

Prologue

Things happen in the dark. I remember her saying that. Like lots of things she said, I didn't really take them in at the time. Maybe I just didn't have long enough to understand her, maybe she was just talking in ways I couldn't really comprehend then. I don't know. I'd like to ask her what she meant. I'd like to ask her now, as I lie soaked in sweat, the windows open and the curtains flapping on this hot London summer night, the grey dawn refusing to show itself. The darkest hour.

Falling. I've been falling for what seems like hours, days, years. I suppose it was a dream again. I can't tell. I feel trapped here with the damp sheets clinging to me like a shroud, sweat on my brow. Am I awake? Maybe. But why did I think about her just now, after the dream? Ah, was that her? Yes, of course, that was her. In the dream. I couldn't see her face, but of course, there was that flash of auburn in the raven-black hair that could only have been her.

Of course. It was her.

She's never been in the dream before. All the times I've had it, in different countries, over all these years, she's never been there. Just now, before I woke up here in the hot dark, I felt like I always do just before it ends: terrified. I'm gripping these sheets, trying to keep hold of the edges of the dream before it fades, like dreams do, so that I can still see her. All dreams fade, even nightmares. They fade and then you're just left with the memory of them, an imprint, a scar.

I was falling. I can feel it now: giving in to gravity, the hammering of my heart, my fingers clutching at the air as I kept falling, falling. The rush of air. I want to keep hold of that feeling while it's still clear in my mind, before it dissipates, that horrible feeling that just seems to go on and on.

I could see all around. Every now and then, the shock of cloud as I plummeted, then out again into the blue. Somewhere far away, a horizon swayed and tilted as my body descended, but I was moving too fast to recognise anything, tumbling and flailing in my own slipstream. Occasionally I'd glimpse a blaze of green racing towards me. It must have been the ground, but I never seemed to get any closer. The next time I'd see it, I was as far away as ever but still dropping like a stone. I couldn't breathe properly, the air blasting past me was suffocating, like

someone clasping a hand over my face. I felt sick, twisting over and over, falling, falling.

But then tonight, I saw something like a speck in the corner of my eye. It would disappear again and then suddenly return much bigger and I'd see it was someone else, falling too, falling like me. That's never happened before. I was too scared, in the dream, too scared to think about what was going on. Now, even though the edges of the dream are starting to break up and I can feel it disappearing, I can remember seeing that flash of auburn showing through the wind-strewn black hair and now I can see her face. Looking at me, as we both fell. Those searchlight blue eyes staring at me just for a moment as we both levelled in mid-fall, and then she was gone again and I continued tumbling, cascading, falling.

Did she look scared? I don't know. Maybe. She was looking straight at me, like she did all those years ago when she used to put her elbows on the table and cock her head slightly as though to say, *Well?* I saw her doing that to others too, challenging and unchallenging at the same time. Distant. Untouchable. Like in that dream. She was there for a second, then gone again.

What caused me to wake? It wasn't any kind of landing, which would have been a death, I suppose. So did I wake up before I died? Am I still falling? Is she? I lie here in the dark, panting with fear, like a cornered animal. Things happen in the dark.

Chapter One

She'd be my age now, fifty-five. A foolish kind of age, really. You're not old yet, but you're seeing off middle age and you know you're heading somewhere, you've glimpsed your destination once or twice in the haze. You understand now that you're not going to live forever but you still don't know how many years you should expect. But she knew there weren't years stretching out in front of her. I remember her plucking at her sleeve once in the kitchen of her house in Prestbury, not even really addressing me but saying out loud, "These won't make old bones."

Jo. Joetta Camilla Thomson but of course no-one called her Joetta. Apart from that father of hers. Everyone else called her Jo. We were both twenty-two when we met. I'd like to tell you that we were close but that just wouldn't be true. I mean, she liked me but when Jo liked people or things, she liked them in a kind of sideways way; even when she stared straight at you, which she did to everyone, she somehow wasn't really looking at you. She was looking through you, trying to find whatever was behind the canvas. She found it, in the end; that's what I think. Or that's what I've pieced together, over the years.

