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The Lighthouse

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Extract

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Prologue

1

Commander Adam Dalgliesh was not unused to being urgently summoned to non-scheduled meetings with unspecified people at inconvenient times, but usually with one purpose in common: he could be confident that somewhere there lay a dead body awaiting his attention. There were other urgent calls, other meetings, sometimes at the highest level. Dalgliesh, as a permanent ADC to the Commissioner, had a number of functions which, as they grew in number and importance, had become so ill-defined that most of his colleagues had given up trying to define them. But this meeting, called in Assistant Commissioner Harkness's office on the seventh floor of New Scotland Yard at ten fifty-five on the morning of Saturday, 23 October, had, from his first entry into the room, the unmistakable presaging of murder. This had nothing to do with a certain serious tension on the faces turned towards him; a departmental debacle would have caused greater concern. It was rather that unnatural death always provoked a peculiar unease, an uncomfortable realisation that there were still some things that might not be susceptible to bureaucratic control.

There were only three men awaiting him and Dalgliesh was surprised to see Alexander Conistone of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. He liked Conistone, who was one of the few eccentrics remaining in an increasingly conformist and politicised service. Conistone had acquired a reputation for crisis management. This was partly founded on his belief that there was no emergency that was not amenable to precedent or departmental regulations but, when these orthodoxies failed, he could reveal an eccentric and dangerous capacity for imaginative initiatives which, by any bureaucratic logic, deserved to end in disaster but never did. Dalgliesh, for whom few of the labyrinths of Westminster bureaucracy were wholly unfamiliar, had earlier decided that this dichotomy of character was inherited. Generations of Conistones had been soldiers. The foreign fields of Britain's imperialistic past were enriched by the bodies of unmemorialised victims of previous Conistones'

crises management. Even his eccentric appearance reflected a personal ambiguity. Alone among his colleagues he dressed with the careful pinstriped conformity of a civil servant of the Thirties while, with his strong bony face, mottled cheeks and hair with the resilient waywardness of straw, he looked like a farmer.

He was seated next to Dalgliesh opposite one of the wide windows. Having sat through the first ten minutes of the present meeting with an unusual economy of words, he sat, his chair a little tilted, complacently surveying the panorama of towers and spires, lit by a transitory unseasonable morning sun. Of the four men in the room – Conistone, Adam Dalgliesh, Assistant Commissioner Harkness and a fresh-faced boy from MI5 who had been introduced as Colin Reeves – Conistone, the one most concerned with the matter in hand, had so far said the least while Reeves, preoccupied with the effort of remembering what was being said without the humiliating expedient of being seen to take notes, hadn't yet spoken. Now Conistone stirred himself for a summing up.

'Murder would be the most embarrassing for us, suicide hardly less so in the circumstances. Accidental death we could probably live with. Given the victim, there's bound to be publicity whichever it is, but it should be manageable unless this is murder. The problem is that we haven't much time. No date has been fixed yet, but the PM would like to arrange this top-secret international get-together in early January. A good time. Parliament not sitting, nothing much happens just after Christmas, nothing is expected to happen. The PM seems to have set his mind on Combe. So you'll take on the case, Adam? Good.'

Before Dalgliesh could reply, Harkness broke in, 'The security rating, if it comes off, couldn't be higher.'

Dalgliesh thought, *And even if you're in the know, which I doubt, you have no intention of telling me who will be meeting at this top-secret conference, or why.* Security was always on a need-to-know basis. He could make his guesses, but had no particular curiosity. On the other hand, he was being asked to investigate a violent death and there were things he needed to be told.

Before Colin Reeves had time to realise that this was his cue to intervene, Conistone said, 'All that will be taken care of, of course. We're not expecting problems. There was a similar situation some years ago – before your time, Harkness – when a VIP politician

thought he'd like a respite from his protection officer and booked two weeks on Combe. The visitor stood the silence and solitude for two days before realising that his life was meaningless without his red boxes. I should have thought that that was the message Combe was established to convey but he didn't get it. No, I don't think we'll be worrying our friends south of the Thames.'

