

The Gastropoda Imperative

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FIVE YEARS EARLIER

Chapter 1

Conal Mitchell, PA to Dermot Drewsbeck, multi-billionaire and sole owner of Tirolean Enterprises, was tense. He was running out of time and daylight. It was fast getting too dark to fly, and if he didn't land the helicopter pretty soon, he stood a good chance of ending belly-up in the drink.

Giving a small grin of satisfaction, he relaxed. There it was, dead ahead, just off the Sussex coast, exactly where it should be. Flat Rock Island. *Spot-on old son. No probs.*

The island was aptly named, looking as it did, as though a giant with an outsize scimitar had sliced the top clean off. Conal swung out from the coast and headed in over the tear-shaped formation from the thin end, searching in the dimming light for the helipad. It had been a long time since he was last here, and he wasn't too sure how the setup might have changed. He'd have to keep an eye peeled for any obstructions.

The project was situated in a natural indentation at the larger end of the island, or rather, the big slab of concrete that was its roof was. The laboratory itself was buried deep underground.

As Conal approached the helipad, the halogen lights edging the slab burst into life, and for a few precious seconds he was blinded.

"Damn! Bloody idiots. What the hell do they think they're doing?"

Blinking back tears, Conal landed in the centre of the big white circle painted at one end of the slab and turned off the engine. Flicking switches, he sat waiting for the rotors to wind down. Giving his eyes a few seconds to adjust to the dark, he jumped from the chopper and slammed the door, turning towards the entrance. He set off at a brisk pace, going through the bollocking he was going to give the idiot who'd just nearly blinded him.

As he strode across the concrete, a sudden thought struck him, and he shook his head at his own stupidity, giving a wry smile. The outside lights came on automatically at dusk; he'd been unlucky enough to be landing at that particular time. He couldn't make out much of the island through the haze of the lights blazing all round him, just the single, lonely looking structure that was the project's entrance.

Making his way towards the glass box stuck on the far side of the slab, he wiped a hand over his bald head, casting glances right and left as he went.

Conal was stocky, 1.7 metres tall and muscular. He always wore a black leather jacket over a white shirt and red tie, matched with grey slacks and highly polished shoes. His co-workers joked that he'd probably bought a job-lot years ago and hadn't worked his way through them all yet.

Conal had been Dermot Drewsbeck's PA for the last five years. The Old Man - as he referred to him in private - had head-hunted him after he'd left the Special Forces, making an offer so outrageous that he couldn't turn him down. Over the years, he'd earned that money though, saving the Old Man's neck on more than one occasion.

Conal was edgy, and with good reason, because he was near enough now to see into the glass walled entrance building. The big curved desk facing the doors sat empty, as did the glass sided lift shaft. The car was obviously down at the basement level. There was no sign of anybody anywhere, and that worried him.

Reaching the doors, he pushed the entrance button, the harsh buzzer making itself heard through the reinforced glass. He knew a second buzzer would be sounding down in the laboratory below, in case the security guard wasn't at the desk for some reason.

Getting no response, Conal punched the over-ride code into the entry pad, clicking impatient fingers as he waited for the glass doors to slide aside. A shiver touched the back of his neck as he entered. Glancing back over his shoulder, he shook his head at his uneasiness.

Walking around the large desk, Conal sat in the seat, staring down at the bank of CCTV screens set in a semi-circle in front of him. There were five, all showing different views of the rooms below. Nothing moved in any of them.

He sat back in his seat for a moment, a puzzled frown on his face, then sat forward with a jerk as he caught sight of something on Camera 5, the one covering The Pit.

Because that particular room was kept in perpetual darkness, the camera was fitted with an infra-red filter, giving everything on the screen an ethereal glow.

Something white lay on the floor, just at the edge of the picture - something that looked familiar.

Grabbing the control stick, Conal moved the camera to get a better view, zooming in on the image. A long, sibilant hiss escaped his lips and his eyes widened. Zooming in some more, he felt his heart rate increase and a patch of sweat break out between his shoulder blades. Yes, he'd been right. There could be no mistaking what lay waiting for him down in the lab.

Picking up the desk phone, he thumbed in a number available to only a few select people. Holding the phone to his ear, he continued staring at the CCTV screen. When his call was answered he uttered four words, his tone a dull, flat monotone.

"Jizzle. Island. Now. Alone."

Taking a few deep breaths, Conal placed the handset back on its cradle and stood, surprised at how unsteady his legs had become. Making his way over to the lift, he pressed the call-button, tapping his finger-tips against his thigh as the car whirred its slow way up from the bottom of the shaft.

The lift seemed to take forever, but when the doors did finally slide open, Conal hesitated, having to stop them closing

again with an outstretched hand. Rubbing the back of his neck, he stepped inside.

Chapter 2

”Jizzle. Island. Now. Alone.”

When the flat voice spoke in his ear, the adrenaline flowed through Dermot Drewsbeck’s body. The quiet words brought a chill to his heart and a lump to his throat.