I can't have known her more than a year, I suppose. She disappeared two days after her twenty-third birthday. The last place she was seen was that pool of water up in the forest near Cockleford, where I found her hair clip. The dragonfly she used to clip her hair back. So many things about Jo were specific, individual, unique; she didn't live her life like the rest of us. That hair clip was as much a part of her as her voice, the motorbike she rode, the ghosts she saw. Maybe she just crammed too much life into that short period, those twenty-three years; maybe the well was full.

It feels odd now, after all this time, talking about the things that happened in Prestbury. I've tried, over the years, to find people to talk to about it all but now there's no-one left, just me lying on my own here in this darkened room in London. You can't unknow some things, can you? When they invade your mind, filling you with knowledge you wish you never had, taking your hand and pulling you through the mirror...

Why has she come back? In many ways, of course, she never went; she pretty much ruined everyone else for me so I've been on my own all

these years. But she's never appeared like that, staring at me again with those blue eyes. She's never visited me in that way since she disappeared.

Bear with me. So much of this story I don't understand but perhaps now I know enough, if I go through it all, patiently. I'll have to piece it together from memory, from what I've found out, from what I've heard from people over the years. She's never been heard of since, you see; I haven't spoken about her to anyone since Mum died. Oh, apart from Mayne, but he doesn't count. I've been on my own for years, clutching at the memories of those final few weeks.

So let me try and tell you what happened.

Jo Thomson was twenty-two years old. She was beautiful, I thought, but not in any conventional way. She never wore any obvious make-up. She was always sweeping that black Spanish hair from her eyes and clipping it back with the dragonfly. Her gaze was like a force field, irresistible and unsettling. She frowned as much as she smiled. She was solitary and I would say unknowable. Yet after she disappeared, while everyone was still searching for her, what became clear was how many people she'd touched. The people told stories of how they felt what I felt, which was a connection with her. They talk about how she listened to them like no-one else. How did she do that? How did she combine so many strengths, contradictions, influences?

She arrived in Prestbury during her second year studying art and design at Cheltenham College. The college is a university now, Gloucestershire University, but back then it was what they used to call a higher education college and sometimes I'd go and see bands in their student union bar. I was never the studious type; my mates and I were never impressed by students but at least they had good bands some Saturdays. I was working at a lorry depot outside of Gloucester, working the night shift emptying and refilling wagons that were heading off in the morning to fill more supermarkets. It was all right – good money and they let us play loud music all night in the warehouse. We had AC/DC and Led Zeppelin and all that from 10 at night till 6 in the morning. Made the nights go by and you could supplement your wages by shifting some of the more expensive stuff into the back of your car and offloading it in the pubs around Cheltenham.

Anyway, one weekend someone said there was a band on at the college so a few of us rocked up and listened for a bit to some utter shit

called Cocteau Twins. Classic student music. I was a bit pissed and sat down against a wall until the band finished. It wasn't long before I realised I'd lost my mates. I was heading out of the union bar to get the bus back to Prestbury when I saw this girl getting on a Yamaha XT500. That was a cool bike in 1986. Maybe it was the beer, but I went over and said:

'You going Prestbury way?'

She had an old black leather jacket and she turned to me while unclipping the dragonfly before putting on an open-face helmet. She gunned up the single-cylinder XT then she shouted back:

'You got a helmet?'

I grinned and shook my head.

'What did you think of the band?' she yelled.

'Complete crap,' I said.

She shook her head but I could see her smiling.

'On you get,' she said. 'If the cops spot you without a helmet, you're on your own.'

It was ages before she told me Cocteau Twins were her favourite band.

A few weeks went by before I saw her again. She dropped me that evening outside the Plough next door to the old graveyard in Prestbury but before I could even say thanks, she'd accelerated off into the dark.

I lived with my mum back then, just the two of us in the same two-up, two-down where I'd spent my whole life, about twenty minutes' walk over on the other side of the village. I never knew my dad, he died in an industrial accident at work when I was a baby and my mum brought me up, supplementing her benefits by cleaning in the posh houses in the village. Prestbury has quite a few of those.

'You know you told me you got a lift on a motorbike the other week?' My mum asked me one morning when I came in from another night shift. She had a twinkle in her eye. 'Some young lady, you said.'

'Yeah.' I was never very chatty in the morning before I headed to bed.

'Oh, if you're not interested,' she said, and carried on eating her cornflakes.

'What?'

