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The Frozen Shroud

MARTIN EDWARDS

FIVE YEARS AGO

CHAPTER ONE

‘Do you believe in ghosts?’ Miriam asked.

Shenagh Moss stretched in the ancient armchair. Oz Knight had once said her every movement possessed a feline grace. Shenagh had moved on – gracefully, of course – from Oz, but he wasn’t wrong. Where she came from, nobody cared about elegance, but these days, poise came as naturally as breathing. Even with no admiring man around, just an elderly housekeeper with anxious eyes.

‘Ghosts are about the past. Look forward, not back, that’s my philosophy.’

Miriam frowned at a mud-stain disfiguring the carpet she’d cleaned for so many years. Thinking about her long-dead husband? Poor, stuck-in-a-rut Miriam. Sixty was no age, but to look at her you’d think she had one foot in the grave. At least she’d made the effort to dye her hair, but why that dismal shade of mousy brown? Her beige cardigan, shapeless grey skirt and thick stockings were a perfect match for this room, with its faded furnishings, and faint aroma of mothballs.

Yet it was never too late to change your life. Look at Francis, twelve years older than Miriam, and a martyr to osteoarthritis. From the moment they met, Shenagh knew she could put a smile back on his face. Life was short, got to grab your pleasure when you saw the chance.

‘We can’t ignore the past.’ Miriam rested a hand on Shenagh’s shoulder, gripping bone through thin silk. ‘Remember the Faceless Woman.’

‘Our very own ghost?’ Shenagh giggled. Forget the rotten weather, life was good. She wanted to cheer Miriam up. ‘Hey, after haunting Ravenbank all those years, you’d think she’d get bored. Forever prowling up and down the same lane, where’s the fun in that?’

‘You may laugh, pet, but Mrs Palladino once caught sight of the Faceless Woman. Gave her the shock of her life – and she wasn’t given to flights of fancy.’

Shenagh glanced at the framed photograph on the sideboard. With her long nose, pursed lips and pointed chin, the late Esme Palladino looked as though she disapproved of imagination, and anything else smacking of self-indulgence. You’d never guess she’d drunk herself to death.

‘Spooky!’ Shenagh pretended to shiver. ‘Makes you wonder why she carried on living in Ravenbank.’

‘Why ever not? This is the loveliest spot in the Lakes – ghost and all!’ Miriam brightened. ‘You could be so happy, pet, living here permanently. This is your home.’

‘Thanks. You’re very kind.’

Yet Miriam was also wrong. Home for Shenagh should be Katoomba, high above her native Sydney in the Blue Mountains. Or maybe a big house at Double Bay or Vaucluse, with views

of the harbour. Not a decaying mausoleum on the edge of Ullswater. She wasn't nostalgic for Sydney's outer western suburbs, of course. No one could be sorry to leave behind that weatherboard hovel by the train track in Jannali. But she needed room to breathe. Ravenbank was suffocating her.

'Well, you're one of us now.'

There was no higher praise that Miriam could bestow. Shenagh was the daughter she'd never had, according to Francis. And for sure, she'd have been a massive improvement on Shenagh's actual Mom, a surfer chick who gave birth at fifteen, and was run over by a truck one night when she was out of it on cocaine, looking for business on the streets of Caringbah instead of looking after her daughter.

'You're very kind.'

'You're not fretting about that dreadful man Meek, are you, pet?'

Miriam *cared*, that was the difference. She'd never even met Craig Meek, but already she was worried sick about what he might do, now he was out of prison.

'Hey, it's fine. Craig isn't any sort of ghost. Just a selfish, troublemaking bully. Nice as pie as long as everything is going his way, but when it isn't . . .'

Miriam peered at her, as if straining to decipher a message written in code. 'Promise you'll be careful. Now he's back in Pooley Bridge . . . well, it's too close for comfort, when he has a history of violence.'

'I'm not running scared,' Shenagh said. 'I wouldn't give him the satisfaction. And that is a promise.'

The velvet curtains weren't thick enough to deaden the lash of rain on the flagstones outside. The clock struck six,

but it felt like midnight. This vast sitting room was draughty, despite the crackling fire. Shenagh reckoned the whole house needed a makeover to bring it into the twenty-first century, but she wasn't going to hang around, waiting for it to happen. Who could blame her for counting the days until she landed back at Kingsford Smith?

