away, to be taken out and examined when necessary.

A small noise made him turn to see a trickle of stones falling down the side of the path, Lorimer's climbing boots apparently having dislodged them. Daniel looked up at the snowy heights above him, dazzling as the sun's rays seemed to turn them to crystal. Avalanches were not unexpected

on this particular mountain and the rapid descent of these stones served to remind him of this grim fact. Daniel climbed on, placing each booted foot carefully, feeling the first stirrings of effort in his legs. He'd be feeling the muscles protesting tomorrow, Lorimer had laughed, but the sense of elation when they'd made the summit would be worth it.

It did not take long for Daniel to realise that he was in a rhythm of movement, each step taking him closer to the moment when he might gain the peak and look out on what Lorimer had promised to be a spectacular view of Glencoe.

Apart from that early morning climber they appeared to have the mountain all to themselves, although when they had pored over the contours of their map Lorimer had pointed out a more difficult route favoured by rock climbers. The reality of this mountainside with its windswept grasses and occasional pink rocks protruding from the undergrowth was so very different from Daniel's anticipation. Yes, he'd told Lorimer, Zimbabwe did have its own highlands, a range on the country's eastern border with Mozambique, but no, he'd never climbed to the top of any of them, although Mount Nyangani was higher than any of the mountains in the UK and the Mutarazi Falls were the second highest waterfall in all of Africa.

Everything about Scotland was so different from home, Daniel thought as a shadow fell across his path, the flank of the mountain suddenly obscuring the sun. He had never felt so cold as that day arriving in Glasgow, rain lashing the pavements, wind sweeping through the alleyways. It was cold here, too, but the sort of cold that made him feel the blood tingling in his veins, spurring him on. There were

gnarled scrubby shrubs and grey heather roots to each side of the trail, quite unlike the lush foliage around the foothills in the Eastern Highlands of Zimbabwe. Yet both countries appeared to have the same custom of firing the dead grasslands (or heather, in this country), a practice that seemed to be part of nature's annual regeneration.

'Want to stop for a break?' Lorimer called back and Daniel pulled back his sleeve to glance at his watch. They'd been climbing for over an hour, much to his surprise. He grinned up at the other man, nodding his agreement.

Lorimer had found a flat stone slightly away from the track and so both men sat there, sharing Netta's buttered scones, munching contentedly.

'That fellow was up with the lark,' Lorimer commented. 'Must have been staying locally to have got up and back by ten this morning.'

'It was still dark at six,' Daniel frowned. 'Could he have done the climb in less than four hours?'

Lorimer shrugged. 'Don't know. If he's local, perhaps he does it regularly. There are some folk who run up and down a mountain for fun, you know. There was a famous race to the top of Ben Lomond and back, but the track became so worn I think that was stopped.'

Daniel shook his head in bewilderment. 'Who would run up a mountain? It's hard enough just walking,' he protested.

'A Scots lad broke the record for climbing every Munro not so long ago,' Lorimer told him. 'Took him less than thirty-two days running, cycling and kayaking to complete the lot.'

Daniel frowned in disbelief. 'Running? And how many Munros are there?'

‘Well, he’s a running coach, so obviously ultra-fit,’ Lorimer explained. ‘And there are currently two hundred and eighty-two peaks that qualify as Munros. I’ve done a few but I’m not one of those folk who just like to tick them off as a challenge completed.’

‘One might be enough for me,’ Daniel sighed, ‘and I am happy to walk at your pace.’

‘It’s the way back down that could be harder on the legs,’ Lorimer cautioned. ‘That’s what will make yours feel like wobbly jelly by the time we’re back in Glasgow.’

He sat back against the slope, hands clasped behind his head, and sighed. ‘Ah, this is what I’ve been dreaming of for months, Daniel. Wide open spaces, clean air to breathe . . .’ He broke off and grinned. ‘Plus, the bonus of your friend Netta’s scones. Don’t tell my wife, but these are the best I’ve ever tasted,’ he whispered.

Daniel gazed down at the winding trail, surprised how far they had already climbed. The car park was a distant blur near the A82 and there was no sign of the climber with the red jacket. Glancing up, he saw that there were now a few clouds moving slowly across skies that had been clear when they had set off, reminding him of Lorimer’s cautious words about how swiftly the weather might change.

‘Daniel! Look!’ Lorimer nudged his friend’s elbow, handing over his binoculars. ‘A snow bunting,’ he whispered.

Daniel could see a tiny white bird against an outcrop of rock, then it came more sharply into view as he caught it in the powerful lenses. It was about the size of a finch, mostly white with smudges of amber around the neck and cheek, its wings streaked with black.

‘Not just your first Munro, but your first snow bunting.’ Lorimer grinned, taking the binoculars back and slinging them around his neck.

Daniel folded the paper bag of scones carefully into his pack beside the map and hefted it onto his shoulders as they began to set off once more. Lorimer had shown him that this mountain top was actually a ridge and that three different Munros might be accessed from the peak of Buachaille Etive Mòr, though the highest one was their goal for today. The snack had given Daniel renewed energy and he quickly established his rhythm again, determined to complete the ascent.