'Nothing for you to worry your big head about,' she said, picking up the paper. 'It's just that I've got a new cleaning job. Nice young thing

just moved onto Deep Street. Lives on her own in that big house at the end. Rides a motorbike. Nothing you'd like to know about, I'm sure.'

The following week I came up with a lame excuse to call in on Jo's house while Mum was cleaning it. It was a big, square sandstone house standing on its own next to the row of cottages on Deep Street, with a fancy iron gate which led you in from the pavement. There were four windows on the ground floor, same on the first and three attic dormer windows cut into the slate roof. The front garden looked like it hadn't been cared for. It was early summer and the weeds had taken over most of the flower beds and there was ivy growing over the front path leading up to the pale blue front door. I remember thinking, as I hammered the brass knocker and heard it echoing inside, that I could feel someone watching me and I even turned around to see who it was, but of course I couldn't spot anyone.

Jo opened the door. She was wearing jeans and had bare feet and a T-shirt with *Clannad* scrawled on it in a sort of Gothic script and a picture of what looked like a folk band under it. She looked straight at me and didn't say anything.

'Um, I think my mum is here,' I said. 'I've locked myself out of the house. I wanted to borrow her keys.'

I'd felt quite cocky on the way over to her house from ours, but now I just felt really stupid, like some little kid who wanted his mum.

Jo carried on looking at me, then she smiled slightly, turned and shouted, 'Karen, there's some bloke here who says he's your son and he can't find his way home.'

Mum appeared in the hallway from a room to one side, holding a duster and a can of furniture polish. She wore her cleaning apron and had a big smirk on her face. She looked at Jo.

'Men,' she said, and rummaged in the pocket of her apron to produce a set of keys.

'Hold on a second,' Jo said, turning back to me and holding the door open wider. 'Let's make use of him while he's here. We need that dresser moving, don't we?'

I followed her as she walked down the hall, glaring at Mum as I went by. She just poked her tongue out at me and grinned again. The three of us ended up in a big kitchen at the back of the house and I spent the next ten minutes heaving a massive wooden dresser from one wall

to another. At one point, Mum came over saying, 'Here, let me move that big book, might make it easier for you.'

She reached for what looked like a massive leather-bound bible that was on the top of the dresser when Jo stopped her, 'No, I'll do that.'

She almost pushed Mum aside, took hold of the book and carried it out of the room. That was the first time I ever saw *the grimoire*.

Looking back, it was the grimoire that tied everything together. Without it, I don't believe any of it would have happened. We'd have all carried on with our lives, none of us would have been... what's the right word? Brutalised. None of us would have been so brutalised, in some cases, destroyed. Yes, the grimoire lived up to its name.

Ah, you may not have heard the word before. I hadn't, then. I know a lot about them now. A grimoire, in simple terms, is a book of spells, an occult object. They have been known to have existed pretty much since human beings knew how to communicate. Most cultures over the millennia have manifested them, always shrouded in secrecy, code, and symbol. Some were used by the wise people in a village to help people in the community overcome illness or misfortune. More often, they have been the focus of the dark side, the repositories of ancient knowledge concerning, for want of a better word, evil. They were said to have the power to summon up demons, and over the centuries the religious authorities stamped out their use wherever possible. Or took them for their own.

When Jo came back into the room, she said she had to do some uni work or something, but it was clear I was expected to leave. So having failed entirely in my mission, I left the house, kicking myself for my shyness. Over the next couple of weeks, I spotted her once or twice in the village. OK, maybe I was walking around the posh side of Prestbury more than I usually did, hoping to get a glimpse of her. But each time I saw her, she was in conversation with someone: the first time some old biddy with a shopping basket who was giving her an earful about something, the second time it was a group of kids she was laughing with. There was something unusual about her, even in those glimpses: that sense of her reaching right in and engaging with people in a way that most of us can't be arsed to do, and then at the same time, a feeling of her being simultaneously distant from the people she was talking to. I can't describe it any better than that.

One afternoon, a couple of weeks after my clumsy re-introduction, I was back at Jo's house. Mum had told me that she needed a hand again shifting furniture and after we'd moved some incredibly heavy kit around the house, the three of us sat down in the kitchen for a cup of tea. We were sat at a big wooden table which stood on the pale yellow slate floor in the middle of the room. Over against one wall was the dresser I'd moved earlier and I noticed that the old book was back on top of it. I pointed at it.