Jizzle was his PA’s ‘code word’, used on an open line when security was a concern. It was only employed in a dire emergency. It meant he had to act and act now; take the call extremely seriously, because something bad was going down.

In the five years his PA had worked for him, Conal had never used it before. Drewsbeck pursed his lips as he considered the phone call and its four words.

Jizzle. Island. Now. Alone.

It was pretty obvious that something bad was going down out at Flat Rock Island. Something very bad if Conal had resorted to using the special code word.

Having spent all day with his Finance Director working out which tax haven was the best one to place his company profits in, Drewsbeck was already dogged tired, and he’d promised to take his wife out for the evening. Now here was Conal’s call, doubling the pressure on him.

Heading a global conglomerate whose turnover outstripped many a small country’s national income was bad enough, without all this bloody cloak and dagger stuff. Damn the man.

The call had unsettled Drewsbeck more than he’d have liked to admit, mounting worry on top of stress, on top of tiredness. This was the most exhausted he’d felt in the thirty-five years since he’d begun building his enterprise - an enterprise that spanned thirty-three companies and employed some twenty-two thousand people in thirteen countries. Dermot Drewsbeck sighed loudly, feeling that he was being ground down just a little farther, just a little deeper.

Calling his wife, Drewsbeck waited until she appeared at the lounge door, then gave her his best, disarming smile. “Something’s come up darling. I’m sorry, but I have to go back into the office.”

“But DermDerm,” she said, a pout on her lips. “You promised me that you’d take the night off for once. We’re supposed to be going to that opera I so wanted to see.”

“I know darling. Sorry. I really am, but there’s nothing I can do about it. Something important’s come up.”

“It’s always something important DermDerm. Aren’t I important too?”

Drewsbeck may have been a short man, with a florid face, running to fat and well past the first flush of youth - but his wife was tall, slim, perfectly groomed, and twenty-five years his junior. She also had a temper to match her brilliant red hair and was looking at him now with an expression that said she was about to explode.

“Have to go darling.” Practically running into the hall, Drewsbeck grabbed his coat and headed out the door at a fast pace.

The lift doors slid open and Conal stepped out into a corridor that ran down the length of the building from end to end. Numerous doors led off both sides, all of which were open - even the one the staff had nicknamed, The Pit.

This wasn’t good - not good at all.

The lighting level in the corridor was low, designed to switch to quarter power whenever the door to The Pit was opened. It was less disturbing for the occupants that way, being as they were, mainly nocturnal.

Conal stood outside the lift, listening intently, jumping when the doors suddenly slid closed behind him. Making as little noise as possible, he eased his way down the corridor, pushing each door fully open as he reached it.

Tea room; small laboratory; larger laboratory; Senior Technician; Male toilet - stalls all empty; Female Toilet - ditto; Computer Technician; Canteen; Department of Malacology; Senior Invertebrate Zoologist; Secretary.

All the rooms were ominously quiet and empty. Two to go. Electrical Intake & Ventilation on the left; The Pit on the right.

Conal took the EI&V first, which was also empty. Leaning back against the corridor wall, he wet dry lips and stared at the partially open door in the opposite wall.

He didn’t want to go in there. He knew was waiting inside.

The staff had given the big recycling room the name *The Pit* because that’s what it resembled. It was dominated by a large, two metre deep hole sunk into the middle of the floor with a knee-high wall surrounding it. Even from where he stood, out in the corridor, Conal could feel the suck of the powerful fans in the ceiling extracting the air from the room.

He’d not been in the Recycling Laboratory since it had been put into operation but knew that even with the big extractor fans going flat out, breathing in the putrid atmosphere without an oxygen mask was almost impossible. He wasn’t looking forward to entering it one little bit.

Next to the extract vent in the ceiling was a chute leading up to the surface. It ended in a circular metal cover, caste into the concrete slab alongside the entrance building. It was here, and on a surprisingly regular basis, that the recyclates made their way into The Pit.

Conal pushed the door back on its hinges, switching on the overhead lighting. As the room was bathed in bright white light, he heard a rustling, slopping sound coming from the pit and hesitated on the threshold.

After castigating himself for being so faint-hearted, he took a deep breath and walked over to the pit, staring down at the gunk that filled it. The surface was still rippling from the movements of the creatures that had dived deep into the

glutinous mess when he'd switched the lights on. Turning away in disgust, he grabbed another quick lungful of air from the corridor and squatted down in the corner, sorting through the tangled pile of bones he found there.

"Well that's solved the problem of where the staff have all disappeared to," he muttered, eyes beginning to sting at the stench in the room.

Chapter 3

When Drewsbeck arrived at the quay, he pulled into the car park and quickly killed the engine. Getting out of his silver Mercedes, he looked around, worried about leaving his expensive car in such a deserted place.

"It'll be okay there, guv," a lanky man shouted from the quayside.

The man was dressed in a pair of dirty orange overalls, bright yellow boots, and a rolled up woollen cap. He smiled broadly and Drewsbeck could see that he had no teeth, making his face look as if it had collapsed in on itself.

