

Chapter 2

The Lighthouse

Parvaneh watched in despair as the black van sped off down the road. Then she quickly made up her mind – by the time she had run to the police station or Alice’s house the van would be gone – and so would Doctor Phillips. There was no time to lose.

She leapt up the narrow steps, which ran in between the whitewashed cottages. At the top, she hared into the middle of the street and threw out her arms.

“STOP!”

But the van was racing towards her, and it showed no sign of slowing down. In fact, it speeded up, and the blast from its horn echoed around the narrow lane.

For a brief moment Parvaneh froze before instinct took over and she dived to one side.

Parvaneh felt the rush of air as the cold metal missed her by a fraction. Then her heart jumped as the street fell away from her, or rather, she fell away from it. She was falling, tumbling back down the steps, reaching out frantically, clawing with her fingertips at the gnarled white walls of the cottages, but it was no use. Gravity was pulling her down.

A sharp pain in her shoulder, followed by spinning blackness, and then nothing.

* * *

A cold fingertip pressed lightly against her eyelid and cracked it open.

A bright light.

Parvaneh looked about her. She was lying on an examining table in what looked like a doctor's surgery, grey-walled and sterile. The woman holding the torch was a nurse, short and dumpy but with a cheery red glow about her face.

"Aha! She wakes," announced the nurse.

Parvaneh tried to sit up, then clutched her shoulder and grimaced. Awake she might be, but she had a dull, throbbing pain that stretched right down her back.

Nasim was at her side, his face white, his eyes red and streaming. "Parvie! Please tell me you are alright."

Alice was behind Nasim, leaning over him, like a mother would, and pressing her hands down on his shoulders. "See, she's fine" she said

soothingly. "What did I tell you?"

Parvaneh flinched as a shard of old memory returned to haunt her of the hospital back home, the day they bombed the market. The white sheets soaked red; the white walls caked in dust; the panic; the stunned, helpless wailing.

Parvaneh shook the memory away. She had other things to think about now. She swung her feet off the bed.

"Wait!" said the nurse. "You can't move yet, lie back down."

"I need to find the doctor – she was taken."

"Who was taken, dear?" the nurse asked.

Parvaneh explained, in a feverish voice, what had happened. Alice and the nurse shared a look. They must reckon I'm delirious, she thought. The nurse placed a hand gently on her chest and pushed her back down on the table. "Please, you need to rest."

“But, but...”

“Och, there hasn’t been a crime here in thirty years!” said the nurse.

“But I saw it...” said Parvaneh, sitting up again.

“Leave it with me, dear” said Alice calmly, making a patting motion with her hands. “I’ll go to the to the police right now, and let them know.”

With that, Alice pulled on her coat and left.

“Tell them they must find that black van,” Parvaneh shouted after her, but Alice was already gone.

* * *

It was hours before the nurse let Parvaneh go. The small village ambulance took her and Nasim back to the cottage. There, they found Alice filling a hot water bottle.

“Bed for you, my dear,” she said.

“But what did the police say?” Parvaneh

asked.

“Don’t worry,” Alice replied, soothingly. “The police are dealing with it. Now get some sleep and you’ll feel better in the morning.”

As Parvaneh lay in bed, she ran her fingers over the hard, peculiarly metallic cover of Doctor Phillips’s book. Even stranger, she found that if she angled it towards the light in a certain way, it glittered.

* * *

Parvaneh spent a restless night, but when she arose in the morning, her shoulder felt better. She stepped outside the cottage, breathing in the salty sea air, which helped clear her head.

The wind whipped up the waves, and brought with it the sound of mournful keening from the seals on the rocks out by the headland. The light here, she thought, it was ever-changing; the

weather shifting with every passing minute. There was beauty in this place.

She tugged Nasim along with her. “Come on, we do not want to be late for school again.”

The old postman tottered by on his bike, issuing her with his usual stern look. The old lady’s face appeared briefly from behind her lace curtains, before they were swiped shut. Parvaneh had to yell at Nasim to stop him from jumping up onto the harbour wall. Everything was exactly like the day before....

At school, the other pupils seemed as cold to her as ever. The teachers too, except for Mrs Struan. Nasim at least made some progress. Parvaneh overheard him talking to Conor and Danny, about Doctor Phillips and the kidnapping. “Do you want to help me find the black van?” he asked, excitedly. “It will be like an adventure.” They seemed to warm to him a bit after that.