'What's that?'

Jo looked over and then back at me. She crossed her arms on the tabletop, leaned towards me but didn't say anything for a moment. It was quite disconcerting. I got used to it in time, like I got used to lots of her ways, but in those first few weeks I was constantly on the back foot. It took me a while, you see, to 'get' Jo. Although, like everyone else, I don't think I ever truly understood her. But I like to think I came close. In those early days, I was just so struck by her. Like I said, you wouldn't have called her classically beautiful but I couldn't get her face out of my mind, the way her blue eyes never flickered, the slightly olive skin she got from her Spanish mum, the jet black hair always tied back so the splashes of auburn henna showed through. Yes, of course I was smitten, I suppose. I didn't know then that Jo didn't really operate like other people and that it would never occur to her to think about someone else as any kind of potential partner. It took me a while to realise that I would be fortunate to call myself her friend. Jo never explained anything about all this; you just learned it as you went along.

Anyway, after a bit she sat back and sighed.

'It's called a grimoire. I hate it.'

Mum asked her to explain what a grimoire was and she told us.

'Why have you got it then, if you don't like it?' I asked.

She shrugged.

'My dad gave it to me when I moved up here to Prestbury. It's a family thing.'

'Quite a weird family thing.'

She looked at me.

'Yeah, you could say that.'

Jo was what I suppose Mum and I called 'posh.' When you grow up in a village like Prestbury, it's not like you're all in it together, all battling to survive. It's much more 'us and them.' People like Mum and

me, living in the estate on the east side of the village, Mum cleaning houses, me working the warehouse night shift until I finally had enough and left; and the people in the big houses in what they called the Conservation Area, who drove nice cars and went out to dinner. Jo wasn't like those people, she wasn't like anyone, but she came from there.

She grew up in London, in a smart detached house in Fulham with roses running up the whitewashed exterior walls and a big garden which was manicured by the hired help. Her mum was Renata Lanza, a fiery Spaniard who came to London in the sixties and set up a successful interior design business. When Jo was a kid in London, her mum had a shop on the Fulham Road selling curtains and wallpapers and interior design services. When I left Prestbury and moved to London, a year or so after Jo disappeared, I once saw her mum, a determined little woman with clicking stilettos and red lipstick, still going about her business in that efficient, chilly way of hers, walking down the Fulham Road with her head held high.

Her dad, Edric Thomson, he was something else. He was an antiques dealer, had a shop down at World's End in Chelsea and strode about the place with that kind of English confidence that only money gives you. I don't mean that in any kind of bitter way; I'm not fussed about money. I've always been the sort who needs enough to get through the weekend and let's see what comes up next week. But you know the kind I'm talking about: worn corduroy trousers, scuffed brown suede shoes, slightly-too-long silver hair just messy enough to make you realise he doesn't give a fuck what you think. That was Edric.

By the time I met Jo, Renata and Edric had divorced. The way she told it, their marriage was one long battle of attrition – the explosive Spaniard and the arrogant, wilful Brit. For most of her childhood, they were all three in that house in Fulham, her dad moving out a year before she left for Cheltenham and, even then, only to a place just round the corner. They came up this way for holidays. Every summer when she was little they'd take some cottage on the edge of the Cotswolds and her mum and dad would continue their booze-filled fights in Cheltenham pubs instead of Fulham wine bars. Jo was just the collateral, as they say, the used shell they punched out of the cannons of their interminable war. Once, when she and I were sitting in the dark in the graveyard in Prestbury — I'll tell you about all that later — her voice went down to a

whisper as she told me how she once pleaded with her dad to stop hitting her mum and, as he turned towards Jo, how her mum grabbed a knife and stuck it in his arm.

Her parents ran successful businesses so there was plenty of money to go around, which was how Jo ended up living on her own in that ridiculous house, which would have been big for a family, let alone one young single person. You see, her parents and the way they fought in front of her all her life, they made her so unhappy yet, at the same time, they had a hold over her. I could never understand it. She got away from them to go to college in Cheltenham – she said she picked Cheltenham without really thinking about it. She just wanted to get away from them and it was the only place she'd been outside of London. After spending her first year in student halls on the south side of the town, she moved into the big house in Prestbury. Her dad bought it, told her it was a good investment and that he could sell it on at a profit after she finished college. It was also a good place for him to store a load of his antique furniture. That explained all the heavy stuff I kept having to move around.