"Over here," the man called, waving a grubby hand. "Your man there said for me to take you across to him. He was lucky he caught me in. I was just on my way out to the pub and all. Great things these mobiles, ain't they?"

The boatman kept up a steady patter as he helped Drewsbeck step across the gap between the boat and the quayside. Drewsbeck wrinkled his nose at the smell of fish pervading the vessel, surreptitiously wiping his hand down the side of his coat as the boatman let go of it. Making his way to the back of the vessel, he sat on the gunwale and tried to tune out the sound of the seaman's voice.

The boat's engine kicked into life with a cough and a burst of black, foul smelling smoke, before settling down to a steady throb. The engine sounded as though it might blow up at any minute, but at least the noise meant he didn't have to listen to the man's inane chatter.

The boatman guided the chugging vessel out into the sound, his body swaying with the movement of the waves as he turned the wheel back and forth.

"How long is this going to take?" Drewsbeck shouted above the rattle of the diesel engine.

"Bout fifteen minutes or so," the boatman called back over his shoulder, wiping the spittle from his chin with the back of his hand.

Drewsbeck settled down into a contemplative mood, the throbbing engine and gently rolling waves combining to ease the tensions that had built up in his shoulders on the long, one and a half hour drive from his mansion at Newton Abbot. He smiled, contemplating what would be waiting for him when he got home. Maybe he should get his secretary to book a nice restaurant for later. His wife loved it when he took her somewhere that celebrities went. Pulling out his mobile, Drewsbeck frowned.

Damn it. No signal.

The boat rolled in a big trough and Drewsbeck caught a brief glimpse of the island in the distance. He'd first seen it from the air, when he'd surveyed the island with his architect four years earlier. Looking down on it then, he'd seen that the small crater they had chosen as a building plot on the larger end of the island would save the builders a lot of construction work. As his architect had pointed out, the surrounding, higher rocks would also help keep the elements at bay. Instructing the pilot to put down in the centre of the crater, Drewsbeck had climbed out, his architect close behind him, to inspect the island that he hoped would add a big chunk to his already considerable fortune.

"I think we've found it Jimmy," he'd said, all smiles as he swept his thinning white hair back over his head, breathing in the sea air. "Just listen to those waves. Wonderful."

"If you can get whoever owns it to sell it to you," the architect had answered in a dubious tone.

"Money talks better than words," he'd retorted with a chuckle. "Or is that louder? Anyway, you just get yourself back to the office and get a team out here pronto. I'll take care of buying the island. You've got nine months to turn this place into a working laboratory. Think you can do it?"

His architect nodded slowly, as though reluctant to commit himself.

The work had been difficult, given the terrain and location, but money was a wonderful motivator. Equipment and materials were flown in by helicopter, while the builders were lodged out with locals and boated back and forth on a daily basis.

Drewsbeck wanted to keep the real reason for the construction work under wraps, because whoever succeeded in harnessing this particular idea would make themselves a fortune. As usual with his new undertakings, there would be people sniffing around - industrial spies were forever on the prowl - so he spread the rumour that the island was going to be used as a big underground oil storage depot.

"Nearly there, guv."

The boatman's shout brought Drewsbeck out of his revelry and he focused on the pier coming up a few metres away. For all his sloppy looks, the boatman was a good seaman, kissing the boat against the tyres hanging from the pier as gently as a mother kissing her baby.

Holding the vessel against the pier with the engine, the boatman shouted for Drewsbeck to jump off, adding: "Do us a favour mate, and drop this here rope over that there bollard when you get ashore."

Drewsbeck slipped the big loop over a rusty bollard and made his way towards the path leading up to the side of the cliff. Intermittent lampposts cast deep, dark shadows along the pathway and he had to be careful where he stepped. After a ten minute hike, he finally made it to the top and walked out onto the huge concrete slab that was the roof of the laboratory they'd built into the island's rock.

Drewsbeck could see his PA sitting behind the desk in the entrance building, feet up, crossed at the ankles. He was drinking something from a plastic cup. Pulling his coat closer around his body against the wind as he walked towards the building, Drewsbeck glanced at his watch.

Getting on for ten o'clock, and it looked as though there was a storm brewing. He hoped that the weather held until they had got off the island. It was too dark to fly back in the helicopter now and he didn't fancy sailing back through a storm with the toothless boatman at the wheel.

Chapter 4

Conal caught sight of Drewsbeck through the glass and swung his feet off the desk. The Old Man looked tired. Worn out in fact. Pressing the door release to let his boss in, Conal stood up.

“Conal,” Drewsbeck said, nodding a greeting.

“Mr. Drewsbeck.” Conal gave his own nod.

“That a coffee you got there?”

“Sure is. Want me to get you a cup? The machine’s just over there.”

“Just need a slurp of yours. If you don’t mind, that is. That was some walk up from the pier.”

Conal held out his plastic cup, noticing the tremor in the Old Man’s hand as he took it.

“So what’s the emergency then?” Drewsbeck said after taking a sip of the hot liquid.

“There’s been an accident.”

“Is everyone okay?”

Conal shook his head. “They’re dead,” he said quietly.

