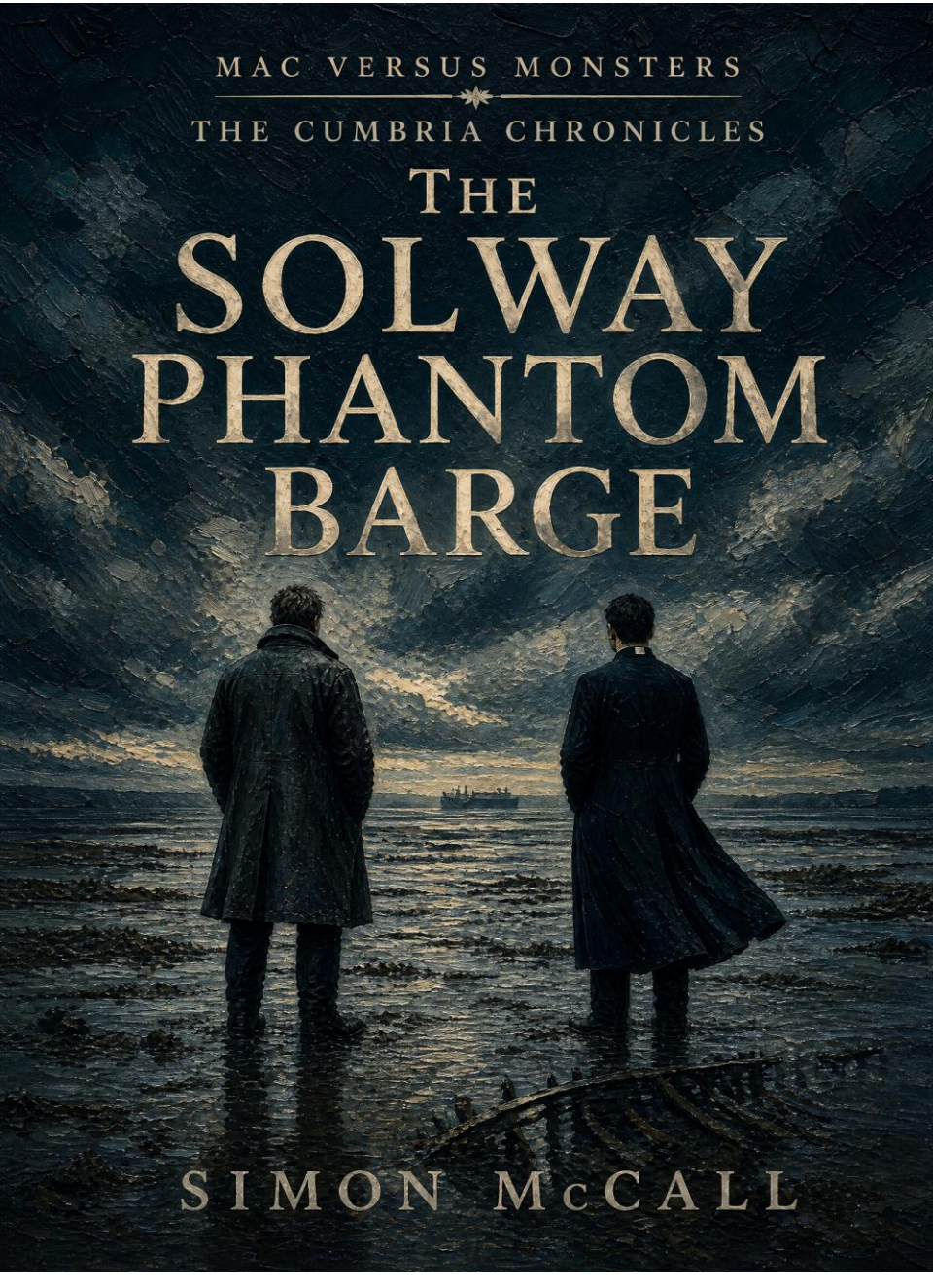
MAC VERSUS MONSTERS

THE CUMBRIA CHRONICLES

THE SOLWAY PHANTOM BARGE



SIMON McCALL

MAC VERSUS MONSTERS

THE CUMBRIA CHRONICLES

Book Eight:

The Solway Phantom Barge

Simon McCall

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"The sea does not forget what the land buries near its edge."

— coastal proverb, attributed variously to Solway fishermen and Galloway smugglers

Part I

"Someone who is not afraid of the dark should perhaps be."

Chapter 1

The call came on a Tuesday morning in the third week of November, when the light over the Irish Sea was the colour of old pewter and the wind off the Solway Firth was the kind that found the gaps in a man's jacket without apology. Father Thomas Carrick was in the vestry of Saint Cuthbert's in Millom, attempting to reconcile the heating oil account with the parish's increasingly strained finances, when his mobile phone rang with a number he didn't recognise.

He almost let it go to voicemail. He had learned, in the eight months since his appointment to Millom, that unrecognised numbers were rarely good news. They were usually journalists following up on something that wasn't his business, or council officials pursuing something that was. But something made him answer. A trained instinct, perhaps. Or simply the knowledge that in his particular calling, the phone calls that felt like they could wait were often the ones that couldn't.

"Father Carrick?" The voice was measured, professional. A man in his fifties, Carrick judged,

with the diction of someone who had learned long ago that the medium of a message mattered as much as the message itself. "My name is Father Stephen Dolan. I'm the chaplain at Furness General Hospital. I hope I'm not intruding on your morning."

"Not at all, Father." Carrick set down his pencil. The heating oil account could wait. It had been waiting for three weeks already.

"I have a somewhat delicate situation," Dolan said, and paused in a way that suggested the delicacy was of a particular kind -- not bureaucratic, not pastoral in the ordinary sense, but belonging to a category of complexity that he was uncertain how to name. "I've been approached by a user of our multi-faith facilities here at the hospital. A Hindu lady. Elderly. Her name is Mrs. Meera Agarwal. She was admitted to the hospital two weeks ago -- a hip replacement, she's recovering well -- and during her stay she has been making use of the Hindu shrine in our chapel of rest."

"I see." Carrick waited. There was more.

"Mrs. Agarwal's husband passed away in September," Dolan continued. "A good man by all accounts. He had lived in this part of Cumbria for nearly forty years, and he had a particular attachment to a place called West Beach at Silloth --

a little coastal town on the Solway Firth. He used to walk there. Every Sunday, apparently, whatever the weather. It was his place. His peace." A brief pause. "He expressed a wish, before he died, that his ashes be scattered there."

Carrick had encountered this before. The intersection of death, geography, and the particular grief of a family trying to honour a man's final wishes in a landscape they felt unsure of. It was not uncommon. But something in Dolan's careful circumspection told him this was not simply about logistics.

"And has she been able to do so?" he asked.

"That," said Father Dolan, "is precisely the problem."

Chapter 2

Father Dolan explained it carefully, in the measured tone of a man who had seen enough of the world's strangeness to have learned that careful language was the best available container for it.

Mrs. Agarwal had gone to West Beach twice with her family. The first time had been a fortnight after her husband's death, in mid-October, when the tide was high and the conditions were right. Hindu tradition required the ashes to be committed to flowing water -- the Ganges in India being the ideal, the sacred geometry of the ritual centred on the purifying movement of a river towards the sea. The Solway Firth was not the Ganges, but the sea was the sea. The priest from the Indian community in Barrow had confirmed it was appropriate. The family had dressed carefully and driven the thirty miles to Silloth in a quiet convoy of two cars. They had walked to the water's edge.

They had not scattered the ashes.

"She described it to me," Dolan said, his voice careful, "as a feeling. Not a noise or a sight. A feeling. She said it was like walking into a room where something terrible had recently happened, except that the room was the beach itself. She said her daughters felt it too. Even her son-in-law, a man she described as having no feeling for such

things whatsoever. They all turned back. She said it was not a decision -- there was no moment of choosing. They simply found themselves walking away from the water as if they had forgotten what they had come for."

"And the second time?" Carrick asked.

"Three weeks later. The same result. Worse, she said. One of her granddaughters became distressed before they reached the beach itself. She was inconsolable for several hours afterward, though she could not explain what she had felt. She is eight years old." A pause. "Mrs. Agarwal is a very composed woman, Father. She is not given to imagination. But she is frightened. And she is grieving, and she cannot complete the most important act of grief her religion asks of her."