Well that, at least, was a relief. To have the security services involved was always a complication. Dalgliesh reflected that the secret service, like the monarchy, in yielding up its mystique in response to public enthusiasm for greater openness, seemed to have lost some of that half-ecclesiastical patina of authority bestowed on those who dealt in esoteric mysteries. Today its head was known by name and pictured in the press, the previous head had actually written her autobiography and its headquarters, an eccentric oriental-looking monument to modernity which dominated its stretch of the south bank of the Thames, seemed designed to attract rather than repel curiosity. To surrender mystique had its disadvantages; an organisation came to be regarded like any other bureaucracy, staffed by the same fallible human beings and liable to the same cock-ups. But he expected no problems with the secret service. The fact that MI5 was represented at middle-grade level suggested that this single death on an offshore island was among the least of their present concerns.

He said, 'I can't go inadequately briefed. You've given me nothing except who's dead, where he died and apparently how. Tell me about the island. Where exactly is it?'

Harkness was in one of his more difficult moods, his ill humour imperfectly concealed by self-importance and a tendency to verbosity. The large map on the table was a little crooked. Frowning, he aligned it more accurately with the edge of the table, pushed it towards Dalgliesh and stabbed it with his forefinger.

'It's here. Combe Island. Off the coast of Cornwall, about twenty miles south-west of Lundy Island and roughly twelve miles from the mainland, Pentworthy in this case. Newquay is the nearest large town.' He looked over at Conistone. 'You'd better carry on. It's more your baby than ours.'

Conistone spoke directly to Dalgliesh. 'I'll waste a little time on the history. It explains Combe and if you don't know it you may start under a disadvantage. The island was owned for over four

hundred years by the Holcombe family who acquired it in the sixteenth century, although no one seems clear exactly how. Probably a Holcombe rowed out with a few armed retainers, hoisted his personal standard and took it over. There can't have been much competition. The title was later ratified by Henry the Eighth once he'd got rid of the Mediterranean pirates who'd established it as a basis for their slave-trading raids along the Devon and Cornish coasts. After that Combe lay more or less neglected until the eighteenth century when the family began to take an interest in it, and visited occasionally to look at the bird-life or spend the day picnicking. Then a Gerald Holcombe, born in the late eighteen-hundreds, decided to use the island for family holidays. He restored the cottages and, in 1912, built a house and additional accommodation for the staff. The family went there every summer in those heady days before the First World War. The war changed everything. The two elder sons were killed, one in France, the other at Gallipoli. The Holcombes are the kind of family who die in wars, not make money from them. That left only the youngest, Henry, who was consumptive and unfit for military service. Apparently, after the death of his brothers he was oppressed by a sense of general unworthiness and had no particular wish to inherit. The money hadn't come from land but from fortunate investments and by the late Twenties they had more or less dried up. So in 1930 he set up a charitable trust with what was left, found some wealthy supporters and handed over the island and the property. His idea was that it should be used as a place of rest and seclusion for men in positions of responsibility who needed to get away from the rigours of their professional lives.'

Now, for the first time, he bent down to open his briefcase and took out a file with a security marking. Rummaging among the documents, he brought out a single sheet of paper. 'I've got the exact wording here. It makes Henry Holcombe's intentions clear. *For men who undertake the dangerous and arduous business of exercising high responsibility in the service of the Crown and of their country, whether in the armed forces, politics, science, industry or the arts, and who require a restorative period of solitude, silence and peace.* Engagingly typical of its age, isn't it? No mention of women, of course. This was 1930, remember. However the accepted convention is held to apply, that the word "men" embraces women. They take a maximum of five

visitors whom they accommodate at their choice either in the main house or in one of the stone cottages. Basically what Combe Island offers is peace and security. In the last few decades the latter has become probably the more important. People who want time to think can go there without their protection officers in the knowledge that they will be safe and completely undisturbed. There's a helicopter pad for bringing them in, and the small harbour is the only possible landing place by sea. No casual visitors are ever allowed and even mobile phones are forbidden – they wouldn't get a signal there anyway. They keep a very low profile. People who go there are generally on personal recommendation, either from a Trustee or from a previous or regular visitor. You can see its advantage for the PM's purpose.'

Reeves blurted out, 'What's wrong with Chequers?'

The others turned on him the brightly interested gaze of an adult prepared to humour a precocious child.

Conistone said, 'Nothing. An agreeable house with, I understand, every comfort. But guests who are invited to Chequers tend to get noticed. Isn't that the purpose of their going there?'

