

Castle Stalker

Arriving at Oban, the train from Glasgow eased to a crawl, stopping with a final sudden jerk a few millimetres short of the buffers. This motion brought the tall woman to wakefulness.

Momentarily disoriented, she glanced around warily. She had not been sleeping well since her father died. This tiredness and the gentle rocking motion of the train had lulled her over into a fitful doze, her mind swirling with images imparted by the stories of those she had helped over the last two decades since graduating and completing her training.

Lilias Gunn swung her large travel rucksack onto her shoulders, stepped down onto the platform and made her way to the ticket barrier.

Near the taxi rank, in the pick-up area, a teenage girl with orange-red hair waved from the side of a red Fiat Panda. Lilias saw it was a four-wheel drive model. There had been a few in Montreal but most people preferred Subarus. Would this final part of her journey be over rough roads? She hoped not.

The girl bounced forward offering her hand:

'Hi, I'm Kenta. You must be Lilias, same as my great-granny. Mum said you were tall and you've got a Canada Maple leaf on your rucksack. And the same hair, like all the Gunns. I never met her but I've seen a photograph. Lilias Gunn the First was supposed to be the tallest woman in Scotland, my Dad said. Pity he went off with that awful woman from the Tourist Board who became an MSP. He lives in Edinburgh now. A kept man, Mum says. But we got the house, tiny though it is. And Mum changed our name back to Gunn. Imagine being called Greta Gunn? Yuck! But better than Margaret-Mary Gunn. Anyway, Mum said to say "sorry" but she can't come, she's taken Granny to the hospital at Fort William. It's her bunions. She's been waiting for this appointment for months and they gave her a cancellation. Here, let me take your rucksack. My God, what's in here, the Crown Jewels? You're a professor, right. Wish I was brainy. D and D I am, always have been. Never mind, I can still drive okay. I like driving. This is my Auntie Tina's car, cool, eh, and it's only five years old. I passed my test six months ago at the third go. Auntie lets me have it whenever I want it in turn for keeping an eye on her sheep and her llamas. She lives on a hill farm. Right then Lilias Gunn the Second, jump in. Sorry, I talk too much.'

'Thanks, Kenta. An unusual name, I think?'

'Yeah, short for Kentallen, my middle name. I don't like my given name, I mean, who wants to be called Deirdre, eh? Most people can't even spell it.'

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'Sure, me neither. I prefer Susan but I only keep that name for close friends and family, not for general use. Liliias is unusual nowadays and that can be useful, for publications and officialdom.'

'Can I call you Susan? I am family after all.'

'Yes Kenta, of course. Please, would you slow down a bit. I get car sick at fast speeds. I have a condition which overloads my brain.'

'Sorry, yeah, tell me about brain overload or what. Sometimes my brain fizzes when I get excited, like now.'

'Kenta, you said you are "D and D"?''

'Yeah, Dyslexic and Dumb. Or Dunce and Dizzy.'

'Dunce?'

'Dunce means Dimmest, always bottom of the class.'

'Ah, so you are an underachiever, so far, at least. How old are you?'

'Eighteen. I work in a kitchen, training to be a chef, sort of. Mum got me the job, she knows the owner from the Skiff Club, you know, team rowing. I've been working there since I was fourteen. I used to help with cleaning the rooms like Mum does at the Kentallen Hotel but I prefer the kitchen. It can be a laugh. Donnie the second chef's totally ancient but he's always cracking jokes. When Chef Maurice is off duty and Donnie's in charge, we play ABBA songs and have a great time singing along. Actually, that's where we've booked you in, at the Pierhouse Hotel. Mum got you a discount but it's still pricey, though everyone says it's worth it. Donnie says people come from all over the world to the Pierhouse because of our seafood and it's all down to us, in the kitchen. And because of the views. You'll love it, Susan, you really will.'

'Yes, I'm sure I will. Your Mum sent me a weblink. You can see Castle Stalker from it, I understand?'

'Yeah, they do tours to it by appointment, but only in summer, not in January. We used to walk over for picnics and stay all day until the tide was out again and we could walk back. It's been unoccupied for years. The man's son, the rich guy who re-built it years ago, he lives near the hotel. Aldo, one of our waiters knows him, says he's a good guy, some sort of genius, worth zillions, has the biggest house for miles.'

'I read there is a ferry to Lismore Island?'