At lunchtime, Parvaneh picked over her school dinner, thinking fondly about the family feasts they used to have back home: Mother’s eggplant dip, grandmother’s bean stew, her uncle who made delicious cabbage rolls. The whole family would sit in the garden, eating pistachio nuts, until night fell and the cicadas sang. Back when they had a home, and a family.

Mrs Struan appeared, smiling. Parvaneh thought at first that she was bringing news – perhaps they’d found Doctor Phillips. Or even better, perhaps they’d found Father. Parvaneh closed her eyes tight, imagining the joy she would feel if that were only true. But no, Mrs Struan was only delivering some exercise books for her to practise with.

* * *

On the way back from school, Parvaneh

spotted a lone policeman outside the police station. A sergeant, he stood gazing out to sea, his arms clasped behind his back. He did not look like a man in the middle of solving a kidnapping. Yanking Nasim behind her, Parvaneh stepped in front of him and coughed.

“Excuse me, but have you found Doctor Phillips yet?”

He stared back at her. “Who are you talking about?”

She recounted the story she’d told Alice and the nurse. “Alice reported it last night. I think Doctor Phillips is in trouble.”

“Oh,” he said, disinterested, and he made to turn away from her.

“Sergeant?” she called after him, but he did not respond. He was just walking off, so she called louder. “Are you not doing anything?”

He whisked round, snapping at her. “Look,

she’s one of them.”

“One of who?” asked Parvaneh.

He stepped towards her, leaned close, and spoke under his voice. “If you want my advice, lass, stay away from them. Don’t concern yourself, just stay out of it.”

With that, the policeman fixed her with a final, stern look and marched off.

Parvaneh was left scratching her head.

“What did he mean, Parvie?” asked Nasim.

“I don’t know.” She would have to speak to Alice. But something the policeman said reminded her of Mr Cochrane, of that look of distrust and suspicion the shopkeeper gave, which Parvaneh thought at first was directed at her, but was not. It was at the deerstalker lady.

She trailed her brother across the street and left him outside the shop. “Nasim, stay right here.” She pushed open the door.

The shopkeeper was behind the counter. He looked up as the bell above the door tinkled.

“You back again?” he said in as cheery a voice as he could muster.

“Mr Cochrane,” Parvaneh said, “do you mind if I ask you something?”

“Of course, dear,” he replied.

“Last night, when I came in here... That lady, why were you looking at her so strangely?”

Mr Cochrane stared at Parvaneh intensely for a second, before leaning forward and speaking under his breath, just like the policeman had done.

“You’ve noticed, haven’t you?”

“Noticed what Mr Cochrane?”

This time he leaned even closer, whispering. “Them!”

His eyes were wild and staring as he went on: “The others, look.” He scrabbled around behind the counter, gazing fearfully every now and then

at the door. “Here!” He stuffed a bunch of photos and newspaper cuttings into her hand.

One of the cuttings was from the island newspaper, a story about strange lights in the sky. The photos were all of strange lights too.

“What is all this?” asked Parvaneh.

“Aliens!” he said. “Extra-terrestrials – they live among us.”

The door of the shop opened and the bell tinkled. He drew back, then added in a rushed and whispered voice: “Let me know if you see anything else, anything strange. Remember, you are one of us.”

“One of who?” she asked.

“*Humans!*” he hissed, before turning to serve another customer.

It all sounded so crazy, so unbelievable. And yet, the deerstalker lady did look very strange, and there were those two blond men, who seemed to

move their heads in unison. Together with Doctor Phillips's kidnapping, something very odd and frightening was happening on this island.

She wanted to ask Mr Cochrane more questions, but the shop door opened again, carrying in a loud yell, a boy's yell, followed by a woman screaming.

"Nasim!" Parvaneh rushed outside.

Her brother wasn't where she'd left him. People were rushing towards the harbour wall – there was some kind of commotion in the water. And then, with a crawling sense of dread, she spotted him: Nasim's head, bobbing just above the water. He was thrashing about, yelling.

"Help! Help!"

Parvaneh dropped her schoolbag and raced across the road. Yet before she could reach the other side, someone else had dived into the water. A woman.

