

ONE

Thursday December 31 2015. 3.20 PM

THE BUS DRIVER drops him off on the main road and wishes him all the compliments of the season before closing the automatic door on the man who was his last passenger on this, the last day of the year. The coast road is impassable to motor vehicles, the only option for the man is to walk the remaining two miles. It is hard going, through snow that is knee deep in places. As he approaches the quay, the Siren Hotel – which, later on, will be near to bursting with merry-makers seeing in the new year – tries to seduce him with the rosy, orange glow of her interior, but he doesn't surrender. Determined to reach the safety of Sanctuary House before night falls, Theo Good-heart pushes onward, in anticipation of a blazing log fire all to himself.

Theo carefully descends the stone steps on the side of the quay, then he walks across the ancient stone flat-bridge which links the mainland to the island. The bridge is accessible only at low tide, when the river Raven is reduced to an arterial network of muddy streams. At high tide when the bridge is deeply submerged, small river craft can pass safely inland or out to sea, and people wanting to visit the island can be rowed across the narrow channel by Alex, the ferryman, for a fee. Swimming in or across the river is forbidden and the majority of those who have defied the ruling and attempted to do so have been sucked under and drowned by submarine whirlpools or overpowered by the strong tidal current.

Bodies which were never recovered – given back – are still thought by the local people to be the captives of a covetous sea god, who holds his catch deep below the slime and the mud of the riverbed. A formidable deity who has been feared and revered in equal measure, since the dark ages.

Theo steps from the slippery stone bridge onto a small stretch of icy shingle. This is the exact spot where the treacherous bog of salt marsh meets the firmer ground of Sanctuary Island. Theo halts at the boundary. To the left of him is the beach and the dunes. They are the only areas that visitors are allowed and tolerated. Two private routes lead directly to Sanctuary House. One is a passage from the beach: a narrow gap in the sand dune, eroded by the relentless force of North Sea gales and innumerable journeys made to and from the house by the occupants.

Standing side-by-side before Theo like skeletal sentries, are two posts supporting weather-beaten warning signs. The paint, blistered and peeling. He thinks— *there's a job for Alex, come the Spring— should I see another Spring.*

One post bears a large rectangular placard which proclaims, "Private Land. Access By Permission Only." And the ultimatum, "Trespassers Will Be Prosecuted." Directly beyond it is the second route to the house. It is a path made from old railway sleepers, butted together. It curves discreetly out-of-sight around the back of the sand-dunes, behind which the house sits hidden.

The second post supports a single white arrow pointing to the right on which are painted the garish, red exclamations, "Danger! Quicksand!"

On the horizon above the turbulent sea, an ominous Armada of pewter clouds outlined with a quickening mercury fluidity are advancing on the landscape, stalking the blood-orange slash of waning daylight. A warning that another snow storm is imminent.

Theo presses on, and is glad to reach the shelter of the sand dunes which act as a wind-break and offer some comfort from the slicing gale. This is the moment Theo has dreaded. He lowers the hand with which he has been shielding his eyes from the onslaught of sleet and fine sand, and observes the house.

Theo is startled at first. The house that he remembers, still looks as familiar as the day he was forced to leave Sanctuary Island forty years ago. During his absence it has not changed one bit. Why should he be surprised at that? The house has not been inhabited since that time and the upkeep of it was left in good, capable hands. Theo notices the pine trees nearby are much taller. They dance wildly, in time to the irregular beat of the gale.

The half-light gives the roof on the second floor of the house the fantastic appearance of a dragon asleep atop a rock, whose lair Theo has accidentally intruded upon. The roof had been purposely designed to look like an upturned Viking boat.

The walls of Sanctuary House are constructed from blocks of rough, quarried granite. On all four sides of the house, solid timber beams crafted like giant letter T's support balconies which afford panoramic vistas at the first and second floor levels.

Huge rectangular windows set horizontally, made from tempered glazing, open sideways like sliding doors, allowing one to step outside onto the balconies. The whole house had been built to be able to withstand any force that Mother Nature might attack it with, and she has done so as

vigorously as she is now doing. Theo isn't the least bit surprised that in all the years he had been away, she hasn't yet scored a victory. Sanctuary House is still an impenetrable and safe place.