Miriam tossed another log from the wicker basket onto the flames, and Shenagh reached out to warm her hands.

'Why do you ask about ghosts?'

'Don't say you've forgotten? Today is Hallowe'en.'

'I wanted to go to a party.' Shenagh feigned a pout. 'Francis wouldn't hear of it. I told him, you don't have to believe in ghoulies, it's only an excuse for a piss-up. But he'd rather stay at home, the lazy sod.'

'One thing he isn't, pet, is lazy.' Miriam seldom ventured to contradict Shenagh, but she'd defend Francis to the death. 'He's absolutely tireless. That's why he reached the top of his profession.'

'Yeah, I hear the nurses worshipped him. No wonder he expects everyone to jump when he says jump. Sometimes he makes me feel like a stupid kid.'

Shenagh smiled. Both of them knew she was anything but stupid. Francis wouldn't want to spend the rest of his life with an airhead, whatever she looked like.

'It's just his way.'

'He thinks the world of you, and no wonder. During that terrible time, when Esme was ill, he couldn't have got through it without you.'

A pink tinge appeared on Miriam's leathery cheeks. This was another of Shenagh's gifts, her lavishness with praise. It

cost nothing to make people feel good, and sometimes they were generous in return.

‘You always say such nice things, pet, but I was only doing my job.’

‘Francis shouldn’t have stayed on in this house,’ Shenagh said. ‘Even though he doesn’t believe in ghosts any more than I do.’

‘Mr Palladino’s a man of science.’ Miriam shook her head. ‘He doesn’t believe in anything he can’t see and touch.’

Shenagh clapped her hands. ‘How’s this for an idea? We can celebrate! Commemorate the occasion. I mean, we can’t just ignore our very own legend. It wouldn’t be fair on poor old Gertrude. Let’s mark the Faceless Woman’s anniversary with champagne!’

‘Oh, pet, I don’t think it’s . . .’

The sitting room door creaked open, and the words died on Miriam’s tongue. The man who walked in carried a stick, and winced with every step he took. His sparse grey hair was wet, his Barbour coat dripped onto the carpet.

‘Filthy night.’

A voice of authority, unaccustomed to dissent. How he must have relished making the nurses swoon. He claimed he missed the world of medicine, but Shenagh suspected he missed not the patients, but the power. Even she’d been startled by his reminiscences of life and death in hospital, and a God-playing former colleague known as Morphine Morris: ‘No bed-blockers in his wards, I can tell you, not after one quick squirt of his trusty syringe!’

‘Dreadful, isn’t it?’ Miriam said.

No wonder Francis had kept Miriam on after Esme’s

liver finally gave up the unequal struggle. Miriam served the same purpose as the adoring nurses. *Yes, Mr Palladino, no, Mr Palladino, three bags full, Mr Palladino.* And it wasn't only Francis; her son was someone else she spoilt rotten. No doubt it was the same with her husband, the late lamented Bobby. Big mistake. Let a man get his own way, and he'd walk all over you.

'Is your back hurting? Your own silly fault, Frankie. I warned you not to overdo it.'

Her easy familiarity shocked Miriam, adding to the fun. The older woman helped Francis remove his coat, and hurried off to hang it up in the hall. He hobbled over to Shenagh's chair, and bent to brush his lips against her hair.

'Why are you keeping Miriam here?' he murmured. 'There's a storm brewing. She needs to get back home.'

'We were talking about the Faceless Woman.' She kissed his cold cheek. 'It's my first Hallowe'en in Ravenbank, and I've paid no attention to the story about Gertrude Smith till now.'

Francis Palladino made the sort of scornful noise he usually reserved for people campaigning for more wind turbines in the Lake District. 'You don't want to bother, it's a load of tosh.'

'Miriam didn't want to go until she was sure you were safe and sound.'

'I'm not a bloody invalid.'

She ran her fingertips along his tweed-clad thigh. 'You'll be sacking your masseuse, then?'

'Somehow,' he murmured, 'I don't think so.'