“All of them? Surely not all of them?”

Conal nodded, taking the coffee out of the Old Man’s hand before he spilt it. “Far as I can tell. Given the circumstances, it’s a bit difficult to be sure really.”

“Jesus. What the hell happened?”

“The boatman came over as usual this afternoon at five, to pick up the staff and take them ashore. When he got here, nobody was waiting. Anyway, he hung around for ten minutes or so, then rang up to security from the intercom down at the pier.” Conal stopped a moment, concern wrinkling his forehead. “Do you want to sit down, Mr Drewsbeck?”

Drewsbeck shook his head in irritation. “Just get on with it.”

“So, after he got no response on the intercom, he traipsed up here to take a look around.”

Conal waited for his boss to finish another sip of coffee before continuing, wishing that the man would sit down before he fell down.

“And?”

“Right. So he couldn’t see anyone at the desk and couldn’t get an answer to his buzzing. It wasn’t dark yet, so the lights weren’t on and the place looked deserted to him. The long and short of it is, he thought we’d closed the project down and not bothered to tell him. Apparently he got straight onto HQ and gave them a right mouthful. They tried contacting the island, but couldn’t raise anyone either, so they got through to Security, who eventually contacted me to find out what might be going on.” Reaching over, Conal took a mouthful of coffee himself, swallowing it carefully before continuing: “I couldn’t raise the desk here, or anybody on the satellite phone. It just seemed odd. How could everyone suddenly be out of contact like that. So I jumped in the ‘copter and headed out here to take a look see.”

“And what did you find?” the Old Man asked, his voice hardening.

Conal moved out from behind the desk so his boss could get to the screens.

“The one on the right. The end one,” he said.

Drewsbeck looked at the CCTV screens, slumping down in the seat with a thump as though the breath had been knocked from him.

“Are those what I think they are,” he asked, voice barely audible.

“Afraid so, Mr Drewsbeck.”

“Take me down. I want to see them for myself.”

“I really don’t think that would be such a good idea, Mr Drewsbeck.”

Drewsbeck’s eyebrows bunched across his nose and he slowly raised his head from studying the CCTV screen. His eyes had turned flinty and Conal could see how suffused with blood his face was, the tiny capillaries standing out.

“I beg your pardon?” he growled.

Conal realised the mistake he’d made and tried to recover. “I just can’t guarantee how safe it will be down there, sir. You’ve seen for yourself what they can do.”

Walking over to the lift, his boss harrumphed. “What’s the damned code!” he snapped.

Walking over to the keypad, Conal punched in the number and stood back as the lift doors opened. Following his boss into the car, he watched him push the ‘Down’ button. His fingers were no longer trembling, in fact, as the minutes ticked by, Drewsbeck was looking more and more like his old self.

“I’ve left the lighting on high,” Conal said as they exited the lift. “To keep the little bastards in The Pit.”

The Old Man just grunted and strode off down the corridor. Conal had to hurry to keep up with him.

Conal opened The Pit door and stood back. “Be careful. There’s glass all over the floor. Looks like some of the shelving has collapsed.”

Drewsbeck carefully picked his way over the mounds of dark soil and glass from a broken breeding tank, walking over to the bones piled in one corner. He squatted down beside them, his knees cracking with the effort. Picking up a large femur, he ran the tip of his finger along it.

“See,” he said quietly, almost as though talking to himself, “it’s been stripped clean. No blood, no tissue, nothing. And look here,” he continued, holding the bone out to Conal, clicking his fingernail along some fine indentations. “Just like a

large rasp had been taken to it.” Dropping the bone, he suddenly dived his hand into the pile, scattering them in all directions, obviously looking for something.

Conal couldn't be sure, but it looked to him as though the Old Man was picking some things out of the pile. His boss had his back to him so he couldn't see what he was doing that well. Getting up, Drewsbeck walked to the pit in the middle of the floor and looked over, staring intently into the mess. Bending over, he held his arm just above the surface and moved it sideways, dropping whatever he'd got in his hand into the pit.

Something shifted just beneath the crusted surface, following his movements. Conal was about to run over and pull his boss away from the danger, but the Old Man turned to face him, a big smile on his face.

“She did it, Conal,” he said, the admiration clear in his voice. “She actually pulled it off. Damn it, she said she would. I never did really believe she would though.”

Conal walked over to all that was left of the project staff and squatted by the bones, just as his boss had. When he'd been down here before on his own, he hadn't wanted to hang about. Now he was curious.

Picking up what looked to him might be a ulna, or maybe a radius - he was having trouble remembering his childhood biology lessons - he saw that the joint at one end was missing. It looked as though it had been attacked by thousands of tiny chisels. Poking through the rest of the skeletons, he saw that the smaller bones were missing. The phalanges was it? Something like that.

The Old Man was on the other side of the pit, looking at some glass tanks along one wall.

Conal felt that coldness on the back of his neck - the sign that something was not as it seemed. It had served him well in the Special Forces, saving his life more than once. Conal rubbed his neck, wondering what was bothering him. He wandered out into the corridor, looking up and down.