There was nobody waiting at home for Daniel Kohi to boast about the achievement of his first hill climb, this mighty Scottish mountain in an area steeped in so much history, but he knew that Netta Gordon would want to hear every detail so that she might write a letter to Daniel’s mother. Since Christmas the pair had corresponded regularly, and Jeanette Kohi had even managed to borrow a mobile phone to text her son. Maggie Lorimer, the detective superintendent’s wife, would be interested to hear of their day’s outing, too, he thought, as the track became steeper and the way ahead appeared to be full of grey rocks.

‘Go slowly here, Daniel.’ Lorimer had stopped and turned to speak to his friend. ‘This last bit is mostly scree and can be really tricky. Lean into the hillside a bit and let your body do the work.’

Daniel looked up doubtfully at the mass of stones that seemed to separate them from the peak but, heeding Lorimer’s advice, he stepped more slowly, careful not to

dislodge a pile of craggy-looking rocks. The sweat began to trickle from under the rim of his hat and run down the side of his face, but still he kept going.

The summit came almost as a surprise, the ridge of rock falling away on either side.

Daniel stood, open-mouthed, as he gazed around at the landscape beneath his feet. The midday sun had emerged from behind a cloud as if to welcome them to the mountain top and he felt the first slight heat from its rays. All around he could see the slopes and shadows of neighbouring glens and mountains, an ever-changing watercolour of greys and greens, and the distant ribbon of road hardly visible though there were glints of light as cars travelled north to Glencoe.

‘It’s so quiet,’ he whispered, as if afraid to break a spell, and Lorimer nodded as though he knew exactly how Daniel was feeling. Daniel swallowed hard, wishing for an instant that his beloved wife and child were still alive so that he could tell them how he felt at this very moment. Looking up, he blinked, blinded by the sun. That same sun was even now warming the bushlands and cities of the country he had fled and would continue to shine on generations still to come. Perhaps Chipó and Johannes were somewhere beyond those dazzling skies, safely in heaven, as his mother believed. Up here, the sense of peace made anything possible, Daniel decided, a small feeling of joy filling his heart.

‘Right, stand over there so I can take your photo,’ Lorimer said, drawing out his mobile phone and waving Daniel to a safe spot with the view behind him. ‘Good, now smile. That’s it. Once more . . .’

Daniel grinned as Lorimer snapped a few pictures, glad

that there would be something to show to his neighbour, Netta. And, perhaps in time, his mother back home. He took a deep breath of fresh mountain air and, eyes closed, raised his face to the sun, savouring this perfect moment.

‘Look! Daniel, look over here!’

There was an urgency in Lorimer’s voice that suddenly took Daniel out of his reverie.

The tall detective had promised to show Daniel a particular place beneath the mountain’s ridge, Crowberry Tower. Was this what he wanted Daniel to see right now?

But something was wrong, Daniel thought as he approached Lorimer and glanced into the other man’s face. Something very wrong.

Peering over the ridge, Daniel saw the body, its red jacket and dark trousers similar to the clothing that other climber had been wearing. But that was where the likeness ended, the fallen man’s blond hair merging into the bright snow.

‘Is he dead?’ Daniel gasped, kneeling down to get closer to the edge and a better view of the fallen man.

‘Impossible to tell from here,’ Lorimer replied. ‘Need to get a call to mountain rescue. Think he’ll have to be air-lifted off. That crag doesn’t look as if it could be accessed on foot.’

‘Can I have your field glasses?’ Daniel asked. ‘I might be able to discern some movement.’

Lorimer handed over the high-definition binoculars.

‘Here, see what you can make out. I’m going to try and get a signal on my mobile.’

Daniel pulled the strap of the glasses over his head and adjusted the focus.

The climber was motionless, arms flung out either side of his body, face down on the small snow-filled gully. If there was blood then Daniel could see none, the impact alone having probably killed the man outright. He was not wearing a hat, something Daniel found puzzling, but perhaps it had blown off as he'd tumbled down that sheer drop. He looked closely – were those bulges in the jacket pocket? Perhaps a hat and scarf were tucked in there, the climber having discarded them at the summit, relieved to have made it to the top. His gaze travelled across the man, taking in every detail: the right fist clenched and grasping something, dark; a small bit of a stick or a branch clutched desperately as he'd fallen? As he looked, a shadow fell across the scene and the blond hair was blown in a sudden freshening breeze. The sun had disappeared now, and more clouds were scudding in from the west.

Daniel sat up, suddenly aware of how alone he was on this mountain top, Lorimer nowhere to be seen. Only moments before, he'd been glowing in the success of climbing his first Munro but now he felt empty, drained by the loss of a life so close to where he was sitting.

Lorimer appeared over the edge of the ridge shaking his head.

'It's no use. Can't get a signal. We'll have to go back down right away and contact the mountain rescue people.'

Daniel stood up. 'I think he's dead,' he told his friend. 'I see no sign of him breathing and besides, I doubt anyone could survive that fall.'

There was silence between them, the only sound a faint sighing of the wind.

‘Hold onto the good memories we’ve made today, Daniel,’ Lorimer said, grasping him by the shoulder. ‘This poor fellow may well have had lots of his own. Who knows what his story might have been?’

Daniel nodded and followed Lorimer back gingerly down the scree till they came onto the trail once more, Lorimer’s words a little comforting.

Yet, neither man was to know at that moment just how much their own lives would be entwined with that dead man’s story.