As Miriam bustled back into the room, he said, 'So you

and Shenagh have been discussing our little legend?’

‘Well, it is Hallowe’en, Mr Palladino,’ Miriam said.

‘Spook night!’ Shenagh cried. ‘You know, I really ought to check out this Faceless Woman. Will I find her with a Google search? Does she have a Facebook page in her memory? Or is that a contradiction in terms, given the – uh – face shortage?’

‘It’s no joking matter, pet!’ Miriam’s eyes widened. ‘Gertrude Smith was murdered on Hallowe’en, and the person who killed her wasn’t hanged. That’s why her spirit is tormented. Justice was never done.’

Outside the house, someone hammered on the old oak front door. Miriam jumped at the very moment that Shenagh dissolved into a fit of helpless laughter.

‘You gave me the fright of my life.’ Miriam was only pretending to scold her son. In her eyes, Robin could do no wrong. ‘We were talking about the Faceless Woman.’

‘Sorry to make such a racket.’ Robin Park chortled, not looking sorry at all. ‘The doorbell needs fixing. Want me to sort it out when I get a moment, Francis? I was telling Shenagh the other day, if the gigs ever dry up, I’d make a pretty decent handyman.’

Palladino’s reply was a non-committal grunt. Robin never would get a moment. The offer was for his mother’s benefit, one more thread in the tapestry she’d woven, depicting Robin the Virtuous, a man kind and generous to a fault. Shenagh thought him lazy and self-obsessed, but she’d met fellers a hundred times worse. He was good-looking, good company, and a pretty good jazz pianist. She’d have been tempted, definitely tempted, but at the cocktail party where Oz Knight

introduced them, she also met Francis. And Francis might not be a lean hunk with startling blue eyes, but he was a civilised and childless old-school Englishman who owned a mansion. No contest.

Robin grinned. ‘Gertrude Smith, eh? She’s part of Ravenbank’s heritage. Like Mum, really.’

His mother frowned. ‘It’s no joke, dear. What happened to that wretched young woman was pure wickedness. It makes my stomach heave just to think of it.’

‘Take it easy,’ Shenagh said. ‘It was a long time ago.’

‘Gertrude Smith never could rest in peace.’ Miriam swallowed hard. ‘On dark nights in the cottage, when Robin is away, I can’t help thinking about that poor young creature, walking down Ravenbank Lane, without a face.’

Robin put his arm around her bulky shoulders. ‘Not to worry. Nobody left alive has ever seen her ghost.’

‘What exactly happened to Gertrude?’ Shenagh asked.

Miriam cleared her throat. ‘Someone battered her face with a heavy stone, and kept on until all that was left was a bloody pulp. No eyes, no nose, just a mashed-up mess.’

Francis frowned, and opened his mouth to speak, but there was no stopping Miriam in full flow.

‘And that’s not all. Gertrude’s face was covered with a woollen blanket, like a shroud. The men who found her had to rip it off. The cold had frozen the shroud to her flesh.’

CHAPTER TWO

‘You don’t suppose Miriam was frightened of being attacked as she walked home?’ Shenagh asked, an hour later. ‘Is that why Robin came, to keep her company?’

‘Miriam is perfectly capable of looking after herself, on Hallowe’en or any other day. Besides, who would want to murder her?’

‘Oh, I dunno. A homicidal ghost, thirsting for vengeance because of the wrong done to her?’

Breathing hard, Palladino shifted his position in the bed. The sudden movement of his crumbling joints caused a spasm of pain to cross his face. ‘Miriam doesn’t have an enemy in the world. She deserved better than a good-for-nothing husband, let alone that idle lad of hers. Calls himself a musician, but does nothing except take advantage of her good nature.’

In fact, the idle lad was thirty-plus, and Francis’s distaste stemmed from the way Shenagh let him flirt with her. Not that either she or Robin meant anything by it. He wasn’t into commitment, frustrating Miriam’s dream of surrounding

herself with grandchildren she could spoil. The old lady had even tried a bit of unsubtle matchmaking between the pair of them. But although Miriam would be the ideal mother-in-law, she was wasting her time. As far as Shenagh was concerned, Robin's role in her life was to divert attention from her latest bit of fun. Like Mom, she'd never been a fan of monogamy. Francis didn't have a clue about what she was up to, thank God. Anyway, it was harmless enough. No way would this latest dalliance interfere with her plans for the future.