Carrick stood up from the vestry desk and moved to the small window. The churchyard of Saint Cuthbert's was visible below, the headstones dark with rain, the grass an exhausted November brown. He was thinking.

"She came to you because there's no Hindu temple in Cumbria," he said. It was not quite a question.

"Correct. The nearest is in Manchester. Her Guru is there. She says she has called him, and he

has told her what she already knew from her childhood -- that the feeling she describes, the sense of inhabiting the same space as something that should have moved on but has not, is recognised in Hindu tradition. The banks of the Ganges are said to harbour such presences. Souls that cannot complete the journey. Lingering things, neither fully here nor fully departed." Dolan paused. "He told her to seek local spiritual guidance. She is not a Catholic. She is not a Christian. But she is in a hospital with a chaplain. And the chaplain -- me -- finds himself somewhat outside his depth."

Carrick was quiet for a moment. Eight months in Millom. He had conducted three funerals, two baptisms, one anxious wedding, and one exorcism. The exorcism had been at Muncaster Castle, and he did not think about it if he could help it, because thinking about it in any detail still caused the fine muscles around his jaw to tighten. He had been afraid. He had done his job. He was not certain the two facts were in any way contradictory, but he had not yet fully worked out how they sat together.

"I'll look into it," he said. "And I'll ask around. There may be someone who already knows about this."

There was. He had known there would be before he put the phone down. There was always someone who already knew.

Chapter 3

The number he had for Connor McClymont was stored in his phone under the name "Mac -- Ambulance" because he hadn't known, when he'd saved it after Muncaster, whether he would ever use it again, and the plain factual label had seemed the safest way to preserve it without attaching to it any expectation of what it meant. In the eight months since, he had not used it. He had thought about it occasionally. He had picked up the phone twice and set it down again without dialling.

Now he dialled.

It rang four times. Then the voice answered: flat, precise, carrying no particular warmth and no particular hostility. Simply there.

"McClymont."

"It's Thomas Carrick," Carrick said. He heard himself add "Father Carrick," and immediately felt the redundancy of it, because McClymont already knew, and stating the title felt like a small retreat into formality at a moment when formality was probably not the point.

"I know," Mac said. "You've thought about calling before."

Carrick blinked. "How did you--"

"You're calling on a Tuesday morning in November. If it was an emergency you'd have called sooner. If it was social -- which it isn't, you're not the social type -- you'd have called at the weekend." A brief pause that had the quality of a man looking at a map. "So you've been sitting on something for a while, and it's finally become urgent enough to use the number. What have you got?"

Carrick sat back down at his desk. He told Mac what Father Dolan had told him, in as much detail as he could recall. He described Mrs. Agarwal's two failed attempts to scatter her husband's ashes at West Beach. He described the feeling she and her family had encountered -- the wordless, overwhelming aversion that had turned them back from the waterline both times. He described the grandmother's account of the Ganga's lingering souls, the cultural framework that made sense of what she had felt, and the granddaughter's distress.

Mac was quiet throughout. Carrick had learned at Muncaster that this was how Mac listened -- not with the encouraging murmurs and confirmatory sounds that most people used to signal their attention, but with a silence that was not passive. It was a working silence. The sound of information being processed.

"West Beach, Silloth," Mac said, when Carrick had finished. "Solway coast."

"Yes. Do you know it?"

"I know the Solway." Another pause. "I've had a flag on that stretch of coastline for three months. Sightings. Fishermen, mostly. Something on the water at night."

Carrick felt the particular stillness that he had come to associate with the moments before things became serious. It was not fear, exactly. It was a kind of bracing.

"What kind of sightings?" he asked.

"The kind people don't report to the police." Mac's voice was even, uninflected. "The kind they mention to each other in pubs and then deny mentioning. I was going to go and look. I was waiting for the right conditions." Another pause, shorter. "I think the right conditions may have just arrived. I'll come to you. Tomorrow morning. Eight o'clock."

"To Millom?" Carrick was surprised despite himself.

"It's on the way. And I want to hear what you make of the woman's account in person. What she

felt, specifically. The vocabulary she used." Mac paused. "You still have my number."

"Obviously," Carrick said.

"Good. Eight o'clock. Have coffee." The line went dead.

Carrick sat for a moment with the phone in his hand. Through the vestry window, the churchyard lay grey and dripping under a sky the colour of unpainted concrete. He thought about the sound of Mac's voice -- that specific quality it had, of a man who did not find uncertainty threatening because he had organised himself around it so thoroughly that it had simply become the medium he operated in. It was, Carrick thought, not entirely unlike faith. Though he doubted Mac would see it that way.

Part II

"The sea remembers everything the land chooses to forget."

Chapter 4

The Badger arrived in Millom at four minutes to eight, which Carrick was learning was precisely how Mac arrived at things: not punctually, in the social sense, but on time in the operational sense, as though he had calculated the margin against the variables and found four minutes the efficient solution. Carrick heard the diesel engine before he saw the vehicle -- a low, unhurried rumble with the particular patience of something that had covered a great many miles and expected to cover a great many more.

The Land Rover 101 Forward Control was parked on the road outside the church when Carrick came out with two mugs of coffee. He had expected it to look strange in Millom, the black-and-white ambulance with its ex-military bearing and its air of having been converted from one kind of purpose to another, very different one. But it didn't look strange. It looked, if anything, like it belonged to precisely this kind of grey coastal town, where things were built to last and appearance was a secondary consideration.

Mac got out of the cab. He looked the same as Carrick remembered: the carved, weathered face, the pale blue eyes that registered everything and appeared to judge nothing, the grey hair and the jacket that was functional rather than warm. He took the coffee mug with a brief nod of acknowledgement that was, Carrick had come to understand, equivalent in Mac's vocabulary to a fairly effusive thank you.

"Tell me about the Silloth area," Mac said, without preamble. He was looking at the map on the bonnet of The Badger, a large-scale Ordnance Survey sheet that had been folded to show the Solway coast. His finger traced the shoreline. "What do you know. Local knowledge, folklore, anything."

Carrick wrapped his hands around his mug. "I've only been in the diocese eight months. I know Silloth is a small town. Victorian, mostly -- it was built as a seaside resort when the railway came. There's a port. Or there was -- mostly disused now, I think. The beach is famous for being very flat and very wide. Walkers. Dog-walkers."

"And the Solway itself?"

"The firth." Carrick considered. "Tidal. Dangerous tides -- very fast. There are stories about people being caught out by the bore. And it's been a smuggling coast for centuries. The border with

Scotland is only a few miles north. Brandy, wool, whatever was worth carrying."

Mac nodded slowly. He was drinking the coffee with the same focused attention he appeared to give everything -- not savoured, but fully registered. "What about the water itself? Any stories. Lights, shapes, unusual sightings."

"Nothing I've heard specifically." Carrick paused. "But I've only been here eight months."

"Lifeboat station at Silloth," Mac said. It was a statement, not a question -- he had clearly already verified it.

"I believe so. RNLI."

"Good." Mac folded the map with a precision that suggested he intended to refold it exactly the same way. "The fishermen and the lifeboat crew are the people who know what happens on that water. They'll have the real stories. Not the ones people tell visitors." He looked at Carrick. "You're coming with me."

It was not quite a question and not quite a command. Carrick had been awake since five-thirty, had already said the morning office and checked his diary for the week, and had found, when he checked it, that he had left Tuesday afternoon and all of

Wednesday clear in a manner that suggested some part of him had expected this.

"I'll get my coat," he said.

Chapter 5

The drive from Millom to Silloth was an hour and twenty minutes through the back end of November. Mac drove in the way he seemed to do most things -- with economy and attention, the big diesel engine a constant low thrum, The Badger covering the miles of the A595 and then the B-roads through Wigton and Abbeytown with the patient, implacable progress of something that was going where it was going and was not interested in shortcuts.

Carrick sat in the passenger seat, which had been cleared for him with a precision that suggested Mac had anticipated the passenger and allocated a specific level of comfort -- not generous, but not absent. There was a good line of sight from the high cab. The Cumbrian countryside was an exhausted grey-brown in November, the fields stripped, the trees bare, the sky doing its November best to demonstrate the full range of the colour grey.