“Hey, Mr Drewsbeck,” he called a moment later, “come and look at this.”

Drewsbeck found his PA kneeling on the floor, the overhead lights reflecting from his bald head. His nose almost touched the tiles as he squinted along the corridor. Standing up, he brushed off his trousers and nodded at the floor. “Take a look for yourself,” he said.

Getting to his knees, Drewsbeck took a look. He could just make out the long scuff marks on the tiles, as though something had been dragged along the corridor. He stood up and shrugged, as though saying, “So what?”

“They were all jumbled up together in the corner when I got down here,” Conal said.

Drewsbeck nodded. “You're saying that they were dragged to the one place and eaten. Is that it?”

“No doubt about it. A lot of the bones are missing. If I'd arrived half-an-hour later, I reckon we wouldn't have had found a thing.”

Drewsbeck firmly closed the door to The Pit and nodded. “I think I saw a canteen farther down the corridor. You can make me that cup of coffee now. We need to talk.”

Conal followed the Old Man's bobbing back as he hurried down the corridor. He seemed to have suddenly come alive, all signs of his tiredness now gone. Shaking his head, Conal crossed to the coffee maker and switched it on, grabbing a couple of cups from under the counter.

Coffee steaming gently in front of them, the two men looked at each other. “A right bloody mess,” Drewsbeck said.

Conal just nodded. Words weren't needed.

“Okay Conal, I'll give it to you straight. This could be the end of everything I've built up over the years.” Holding his hand up as Conal started to speak, Drewsbeck shook his head. “No, let me finish.” He took a moment to think. “You've been with me a long time Conal, you know what's involved here, the thousands of jobs that would be lost if this ever gets out. I can't let that happen. I really can't.”

There was a long, drawn out silence as the two men sat and thought about that. Conal's brain was buzzing. Everything he now had, everything he'd become in the past five years, was due to the faith the Old Man had put in him. He'd always admired his boss, amazed at the long hours he put in, and how he managed to come up with new investments and projects to keep the organisation growing year on year. Now all that was threatened. But this was too big a thing to hide.

“I really need your help here Conal,” the Old Man said quietly. “If this terrible accident gets out it'll finish me.” He sat quietly for a moment, then looked at his PA, his eyes drilling into him. “These people knew the dangers of working here on this project. That's the reason I looked for people who didn't have any families when I employed them, and paid them so much money.”

“Even so, you can't cover up six deaths,” Conal said.

“With your help, I think I can. I have an idea,” he said quietly, “but it'll depend on my being able to bribe a senior Civil Servant. I have something on him that we can use to get his help.”

“We?”

Ignoring Conal's comment, Drewsbeck pushed on. “The biggest problem we have here is the six missing staff. How to account for the fact that there are no bodies to bury,” he said.

Conal allowed himself a small smile at the repeated, ‘we’. “Go on,” he said.

“So, here's what we do.”

Conal listened hard. The Old Man seemed to have thought of everything, covered every base. It was almost as though he'd already had it all worked out before they'd entered the laboratories. He had to admire the Old Man's quick mind.

Conal was uncomfortable about covering up the tragedy, but it *was* an accident and nobody would suffer, except his boss if the newspapers ever found out what had gone on here.

Conal finally nodded his agreement, pushing the sudden cold spot on his neck to the back of his mind.

Chapter 5

When Conal and Drewsbeck got back to the boat, the boatman was sitting on a pile of old sacks, snoring fit to bust, his loose upper lip flapping at each exhalation. Conal jumped aboard and helped Drewsbeck over the gunwale. Their thumping entrance woke the boatman from his sleep and he's eyes suddenly shot open.

"Wha—" he mumbled, shaking himself awake before struggling to his feet. "Oh, you're back then," he grumbled. "Thought you were going to be there all bloody night."

Conal and Drewsbeck smiled at each other. Then finding somewhere to sit amongst the crates and lobster pots littering the deck, they made themselves as comfortable as they could. The boat set out for the mainland, its noisy engine belching out more thick black smoke. Conal hoped it would make it all the way to the quayside. The sea was choppier now, the boat rolling alarmingly on the waves, and he didn't like the prospect of being stuck out here waiting for the coastguard to rescue them.

"You never did tell me how it all started?" Conal said, trying to push the picture of them all floundering in the sea from his mind. "The project," he added, nodding back at the island.

Drewsbeck looked over his shoulder for a moment and gave a soft smile, as though his PA's question had brought back fond memories. "Well that's quite a story," he said. "I was approached by a young woman, fresh out of university with her new Ph.D. She'd been working on this environmental idea she'd had since she was thirteen or so. Real dedicated. You know the type?"

Conal nodded. "Met a few," he said.

"She spent weeks trying to get to see me."

Conal shook his head. "Don't recall anyone like that."

"Before your time, Conal. Anyway, she finally gets past Mrs Hamter. She was your predecessor." He chuckled. "A formidable lady indeed. So Mrs H set her up an appointment, and here she is, sitting in front of me, asking for money to develop this crazy scheme of hers. She told me that, because my companies produce so much waste, it was only reasonable that I should find a method of cleaning it up.