She nibbled Francis's dry lips. He was such a well-dressed man that it always came as a shock when he shed his clothes to reveal this scrawny body. His flesh felt like pudding pie, and the wonky vertebrae cramped his style as a lover. Massage helped, but it couldn't make him young again. Not that she was complaining. Long ago, she'd learnt you can't have everything, though it didn't stop her trying.

Over his shoulder, she stuck her tongue out at a photograph in an ornate ironwork frame standing on the bedside cabinet. Esme, again. In this black-and-white, head-and-shoulders portrait, she was in her thirties, hair in a bun, wearing her irritable schoolmarm face. The mirthless smile betrayed impatience, as if she wanted to scold the photographer for being so slow to take the picture. It amused Shenagh that Esme was gazing at her, in bed with her husband. Sort of a turn-on, having a dead wife as a voyeur.

'Miriam won't come to any harm.'

'Hope not. She's petrified of ghosts.'

'So was Esme. But only when she was four sheets to the wind. Claimed she saw Gertrude Smith at Ravenbank Corner one Hallowe'en, and managed to convince Miriam

it wasn't a hallucination. She's extraordinarily credulous, for such a tough old boot.'

The tough old boot was younger and fitter than Francis, but Shenagh kept her mouth zipped. She'd learnt not to tease him about his age.

Her hand sneaked between his legs, but when he didn't respond, she murmured, 'Hey, it's Hallowe'en. A night when all sorts may happen.'

'A feeble excuse for shops making money, and children making a nuisance of themselves.' He'd lapsed into grumpy old man mode. 'I blame the Americans. Thank God we don't have trick-or-treating in an out of the way place like this.'

'I'm still glad Robin walked Miriam back to her cottage, made sure she's all right. She'd have a seizure if she caught a glimpse of the Faceless Woman.'

'Superstitious claptrap, that's the top and bottom of it.'

Sure was, but Francis needed contradicting, every now and then. If he couldn't handle contrariness, he should've signed up for the senior citizens' tea dance down the road in Penrith, not started shagging a red-headed westie from Penrith Valley on the other side of the world.

'Several people have seen Gertrude's ghost over the years. Jeffrey Burgoyne told me so.'

'When were you talking to Jeffrey Burgoyne?'

He sounded disgruntled, but surely not even Francis could be jealous of Jeffrey? 'Must have been back when we first met. He asked if I knew about the legend.'

Francis snorted. 'Pay no attention to Jeffrey. Fellow's an actor, spends too much of his time prancing around like a poor man's Ian McKellen. And he's a dreadful gossip.'

Was there a touch of homophobia there? Probably, but Shenagh didn't intend to make an issue of it. She knew something about Jeffrey that Francis would never guess, but she wasn't in the mood for gossip. The last thing she wanted was to start a conversation about Jeffrey Burgoyne and his partner.

'Sweetheart, this is Ravenbank. What else is there for people to do? That's why I want to escape.'

He squeezed her right breast. Hooray! His fingers were cold, but at least there was life in the old dog yet.

'Can't wait,' he said in a throaty whisper.

The eight-day mahogany mantle clock was an heirloom. A wedding present to Francis Palladino's great-grandfather, with floral decorations and brass bun feet, and topped by a gilded cockerel perched on two books. Shenagh loathed its extravagant ugliness.

The clock struck each hour on a gong; at one in the morning, it woke him. They'd shared a couple of bottles of claret over dinner; Shenagh had waved away Miriam's offer to do the cooking, and Francis found that fine wine always helped compensate for his lover's lack of culinary expertise. The combination of the alcohol, the fire, and their exertions in bed had made him drowsy, so he hadn't accompanied her when she said she would take Hippo for a walk.

'With any luck, I'll come face to face with Gertrude's ghost.' She giggled. 'Hey, I guess that's a contradiction in terms if the ghost doesn't actually have a . . .'

'Don't stay out too long,' he muttered. Within five minutes, he was snoring.