The island is shaped like a diamond on a playing card that is not standing on a sharp point, but lying on one side. Along the southern edge is a broad beach with sand dunes which then inclines to the rocky headland of the North-West point and the disused lighthouse. The northern edge is fortress like, comprised of jagged, razor sharp rocks. At the furthest point East they abruptly fall away in a South-easterly direction. These rocks are smoother; rounded by the gentle ebb and flow of the tides. And there is a sheltered spot; a safe place, favoured by seals for basking in the sunshine. At the South-East point are broad mud flats, more commonly known as Raven Marsh. This god-forsaken marshland clings to the South-East point of the island like the head of a leech whose body trails for some distance along part of the southern edge where the River Raven flows parallel to it. The marsh eventually dries and turns to shingle next to the stone flat-bridge.

Sanctuary Island is Theo's by birthright. When Theo's beloved Sam died, Theo had inherited Sanctuary Island. From Theo's birth up till the final day of Sam's life, Sam had pledged his heart, his mind, his body and soul to Theo's welfare. It is still said by those who knew and liked Sam, that no other boy could have been brought-up, cared for, and loved quite so well as Theo Good-heart had been.

Theo is fearful of flying. The day before, when the jumbo jet plane was heading skywards into a hazardous storm, his fear was all the greater, but he was glad nevertheless that his was the last plane allowed to take off before the order went out to delay all further flights. If his flight had been grounded, Theo might very well have backed out and not set foot on Sanctuary Island again; in doing so he had broken the promise he made to himself and Pietro that he would never return.

Theo's claustrophobia had hit hard. Being cooped up inside the body of an aircraft for the duration of a four hour flight – like a battery hen desperate to spread it's wings – was like living a nightmare. During take-off, panic had taken a hold of him and remained throughout the flight. For seven hours the turbulence rarely let up so Theo had kept his eyes screwed shut and had prayed for most of the journey.

Theo had taken a few covert glances at the younger male sitting silently beside him. Theo's neighbour had regarded Theo in the same way.

Neither of them had spoken. During landing, near to touchdown, Theo had observed through the thickly whirling snowflakes the wing-tip on their side of the plane almost scrape the ground. When the wheels had screeched on the icy runway and the plane bounced and jolted the passengers, Theo inadvertently grasped the hand of the young stranger whose own white-knuckled hand was already gripping the arm-rest. The young man hadn't pulled his hand away. He hadn't reacted at all. He continued to stare, petrified, at the headrest in front of him. He hadn't seemed to mind having his hand held at that particular moment and Theo had thought— *either he's glad of it, or else he's too frightened even to notice*. Theo had deliberately kept his hand there. A gesture both reassuring and kindly.

When the engines reversed, shrieking their objection at being forced to slow the plane down to a gentle running speed, only then had the two men looked directly at one-another and smiled. Then at the sight of Theo's pale and freckled, long-fingered hand still holding the others' for dear life, they had laughed almost to the point of shedding tears from the sheer relief that the plane was still in one piece and they had made it through the storm alive. Even after the plane had come to a stand-still – perhaps emboldened by their physical contact whilst the plane was landing – they continued to hold hands. Silent gratification passed from each to the other. Then along with the other passengers on board, they had applauded the Captain and his co-pilot, both of whom made a brief appearance. They were used to negotiating the skies in rough weather conditions, but this flight had been particularly arduous for themselves, and their cabin crew, all of whom were genuinely touched by the passengers' show of appreciation.

It wasn't until later, when he was on a train bound for Norwich that Theo recalled the young fellow on the plane in the seat next to his own. They had gone through customs together and opted to share a taxi: they were both destined for central London. Theo to his solicitor and the other to "head office", though the man hadn't elaborated on the office nor the nature of his work. They had journeyed mostly in silence, each proffered only fragments of polite, if somewhat guarded vocal interaction.

The tension between them had been palpable. That might have been down to a mutual spark of sexual attraction, Theo contemplated. He had thought— *it could account for our guardedness, though it might only be wishful daydreaming on my part*.

They'd briefly shaken hands before going in separate directions. Theo had then stopped to look back. He'd stared intensely at the receding figure, as if willing the stranger to do the same, but the man hadn't. Theo

felt momentarily angry with himself for not making a concerted effort to befriend the man. He should at least have offered him his personal card. Theo had never mastered the art of acting spontaneously. Acting on impulse doesn't come easily to one as shy as Theo is.

He had reprimanded himself for the billionth time— *hesitation again! Why do I still let that happen? He seemed like a genuinely nice guy; handsome too, and I didn't even ask him his name.*