They did not speak for the first fifteen minutes. Mac was consulting some internal process that required quiet. Carrick was looking at the landscape and thinking about Mrs. Agarwal, who had come to a beach twice with her family and both times had been turned back by something she could not

name. The specific quality of that experience -- a feeling that turned a decision into a compulsion, that made people walk away without knowing they had chosen to -- was not something that appeared in any standard pastoral manual. But it was something Carrick had encountered before, at Muncaster, in the specific physical pressure of a poltergeist's rage. He knew what it felt like to be in a space where something was very wrong. He knew it in his body rather than his mind.

"You're thinking about how you would describe it," Mac said, without looking away from the road.

"The phenomenon at the beach."

"Yes." Carrick was no longer surprised by these observations. Mac had spent two decades in military investigation, and observation, of people as well as places, was simply how he processed the world. "The vocabulary she used -- Mrs. Agarwal. It's interesting. She didn't say she was frightened in the ordinary sense. She said the place felt inhabited. Occupied by something incomplete."

"Go on."

"In my training -- and I was only a few weeks past my training when we met at Muncaster -- they distinguish between presence and agency. A presence is something that is simply there, leaving

a residue. Like the hermit on Skiddaw -- you described something like a psychic recording. But agency is different. Agency is something that acts. That wants. That pushes." He looked at the flat horizon of the Solway. "What she described at West Beach sounds more like presence than agency. It filled the space. It didn't attack."

"But it was strong enough to turn back a family on a very important errand," Mac said. "Twice."

"Yes."

"That's not nothing." Mac was quiet for a moment. "What makes a presence that strong? In your understanding."

Carrick thought about this with the careful attention of a man who had sat his examinations and then discovered that examinations and field experience were two entirely different types of knowledge. "Unresolved grief. Unfinished business. Something that should have happened and didn't. The stronger the original need or obligation, the more persistent the residue." He paused. "The Hindu concept of it -- the lingering souls Mrs. Agarwal described from her childhood -- is structurally very similar to what the Church teaches about souls in purgatory. Not damned. Not at peace. Waiting. Held in place by something they couldn't complete."

Mac drove on, past the flat fields and the distant glint of the Solway. "And in both traditions," he said, "the solution is similar."

"Someone finishes the business for them."

"Right." A pause. "The question is always what the business is."

They came into Silloth from the south, through a flat, windswept landscape that had the particular quality of the coastal margins -- a place that was simultaneously land and not quite land, as if the sea had at some point made a territorial claim on it and then declined to press the point. The town materialised from the grey afternoon: a broad green promenade, the flat expanse of the firth beyond it, Victorian terraces of red sandstone, a war memorial, a lifeboat station on the edge of the harbour.

Mac pulled The Badger into a side street off the main promenade and cut the engine. He sat for a moment in the silence, looking at the water. The Solway was calm today, the surface a dull, uninflected steel under the low sky. Scotland was a dark line on the far side, fifteen miles away across the firth. The wind was cold and carried the smell of brine and something else -- something that Carrick couldn't immediately name and then did: old wood.

Rotting timber. The smell of something submerged and slowly coming apart.

"We start with the lifeboat station," Mac said. "I want the ground truth first, before the folklore. The official record of anything unusual. Then we find the unofficial record." He got out of the cab, and Carrick, after a moment, followed.

Chapter 6

The lifeboat station was a functional structure at the edge of the harbour, the RNLI orange and blue a deliberate, cheerful contrast to the grey surroundings. A man in his sixties was working on a piece of equipment outside the main door -- not a mechanic's job, but the patient, repetitive maintenance of someone who kept things in order because he understood that order, at sea, was the difference between coming home and not.

Mac approached without introducing himself as anything in particular, which Carrick had observed was his preferred entry point. He asked if the man had a moment. The man, whose name was Brian and who had the manner of someone who had long since learned to evaluate strangers with coastal speed and precision, looked at Mac and then at Carrick and then at The Badger, and appeared to reach some kind of satisfactory conclusion.

"Depends what for," he said.

"I'm looking into some unusual sightings. On the water. At night, mainly. Over the past year or so." Mac's tone was neutral -- not official, not sensational. The tone of someone who wanted information and was prepared to be patient about getting it.

Brian set down his equipment. He looked out at the firth. "Who told you to come here?"

"No one told me. I followed a pattern."

Brian was quiet for a moment. Then: "You'd better come in."

The station's crew room was warm and smelled of coffee and marine-grade waterproofing. There were photographs on the walls: launches, rescues, the particular intense postures of people doing dangerous work in bad conditions. A young crew member was at a table, studying charts; he nodded at them and returned to his work.

Brian poured coffee from a pot that was not new. He sat down across from them with the deliberate posture of a man who had decided to tell something he had previously decided not to tell.

"First time was March," he said. "Dave Hendry saw it first. He's one of the independent fishermen -- works the firth in a small trawler. He came in and said there was a barge on the estuary. Flat-bottomed, old-fashioned, the kind that used to carry coal down from Workington. No engine sound. No navigation lights. And the sail -- it wasn't a proper sail." He stopped and looked at the table. "He said the sail was a shroud."

Carrick was very still.

"Like a burial shroud," Mac said. It was not a question.

"Like a burial shroud. Rigged as a sail. He said the cloth was very pale, moving in the wind, and there were shapes on it -- not printed, not painted, more like shadows. Like something showing through from underneath." Brian wrapped his hands around his mug. "He said there were figures on the deck. He counted seven. They were at the rail, looking towards shore. But the barge wasn't moving towards shore. It was just sitting there, in the mist, a few hundred metres out."

"And then?" Mac asked.

"And then the mist came in thicker and it was gone." A pause. "Dave is not a man who tells stories. He is not a fanciful man. He was very shaken."

"How many times since March?" Mac asked.

Brian looked at the young crew member, who was now listening without pretending not to. "Four times that I know of. Three from the fishing boats. Once from a dog-walker on the promenade. She called the coastguard. The coastguard found nothing." He met Mac's eyes. "Each time: the same barge. The same shroud sail. Seven figures. Always

at night, or in low visibility. Always offshore. Never coming in." He paused. "Almost never."

Mac was very still. "Almost?"

"Two weeks ago," Brian said. "Dave was out early, before dawn. He said the barge came in close -- very close, inside the harbour approaches. He could see the figures clearly. And he said --" Another pause, the pause of a man navigating the distance between what he had been told and what he was prepared to repeat. "He said there wasn't just seven. The rail had space for eight. There was a space at the end. An empty space. Like a place being kept for someone."

The crew room was quiet except for the wind at the window and the distant, indifferent sound of the sea.

"He thought it was looking for someone," Brian said. "The barge. He said the seven figures weren't looking at the shore. They were looking at the empty space between them. And the feeling he had --" He stopped. "He said it was the worst feeling he'd ever had at sea. Worse than the two times he's been in the water. He said it was the feeling that something terrible was about to happen."

"A harbinger," Carrick said quietly.

Brian looked at him. "That's the word."

Part III

"Data without pattern is noise.
Pattern without data is superstition.
The work is finding which you have."

Chapter 7

The pub that Brian had directed them to was called The Solway Arms and was, in the way of the best coastal pubs, a room that had absorbed everything the sea and the people adjacent to it had to offer for a very long time. Low-beamed, dark-panelled, smelling of coal fire and salt air and the particular damp that entered from the harbour-side door and declined to leave. It was early enough in the afternoon that it was not busy. A man in a yellow oilskin was at the bar. Three fishermen in the far corner were talking in the low, economical way of men who spent long periods in close proximity and had learned to get a great deal of meaning into a very few words.

Mac ordered two pints of local bitter and a plate of bread and cheese. He did not appear to eat it. The plate was a prop, Carrick had worked out -- a reason to sit at a table for an extended period without attracting the notice that two men drinking slowly and saying nothing would eventually attract.

"You're doing this deliberately," Carrick said quietly.

"Doing what?"

"Not talking. So I have to listen."

Mac glanced at him. There was something in his expression that might, at a distance and with generous interpretation, have been a fraction of amusement. "That's not why I'm not talking. I'm not talking because I'm listening." A pause. "The man in the yellow oilskin has been talking to the barman for six minutes. He's mentioned the weather twice and the tides once. He's about to mention something else. Don't look at him."