Alice.

Displaying remarkable agility for her age, Alice swam towards Nasim in wide confident strokes, then she steadied him, supporting his head above the water, and pulled him towards the bottom of the slipway, where Parvaneh was waiting.

Parvaneh wrapped her arms around her brother, even though he was dripping wet.

"I told you about that wall!"

"S-sorry!" he coughed. Then, under his breath, he whispered. "I didn't fall, you know, I was pushed."

Alice walked dripping towards them. She didn't seem remotely bothered by the cold or the wet. Smiling, she playfully flicked Nasim under his chin. "Ah, he's fine, a big strong boy. We'll need to get you swimming lessons, though, laddie."

Now Parvaneh turned and wrapped her arms

around the older lady too. “Thank you!”

Alice was surprised, but pleased. “You’ll get wet, young lady.”

“I don’t care.”

Nasim’s teeth chattered, so Alice took his shoulder and guided him up the slipway. “Come on, let’s get the boy inside.”

* * *

Nasim soon dried out by the fire. After some hot soup, he snivelled that he was feeling better. “But I would like to go to bed now, please.”

Alice took him upstairs, laughing and joking gently, and he played along with it. She seemed to have taken a shine to him, and he to her. Good, thought Parvaneh, he needed that in his life.

She would speak to Alice when she came back downstairs. Gazing out of the window, her eyes fell on the lighthouse, waves lapping the rocks at

its base. She remembered something Doctor Phillips had said before she was taken: “I’m building something there.” What was she building, and did it have something to do with her being taken?

Dusk was falling, and as she looked closer she was sure she could see a light at one of the windows. Perhaps, who knows, Doctor Phillips had been let go. Perhaps she’d returned and everything was fine.

The lighthouse wasn’t far, a short stroll away. Parvaneh checked her watch – she could run there and be back in the house before Alice came back downstairs.

She gnawed at her lip for a second, before throwing open the door of the cottage and setting off at a jog down the street.

All the island’s fishing boats were tied up for the night. Gulls were stationed on the rooftops,

their necks hunkered down in rest. Fiddle music seeped out of one house, a sad, lonely broken-hearted tune.

The street soon gave way to a stony path, which curled along the shoreline. Then the path ran out, and she dashed across the dark, slippery rocks, the waves crashing nearby. She halted for a second as she traced, in the failing light, at a strange indentation in the rock, a huge footprint with three toes, rimmed with seaweed and crusted with barnacles. Ancient dinosaurs, she imagined, must once have walked here, aeons ago. The stars were beginning to appear in the sky. What a strange, other-worldly place this is, she thought, as she gazed up.

The lighthouse door was slightly ajar. She knocked, but there was no answer, so she pushed the door open.

A bulky iron frame was attached to the inside

of the doorway, fitted with rivets. It was almost like one of those body scanners you have to pass through at airport security: a red strip light ran around it, and small horn-shaped fittings projected out of the top, aiming downwards.

She flicked on the light switch. There was a large flashing, orange button next to it, marked 'DEFENCE! EMERGENCY USE ONLY!'

Parvaneh looked round the room. The floor-to-ceiling window at the far end was lying slightly open, like the front door, and the lace curtains billowed in the breeze. A set of steps curled up around the outer wall. A light shone down from above, possibly the light Parvaneh had seen from the cottage. Apart from a small cot bed and a chair, there were no other furnishings here. The only other thing was a long bank of controls, switches and lights that ran along the wall.

And then, as she brushed her hand along the

shiny surface of the control panel, she saw something even stranger. A rectangular slot sunk into the top, surrounded by red glowing lights. A book sat in the slot, a book she recognised.

Parvaneh picked it up, flicked it open. A book of her mother's poetry. Doctor Phillips must have tracked down a copy from somewhere. An inscription was written on the inside cover, in bold capital letters:

'MONTVILL IS COMING'

She sniffed the page – the ink was quite fresh. Yet before she even had a chance to consider what it meant, the front door behind her creaked open. She whirled round to find two tall, blond men standing side by side in the doorway – the same two men she'd seen before. Their eyes stared closely at her, cold and calm and purposeful.

And now you decide...

What should Parvaneh do now?

A) Stand her ground

B) Try to escape through the window

C) Push the button marked 'DEFENCE'

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