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'Yeah, Lismore is magic. We used to take our bikes over, the whole gang, even the wee ones. It's like stepping back in time over there. You can get a good view if it from Auntie Tina's house. I can see all our favourite fishing spots from there, at least all the ones on the East side. We used to catch fish and cook them on the spot, on the beach, using driftwood. Our local kids still do it, and some of the summer people, the regulars. That's how I met David. He was my best-ever boyfriend for three years but now he's at Uni at Cambridge, he's stopped answering my emails. I think he's found someone new, someone better. He's very, very clever. Wants to be a brain surgeon, like his Dad. I mean, if you're a brain surgeon, who needs a Dunce for a girlfriend, eh? Look, you can see Lismore now.'

'I read its ten miles long and one mile wide?'

'Is it? I suppose so. Some day, if I find the right person to marry, I would like to live there. Are you married, Susan?'

'No. No. I might not be the marrying kind. According to my father, I am too selfish, too set in my ways, too sure of myself. Mum just smiled when he said that because she knew it was as if he was talking about himself. She used to say she was "the giver" and he was "the taker" although he didn't even realise how selfish he was. I miss them both so very, very much, but in different ways.'

'How long since they died?'

'Mum died two years past at Christmas and my Dad three months ago. He was never the same person without her. Sort of turned in on himself, gave up. I tried my best but, in the end, I know he was glad to go, to join her in the hereafter. Broken hearts kill more people than you might think.'

'Mum said you have his ashes with you, to scatter back here.'

'Yes. I have Mum's too. She would have wanted that. Their ashes are in the same casket, in my rucksack. There was no problem at Montreal airport but at Amsterdam scanners spotted it, thought it was drugs and there was a small fee to pay. Seems I should have got a certificate from Canada, from the funeral director in Iqaluit.'

'Where is Iqaluit, exactly?'

'It's the capital of Nunavut, on the edge of the Hudson Bay. It is cold all year round. Here on the West of Scotland you have the warmth of the Gulf Stream, Iqaluit has the Labrador current which is very cold. Even in the height of summer in Iqaluit it seldom gets above ten Celsius. And even though it's cold, it's teeming with flies. That's why I live in Montreal.'

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'Mum says Uncle Hamish was a ship's engineer, so why did he decide to live there?

'Yes, he was a chief engineer, trained in Glasgow and sailed all over the world. But at that time, he was a drinker, a womaniser. One night, ashore in Toronto, he got very drunk. There was a fight. That's the problem of being a gentle but drunk big guy, aggressive drunk little guys want to fight you. The other man nearly died. The witnesses from the bar said the little guy started it. Father was very fortunate to be given a Community Service Order. Two years working on a government programme at a college in Iqaluit, a project to train youngsters to become motor mechanics. That's where he met Mum. By the time I was on the way she agreed to marry him, despite her family's opposition to their marriage. But when they got to know him, everything was fine.'

'Susan, you are so beautiful, was that from your mother?'

'Yes, Mum was Inuit. In the past they were called Eskimos, sometimes Canadian Indians. The Inuit people in Canada are still in transition. There are many problems, alcohol, drugs, resistance to 'white' education, unemployment, lack of integration. When I went to high school I started in with a bad crowd and got into trouble. Mum and Dad were down on me. Thank goodness for Alice, the teacher who showed me how to deal with my dyslexia.'

'You have dyslexia too?'

'Like you Kenta, I was a slow learner but then one day Miss Alice Dugald arrived from Montreal. Like me, she had a Scottish father which meant we had a sort of bond. She very quickly realised I had dyslexia and helped me to overcome the challenges. Over time I discovered that dyslexia is a gift, not a curse and, well, here I am.'

'Susan, do you think you could help me?'

'Sure, it takes a lot of effort. But I'm on a sabbatical until the end of this year, if I go back. I'm planning to find out a bit more about Scotland while I'm here so I'm going to look for a place to rent. Do you know of any place that might be available? Somewhere small and not too expensive?'

'We could ask Auntie Tina. She has space, now her sons Alistair and Ewan are married, living down in Glasgow. But Susan, are you okay with dogs and cats? She has tons of them and two parrots who argue all the time and copy TV voices, and a massive glass tank with lots of gerbils in it.'

'Yes, I like animals. I almost trained as a vet but decided to study psychology instead.'

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'Psychology! So you can see into people's brains? Cool, like those people on TV programmes who help the Police to catch criminals?'

