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THE FORGOTTEN

PETER WILLIAMS



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**Dedicated to Beth, for all her invaluable support, and for
being my sister**

ro-labhairt
(Prologue)

*The Scottish Museum Of National Identity, Edinburgh,
Scotland, nightshift, one year ago.*

Corra Gunn pushed the floor buffer up to the black base of a display case. The small redhead switched the polisher off, and the whine was replaced by dead silence, as she was the only one on the ground floor.

The main room stretched up four storeys to the skylight that covered the entire ceiling. Balconies on each level allowed visitors to lean over and look down upon the bagpipe shaped fountain that dominated the main entrance. It was silent but gurgled jets of water from all the pipes during opening hours.

In front of the middle-aged cleaner was an exhibit she'd never seen before; a mummified middle finger sat in a cradle illuminated by subdued light from below. Above it was a spotlit painting of an old crone, her long, thin, white hair blowing like snow in the wind, and her skin a frosty blue. She was clutching a large, spherical crystal that sat atop her cane made of ice.

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Corra's brows furrowed in concentration as she read the plaque: 'The Blue Hag (The Cailleach Bheur): this mummified middle finger is said to have been severed from the hand of immortal, Scottish hag of myth. Legend has it that she froze the ground with each tap of her magical staff and grew older with the year, only to be reborn every All Hallows' Eve. She represents winter in Celtic mythology.'

She somehow knew, as surely as she knew her own name, that The Cailleach Bheur was real, but the finger wasn't hers. She shook her head as long-lost memories danced on the tip of her tongue before a fluttering sound from above broke her concentration.

For a second she thought she saw a shadowy figure dropping to her left, but dismissed it as a pigeon that had flown in through the high, double-doored entrance and became trapped when the museum closed, which was not an uncommon occurrence. For some strange reason she never fathomed, shadows always calmed her, made her feel safe.

She shrugged and used her key to deactivate the case's proximity sensors. As she pulled a spray bottle and a chamois leather from her tabard, she heard a noise from the darkened

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Irn-Bru exhibit room in the same direction that the shadow had caught her eye.

As she spun around in fright, an arrow pierced her chest with enough force to lift her off her feet and slam her into the showcase, toppling it with a loud crash.

A hasty audit by museum staff the next day revealed that the only thing missing was the finger. What really intrigued the public was why an archer, a remnant of the past himself, should go to such great lengths to take something of so little financial value.

Historians, mythologists and archaeologists appeared on TV, radio and in newsprint to make statements that were long on syllables but short on insight. There were even critics of the museum complaining that the exhibition was only staged in the first place to combat accusations that it was pandering to a cliched, touristy image of Scotland.

If you'd asked any of them, or the media in general, the name of the woman who died that night they couldn't have told you without googling it. Two days later a reminder appeared on the front page of the local newspaper.

“The Mystery of the Missing Finger Victim’s Body Stolen!

The theft this reporter has dubbed ‘The Mystery of the Missing Finger’ deepened yesterday when, in an act eerily reminiscent of Burke and Hare the bodysnatchers, the remains of Mrs Corra Gunn were taken from the city mortuary in the early hours of the morning by person or persons unknown.

Mrs Gunn (42) was the member of the Scottish Museum of National Identity maintenance staff who was killed during the theft of the witch’s finger due to feature in the ‘Scotland: The Myth, The Legend’ exhibition, which opened this week. She is survived by her husband, Cameron Gunn.

If you have any information, please call Crime Stoppers on 0800 555 111.”

Chapter One

chan eil duine a 'smaoineachadh air na frogaire
(Nobody Thinks of the Frogmen)

Tuesday afternoon, Present day, Edinburgh, Scotland.

Cameron Gunn sat in the public library in front of an old PC, furtively eating economy salt and vinegar crisps from a packet in his jacket pocket. On the screen was a website with the less than catchy title of: 'Celtic Gods, Goddesses and Elementals'. The headline emblazoned across the top of the page in large, dark-green, ornate lettering read: 'The Mystery of the Missing Finger!'

Besides information, the 45-year old was also there for the warmth, as he couldn't afford to heat his home. It was a temporary situation, with a drawer full of final demands and mortgage defaults, he wouldn't have anything to heat in a few weeks time.

Shouting from the run-down main street, with its shutdown shops and graffitied walls, drew his attention to the large window on his left, where he could see a young brunette being pushed from one to the other as four large men, dressed

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all in black, surrounded her.

Deciding it wasn't his problem, he returned his attention to the screen where dense text flowed around a photo of the Cailleach Bheur's painting from the museum display.

A few moments later a cry of pain from the woman made him look up again; she was staggering back, a bright red mark from a backhanded slap, and a cut from a ring, on her cheek.

He brushed his steel-grey hair out of his eyes, wishing he could afford a haircut, looked around and sighed. The counter staff and the few customers were busy pretending nothing was happening. This was an area where there was sometimes law, occasionally order, but rarely both at the same time. He headed for the exit, pausing to pick up a hefty encyclopaedia and a bulky thesaurus from the reference section on the way.

The head librarian, who had long since felt that the stubbly chinned man dressed in work jeans and whatever clean polo shirt came to hand, was lowering the tone of what she hoped, one day, would be a middle-class oasis in a working-class desert. Now, to add insult to injury, he was stealing her books, "Wait! You have to check those out," she shouted after him.

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“I’m glad to see that you’ve got your priorities straight,” he said as he walked out into the rain, which had been drizzling, on and off, all day.

