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Opening extract from

The Company of Ghosts

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Chapter One

The island is shrouded in mist. A girl stands so close to the water that spray showers over her like beads of pearl. Yet she feels nothing.

She is watching a fisherman drawing into land. He beaches his boat and hauls a basket out onto a shore that is purple with the shells of mussels. He crouches down, scooping handfuls into his basket. He whistles tunefully as he works, intent on his task. He doesn't hear any sound as the girl steps over the shell beach towards him, nor does he see a shadow as she stands between him and the low sunlight. He doesn't hear her voice. He hears only the clattering of the shells, the scraping of waves on the shingle, the sobbing cry of gulls.

'Guthrie,' the girl says to him, as she says every time he comes to the island. 'Please help me. Will you never help me?'

He pauses for a moment, glances up as if something caught his senses, and then frowns. He finishes his task quickly, heaves his basket into his boat *Miss Tweedie*, and heads for home with the tide.

Chapter Two

Ellie waited until she heard her mother and Angus head up to their room. Time to go. Quickly she fished out her father's rucksack from under the bed and stuffed a few items of clothing inside it, then looked round the room, dithering. On top of her desk were her sketchbook and art materials, all unused. They had been a last gift from her father. Hastily she gathered them up and slid them behind the little bundle of clothes in the rucksack. Her mother's voice, movement in the other room, a quick laugh. *Now*, Ellie told herself. *Go. Go.* She had already written a note and placed it on her pillow. *I can't come with you. Enjoy yourselves.*

She crept down the stairs and out into the front garden. She felt dizzy, as if she hadn't breathed properly all day. But she daren't stop now. She ran along the street and didn't pause until she had reached a bus stop on the corner, where

she wouldn't be seen from the house, then took out her phone and rang her friend, Hannah. There was no reply. She walked on to the next bus stop, dialling one of her other friends on the way. Again, only voicemail. There was no point in leaving a message. After all, what could she say to them, but 'Help me'?

Ellie wriggled her father's rucksack from her shoulders and let it slouch down to the ground as she felt in her pockets; a half-eaten bar of chocolate in one, her purse in the other. She tipped out a handful of loose change into her palm and counted the coins. Hardly anything there. Her bank card was no use as her account was empty. She stared ahead blankly as the traffic rumbled past, calculating how long her money would last, and was startled out of her reverie by a voice behind her.

'Where's your violin? Not coming to orchestra today?'

A tall, smiling girl with a cello strapped to her back had joined her at the bus stop. For a moment Ellie couldn't remember her name. She hardly knew her, except that they both played in the strings section of the city youth orchestra. The other girl was the lead cellist, a much better player than Ellie would ever be, and even took solo parts sometimes. Ellie always sat in the second section of the violins, feverishly

sight-reading because she never practised the music despite her mother's threats and her father's bribes. Yet she loved orchestra, loved the kind of music they played, and wouldn't normally miss the practice for anything. But that night she'd forgotten all about it, forgotten everything except her own anger and unhappiness. It would have been somewhere to go, wouldn't it? Something to do to get her out of the house. But then what?

'Going away?' the tall girl asked. Morag, that was it. Morag Donaldson. When she played her cello her whole body swayed, and her hair swung with her like a shining black veil. She would have her head high and her eyes closed, as if she were playing in her dreams. She hardly ever needed to look at the music.

Ellie nodded and glanced up the road again, as if she were anxiously waiting for the bus to come. *Go away*, she thought. *Just leave me alone*.

'Somewhere nice?'

Ellie started crying, tears just rolling down her cheeks as she stood, silent and helpless, doing nothing to try to stop them.

'I'm sorry.' Morag nervously shifted her weight from one leg to another. Then, 'Please don't, Ellie.' And then,

rummaging in her pocket, 'Here, have some tissues.' And last of all, 'What's the matter?'

The bus arrived. The doors opened and it stood, shivering, until it was clear that the girls weren't getting on, then the doors closed again and it pulled away.

'You've missed your bus,' sniffed Ellie.

'So've you.'

'It doesn't matter.' Ellie screwed up the tissue into a ball of pulp in her fist and shoved it into her pocket. 'I don't think I wanted that one.'

'It's the only one that goes from here,' Morag reminded her gently. 'Where do you want to get to?'

Ellie looked away and stared at the leaning post of the bus stop as if it was the only thing she wanted to talk to. 'I've no idea. Anywhere.'

There was a long silence. Morag watched helplessly as Ellie struggled against her tears. She was such a waif of a girl, such a tiny, white-faced picture of unhappiness. 'I know it's none of my business, but are you running away from home or something?'

'Not running away,' Ellie muttered. 'I just walked out, that's all.'