'No, sorry to disappoint you. No, I help trauma victims mostly. People whose lives have been blown off course by accidents like losing a limb or suffering catastrophic loss like the tragic death of a child, that sort of thing.'

'Sounds like a tough job. I don't think I could do it. Does it not make you feel sad all the time?'

'Yes, sometimes. But often it brings its own rewards. When people get back on track again, they are often better people, more giving. I suppose I get that side of my nature from Mum. She was a care worker, a counsellor in a hospice for people dying from cancer, mostly due to alcohol and drugs. She always used to say to me, "Remember to care for those left behind, they are victims too".'

'That's what happened to Auntie Tina. Her husband, Uncle Callum died in an accident on their farm. I was about five, I think, so they kept it all from me. But later I learned the tractor he was driving went over a cliff when the rock edge crumbled. He was crushed to death under it. Auntie Tina found him. His head was severed, lying on the ground quite far from the rest of his body. She was in a hospital in Glasgow for about a year but she's fine now. Or mostly. She still gets sad. We never talk about it nowadays, just so you know.'

'Yes, thanks for that, I understand what you're saying. When my father died, I decided to take a break. I think maybe it's time for me to move on, try something different. Giving out emotionally year on year like my Mum did is exhausting. I tried a course on painting and drawing recently and I plan to have a go again, maybe try landscapes. I love all these hills and green landscapes and your Highland Cows and sheep are so cute.'

'Donnie at the Pierhouse is an artist. He's brilliant. He takes great photographs too but not as good as mine. He says I have an instinct for composition. I'm saving up for a proper camera now. You'll like him. Ah, and here we are. Look, there's Castle Stalker now.'

'Kenta, can we stop. I want to look at it. My Dad was always talking about coming home to Appin. That's why he asked me to scatter his ashes on Castle Stalker island. Are we allowed to go on to the island? Do you think the owner would mind?'

'No, not at all. We have the right to roam here in Scotland now, provided we don't do any damage. Aldo says the owner is a lovely man, very accommodating. Aldo and Donnie are quite friendly with him. They could ask him for you if you like?'

'Or I could ask him myself? Do you know if he is at home just now, the owner?'

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'Yes, I saw him drive home earlier and look, there's his vehicle. I'd love to meet him too.'

'OK, Susan, let's do it now. If find the direct approach is usually best.'

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During the early hours of the following morning, from her room at the hotel, and with her final decision made, Lillias Gunn sent off a series of emails, several official, signed electronically as 'Lillias Gunn', others signed simply as 'Your friend Susan'.

She packed the casket containing her parents' ashes into her small day rucksack followed by a waterproof wallet which contained the written permission of the owner of Castle Stalker, together with three short personal letters, one addressed to Kenta and Greta, the second to Tina and the third to her new friends Donnie and Aldo.

An hour before low tide, in the dark, she slipped out of the hotel into the warm misty drizzle the locals called 'smirr' and walked around the curving shoreline to the point where the shore reached out in a muddy track to the island.

As the hotel came to life ahead of the morning breakfast service, a *WhatsApp* message arrived at Kenta's mobile phone.

It showed a short video of Susan scattering her parents' ashes in the gloom of the early dawn with the message:

Please scatter my ashes beside Mum and Dad.

Postscript:

The post-mortem revealed her corpse contained a massive overdose of barbiturates, a suicide drug favoured by many with a medical background.

Over the next few days, in dribs and drabs, Kenta and Tina received a fuller explanation, and, with help from the firm of solicitors in Montreal, they pieced together Susan's story.

Since her parents' deaths, Dr Lillias Gunn had been a voluntary patient in her own unit. Initially she had regressed becoming clinically depressed, failing to respond to treatment. Then, two weeks before she arrived in Scotland, she had perked up. During counselling, she had explained her planned trip, mentioning her 'lost' family in Port Appin.

In her final email sent to her solicitors from her hotel room, Lillias Lismore Gunn had confirmed that she wished the proceeds from her estate to be split 20% to Ms

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Margaret-Mary Gunn, 20% to Mrs Christina Gunn, and 60% to Miss Deirdre Kentallen Gunn.

A follow-up email from the solicitors indicated a preliminary estimate of the Lillias Gunn estate at around 800,000 Dollars Canadian (equivalent to £480, 000), after legal fees and taxes and confirming these monies should become available for disbursement in June 2017.