Dalgliesh asked, 'How did Downing Street get to know about the island?'

Conistone slid the paper back into his file. 'Through one of the PM's newly ennobled chums. He went to Combe to recover from the dangerous and arduous responsibility of adding one more grocery chain to his empire and another billion to his personal fortune.'

'There are some permanent staff, presumably. Or do the VIPs do their own washing up?'

'There's the secretary, Rupert Maycroft, previously a solicitor in Warnborough. We've had to confide in him and, of course, inform the Trustees that Number Ten would be grateful if some important visitors could be accommodated in early January. At present it's all very tentative but we've asked him to make no bookings after this month. There are the usual staff – boatman, housekeeper, cook. We know something about all of them. One or two of the previous visitors have been important enough to warrant security checks. It's all been done very discreetly. There's a resident physician, Dr Guy Staveley, and his wife, although I gather she's more off than on the island. Can't stand the boredom apparently. Staveley's a refugee from a London general practice. Apparently he made a wrong

diagnosis and a child died, so he's got himself a job where the worst that can happen is someone falling off a cliff and he can't be blamed for that.'

Harkness said, 'Only one resident has a criminal conviction, the boatman Jago Tamlyn in 1998 for GBH. I gather there were mitigating circumstances but it must have been a serious attack. He got twelve months. He's been in no trouble since.'

Dalgliesh asked, 'When did the current visitors arrive?'

'All five in the last week. The writer Nathan Oliver, together with his daughter Miranda and copy-editor Dennis Tremlett, came on Monday. A retired German diplomat, Dr Raimund Speidel, ex-Ambassador to Beijing, came by private yacht from France on Wednesday, and Dr Mark Yelland, director of the Hayes-Skolling research laboratory in the Midlands which has been targeted by the animal liberation activists, arrived on Thursday. Maycroft will be able to put you in the picture.'

Harkness broke in, 'Better take the minimum of people, at least until you know what you're dealing with. The smaller the invasion the better.'

Dalgliesh said, 'It will hardly be an invasion. I'm still awaiting a replacement for Tarrant but I'll take Inspector Miskin and Sergeant Benton-Smith. We can probably manage without a SOCO or official photographer at this stage, but if it proves to be murder, I'll have to have reinforcements or let the local force take over. I'll need a pathologist. I'll speak to Kynaston if I can reach him. He may be away from his lab on a case.'

Harkness said, 'That won't be necessary. We're using Edith Glenister. You know her, of course.'

'Hasn't she retired?'

Conistone said, 'Officially two years ago, but she does work occasionally, mostly on sensitive overseas cases. At sixty-five she's probably had enough of trudging gum-booted through muddy fields with the local CID, examining decomposing bodies in ditches.'

Dalgliesh doubted whether this was why Professor Glenister had officially retired. He had never worked with her but he knew her reputation. She was among the most highly regarded of women forensic pathologists, notable for an almost uncanny accuracy in assessing the time of death, for the speed and comprehensiveness of her reports and for the clarity and authority with which she gave

evidence in court. She was notable, too, for her insistence on maintaining the distinction between the functions of the pathologist and the investigating officer. Professor Glenister, he knew, would never hear details of the circumstances of the murder before examining the body, ensuring, presumably, that she came to the corpse with no preconceived ideas. He was intrigued by the prospect of working with her and had no doubt that it was the FCO who had originally suggested using her. All the same, he would have preferred his usual forensic pathologist.

He said, 'You're not implying that Miles Kynaston can't be trusted to keep his mouth shut?'

Harkness broke in. 'Of course not, but Cornwall is hardly his patch. Professor Glenister is stationed at present in the South West. Anyway Kynaston isn't available, we've checked.' Dalgliesh was tempted to say, *How convenient for the FCO.* They certainly hadn't lost any time. Harkness went on, 'You can pick her up at RAF St Mawgan, near Newquay, and they'll arrange a special helicopter to take the body to the mortuary she uses. She'll treat the case as urgent. You should get her report sometime tomorrow.'

Dalgliesh said, 'So Maycroft rang you as soon as possible after finding the body? I suppose he was following instructions.'

Harkness said, 'He was given a phone number, told that it was top secret and instructed to phone the Trustees if anything untoward happened on the island. He's been warned that you'll be arriving by helicopter and to expect you by early afternoon.'