"She'd gone to the trouble of preparing a presentation, so I felt I had no option but to sit through it. Thing was, I knew after the first overhead that it would never work, but I let her carry on anyway. Felt a bit sorry for her I suppose, all the years of hard work she'd already put into it."

"You felt sorry for her?" The incredulity in Conal's voice brought a flicker of a smile to Drewsbeck's lips.

"I have got a heart, you know Conal," he said.

"Yeah. Sorry. So what happened?"

"I said I'd look into it. Asked Mrs H to take the young woman's details. Then, after she'd left, dropped her proposal into the drawer marked 'Rejects'. That was that, or so I thought. Hell, how wrong can a man be." Drewsbeck paused, staring out into the night, lost in his own thoughts for a moment.

Conal coughed, raising his eyebrows as Drewsbeck's gaze turned back to him. "So?" he prompted.

Drewsbeck chuckled, shaking his head slightly. "She wasn't about to take no for an answer. She came back, again and again, almost camping out in the office at one point. Drove poor Mrs H to distraction. In the end I had to get the police to kick her out and make sure reception never let her into the building again.

"Then she started showing up at places I went. Restaurants, the theatre, places like that. God knows how she found out where I'd be. Wouldn't surprise me if she hadn't spent a fortune on having me followed. She never said a damned word. Just sat there staring. Do you know how bloody annoying that can be, Conal? Having someone staring at you that way everywhere you go?"

Conal shook his head and smiled to himself. He just couldn't see the Old Man in that situation.

"This went on for . . . oh, perhaps six months. Then she changed tactics."

Conal could see that the Old Man was back in his memories again, but more than that, was wearing a slightly embarrassed expression.

"You can't stop there. What the hell happened?" Conal prompted.

"She dumped three bins full of stinking refuse through the sunroof of my Mercedes. Then stuck a pole in it with a cardboard notice attached, saying: 'If you produce a load of shit and don't clean up after yourself. This is what happens, you bad boy.'"

"Fuck," Conal said, throwing his head back and laughing loudly.

"Fuck indeed," Drewsbeck agreed.

"A nutcase then. What happened? Did she go to jail?"

"Nearly. If my brief hadn't worked so hard, she certainly would have done."

"You kept her out of jail?" Conal couldn't believe what he was hearing. "Hang on a minute. She ruined your Mercedes, stalked you, publicly humiliated you, and you kept her out of jail, then went ahead with her project. Were you and her . . .?" Holding out spread fingers, Conal tipped them back and forth.

Drewsbeck burst into a laugh, which quickly descended into a series of wet coughs in the damp air. "I'm a married man, for God's sake," he said. "And anyway, a young girl like that wouldn't have any romantic leanings towards an old codger like me."

Given how much power the Old Man wielded and the billions he was worth, Conal seriously doubted that. "So why then?" he said.

Drewsbeck shrugged. "Don't know really. Something about her caught my attention, I suppose. The tenacity and belief she had in her own work. The amount of time she'd invested into trying to get it off the ground. But mostly, the risks she was willing to take." Drewsbeck sat silently for a moment, then looked up at Conal, the skin around his eyes crinkling. "It reminded me of myself when I was young and full of fresh energy. Knowing I had the answers to all the world's problems. Damn it Conal, she made me feel young again!"

Conal leant back with a new respect. He chuckled again. "Sounds to me like you'd fallen for her."

"No, you don't understand. We never had children you see. The first wife and I. She was more like a daughter to me than anything else." His face suddenly dropped and he looked at the deck, seeming old again. "And now she's gone, and I can't even bury what's left of her."

"We have no choice if you want to survive this," Conal said. "We can't chance anyone ever finding out what happened there."

Drewsbeck nodded sadly. "I know."

Conal bit back his retort that there hadn't been much of anything left to bury anyway. "We have no choice," he repeated.

"So anyway, I got together a small team of top scientists," Drewsbeck carried on, as though his PA hadn't spoken, "and got them to look at her idea. Most of them agreed it was impossible. A couple said it was a million to one shot."

"So you bought the island on a million to one shot."

Drewsbeck nodded, looking back at Flat Rock Island with a sad expression.

The clouds had blackened and the wind risen. Apart from the lights on the boat, it was a dark night. The grey seas were running higher, and as Conal's eyes followed Drewsbeck stare, it seemed to him to be a scene out of some drama. All that was missing was the flash of lightning and the roll of thunder to add the final touches.

"But damn me, Conal," the Old Man said quietly. "She did it. She actually went ahead and did it."

"Get ready gents," the boatman called, slowing the engine as the boat pulled alongside the quay.

As it banged and bumped against the brickwork, Conal gave Drewsbeck a helping hand up the ladder. As he reached the top and stepped onto the quayside, a small ball of soil that had compacted between the heel and sole of his shoe when he'd been in The Pit, was knocked free. It fell to the ground, breaking apart, the six eggs nestled in its centre thrown clear. The small eggs rolled towards the edge of the quay.