Carrick did not look. He looked at the table. After a moment, he heard the man in the oilskin say, in the particular lowered register of someone sharing information they have previously shared and have by now slightly regretted: "She was out again last night. Tom said. The old barge. In the mist, well offshore."

The barman's response was inaudible.

"Four times now, that we know of," the oilskin man said. "And each time closer. Tom said last night she was practically at the bar mouth. Could see the rigging."

"That's five times," Mac said to Carrick, very quietly. "Closer each time."

"A pattern," Carrick said.

"Beginning to be." Mac turned his pint glass a quarter rotation on the table, a small, habitual movement. "The pattern tells us two things. One: the sightings are increasing in frequency and proximity. Something is escalating. Two: they're described consistently -- the barge, the shroud, the seven figures, the empty eighth space -- across multiple independent witnesses who have not compared notes. That level of consistency in independent testimony means the phenomenon is genuine and it is stable."

"Not that it needed saying," Carrick murmured.

"It always needs saying," Mac said. "You're a trained exorcist. You came to this assuming it's real. That assumption needs to be earned every time, by evidence, or you stop being an investigator and become a man who confirms his own beliefs. That's dangerous."

Carrick looked at him. "Is that a lesson?"

"It's an observation." Mac took a measured sip of his pint. "Take it how you like."

They stayed in the pub for another hour. Mac listened. Carrick listened, with less practice but, he was discovering, more patience than he had previously credited himself with. The fishermen in the far corner mentioned the barge twice -- obliquely, as a background presence in a conversation that was primarily about tides, prices, and the competence or otherwise of the harbourmaster. The information was thin but consistent. The phenomenon was local knowledge. It was not discussed openly. It was not discussed with alarm. It was discussed in the way that deeply coastal communities discuss the things that live at the edge of their working reality -- with a careful, experienced matter-of-factness that was, Carrick thought, in its own way a form of wisdom.

Outside, the light was fading. Mac settled the bill and they walked back along the promenade towards The Badger.

"Tonight," Mac said, "we watch."

Chapter 8

The interior of The Badger at night was a different world from the one that moved outside it. Warm, precisely organised, dark except for the low LEDs above the counter and the dim glow of the laptop screen. Mac had parked on the promenade at the north end, where the road gave way to a gravelled pull-off used by dog-walkers and, in summer, by the occasional tour bus. From here, the beach was visible through the windscreen: a vast, flat plane of wet sand and shallow water, the Solway beyond it dark and barely distinguishable from the sky.

Carrick sat on the fold-down stool that Mac had indicated with a brief gesture. Mac was at the counter, the laptop open, a mug of coffee in his hand. The satellite dish outside was already aligned and locked.

"What are we looking for?" Carrick asked.

"Pattern." Mac set down his coffee and pulled up a map on the screen -- a hydrographic chart of the Solway Firth, showing depths, sandbanks, navigation channels. He overlaid a set of digital pins. Five red markers, each one dated. The earliest was in March. The most recent was the previous night. "Five sightings. I'm going to plot time, location, conditions."

He worked in silence for several minutes. Carrick watched. There was, he had found, something clarifying about watching Mac work -- the way his methodical precision made the surrounding complexity less chaotic, not because it diminished the complexity but because it demonstrated that complexity could be approached with sufficient patience. It was, Carrick thought, not entirely unlike the effect of a well-conducted liturgy.

"Tidal conditions," Mac said, without looking up. "All five sightings occurred within two hours either side of high water. The tidal range on the Solway is very large -- one of the highest in Britain. At low water, the sandbanks out here are exposed for half a mile or more. At high water, the channel is navigable and the shoreline is accessible." He paused. "Something that appears on water near the shore is constrained by the tides. If the sightings are consistent with high water, they're not random. They're timed."

"Deliberately timed?" Carrick asked.

"Or physically constrained by the same conditions that govern everything else on this water. I won't know which until I have more data." Mac pulled up a tide table. His finger moved down the columns. "High water at Silloth tomorrow

morning is at oh-four-forty. Before dawn. Mist is forecast -- the Solway is notorious for sea-fog in November." He looked at Carrick. "I think that's when it comes. And I think we need to be on the beach when it does."

Carrick looked out at the dark water. "The fishermen said it's a harbinger. That each sighting gets closer because it's -- warning something. Or looking for something."

"Both may be true," Mac said. "In my experience, the things people call harbingers usually turn out to be entities that are trying to communicate something. The warning and the searching are often the same act." He closed the tide table and opened a new file -- what appeared to be a list of reference materials. Documents, archive records, some scanned, some notes. "I've been doing background research on the port of Silloth since March. The harbour has a history. It was an active smuggling point in the eighteenth century -- wool, French brandy, sometimes people. There are wreck records in the port authority archive." He paused. "And there are dredging plans."

"Dredging?"

"The harbour is silted. It has been for decades. There's a development proposal -- a small marina, leisure use, regeneration of the port area. The

council approved it last year. Dredging works are scheduled to begin in six weeks." Mac looked at the screen. "The channel they're planning to dredge runs directly through an area that the old wreck maps show as the location of a vessel lost in 1784."

He said it without drama. The silence that followed had a particular weight.

"You already know what that means," Carrick said.

"I have a hypothesis," Mac said carefully. "I don't know it yet. We need to be on the beach at four-thirty tomorrow morning to find out if I'm right."

He poured coffee into both mugs. The action was unhurried and precise, as if coffee-making were a small but important ritual against the disorder of the world. He handed one to Carrick. They sat in the dark of The Badger and watched the Solway through the windscreen, and waited for the tide to turn.

Chapter 9

Mac slept from eleven until three-thirty in his usual disciplined way -- clothes on, weapon within reach, the alarm on his watch a single quiet vibration. Carrick did not sleep at all, which he had expected. He said the night office by memory in the dark of The Badger's rear compartment, the familiar Latin a useful anchor for a mind that was engaged in the slightly dizzying task of acknowledging that it was here, on a November beach at the edge of Scotland, because a Hindu woman's family had been turned away from the sea and a fisherman had seen a barge with a shroud for a sail, and that both of these things were very probably connected, and that the connection was probably his professional territory.

At three forty-five Mac was at the counter making coffee. At four o'clock they were on the beach.

West Beach at four in the morning in late November was the kind of place that made a man understand, with his body rather than his mind, exactly what the word "vast" meant. The beach was two miles long and perfectly flat, the wet sand catching what little light there was and reflecting it back as a dark, broken mirror. The tide was coming in, the water advancing in broad, shallow sheets

across the sand. The mist was present, as forecast -- not dense, not impenetrable, but sufficient to reduce the far shore of the firth to a suggestion and to give the middle distance the quality of an unfinished painting.

Mac moved across the sand with the particular economy of a man who was conserving energy and attention for something he expected to need them for. He carried his pack. He had the EM meter in his jacket pocket. He said nothing.

Carrick walked beside him and tried to do what Mac did, which was to be present in the place without projecting onto it. It was harder than it sounded. The beach at this hour had a presence of its own -- not supernatural, but forceful. The sound of the advancing tide, the cold, the weight of the dark. It was the kind of place that generated feelings unbidden. He was aware that the unbidden was not always the significant.

They stopped fifty yards from the waterline. The tide was perhaps twenty minutes from high water. The mist was thickening off the sea, rolling in from the firth in slow, unhurried banks.

"The meter," Carrick said quietly. He had watched Mac use it before.

Mac pulled it from his pocket without comment and handed it over. It was the modified device -- the coiled antenna, the reinforced casing. "Switch to the lower range," Mac said. "You want the slow oscillation. Anything rapid means active interference. Slow and steady means background presence."

Carrick switched ranges. The needle moved. Not rapidly -- a slow, rhythmic motion. A pulse. "Something's here," he said.

"Yes," Mac said. "It's been here all night. I checked at midnight. The baseline is very low but consistent. It's not dangerous -- it's ambient. Like the temperature of a room rather than an open fire." He took the meter back. "What do you feel?"

Carrick considered the question honestly. He was aware that this was not a social question. Mac was using him as an instrument -- an instrument with a different set of sensitivities to his own. At Muncaster, Mac had told him: you bring the faith, I'll bring the firepower. The division of labour had been crude but effective. This felt like a refinement of it.