Dalgliesh said, 'He'll have some difficulty explaining to his colleagues why this particular death should attract a Metropolitan Police commander and a detective inspector instead of being dealt with by the local CID, but I suppose you've covered that.'

Harkness said, 'As well as we can. The Chief Constable has been put in the picture, of course. There's no point in arguing over which force should take responsibility until we know whether we've got a murder to investigate. In the meantime they'll cooperate. If it is murder and the island is as secure as they claim, there'll be a limited number of suspects. That should speed up the inquiry.'

Only someone ignorant of a murder investigation, or who had conveniently forgotten the less successful incidents of his past, could have been so misjudging. A small group of suspects, if each was intelligent and prudent enough to keep his or her counsel and resist

the fateful impulse to volunteer more than was asked, could complicate any investigation and bedevil the prosecution.

At the door Conistone turned. 'The food's all right on Combe Island I suppose? The beds comfortable?'

Harkness said coolly, 'We've had no time to enquire. Frankly it didn't occur to me. I should have thought that whether the cook knows her job and the state of the mattresses is more your concern than ours. Our interest is in a dead body.'

Conistone took the barb with good humour. 'True. We'll check on the amenities if this conference comes off. The first thing the rich and powerful learn is the value of comfort. I should have mentioned that the last surviving Holcombe is a permanent resident on the island, Miss Emily Holcombe, aged eighty plus, a former Oxford academic. History, I believe. Your subject, wasn't it, Adam – but weren't you at the other place? She'll either be an ally or a perfect nuisance. If I know anything about academic women it will be the latter. Thank you for taking this on. We'll be in touch.'

Harkness rose to escort Conistone and Reeves out of the building. Leaving them at the lifts, Dalgliesh went back to his office. First he must phone Kate and Benton-Smith. After that there was a more difficult call. He and Emma Lavenham were to have spent tonight and tomorrow together. If she planned to spend the afternoon in London, she might already be on her way. He'd have to reach her on her mobile phone. It wouldn't be the first call of its kind and, as always, she would be half-expecting it. She wouldn't complain – Emma never did. Both of them had occasional urgent commitments and their time together was the more precious because it could never be relied upon. And there were three words he wanted to say to her which he found he could never speak over the phone. They too would have to wait.

He put his head round the door of his PA's room. 'Get DI Miskin and Sergeant Benton-Smith for me, will you, Susie. Then I'll need a car to go to Battersea Heliport, picking up Sergeant Benton-Smith first, then Inspector Miskin. Her murder case is in her office. See that it's put in the car, will you.'

The call could hardly have come at a less convenient time. After a month of working a sixteen-hour day tiredness had caught up with him and, although he could manage tiredness, what he longed for was rest, peace and, for two blessed days, the company of Emma. He

told himself that he had only himself to blame for the spoilt weekend. He wasn't compelled to undertake a possible murder investigation, however politically or socially important the victim or challenging the crime. There were senior officers who would have preferred him to concentrate on initiatives with which he was already closely involved, the complications of policing a multiracial society in which drugs, terrorism and international crime conglomerates were the major challenges, the proposal for a new detective force to deal with serious crimes best investigated nationally. The plans would be bedevilled with politics; top-level policing always had been. The Met needed senior officers who were at ease in that duplicitous world. He saw himself as in danger of becoming one more bureaucrat, a committee member, adviser, co-ordinator – not a detective. If this happened, would he any longer be a poet? Wasn't it in the rich soil of a murder investigation, in the fascination of the gradual unveiling of truth, in shared exertion and the prospect of danger, and in the pitiableness of desperate and broken lives that his poetry put out its shoots?

But now, with Kate and Benton-Smith on their way, there were things to be done and quickly, meetings to be tactfully cancelled, papers to be locked away, the public relations branch to be put in the picture. He kept a bag always packed for these sudden emergencies, but it was in his Queenhithe flat and he was glad that he needed to call in there. He had never yet phoned Emma from New Scotland Yard. She would know as soon as she heard his voice what he was about to say. She would make her own arrangements for the weekend, perhaps excluding him from her thoughts as he was from her company.

Ten minutes later he closed the door of his office and for the first time with a backward glance, as if taking leave of a long familiar place he might not see again.