'Why not just tell him where to get off?' I said to her during one of our chats. 'Why let him manage where you live? Can't you just rent a bedsit like most students?'

She looked sort of hurt and confused when I said that and I regretted blurting it out. I'd never met him but I already hated him for causing her such unhappiness. I just wanted her to be happy and it seemed weird to me that she would maintain the link with her parents that way. But I suppose it suited her too; she liked being on her own. And I was wrong to push her on it; I wasn't her boyfriend and I didn't really have any idea what went on in the depths of Jo Thomson and she didn't need some prat like me to make things any worse for her. She dealt with so much that year I knew her. I just scraped the surface of knowing what she went through. I can see now, there was so much going on inside of Jo, the last thing she was going to focus on was where or how she should live. She just wanted to be on her own and yet she'd never known any real independence, so she ended up knocking around that house in Prestbury.

I was blundering about like an idiot most of the time. I look back now and think how much more effective I could have been, what steps

I could have taken to be of more practical assistance to her. I don't know, maybe I didn't do all that bad.

So pretty soon after we met, we established this friendship which was based on me trying to keep up with her and her sort of being amused at how I went about my life. The fact that I thought AC/DC were artistically superior to Cocteau Twins, for example. She'd never met anyone who'd thought that. And we liked each other, don't get me wrong. Once I'd realised pretty early on that there was no spark of interest from her side, we looked out for each other like friends do. We hung out. I was free most afternoons because I didn't start work at the warehouse till 10pm, so when I discovered that Jo was researching something, I felt like I wanted to try and help.

Pretty soon after Jo moved into the house, before I ever met her, she'd begun to experience what she called 'the dark side.' Maybe it was like that premonition I had the first time I walked up the path of her house, that sinister feeling of being watched. But with Jo, it had developed way beyond feeling a bit out of sorts. She began to experience a series of what I guess you'd call hauntings. That's the only way to describe it, or at least to introduce it, but at the time I don't think that was a word either she or I used. Either way, Jo was seeing very unusual things in Prestbury, and if we were going to get to the bottom of what was happening to her, we had to put in the effort. Each time she had an encounter with a ghost or a spirit or something equally inexplicable, we had to research connections. Sounds mad, doesn't it? But for that one year, it seemed no stranger to me that she should be telling me about a headless figure she'd seen in The Burgage, one of the older Prestbury streets, the previous night, than if she was relating what she'd had for lunch. We were embedded, as the soldiers say: we lived amongst the dead. And if it started out with me not taking it seriously, thinking it was a bit of a laugh... well, that all changed pretty quickly.

Anyway, there we were, the Odd Couple, as Mum used to call us. The long-haired rocker and the cool design student, sitting in the kitchen of this big old house drinking Earl Grey and reading through old books on religious history and poltergeists. Every teacher I'd ever had at school had told me I was stupid, lazy, but Jo never questioned what I could or couldn't do. And I took to it, I found that the research, the reading, it shone a light on a room somewhere in my head that had been dark for years.

My mates used to take the piss out of me. 'She's way out of your league, mate,' but I'd shake my head, tell them they didn't get it. It wasn't like that. I saw less and less of them outside of work. They couldn't keep up with what I was experiencing. Which was what? I still don't know.

Jo didn't really have any friends to start with. I never met a single one of the other students from her college, she never spoke about any of them, never seemed to do the things that other students did. While that did in some ways seem strange, in others it appealed to me. An old head on young shoulders, that's what Mum called her. I invited her to go to gigs but she was never interested so, after a while, I stopped – the Cocteau Twins gig had been a one-off because they were her favourite band. She drove into college on her XT for lectures and stuff but never hung around the campus. If she went anywhere, it was on her own, exploring the countryside, the woods.

That was the other thing about her; she never tired of finding stuff out. If she was in a shop, she'd train those clear blue eyes on the person behind the counter and listen intently as they talked about the weather or the problem with the delivery driver. There wasn't anything which didn't seem to fascinate Jo, she hovered it all up. And she never missed a thing. She'd go, 'Did you see the way that little boy in the Co-op was singing to himself?' and I'd be thinking, uh, no. But everything was interesting to Jo. Just maybe too much.