"Sadness," Carrick said. "Not grief, specifically. More like -- the feeling a place has when something should have happened here and didn't. The way a

room feels when the person who was expected home doesn't come."

Mac was very still beside him. "Good. That's useful."

"That's what Mrs. Agarwal felt," Carrick said. "That's exactly it. She said it was a room where something terrible had happened. But I don't think it's terrible. I think it's incomplete."

"Distinguish between those two," Mac said quietly. "They're not the same thing."

"A terrible thing is finished. An incomplete thing is still ongoing. Still being felt." Carrick paused. "An incomplete thing can be resolved. A terrible thing can only be mourned."

Mac said nothing for a long moment. Then: "Look."

The mist had thickened while they were talking. It lay now across the water in broad, white drifts, and from within one of those drifts, perhaps two hundred yards offshore, a shape was emerging. It came slowly -- not moving through the mist but being revealed by it, as if the mist were a curtain being drawn aside rather than a medium being traversed. The shape was a vessel: low-hulled, flat-bottomed, riding high in the shallow water of the firth with the particular stability of something very

old and very simple. Its mast was bare of conventional sail.

What hung from the mast was pale, and moved in the offshore wind, and was not a sail.

The figures at the rail were seven. They were visible as silhouettes -- dark against the pale shroud, still, watching the shore. They were not moving, not gesturing, not speaking. They were simply there, in the way that things were there in certain kinds of dreams: absolutely present, absolutely purposeful, and entirely beyond the ordinary grammar of encounter.

Carrick stood on the wet sand of West Beach and looked at the phantom barge in the mist and felt something that was not fear. He identified it after a moment. It was the feeling he had in the moments after a death, when the body was still present and the soul had just departed: a profound, absolute stillness, as if the world were holding its breath.

"Seven," Mac said quietly. His voice was steady. He had his notebook out.

"And an empty space," Carrick said. "Brian said -- the eighth space. Do you see it?"

"Yes." Mac was noting something. "The rail has eight positions. Seven occupied. The eighth is at the

prow. Facing shore." A pause. "They're not looking at us. They're looking at the empty place."

The barge rode the incoming tide without effort, without sound, without any of the physical signs that accompanied a vessel with an engine or a crew that breathed. It was an entirely silent thing, and its silence was somehow more eloquent than speech.

"They're trying to tell us something," Carrick said.

"Yes." Mac closed his notebook. "And I think I know what. But I need to check the wreck records before I'm certain." He turned away from the water. "Come on. The archive opens at nine."

They walked back across the sand. Behind them, without drama or announcement, the mist closed back over the firth, and the barge was gone.

Part IV

"The dead are not always waiting to be found. Sometimes they are waiting to be heard."

Chapter 10

The Cumbria Archive Centre maintained a satellite office in Carlisle, but the local collections for the Allerdale and Solway area were held in a smaller facility in Wigton: a converted Georgian house with the smell of old paper that Carrick was coming to associate with the places where Mac went to find things. Mac had the institutional manner of a visiting academic -- precise, patient, and equipped with a very specific request -- and the archivist, a woman in her fifties who had the calm, interested competence of someone who liked nothing better than a specific request, produced the materials without undue delay.

The wreck records for the Solway Firth in the eighteenth century were partial but present. They existed in three forms: customs house registers, which recorded losses of vessels carrying taxable goods; admiralty reports, which concerned vessels with naval significance; and the private accounts of the harbourmasters at Silloth, Maryport, and Whitehaven, who had maintained their own running records of incidents in their jurisdictions.

Mac worked through the Silloth harbourmaster's records from 1780 to 1790 in the careful, unhurried way he had worked through the Carlisle archive for the Armathwaite case -- reading each entry twice, noting anything that didn't fit the surrounding pattern. Carrick sat beside him and read over his shoulder, which Mac permitted without comment.

They found it on the third document. An entry dated October 14th, 1784, in a harbourmaster's hand that was urgent, cramped, and significantly less regular than the preceding entries.

> *Lost this night the coasting vessel Agnes Mary, laden with French spirits by clandestine importation, driven by storm onto the west bank sandbar and overturned. All souls aboard perished being in number eight, the master John Tully of Whitehaven and seven souls of his crew. The cargo was taken by the sea and is presumed lost. The bodies of seven men were recovered and are to be interred at St. Andrews churchyard by arrangement of the Revenue. The master Tully was not among the recovered. His body has not been found. It is the understanding of this harbour that the said Tully was known in this district as a man of the trade and by his*

faith a Catholic, being buried in no proper ground, and it is the assessment of this port that his mortal remains are lost in the bar sands offshore west of this harbour.

Mac set down his pencil. He had not needed to read it twice.

"John Tully," Carrick said.

"A smuggler." Mac looked at the entry for a long moment. "Eight men. Seven recovered and buried. One not recovered -- the master. His body is in the sand offshore west of the harbour." He paused. "Which is where the dredging works are scheduled."

Carrick was thinking through the theology of it with the focused care of a man who understood that theology, at this juncture, was not abstract. "He wasn't buried. In the Catholic understanding, a proper burial is not about the body's location alone. It's about the rites. The intention. The commendation of the soul." He paused. "If he died without last rites and without burial, and if his body has been lying in a sandbank for two hundred and forty years --"

"And is about to be disturbed and broken up by a dredger," Mac said.

"Then in his own tradition, and by any tradition that takes seriously the idea that the body is the vessel of the person, there is a profound incompleteness. The soul can't move forward because nothing has ever formally acknowledged the person's death." Carrick looked at the document in its archival box. "The seven who were buried -- they're on the barge. They've been waiting for two hundred and forty years for their captain. The eighth space is his."

"And the dredging will destroy any chance of recovering him," Mac said.

"Which is why the sightings have escalated. The timeline fits -- the development was approved last year, the dredging plans were formalised six months ago." Carrick was speaking more quickly now, the pieces falling into place with the particular velocity of a conclusion that has been building for some time and has finally arrived. "They're not warning of a death to come. They're warning of a desecration."

Mac was already photographing the document. "I need to see the dredging contractor's survey maps. And the port authority development plans." He straightened. "And you need to make a phone call."

"To whom?"

"Father Dolan. Tell him what we've found. Tell him we may have an answer for Mrs. Agarwal. And tell him we'll need his help."

Chapter 11

The dredging contractor's office was in a business park outside Carlisle. Mac arrived there at two o'clock in the afternoon with the air of a man conducting a site survey -- clipboard, the ruggedized laptop, the particular confident assumption that he was expected. Carrick sat in The Badger and said a prayer, which he estimated was about equally useful as what Mac was doing, though in a different way.

Mac was back in fifteen minutes with a folder of photocopied survey maps.

"They were helpful," Carrick said, surprised.

"People are generally helpful to official-sounding questions asked with sufficient confidence," Mac said. He spread the maps on the counter of The Badger. "Look here."

He had marked a point on the map in pencil -- a position approximately three hundred metres west of the harbour mouth, in the dredging channel. He placed his finger on it. "The harbourmaster's 1784 entry said Tully's vessel went down on the west bank sandbar. This channel runs through the west bank sandbar. The dredge will clear it to a depth of four metres." He paused. "The Agnes Mary was a flat-bottomed coaster. At the

depth she's lying, which would be two to three metres in the original sand, the dredge will go straight through her."

"What remains of her after two hundred and forty years?" Carrick asked.

"In the Solway's cold water and anaerobic sand? More than you might expect. Ship's timbers, ballast, metalwork. And bone." Mac looked at the map. "The sand preserves things. There are Bronze Age boats still being found in this estuary."

He called The Maji from the front cab. Carrick had only been present for one previous call to The Maji, at Muncaster, when Mac had provided the concise tactical brief and The Maji had provided the lore. The rhythm of it was the same now: Mac's report delivered with military economy, the pause at the other end that was not thinking but recognition, and then the voice -- quiet, precise, accented with the music of somewhere distant.

"A maritime harbinger of seven," The Maji said, when Mac had finished. "With an empty eighth place. This is a very specific configuration. It appears in the North Atlantic folklore of the British Isles and the north-western coast of France -- most commonly in the traditions of communities with strong seafaring and smuggling histories. The vessel in the vision is always a vessel that was lost

with its crew. The crew appear as they were in death. The empty place is always for the person whose remains are unburied and unblest." A pause. "The phenomenon is not malevolent. It is petitionary. It is asking for something."