'And you've really no idea where you're going? I mean, where will you stop tonight?'

A boy on a rattling bike swerved onto the pavement in front of them, wove between Ellie's rucksack and the bus stop, grinning at each of the girls in turn, then bounced off the pavement again and sped away.

'I'll be okay. I'll be fine.'

Morag shook her head. 'You aren't okay. You're upset. You can't just go off on your own like this. Terrible things happen to girls of our age when they run away from home. Rape, murder, drugs, prostitution . . .' She spread out her hands. 'Sorry, I'm sounding like my mum. But – Ellie. You mustn't.'

Her earnestness gave Ellie a weak smile. 'I won't let anything happen. I'm not stupid.'

'Please go back home, just for tonight. Why won't you?'

Ellie hesitated. She didn't want to tell any of her story. She couldn't bear to tell anyone. Not yet. But Morag's concern was like a warm red scarf on a chilly night. 'My dad's not there any more,' she said simply. That would do. That was bad enough. And, anyway, it was the worst thing.

'Tell you what. If you like, you could come back to my house for a bit. Have you had anything to eat tonight?'

Ellie shrugged, overwhelmed again. She couldn't remember when she'd last eaten. There had been food after the awful ceremony that morning, she remembered, but she

hadn't touched any of it. She'd spent the rest of the day dry-eyed in her room, staring into space, and had finally hunted out her father's rucksack and bunched those few things into it. And then, she had simply walked out of the house.

She was dimly aware that Morag had turned away from her and was rapidly texting. Ellie bent down to pick up her rucksack again, thinking that maybe she should walk to the railway station. At least she would be out of the wind there.

Morag pushed the mobile into her pocket and swung round to her. 'Mum's fixing you something to eat. And me. I'm starving,' she laughed. 'Just come round and eat something. It'll help you think.'

'I can't.' Ellie stared helplessly at Morag. Really, at that moment, no-one could offer her anything more comforting. And yet they hardly knew each other.

'Why not?'

'What about orchestra?'

'What about it? It's Strauss this month anyway. I can't stand those Viennese waltzes. Too cheerful for me!' Morag helped Ellie to ease her rucksack onto her shoulders. 'My mum's brilliant, by the way. She won't ask you any questions. She might offer you a bed for the night, though. Think about it.' She didn't add that her mother was a social

worker, and well used to dealing with distressed teenagers. She stood back and smiled at Ellie. 'Oh, and my dad's just a big clumsy bear who only thinks about poetry. He might not even notice you!'

Ellie realised three things. She was very hungry. She didn't even have enough loose change for a bag of chips. And she was suddenly bone tired.

Ellie had never seen a house in such a state of gentle chaos before. Her own house was stylish, calm, cream and immaculately ordered. The only splashes of colour came from her father's paintings, and they had been removed recently and replaced with mirrors artfully positioned to reflect light from the windows and the different greens from the garden. In Morag's house the sagging armchairs were covered with cheerful Indian throws and cushions. Where they had slipped out of place to reveal the fabric underneath you could see the draggled threads where generations of cats had clawed and snagged the material. Books jostled for shelf space with photographs, CDs, a hairbrush wispy with grey hair, a ball of yellow knitting wool with needles sticking out like a snail's horns, biros, bunches of keys and sea shells. An amber cat stretched out, full-length, on the windowsill,

trapping to itself the only smear of sunshine that was left of the day.

Morag led Ellie through to the kitchen, where her mother was easing slices of pie onto a couple of non-matching plates. She glanced up at Ellie and smiled.

'Hi, Ellie. I'm Sheila. Just drop your bag on the floor. Gosh, you're like your mum.'

Ellie was dismayed. 'Oh. You know her.'

'A bit. Angela Brockhole. Very elegant. I've seen her at your concerts a few times, and we went to the same yoga class for a bit. We used to go for coffee afterwards, with a few others from the class, but I never get a chance to go these days. The number of classes I join and never finish! You don't forget a name like yours though. Badger sett it means, but of course you'd know that. Now – eat!'

She pointed to a chair. Ellie slid down into it and let her rucksack thud softly to the floor. She was too tired to say thank you. She gazed round the kitchen while Sheila rummaged in a drawer for cutlery. There was a slate board hanging on the wall next to the table, with the words *When all the world was young, lad, and all the trees were green. Kingsley* chalked on it. It was hanging slightly askew, and she resisted the temptation to reach out and straighten it.

'Aren't you eating yours, Morag? You didn't eat much tea.'

Morag shook her head. 'I've got a bit of a headache now.'

