SECRET OF THE SHADOWS

CATHY MACPHAIL

BLOOMSBURY

LONDON BERLIN NEW YORK SYDNEY

Bloomsbury Publishing, London, Berlin, New York and Sydney

First published in Great Britain in March 2012 by Bloomsbury Publishing Plc
50 Bedford Square, London, WC1B 3DP

Copyright © Cathy MacPhail 2012

The moral right of the author has been asserted

All rights reserved
No part of this publication may be reproduced or
transmitted by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying
or otherwise, without the prior permission of the publisher

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 978 1 4088 1268 6

Typeset by Hewer Text UK Ltd, Edinburgh
Printed in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, St Ives Plc, Bungay, Suffolk

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

www.bloomsbury.com
www.cathymacphail.com

He was walking ahead of me, Ben Kincaid, this boy whose life I had changed. Still young, as he was when I saw him, day after day, sitting at the back of the class. In my dream, he was turning back to me and smiling.

'Thank you, Tyler,' he was saying.

And gathering round him others came, figures emerging from a mist, their hands reaching out to me, softly pleading. 'Help me, Tyler.' They knew my name. They all knew my name. I could hear the tears in their whispers.

And in that moment the dream became something more, something to fear. How could I help them, all these dead people?

I woke up. Glad to be awake.

I dreamed of Ben Kincaid often. Ben Kincaid, the boy who had asked for my help from beyond the grave. I had stepped back into his time and changed the past. Did all

the people in my dreams want me to do the same for them? But I wasn't sure I could I do it again? Change the past? It was the question that haunted my dreams . . .

Could I do it again?

1

'It's such a lovely little house, Mum. I wish Gran could have had more time in it.'

We stood outside the shore-side bungalow, me and Mum, looking around at the white painted bay windows, the rock garden and the honeysuckle crawling over the front door. From here, there was a spectacular view down the river as it opened out to the Irish sea. Mille Failte, the wooden sign above the door read. The house had been called that long before Gran had bought it. Mille Failte, Gaelic for a thousand welcomes, and the name suited it. It was a picture postcard house, sitting there on a finger of land on the edge of a wild, rocky coastline. Even wilder today, with the wind lifting the sand, sending it rising like a mist along the shore, and the white-crested waves crashing against the rocks. Gran and her sister, my aunt Belle, had bought it between

them so they could spend their old age here together. That dream had been shattered when Gran died of a heart attack.

Aunt Belle was my over the top American aunt, who had sailed off to New York when she was sixteen. She too had dreamed of living here. Home for her was still Scotland. 'The old country', she called it. But now, with Gran gone, Aunt Belle had decided to put the house up for sale and she was coming over for the summer to see to it.

Mum opened the front door. 'Are you sure you don't mind staying here with Aunt Belle?'

Mum and Dad had already booked their trip to Australia when Aunt Belle had suggested flying over from New York. But I hadn't fancied the long flight, and was only too happy to spend the time here with this favourite aunt of mine, helping her sort the house out.

''Course I don't,' I assured Mum. 'She's such a laugh. And I certainly don't want to spend the summer on my own with our Steven.'

Steven, my dippy brother, had just started his apprenticeship as a motor mechanic. All he ever wanted to do was talk about cars.

Mum looked dismayed. 'That's my big worry – leaving

him in the house on his own. He'll have parties every night, I just know it.'

'Our Steven? Are you joking? He'll have a ball. He'll be able to watch his rubbish car chase programmes with no one complaining about them.'

I wasn't sure that was true. As soon as his pals knew he had an 'empty' as we call it (a house with no parents in it), they would descend in their hordes. But I couldn't tell her that. It would only worry her more.

The hallway was dark when we stepped inside. Not even a beam of sunlight managed to struggle through the stained-glass window over the heavy wooden front door. All the rooms were closed up and there was a musty smell in the air.

Mum sniffed. 'Needs a good spring cleaning,' she said. 'It's been empty for too long.'

A family called Forbes had rented it a few months after Gran died, but they had left just a few weeks later.

'Why did the tenants leave, Mum?' I asked. 'Weren't they supposed to be here for a year?'

Mum nodded. 'Yes, it was his job or something. He was called away.'

'Lucky for us they did leave.' I laughed. 'Or me and Aunt Belle wouldn't have anywhere to stay.'

Mum opened the door of the front room. It was dark in there too. The blinds were closed tight and there were white sheets thrown over the chairs and the sofa. Mum pulled one of the sheets back and revealed Gran's favourite blue armchair.

It must have brought back memories for my mum. She sat down and began to cry softly.

'She used to love sitting here, reading her morning paper, watching the river. She said it was the nearest thing to heaven she could imagine.'

I took Mum's hand, trying to comfort her. 'She was happy here, those last few months. That's all you have to remember.'

Mum shook her head. 'I'm not so sure. Something was bothering her before she died. Now I'll never know what it was.'

I'll go back in time and ask her, I almost said, but Mum wouldn't have understood. She didn't know what I had done for Ben Kincaid. No one knew, or ever could know. Not even my friends, Jazz and Aisha or Callum and Adam, or the lovely Mac. None of them would ever know.