"We know what it's asking for," Mac said.

"Yes. The question is whether you can give it to him." The Maji paused again, in the particular way that preceded important qualifications. "The dredging is the immediate threat. If the remains are destroyed before they can be recovered and properly interred, the phenomenon will not resolve. It may, in fact, intensify. A soul that was already unable to depart, now finally and definitively deprived of any possibility of proper burial --"

"Understood," Mac said. "Two problems. Stop the dredging. Find the remains."

"And the third," The Maji said quietly.

A silence. "The third," Mac agreed.

"If the remains are recovered," The Maji said, "someone will need to perform the burial rites. In the Catholic tradition. You have someone for that."

"Yes," Mac said. He looked at Carrick. "I have someone for that."

Carrick, listening from the passenger seat, felt the familiar tightening in his jaw. He had done this once before. He had managed. He was not certain that managing and succeeding were the same thing, and he was not certain the distinction mattered, and he was not certain of a great deal else, but he was certain that the man in the archive records -- John Tully of Whitehaven, Catholic, smuggler, dead in a sandbank for two hundred and forty years -- deserved what the Church could give him.

"I'll need to talk to the bishop," Carrick said. "Burial of human remains recovered from a maritime site -- there's a process. And we'll need the authorities to be satisfied the remains are historical, not recent."

"I know," Mac said. "That's the slow work. The fast work is stopping the dredge."

Chapter 12

Mac's method for stopping the dredge was, Carrick observed, characteristically indirect. He did not confront the contractor. He did not approach the port authority. He wrote a letter.

The letter was composed on the laptop in the rear of The Badger, printed at the library in Wigton, and posted the following morning by first class recorded delivery to Historic England, the Marine Conservation Society, and the Cumbria and Lakes Historic Environment Service. It was addressed from a letterhead Mac had created -- the Institute for Maritime Heritage Documentation, an entity that appeared to have an Edinburgh postal address and a professional website that, if examined carefully, had been registered seventy-two hours earlier.

The letter reported the discovery of archival evidence suggesting that the proposed dredging channel at Silloth harbour passed directly through the documented loss site of the coasting vessel Agnes Mary (1784), a historically significant vessel known to have carried French spirits by clandestine importation during the height of the Solway smuggling period. The letter requested a temporary suspension of dredging pending an archaeological assessment under the Historic Environment

(Wales) Act framework and equivalent Cumbrian provision, and noted that the site likely contained human remains of significant historical interest.

"Is that all real?" Carrick asked, when Mac read it back.

"The archive record is real. The legal provisions are real. The institute is not real but the letter will take ten days to be verified as not real, during which time it will have generated the correct correspondence and caused the correct delays." Mac folded the letters. "The question of whether an institution that does not formally exist can do legitimate work is, I find, best left as a philosophical problem."

"The Church does not entirely share that view," Carrick said.

"No," Mac agreed. "But the Church also teaches that the ends do not justify the means, and I don't operate on that principle either. The dredge needs to stop. This stops it. The letter is factually accurate. The institution is not." He paused. "I've made worse compromises."

Carrick was quiet for a moment. He thought about the particular moral arithmetic of Mac's work -- the places where the conventional ethical categories did not quite fit the territory, where the

right thing and the proper thing were in tension and a decision had to be made about which weight to put on which side of the scale. It was not, he found, entirely unlike the moral arithmetic of his own work. The framework was different. The problem of acting in a world that was messier than the framework had the same essential shape.

"I'll contact the university department of maritime archaeology," Mac said. "There's a team in Newcastle that does exactly this kind of work. I'll frame it as a tip about a potential site. They'll apply for the proper survey licence. That's the legitimate route."

"And while that's moving through the system -- "

"The letters buy the time. The archaeology department validates the site. The port authority gets a legitimate survey request from a recognised academic institution." Mac looked at the map. "It will take three to four weeks. The dredge start date is in six weeks. We have the margin."

"And Tully?"

"If the maritime archaeologists find him -- and I think they will -- the remains are documented, assessed, and released for burial. That's the standard procedure for human remains of proven

historical age." Mac closed the laptop. "At which point it becomes your problem entirely."

"I'm aware," Carrick said. "I've been speaking to the bishop's office. There is a rite for the interment of recovered historical remains. It's not commonly used, but it exists." He paused. "The bishop was more curious than obstructive. He's a practical man."

"Practical bishops," Mac said, "are a useful thing." There was something in his voice -- not warmth, exactly, but a kind of dry appreciation. "One more thing."

"Mrs. Agarwal."

"She should know what we found. And why." Mac looked at Carrick. "That's your conversation. You're better at it than I am."

Carrick nodded. He called Father Dolan that evening and relayed the story -- the archive records, the phantom barge, the connection between the unburied smuggler and the aversion that had kept Mrs. Agarwal's family from the beach. He did not simplify the supernatural elements. Dolan was a hospital chaplain. He had his own catalogue of inexplicable things.

"She needs to know," Carrick said, "that the feeling at the beach was not hostile to her. It was

not a warning against her specifically, or against what she was trying to do. It was the accumulated distress of a man unburied for two centuries, filling the space he'd been lost in. Once that's resolved -- once he's been found and properly buried -- the beach will be what it should be. A place her husband loved."

The silence on the line had a particular quality. "I'll tell her," Dolan said. "She'll understand. She'll know exactly what that means."

Chapter 13

They went back to the beach one more time, the night before the maritime archaeology team was due to conduct their preliminary survey. Mac had calculated that the following high tide would be the last of the sighting pattern -- if his analysis was correct and the apparitions were escalating towards a resolution point, the next high water was the most likely moment for the final appearance.

He was right. The barge came at four-seventeen in the morning, in a bank of mist so dense that the water and the sky were barely distinguishable from each other. It came closer than before -- within a hundred yards of the shoreline, riding the high water with that same impossible silence, the shroud sail pale in the darkness, the seven figures still and watching.

Mac and Carrick stood at the water's edge. The cold was absolute. The tide was a whisper against the sand.

"I'm going to address them," Carrick said. It was not a question and not quite a declaration. It was the statement of a man who had arrived at a decision by a route he could not entirely retrace but trusted.

Mac said nothing. He was watching the barge with the flat, open attention he brought to everything in the field -- present, recording, assessing. He did not reach for his weapon. This was not, he had established, that kind of encounter.

Carrick took a step into the water. It came over his boots. The cold was a physical fact, not a supernatural one. He stood in the shallow, advancing tide and looked at the seven figures at the rail of the barge.

"John Tully," he said. He was surprised by the steadiness of his own voice. "And the crew of the Agnes Mary. I know why you're here. I know what you've been waiting for."

The figures did not move. The barge did not move. But something in the atmosphere changed -- the specific quality of the silence shifted, the way the pressure in a room changes when a door is opened somewhere else in the house. Something had heard him.

"Your master is lost in the sand offshore," Carrick said. He was speaking the way he had learned to speak in the exorcism training, and then again at Muncaster: not loudly, not dramatically, but with the precise conviction of someone stating a fact they were fully prepared to act on. "We know where he is. We are going to find him. And when we

find him, he will receive the rites of the Church and he will be buried in consecrated ground. He will not be disturbed by the dredge. He will not be lost."

A long moment.

Then the seventh figure -- the one nearest the empty eighth space, the one standing as if adjacent to an absence -- turned its face towards the shore. It was not a face in the ordinary sense. It was the impression of a face: the dark outline of a seventeenth-century mariner's features, a nose, a brow, the shadow of a beard. But the expression it carried was unmistakable. Carrick had spent the last eight months in a profession that required him to read expressions. He knew what this one was.

Relief.

Not the relief of someone whose fear has ended. The relief of someone who has been waiting so long that they had forgotten waiting was what they were doing, and have suddenly been reminded that the thing they were waiting for is real and is coming.

"We will finish this," Carrick said. "I give you my word."

The mist moved. The barge receded, not dramatically, not with any theatrical vanishing, but simply withdrawing with the retreating tide, becoming less distinct, becoming part of the mist,

becoming the mist. The seventh figure was the last to disappear. Its face remained visible the longest.

When it was gone, the beach was simply a beach. Cold, flat, dark, the tide advancing with the patient indifference of the sea.