'All the more for Ellie then. Hope you're not veggie. We used to be, but we've all slipped over to the dark side. Only eat organic meat though. *Guten appetit*, Ellie.' She gestured to Morag to follow her out of the kitchen. Ellie could hear the murmur of their voices, but couldn't tune in to any of the words. She helped herself to some water, dislodging a glass from a pile of dishes soaking in a bowl of suds, and ate. She only looked up from her plate when Sheila Donaldson came back alone into the kitchen and sat at the table, phone in hand.

Isn't that typical of adults? thought Ellie. *I know exactly what's coming. She's going to phone Mum and get her to take me home.* She pushed her plate away.

'Morag's making up a bed for you in her room. It's only an airbed, but it'll be fine. And you can flop into it any time you like. You look as if that's the only thing you want to do, even though it's only just gone eight.'

Ellie felt her tears welling up, and Sheila just squeezed her hand and waited a minute before she spoke again.

'I'm going to phone your mother now. I just want her to know you're safe. I don't want to know anything about what's happened between you. It's none of my business. But

if my beautiful sixteen-year-old daughter had just walked out of the house, I'd want to know where she was. Okay?'

Sheila slid a pad and pen towards her. Ellie nodded and sighed. 'I'm going to tell her you're asleep,' she said, when Ellie had finished. 'Which you probably will be by the time I've finished deciphering this. Off you go. The bathroom's at the top of the stairs. Sleep well, my love.'

Ellie used the bathroom and stood, uncertain, on the landing; not sure which room she should be using. She pushed open a bedroom door tentatively and backed out again in dismay when she saw the long figure of a boy stretched out on the bed, reading. He grunted without looking up.

'That's George's room,' Morag called from across the landing. 'I'm in here, Ellie.'

Ellie closed the door quietly and went into the opposite bedroom, where Morag was unrolling a sleeping bag onto an airbed.

'Thanks for doing this,' Ellie said. 'You've been really kind. You and your mum.'

'You're welcome. I've got a bit of packing to do now. I'll try not to disturb you though. I can do some of it in my brother's room.'

'Are you going away?'

'Tomorrow, yes. We always go away as soon as the school holidays start.'

Ellie looked away, dismayed again. She clutched the strap of her rucksack. It was suddenly a bulky thing, impossible to hide, assuming unlimited hospitality. *One night*, she thought wildly. *And then what? Where do I go next?*

She noticed a large black and white photograph hanging near Morag's bed. Pretending to be casual and at ease, she went over to look more closely. It was a seascape, moody with rocks and cliffs and wild showers of spray. Her own reflection was drawn into it, like a ghost image among the lights and shadows.

'That's our island,' Morag said.

'It looks mysterious.'

'It is. That's where we're going tomorrow.'

'Is it really yours? You really own an island?'

'Well, no, we don't really. It feels like ours because no-one else ever uses it. It belongs to some distant cousin of Dad's. Guthrie. But he lives on the mainland now. He used to be the lighthouse keeper.'

'So no-one lives there any more?'

'No-one.'

Ellie leaned forward and touched the photograph

lightly. Her breath misted the glass so her reflection grew hazy and then vanished as if into cloud. Immediately she pulled herself away. She squatted on her airbed, watching Morag collecting her things together, remembering it was only a few hours since she had done just that, since she had stuffed random bits and pieces of her life into her rucksack, desperate to get away from her house.

'We've been going there as long as I can remember,' Morag continued. 'Mum keeps dropping hints about going to the Bahamas or Cornwall or even Skye for a change, but somehow we always get drawn back to the island.'

'Family holidays,' Ellie said. 'I used to enjoy those.'

'This might be our last family holiday, Mum thinks. She's been saying that since George was sixteen. She reckons we'll just be wanting to go off with our friends next year. He will, at the end of the month, but the island has to come first!' She glided round the room, chatting lightly, and Ellie let her talk wash over her, relaxing and soothing. She felt easy now in Morag's company. She slid down into her sleeping bag and lay with her head on one side so she could see the photograph of the island.

'You're so lucky,' she said. 'Having an island to go to.'

'I know. It's brilliant.'

'When Dad was here we used to go to England. Near Newcastle. All his family lived there. But they're all dead now.' Her voice trembled slightly.

'Oh God, that's awful for you. I'm so sorry.' Morag looked at her, anxious in case Ellie was going to cry again, then tried to brighten her tone. 'Newcastle. That's where George is going next year. Newcastle Uni. Mum's furious with him for not choosing Aberdeen. That's where *she* comes from.' She paused with her hand on the doorjamb, ready to go downstairs. 'Ellie. What will you do tomorrow?'

Ellie shrugged. 'I'm not sure.' *I could go back home*, she thought. *Mum will have gone by then. But I'd be alone in the house for two weeks.* She bit her lip and curled herself up inside the sleeping bag, letting the day's unhappiness wash over her. 'I'll be fine.'