Five eggs fell into the sea, their embryos shrivelling under the attack of the salty water. But one rolled into a narrow crack on the quayside and wedged there.

Chapter 6

After booking in at a local hotel, Conal spent what was left of the night phoning some contacts he knew in London, arranging for a small team of builders to be sent down to the island as soon as possible the next day.

Conal finally got to bed around two o'clock in the morning, tired but satisfied that he'd made a good start. He found sleep evasive and woke in the morning bleary eyed and thick-headed. Looking at the miniatures lined up on the bedside cabinet, he could see why that might be. He hadn't drunk so much in years and the alcohol had gone straight to his head. Cleaning his teeth, he decided that now was not a good time to fall back into old habits.

After a hot shower and breakfast, he spent the rest of the day renting a suitable room near to the quay that he could use as an office, bought some office furniture from a local second hand shop, and met his builders off the train.

During the following six weeks, Conal was hardly off the island, only coming back to the mainland to sleep and make telephone calls, as there was no mobile signal on the island. His builders complained about the lack of facilities and had a few Health and Safety concerns, but a hefty bonus soon took care of that nonsense. All in all, Conal thought that things were going really well.

It was essential that Conal stopped anyone venturing below ground into the laboratory before the work had been completed. He couldn't take the chance of any of his builder's getting too curious. If anyone discovered what they were burying under the tons of concrete being laid, not only Conal's, but thousands of other people's jobs, would be put at risk.

Conal was in two minds about what they were doing. He knew that, if not outright illegal, then what he was doing was certainly flying close to the edge. But it had been a tragic accident, and there was nothing left for the families to bury but a few scattered bones. On the whole, he had to agree with the Old Man's view of what had happened and how to deal with it.

The first thing Conal did was to build a small floating dock just off the quay. This would act as the staging post for his workers to hose themselves down before coming ashore. The whole deception had to be carried out just right. The picture he was painting had to be believable or the locals would see straight through it.

Conal knew that some of the youngsters occasionally came over and partied on the island's only beach at night, even though they risked getting a call from the local police force by doing so. It had been impossible to keep them off the island while the laboratory had been in use, but he needed to find a way of doing so now.

To this end Conal put the story about that his team were clearing up after a chemical spill, hoping that information, along with men in white decontamination suits running all over the island, would keep the party goers off the island for the time being. Once they'd finished covering the evidence with concrete it wouldn't matter so much, but even so he had a plan to keep people away for at least a few years after that.

At first Conal's builders had raised their eyebrows when he'd asked them to work in decontamination suits but, as usual, a hefty raise in their pay soon had them back at work. Conal wondered just how many more reasons they would find to fleece more cash out of the project.

The boatman had unexpectedly found himself with a new contract to ferry the workmen across to the island and back everyday; the local hotel was fully booked; and the small village shop found itself doubling its usual wholesale order. Everybody seemed happy and Conal worked to keep it that way.

After erecting the small floating dock, Conal had his builders dismantle the glass enclosed entrance building, burying the pieces next to the concrete roof. The original contractors had back-filled the space between the concrete box construction and the rocks with gravel to allow for drainage, so it made disposal of the thick glass panes and aluminium frames easier than shipping them ashore or flying them out by helicopter.

All through the dismantling process, Conal kept a careful eye on his men, making sure that nobody slipped below ground. Before anyone had set foot on the building site, he'd taken the precaution of disconnecting the lift controls and turning off the electrical supplies, but he couldn't afford to take the smallest chance that somebody might stumble onto the secret they were concealing below the island. Too much was riding on this for the slightest slip-up.

In the last week of the contract, the builders finally filled in the lift shaft, and Conal could relax. As he watched the last load of concrete being levelled over the big recycling chute cover, he gave a sigh of relief. Nobody was going to know what was buried under the island now. There was no way in or out of the laboratory any longer, and the horrors still living down there would soon run out of food and die.

The locals were fascinated by the men dressed in white suits, regularly seen hosing themselves off after every shift on the island. They were the talk of the pub for weeks on end and it wasn't too long before the most outrageous rumours were circulating in the surrounding villages. But for all the locals imaginings, none of them were prepared for the last stage of Conal's gigantic con.

After enclosing the shore lines of the island with a tall, barbed wire topped fence, Conal had big signs attached to it at three metre intervals. The notices were big and coloured a brilliant red, and raised eyebrows for miles around - reading, as they did, 'Danger. Keep Off. Biological Hazard.'

PRESENT DAY

Chapter 7

Scott eased the car along the narrow lanes, squinting into the darkness.

"I'm sure it's somewhere along here," he said.

"Maybe we should just forget it and go back to the hotel," his companion said, totally fed up with her boss for wasting all this time looking for the perfect view.

"No. No, there it is. That's the road I'm looking for."

Emilia thought the rutted track looked more like a path than a road, but kept quiet, praying that David didn't get the car stuck halfway along it.

"You sure it's up here, Dave?"

"Positive," he said with a quick nod. "Just a little while longer and we'll be there."