Mac was beside Carrick. He had been there throughout -- a steady, silent presence at the edge of the water, a man who had stood on enough dark shores to have long since made his peace with what lived in them. He said nothing for a moment.

Then: "Good."

It was, Carrick had come to understand, the highest available compliment.

Part V

"Two men in a doorway between worlds. Neither of them quite comfortable with what the view looks like from there."

Chapter 14

The maritime archaeology survey found the Agnes Mary on the third day. She was exactly where the 1784 harbourmaster's record said she would be, and she was in considerably better condition than she had any right to be after two and a half centuries in the cold, oxygen-poor mud of the Solway sandbank. The lead archaeologist -- a brisk, efficient woman from the Newcastle team named Dr. Farrow -- described it to Mac over the phone as an extraordinary find, a late-eighteenth-century coastal vessel in a remarkable state of preservation, and reported with the barely contained excitement of someone who has just found exactly what they were looking for that there were human remains in the stern cabin.

One set of remains. The master's cabin.

"John Tully," Mac told Carrick, when he relayed the call.

"How do they know it's him specifically?"

"They found a silver collar medallion with initials engraved on it. JT. Common enough, but combined with the location and the archive record --" Mac looked up. "It's him. Dr. Farrow is satisfied. She's applying for the licence to lift the remains."

The Cumbria Coroner's office processed the case with the calm efficiency of a service that dealt regularly with historical remains in a county that had been inhabited since the Bronze Age and was not easily surprised by them. The osteoarchaeological assessment confirmed age -- mid-to-late eighteenth century, consistent with the archive date. The remains were released for burial seven weeks after the initial survey, on a grey Thursday in January, with the harbour beyond the churchyard wall and the Solway visible as a dark line between the promenade houses.

Saint Andrew's Church, Silloth. The same churchyard where seven of his crew had been buried in October 1784.

It was a small service. Mac was there, which surprised Carrick, who had not asked him and had not expected him to come. Mac stood at the back in the churchyard during the graveside committal, in his plain dark jacket, with his hands at his sides and his pale blue eyes on the grave, and he said nothing and moved nothing and Carrick had the strong

impression that Mac was marking this with an internal precision that had nothing to do with any formal practice and everything to do with a very personal understanding of what it meant to bury someone properly.

Father Dolan was there. And Mrs. Agarwal was there.

She had asked to come. Dolan had relayed the request to Carrick, who had spoken to the bishop's office, who had seen no impediment. She was not a Catholic and had no formal role in the rite, but she stood near the graveside with her hands folded and her face composed in the particular composure of a woman who understood, in a very complete way, what was being done here and why.

After the service, she came to Carrick. She was a small, elegant woman in her eighties, with white hair and the bearing of someone who had carried a great deal in her life and had not let it make her smaller. She took both of his hands in hers, which was a gesture he was not accustomed to from anyone he had just met.

"My husband will rest here now," she said. Her voice was very quiet. It was not a question.

"I believe so," Carrick said. "The beach will be what it should be. What he made it."

She nodded. She looked at the grave for a moment -- Tully's grave, new soil on old ground, a headstone still to come -- and then at the older graves nearby, the rows of the Agnes Mary's crew. "He has his men," she said. "Now he has his captain."

She released his hands and walked back to where her family was waiting. Carrick watched her go. He was aware of Mac's presence at the back of the churchyard, that still, watchful stance. He was also aware of something that he had not expected to feel at the end of this particular piece of work: a deep, complete exhaustion that had nothing to do with tiredness and everything to do with the effort of doing something that mattered fully.

Chapter 15

Three weeks after the burial of John Tully, on a mild morning in February when the light over the Solway was almost convincingly spring-like, Mrs. Meera Agarwal and her family went to West Beach at high tide.

She did not call Carrick first. She called him after.

"The beach was simply a beach," she said. Her voice had the quality of someone reporting a fact that they had known on faith and were now reporting on evidence. "My granddaughter ran into the water. She was not frightened. She was not distressed." A pause. "We scattered my husband's ashes. The tide took them. He would have been satisfied with that." Another pause, quieter. "I was satisfied with that."

Carrick sat down on the rectory stairs after the call and did not move for several minutes. He was, he thought, learning something about his work that the seminary had gestured at but not quite delivered: that the resolution of a thing was not always dramatic. That sometimes the most important moment was the ordinary one that had been made possible by the extraordinary ones that preceded it. A woman walking into the sea. A granddaughter running in the shallows. The

moment after a problem ended being indistinguishable from the ordinary life that had always been there.

He sent Mac a message. The message said: She went to the beach. It worked.

Mac's reply came twelve minutes later. It said: Good. He also mentioned the barge.

Carrick frowned. He wrote: What about it?

Mac's reply: No sightings since the night we addressed them. Not even background readings on the EM meter. Confirmed last night.

Carrick wrote: You went back.

Mac wrote: I always verify.

Carrick looked at the phone for a moment and then wrote: Buy you a coffee?

Mac wrote: I'll come to you. I have a few days.

Chapter 16

It was the conversation that Carrick had not been expecting, which was perhaps why it happened.

The Badger was parked on a cliff road above the coast at Ravenglass, a few miles south of Millom, facing the Irish Sea. It was evening. Mac had made coffee -- real coffee, French press, four minutes exactly -- and they were sitting in the rear of the ambulance with the door slightly open and the cold coming in off the water and the last light making the sea look briefly like hammered copper.

They had been talking about the case, about the burial, about Mrs. Agarwal's call. The conversation had wound down in the natural way of conversations that have covered their necessary ground and are resting. The silence was not uncomfortable. It was the silence of two men who had recently been in proximity to something that required a certain amount of internal processing, and were engaged in that processing in parallel.

"The gift," Mac said. He was looking at the sea.

Carrick waited.

"You were told you had it. In your training." Mac turned the mug between his hands. "The

sensitivity. The ability to read what's in a room before anyone tells you what's in it."

"Yes." Carrick looked at the sea. "It was a blessing, according to my novice master. A sign of election."

"Did you agree?"

A long pause. "Not initially. It felt less like a blessing and more like a condition. Something that happened to me rather than something I had." He thought about this. "It was frightening, when I was young. The feeling of walking into a space and knowing -- not thinking, knowing -- that something was wrong in it. The feeling that certain places had a weight that others didn't. I thought I was ill for quite a long time."

"What changed?" Mac asked.

"I found a framework for it." Carrick looked at the mug in his own hands. "The Church. The theology. The idea that what I was perceiving was real, not pathological, and that it was perceivable for a reason. That the ability was not an affliction but a vocation." He paused. "It was -- enormously relieving. To have a name for it."

Mac was quiet for a moment. "I didn't have a name for it for a long time," he said. Not prefaced or explained. A statement.

Carrick didn't ask. He had learned that asking Mac for something he was not yet offering was the fastest way to end a conversation.

"In the desert," Mac said. "Iraq. There was a Jinni. An entity that fed on life force. I was the only one in my unit who survived." A brief pause. "I could feel it. The others couldn't. I didn't know what I was feeling. I couldn't explain why I was still alive. I spent ten years thinking I was simply better at the job. And then I spent another ten thinking I was simply lucky. And then I couldn't sustain either theory."

"What happened then?"

"Elva Hill." Mac looked at the dark water. "I encountered the Fae. And a man I trust told me what I was. What I am." He didn't elaborate on the bargain. He didn't need to. Carrick had worked out the shape of it from the case at Muncaster -- the mark on Mac's hand, the nature of the summons, the specific weight of obligation Mac carried. "Warden. That's the word he used."

"Does the word help?" Carrick asked.

"It helps with the understanding," Mac said. "It doesn't help with everything else." He was quiet for a moment. "I didn't choose this. I was appointed. The bargain was made on my behalf by someone

who had the authority to make it, and I was --" He paused. "Not consulted."

Carrick thought about this. "That's very like a vocation," he said carefully.

Mac looked at him.

"The Church teaches that God calls. That the call is not an offer to be accepted or declined in the ordinary sense -- it's more like a recognition of what you already are. You don't choose a vocation. You discover it." Carrick looked at the sea. "There's a great deal of comfort in that for some people. For others it's the most alarming thing they've ever heard."

"Which were you?" Mac asked.