The smell drifting from a nearby chippy made his stomach rumble, reminding him of how long it had been since he’d been able to afford a hot meal.

The men were standing in a circle over the woman who lay in a puddle, the muddy, brown water staining her blue, padded hoodie. One of them was shouting something inaudible at her in an interrogatory tone.

Cameron spun, hurling a volume, like a discus thrower into the back of one of the men’s head, dropping him like a stone. One of the others turned just in time to catch the second book full in the face, joining his friend on the ground, blood flowing from a broken nose.

One of the remaining attackers circled behind him as the other one charged, a commando knife raised above his head. He was far taller and more muscular than Cameron’s own five foot ten tall, sinewy frame. He quickly stepped sideways, tripped the thug with an extended foot, grabbed his arm as he fell and dislocated it with one, swift kick to the shoulder,

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catching the weapon as it dropped.

Detecting movement in his periphery, he spun rapidly, as he raised the knife he felt a blade prick his throat. The man before him was taller, shaven-headed and in his forties with a military bearing. When he spoke, it was with a clipped, upper-class English accent, “Be on your way, there’s a good chap. One would rather not carry out an impromptu tracheotomy on a civilian—unless one could not avoid it,” he said, using a lot of big words to appear more intelligent than he actually was, as the self-important frequently do.

“I thought I hit one of the others with the thesaurus?” Cameron said, “Anyway, that’s your carotid artery I’m pressing my blade against,” he said without emotion, “if you cut me I’ll pierce it on the way down, then we can play a fun little game I like to call ‘See who bleeds out first’.”

“You are undoubtedly psychotic,” the man said, showing the first chink in his calm demeanour.

“My doctor prefers clinically depressed, and he has diplomas and everything.”

“Perhaps so, Mr Gunn, but I do not believe you are

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despondent enough to sacrifice yourself for a total stranger.”

Cameron surveyed him dispassionately, “It’s not who I’m willing to die for that should worry you,” he said, “it’s what I have to live for.”

Hearing the distant sound of approaching police sirens the man stepped carefully away, smiling grimly, “After helping his people to their feet, he turned around, “This is not over, by the time I’m finished with you’ll wish you had never been born.”

“Too late, better luck next time,” Cameron said as they limped away. He turned to check on the woman, but she’d taken the opportunity to escape, and he couldn’t blame her.

There was no point in running, he decided. The librarian, who’d probably dialled 999 to report the theft of two library books, would be only too happy to give the police his address from his library card.

He picked up the two torn and sodden tomes, dropped them on the library’s ‘information bar’ and sat back down in front of the monitor, where he stared blankly at the screen wondering how a random stranger knew his name.

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It had taken Cameron almost two hours to walk to the road bridge crossing the River Forth after some mysterious benefactor had posted his bail and the police had kicked him out with no money and no other way to get home. He was sure they took him to a station in Fife as payback for being a thorn in their side for the last twelve months.

They knew that two damaged books and a bloodstained pavement were unlikely to make much of a case for the procurator fiscal since the attackers and their victim had vanished without a trace. But it wasn't a complete loss for them, as it did earn him a lifetime ban from the library service, as the head librarian had delighted in telling the constables who'd arrested him.

It had just turned midnight as he climbed over the safety barrier, planning to make it a really short Wednesday. The rain had stopped, and the full moon was reflected in the calm water 500 feet below. He'd stood in places like this many times since his wife's murder, only to walk away cursing his cowardice each time. Today, he decided, would be different.

"Nobody thinks of the frogmen," said a voice from behind.

* * *

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“Sorry?” Cameron said, caught off-guard, as he looked back to see that the words had come from the 5’8 slim frame of a brown-haired, thirty-something man in an expensive, business suit.

“People who drown themselves have no consideration for the divers who have to pull their rotting corpses out of the water. Hopefully, you won’t decay too much before they find you,” he continued.

“I take it you paid my bail,” Cameron said turning back to look at the water, “I hope you can afford to lose it.”

“This is no way to end it, going down fighting for what’s right is one thing, but just to be done with your grief? I don’t think so.”

“If you work for the Samaritans you’re doing a very bad job,” Cameron said, without taking his eyes off the waves that were gently lapping against the bridge supports.

“Okay,” the man sighed. “Let me put it another way: with you gone who’ll find Corra’s body? Who’ll make sure she’s laid to rest? Without you who’s left to give a damn?”

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“You know where she is?” Cameron said, with a rare display of emotion as he vaulted back onto the walkway to grab the smaller man’s lapels.

“No, but I’m going on a quest to find the finger stolen from the museum, and if you come with me I promise that you’ll either find her or die trying. And considering what you were about to do, I don’t see a downside in that for you,” the man said wriggling free to open the front passenger door of his Aston Martin Rapide and gestured for Cameron to enter.

He thought about it for a minute then shrugged, “Since my mother always told me not to get in motors with strangers, I’ll ask you who you are,” Cameron said as he luxuriated in the upholstery of a car that cost more than his house.

“I’m Loudon Mackay, I’m a god, and you never had a mother. In that respect and many others, you and I are the same,” he said.

Cameron tried to ignore anything in that sentence that didn’t make any sense, but that only left him with a few conjunctions. He looked at the Burberry shirt, Christian Lacroix tie, Armani suit and Gucci Oxford brogues the man was attired in, “I somehow doubt that you and I share a

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