David Scott was excited. He'd been chasing his secretary for eighteen months, trying every trick in the book to get into her pants. Emilia was a stunner, the guys in the office followed her every move when she walked by. She had full lips, light brown hair and the most amazing blue eyes. Her figure was straight out of the *Penthouse* magazine, and to top it all, she had the most mischievous smile he'd ever come across.

Tonight was the night, he was sure of it. She hadn't exactly agreed to sleep with him, nothing so upfront as that, but she had agreed to come along to see the view out over the Bristol Channel from the headland off the Hartland cliffs.

When the path suddenly disappeared, Emilia put her hand on the dashboard in alarm. All she could see in front of the car was a long drop to the sea shore below.

David chuckled as he stopped the car, turning off the lights and engine. "We're here," he said.

Emilia looked out across the bay, her breath catching as she took in the view. The night sky was clear, a bright moon throwing a yellow stripe across the sea's smooth surface towards them. She got out of the car and stood by the edge of the cliff looking out across the water.

"I told you it was great, didn't I?" David said, standing with his arm around her waist. "What a view, hey?"

Emilia's hobby was photography and she took it very seriously. When David had first told her about the view from Hartland cliff, she'd thought it was just a come-on to get her up here for a bit of hanky-panky. Not that she objected to that, he was very handsome. He was married of course, but that didn't bother her any. If his wife couldn't keep him at home, that was her tough luck.

"Grab your camera and come over here," David said.

Emilia followed her boss across some tufty grass and watched while he made a small fire from bits and pieces of branches laying about amongst the bushes. He went back to the car and returned with a blanket and a couple of glasses. When she raised her eyebrows, he told her that he'd be back in a second, and he was, clutching a bottle of Champaign.

She gave a delighted laugh and pecked him on the cheek. "Why don't you get things ready while I take a few photos," she said.

Half-an-hour later they were laying in each others arms, enjoying the view and sipping from their glasses.

"David?"

"Uh huh?"

"I hope you don't think I'm one of your easy lays." She saw the frown form on his face. "I've heard all the rumours, you know?"

"But Emi—"

Placing a cool finger on his lips, she smiled. "Just shut up and kiss me."

David rolled onto his back, pulling her on top of him, and as he slipped his tongue into her mouth, she could feel his hardness against her thigh. She kissed him deeply, running her fingers through his hair. He kissed her back, grunting.

He grunted again, then pulled away, levering himself upwards on one arm, tipping her onto the ground. "Shit!" he said. "Something's bitten me. Fuck that hurts." After a short pause, he swore again, slapping at his leg. His voice rose to a shout. "Fuck. What the fuck's that?"

Emilia scrambled to her feet, frightened as she watched her boss thrash about on the ground. She pulled at his arm. "David. David. What is it? What's the matter?"

He began a continuous wailing, flapping his arms, trying to reach behind him. "My back. My back. It's on fire. Jesus, help me Emi. Fuck it hurts!"

Giving a violent lurch, he arched his back, only feet and head touching the ground. Then screaming a last desperate plea for help, he collapsed back onto the blanket and lay silently staring up at her with unfocussed eyes.

Emilia dropped to her knees beside him, shaking his body. "David. What is it? Tell me."

When he didn't respond, she turned him over, her mouth dropping open in horror as she stared at his back. It was then that her own screams echoed across the clifftop, but there was nobody there to hear Emilia's cries of terror.

Covering her face, she screamed again and again, her whole body shuddering as the adrenaline pumped through it. The clothes had gone from David's back, the edges ragged and bloody. Where his skin and muscles should have been was a big bloody hole.

Even his ribs had disappeared. She could see his heart beating feebly, spurting out his life-blood, black under the bright moonlight. But what tipped her mind to the edge of madness was the sight of the wriggling creatures burrowing

their way about deep inside his body.

Emilia felt something bite the inside of her thigh. Then another bite, her ankle this time. Jumping to her feet, she looked about wildly for whatever was attacking her, but could see nothing.

Almost hyperventilating now, she gulped in air, finally managing to pull herself together enough to get her mind into gear. She had to get help. Call an ambulance.

The car. Her bag and mobile were in the car.

Running across the grass, Emilia stumbled as her ankle was bitten again. It burnt, as though someone had dropped acid on her skin. She reached the car, wrenching open the door and tumbling into the driver's seat. Slamming the door shut behind her, she scrambled for her bag, dropping it on the floor.

Help. She needed help.

Emilia's head felt woozy, she was becoming disorientated, almost sleepy. Brushing off the feeling, she started the car, trying to find the clutch with her foot.

"Damn! Damn!"

She pushed and pulled at the gear stick, the gears grinding alarmingly. Then she had it. Slamming her foot on the throttle, she floored it.

It was only when the car had leapt over the edge of the cliff that Emilia realised the terrible mistake she'd made.

The car hit the cliff halfway down, bursting into flames. Bouncing off, it did a slow roll, then hit the sea. By the time the car sank under the waves, Emilia had already burnt to death in the inferno.

Up on the clifftop, there was little left of David Scott, just a metal buckle from his belt, a zipper, and some loose change from his pockets.

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