"Both. In sequence." He paused. "I came to the priesthood because I thought the structure would contain the sensitivity -- give it a legitimate form, make it purposeful rather than random. And it does do that. But it's -- more than I expected." He was choosing words carefully. "Novice exorcist is not how I would have described my career trajectory at ordination."

"No," Mac agreed. There was something in his voice that was not quite amusement and not quite sympathy but was a flavour of both. "I was a military police investigator. That was not how I

would have described my career trajectory at commission."

"You don't regret it," Carrick said. It was not quite a question.

Mac was quiet for a long time. The sea made its quiet, persistent sounds. "I regret what happened in the desert," he said at last. "I regret it every day. I don't think that will change." A pause. "But the work I'm doing now -- it matters in a way the other work didn't always matter. When something is resolved -- when a beach can be a beach again, when someone's husband can be put to rest -- it's -- "

He didn't finish the sentence. Carrick did not press him to.

"Yes," Carrick said simply.

The sun had set fully. The sea was dark and the sky was dark and The Badger was warm and smelled of coffee. Mac refilled both mugs without being asked.

"The trust," Carrick said, after a moment. "That's the hard part. For me."

Mac looked at him. He was listening in the full sense.

"I have the training. I have the gift, or whatever it is. I have the authority of the Church -- formally, the bishop has assigned me to this work. But I don't trust any of those things entirely." Carrick looked at his coffee. "At Muncaster, I was frightened the entire time. I did my job because you were there and because the alternative was leaving the Boggle to be tormented and that was unacceptable, but I wasn't -- I didn't feel as though I knew what I was doing. I felt as though I was performing a competence I didn't quite have."

"And tonight?" Mac asked. "On the beach. Talking to the barge."

Carrick thought about that moment -- the water over his boots, the seven figures at the rail, the steadiness of his own voice. "Different," he said. "I wasn't performing anything. I just -- said what was true. What needed to be said." He paused. "I didn't feel as though I had stopped being afraid. I felt as though the fear had become irrelevant."

"That's the transition," Mac said. "That's when the training becomes the work."

"Is that what happened to you? In the desert?"

"No." Mac's voice was flat. "In the desert I survived by luck and training. The gift, whatever it is, kept me alive but I didn't understand it. I've

been trying to understand it for twenty years." He looked at the sea. "I'm closer than I was. That's the best I can say."

Carrick nodded. "I think," he said carefully, "that might be the only honest thing anyone can say about any of it."

Mac drank his coffee. "Possibly," he said. "I prefer certainty. But I've stopped waiting for it."

Chapter 17

Mac left the following morning. He drove north, the usual direction when he was leaving the West Cumbrian coast -- towards the Solway, towards whatever the next signal would be. The road north from Millom was the same road it always was: narrow, efficient, surrounded by the blunt, grey-green fact of the coastal landscape.

He pulled The Badger into a lay-by on the hill above Ravenglass and made the call he had been intending to make for three days.

The Maji answered on the second ring. "Connor," he said. "How is our young priest?"

"He's coming along," Mac said.

There was the quality of a smile in The Maji's silence. "You spent two days in close proximity to him. I assume there was conversation."

"Some."

"And your assessment?"

Mac looked at the sea through the windscreen. The Solway was a steady, uninflected grey under a February sky. Somewhere out beyond the harbour bar, the sandbank where the Agnes Mary had lain for two and a half centuries was just a sandbank now. Dr. Farrow's team had been thorough. John

Tully was in Saint Andrew's churchyard. The balance was restored.

"He has the sensitivity," Mac said. "Better than mine in some ways -- he reads emotional residue more accurately. He's still not entirely comfortable with what he can do, but he's stopped being frightened of it. That's the critical development." A pause. "He stood in the water and talked to the barge. In the dark. Four in the morning. He was steady."

"Good," The Maji said. "What does he not yet have?"

"Confidence in his own instincts. He second-guesses the gift in the moment because he's afraid of being wrong. He'll work through that." Mac turned the ignition. The big diesel engine rumbled into life. "His theology is also genuinely useful. The conceptual frameworks the Church gives him -- the sacramental logic, the rite, the accumulated taxonomy of the non-human -- it's better lore than most of what I carry. He just hasn't fully integrated it with the field work yet."

"He will," The Maji said, with the quiet certainty of a man who had watched a great many things develop over a great many years. "And you? How are you navigating the new role?"

Mac did not answer immediately. He put The Badger in gear and pulled onto the road, the northward direction an instinct rather than a decision.

"I'm navigating," he said. "I'm finding the edges. I know what the role asks for but I don't always know what it gives." A pause. "Working with Carrick -- it clarified something."

"Which was?"

"The Warden role is a solitary one by its nature. I investigate alone, I engage alone, I close cases alone. But the Warden is a border guard. Borders have two sides." He was thinking as he spoke, which The Maji had long since learned to allow. "Carrick operates on the other side. Not of the Fae border, but of the other one. The border between the living and whatever is incomplete about the dead. I protect the first. He reconciles the second." Another pause. "In the Silloth case, neither of us could have done the whole thing. I couldn't have offered the burial rite. He couldn't have stopped the dredge or identified the pattern."

"You are describing a working relationship," The Maji said.

"Yes."

"That is a significant development for a man who has historically preferred to work alone."

"I'm aware," Mac said.

"And you are at peace with it?"

Mac looked at the road ahead. The coast fell away to his left, the sea a long grey line at the bottom of the fields. The scar on the back of his right hand -- the Fae mark, faint as a watermark most of the time -- registered no cold, no signal. The watch was quiet. For now.

"I'm at peace with the evidence that it works," he said.

The Maji made the sound that was very nearly a laugh. "For you, Connor, that is as close to at peace as I have ever known you to get. I will take it."

Mac said nothing. He drove north, the Solway opening up on his left as the road crested the hill, the water wide and grey and flat all the way to the Scottish shore. It was not a beautiful view in the conventional sense. It was a utilitarian view: land, water, sky, and the knowledge of what lay beneath all three.

It was enough. It was, in fact, exactly right.

Epilogue

The beach at Silloth on a morning in late March was a different proposition from the beach at Silloth in the dark, at four in the morning, in November. The light was good -- a pale, tentative spring light that made the sand look almost welcoming and gave the Solway Firth the kind of colour that the travel writers used on their better days. The tide was going out. A dog was running the waterline in the exuberant, purposeless way of dogs for whom the world is fresh and the sea is new every morning.

Mrs. Meera Agarwal walked the beach with her family. Four of them: her daughter, her son-in-law, her granddaughter. They were doing what people do on beaches in spring -- walking, talking, letting the wind do what the wind does, occasionally stooping for a shell or a piece of sea-glass or simply because the world was at foot level and worth looking at.

No one watching them would have seen anything unusual. A family on a beach. An elderly woman in a good wool coat walking with the steady care of someone who has recently been in hospital and is not yet entirely confident of the ground. A granddaughter doing the running that

grandmothers no longer do, depositing small objects in the elderly woman's coat pockets with a seriousness that the elderly woman received with complete gravity.

No one watching them would have known that they had been to this beach twice before and turned back both times, or that the resolution of the thing that had turned them back had involved an archive record from 1784, a converted ex-military ambulance, a novice exorcist, a phantom barge, and the burial of a two-hundred-and-forty-year-old Catholic smuggler in a churchyard a quarter of a mile from where they were walking.

No one watching them would have needed to know.

The Solway carried the ashes of Rajesh Agarwal, retired pharmacist, former resident of Barrow-in-Furness, Sunday walker, seeker of coastal light, towards the sea. The morning was quiet. The beach was simply a beach.

It was enough.

* * *

The wreck of the Agnes Mary is entirely fictional. The Solway Firth, West Beach at Silloth, Furness General Hospital, and Saint Andrew's Church are real places. The smuggling history of the Solway coast is not invented. John Tully is.

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About The Author



Simon McCall is a contemporary author and artist in digital/new media whose work is deeply rooted in the landscapes and legends of Northern England. Living and working in Cumbria, his creative process is a constant dialogue between the written word and visual expression.

Combining the disciplines of art and writing, Simon's literary works often possess a cinematic quality, painting vivid pictures of the human condition against the backdrop of the wild Cumbrian fells. His novels explore themes of isolation, heritage, and the thin veil between reality and folklore.

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