One o'clock? She must be back by now. After locking up,

she'd gone straight up to bed. Might she be waiting to offer him her own special version of trick or treat? He levered his protesting body out of his armchair, switched off the light, and stumbled upstairs.

The bedroom was empty. No sign of her in the bathroom, either.

'Shenagh?'

He called her name twice more. She didn't answer.

Puffing and grunting, he made his way back down the steep staircase. Hippo's basket was empty. Surely Shenagh hadn't had an accident while taking him out? She was young, fit, and fearless. Yet a lifetime in medicine had taught him that nobody was invulnerable. Disaster often struck out of a clear blue sky. Or out of a dark, starless sky.

What could have gone wrong? Hippo – properly, Hippocrates – was an Irish Setter, five years old and full of energy. Too boisterous for his owner's taste, but he had been a present for Esme after she fell ill, and after her death, Miriam, ever the sentimentalist, begged him not to let the dog go.

Shenagh loved Hippo too, a case of one tactile extrovert bonding with another. She used to say she enjoyed nothing better than being licked by a wild, panting animal. When, in the damp of autumn, Francis's arthritic back started playing up, she'd volunteered to take Hippo for walks by herself. Ravenbank was an ideal place for a dog to roam, whether on the muddy track by the lake shore, or along the secluded lanes and overgrown pathways criss-crossing between the scattered houses.

No choice but to go and look for her. Shuddering with dismay, he pulled on his Barbour coat and thickest lambswool

scarf, and shoved his age-spotted hands into leather gloves. Before grabbing his torch, he donned the garish woollen hat Shenagh had bought as a birthday present. He'd avoided wearing it until now, because it made him look foolish; at least nobody else would be out there to see it.

He knew better than to panic. Thirty-five years as a stroke physician had accustomed him to distress. From student days, he'd cultivated a cool fatalism. Speculation was the enemy of medicine. Doctors traded in facts, unlike patients who made themselves sick and unhappy by allowing their thoughts to roam. Imagination ranked with superstition and religion. A rational man could have no time for any of them.

The moment he stepped outside, the cold sank its teeth into his cheeks. Ravenbank was a small and isolated peninsula jutting out into Ullswater, at the mercy of gales roaring down from Helvellyn. The rain had slackened to a malicious drizzle, but swirls of fog kept blowing in from the lake, and the wind howled through the trees like a creature in pain.

He headed for the path to the ruined boathouse. To his left lay the grave of the woman who had once lived here. The jealous wife who had battered Gertrude Smith to death. This part of the estate had become a wilderness, the old lichen-covered tombstone invisible beneath a tangle of dripping ferns, serpentine brambles, and stinging nettles. What had possessed Clifford Hodgkinson to bury the rotting remains of his disgraced spouse in the grounds of the Hall? Morbid sentimentality, that was the top and bottom of it.

'Shenagh!' he called.

No answer. What the hell was she playing at? Once or

twice he'd wondered about her new-found enthusiasm for taking Hippo for a walk late at night. It wasn't the form of exercise she usually favoured. Francis had warned her to be careful. Craig Meek knew where she lived, and a crude thug like that was capable of anything. But Shenagh was stubborn, and insisted she'd never let Meek mess her about again. She refused to become a prisoner in her own home through fear of anything he might try to do.

Once or twice, Francis had asked himself if walking the dog was a subterfuge, an excuse for getting out of the house so that she could meet someone in secret. Namely, that conceited lecher, Oz Knight. But he'd dismissed the idea out of hand. Knight was history as far as Shenagh was concerned; besides, he'd never be able to explain any nocturnal absences to that wife of his. Francis knew better than to give in to paranoia. Shenagh was a lovely woman, and any red-blooded male was bound to lust after her, but she knew which side her bread was buttered on. He was confident of that.

The worst case scenario was that Shenagh or Hippo had finished up in the water. He'd start by eliminating this possibility; a reassuringly scientific approach. Shenagh was sure-footed, and a strong swimmer. Her early years had been tough; he'd never pried into details, but she'd developed an instinct for self-preservation. Much as she cared for the dog, if it got into difficulties, she'd not risk her life on a rescue. The lake was deep and excruciatingly cold. Nobody could survive its icy embrace for long.