I took off my jacket and hung it on the back of a chair. I drew up the blinds and pushed open the windows. The

wind tugged at them with such force they flew wide apart. I let out a yell and Mum hurried towards me. It took both of us a lot of effort to haul them shut again.

'You can't avoid the wind here,' she said.

But with the wind came that wonderful smell of the sea and I breathed it deep into my lungs.

'It's going to be so healthy living here. I'm going to go for a jog on that beach every day.'

That made Mum smile. 'If you can drag yourself out of bed before noon.' She wiped her eyes. 'The beds will need changing. But we'll leave the bedrooms till last. Get the rest of the house sorted first, eh?'

'Aunt Belle can sleep in Gran's old room,' I said. 'It's got the en suite. I'll sleep in the other one. It's just as nice as the other anyway.'

How was I to know then, nothing could have been further from the truth.

2

We switched on the radio and sang along with the music as we worked, vacuuming the carpets, dusting and polishing, and in between songs we had a chance to talk too. Mum was so looking forward to catching up with her sister and her husband, out in Australia. Her and Dad had never been there before. The two couples planned to go on a road trip together.

Opposite the living room was a small dining room. It was hardly ever used. I would have had a desk and lots of books in there instead of the oval dining table and high-backed chairs that Gran had picked. It too had a bay window looking up towards the village. We tackled this room next, shifting the chairs and the table so we could vacuum properly. Then we finished the main bathroom off the hall, and the kitchen before we decided to start on the two bedrooms.

'I'll do Gran's room,' Mum said. She picked up the fresh sheets we had brought.

'Are you sure you'll be OK?' I asked her. The room would bring back more memories. So much of Gran was still there.

Mum patted my arm. 'Of course I will.'

The hallway lay in a T shape. At one end was Gran's room and at the other end, next to the kitchen, was the room where I would sleep.

It was dark in here too. Even when I opened the blinds not much light came in. It was a typical Scottish summer's day – windy and wet. The kind of day when lamps are never switched off. I left the door open so some light from the hallway could spill in. I could still hear the music from the radio, and my mum humming happily in Gran's room.

This room would be bright on a sunny day, I thought, with its apple green curtains and duvet cover, and the matching armchair in the corner. There was a tall lamp leaning over the chair and I imagined myself curled up there, reading a book. I was going to like it here, I decided. At least I would when it warmed up. I shivered and started pulling the sheets from the bed.

I hadn't felt cold in the rest of the house, but in here

there was a distinct chill. I called out. 'Mum, this room's freezing!'

I opened the door and went into the hall. 'See – it's warmer here.' I was talking to myself. Mum couldn't hear me over the music, and I shrugged and went back into the bedroom.

I changed the bed, then bundled up the bedclothes. I opened the door and walked down the hall to Gran's room.

'It's freezing in my room,' I told Mum.

Gran's room, on the other hand, was bright and yellow, and warm too. There must be a draught coming from somewhere.'

'Well, we could put the central heating on. Or maybe get you a heater.'

I dumped the sheets into the bag we'd brought for dirty laundry, then took the polish and cloth and walked back to my bedroom.

The door was closed. Hadn't I left it open? And it kept closing. I called back to Mum. 'Something wrong with this door too. It won't stay open.'

She didn't answer me again. Too busy singing along to an old Beatles track.

I had only just stepped into the room when the door swung closed again.

If I wanted to keep it open, I'd have to wedge it with something. I looked around the room and a movement at the window caught my eye. There was a spider crawling up the glass.

If there is one thing I hate, it's spiders. And this was a big one, a big summer spider, its hairy legs stretching across the glass.

And then, I watched as it was joined by another, and then another. They must have been coming from behind the chest beneath the window.

I stepped back. Within moments, there was an army of spiders covering the glass, shutting out what little light there was, plunging the room into darkness. I had never seen so many spiders.

I screamed, 'Mum!' I ran for the door, yanked it open.

She had heard me, was already in the hall.

'What is the matter?'

I pointed to the room. 'It's full of spiders. They're everywhere. We'll have to get someone in to get rid of them.' I pulled her along. 'You go in first. There's hundreds of them.'

She stepped inside and looked around. 'Come here, Tyler.'

I followed her warily inside.

The spiders were gone. The window was bright and clear. There was a break in the clouds and even the pale yellow sun seemed to be making an effort to beam into the room.

'But they were there.' I pointed at the window. 'There must be a nest of them behind that chest.'

Mum looked behind the chest, then she dragged it clear of the window. Nothing. The wall beneath the window was freshly painted white. 'You and that imagination of yours, Tyler.' And she laughed. But I couldn't even smile. All I could think of was, where had all the spiders gone?

She helped me vacuum and dust the room and after a while, we left.

But I should have known then. The door that wouldn't stay open, the cold in that room, the spiders. I should have realised something evil was there in that house. But I didn't. Instead, I went with Aunt Belle to stay there for the summer, and moved into a nightmare.