Rain spat in his face as he limped along the muddy track. On the far side of Ullswater, lights glimmered behind curtained windows as Hallowe'en parties staggered to an

end. Headlamps flickered as vehicles on the main road to Glenridding passed between the trees on the west bank. The east side of the lake was silent but for the melancholy hooting of an owl, and the muffled scrabbling of an invisible fox. His torch beam picked out the way ahead. The rest was blackness.

The air smelt of damp leaves and wet earth. The lakeside path was bumpy, and he needed to watch where he put his feet. It didn't help that the gale was making his eyes water, and his vision was blurred. How easy to trip over a tree root, and snap his Achilles, especially when he was hampered by this damnable pain in his back and knees. Gritting his teeth, he followed the path's curve around the promontory. No sign of Shenagh or Hippo.

Reaching a gap in the mass of trees, he began to climb towards the heart of Ravenbank. The downpour had made the ground treacherous, and his boots kept sliding as he struggled up the slope, but he pressed on. He knew this place like the back of his hand, and since Esme's death he'd found comfort in the familiar, yet Shenagh was right. He was too set in his ways. If he didn't change them now, he never would. She had opened his eyes to fresh horizons that he was desperate to explore, before it was too late.

Where the hell was she?

His boots pinched, and he could feel blisters forming on his heels. The wind blew a thin, spiky branch into his face, almost taking out his eyes. He brushed it out of his face, and carried on until he reached the spot where a stony lane petered out into a rough track.

'Hippo! Hippocrates!' He whistled twice before he called

again. ‘Are you there, boy? Shenagh, where have you got to?’

The fog clutched at his throat as he approached the Corner House. Wheezing noisily, he stopped to rest his aching back against the For Sale sign. In case Shenagh had taken shelter inside the empty cottage, he peered through the cobwebbed windows, but saw nothing. Taking a deep, rasping breath, he limped on down Water Lane. His torch beam picked out Watendlath, the whitewashed home of that pansy Jeffrey Burgoyne and his boyfriend. Francis didn’t care for the boyfriend, or the way he looked at Shenagh when he thought nobody else could see. Was he wondering what it would be like with a woman? People nowadays hadn’t the faintest idea of how to behave.

A tall hawthorn hedge marked the boundary of the Hall’s grounds. He decided to retrace his steps, and follow one of the paths that led through the wooded area. Near to the beck, not far from where the two lanes crossed at Ravenbank Corner, Gertrude Smith’s corpse had been discovered. And this was where Esme insisted she’d seen Gertrude’s ghost, a shimmering white phantom with a bloodied, unrecognisable face.

Absolute bunkum. Esme had downed too much gin while he was at the hospital, that long ago Hallowe’en.

‘Hippo!’

At last his patience was rewarded. His tired eyes detected a movement in the distance, moments before a familiar bark ripped apart the silence of the night. Within seconds his torch fastened on the big, awkward dog, bounding towards him. Relief washed through him as he bent down, and patted Hippo. The fur was sodden.

‘So what have you done with Shenagh, old fellow?’

Hippo whimpered.

'Is she hurt? Don't tell me she's taken a tumble, and fractured her ankle?'

The dog pulled away from him, and loped over the grass towards a clump of silver birch trees. Francis hurried after him, stumbling in his efforts to keep up. Somehow he managed not to lose his balance, but his heart was thudding and the throbbing of his back made every movement a test of will.

Suddenly, the narrow beam of light from his torch caught a huddled shape on the ground.

He'd found Shenagh.

'For God's sake, what has he done to you?'

He'd forgotten that he didn't believe in God.

Hippo stood panting over the motionless form. It took Francis an age to catch up, but he recognised Shenagh's black anorak, jeans and boots. They were designer cowboy boots; he'd bought them for her birthday, stifling his horror at the ridiculous price.

As he drew closer, his torch beam moved up towards her neck and face. They were covered by a rough woollen blanket. He pulled it away and hurled it onto the sodden ground.

Shenagh had lost her face. The lovely face he had so often kissed.

As he stared at the bloody, ruined features, he let out a howl of rage and pain. A fearful noise, the cry of a beast with a mortal wound.