
Opening extract from

Secret Ministry of Frost

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Chapter One
Light

Light was woken on the morning of her father's funeral by a pneumatic hiss. She rolled to the side but she was too slow.

Whump.

A heavy steel and glass message tube landed on the duvet above her stomach, knocking the air out of her.

Ow.

Light coughed and spluttered, picking up the tube.

Stupid message system.

Her family had a history of eccentricity, and this was her great-grandfather's contribution: a system of wide brass pipes laid through the house, by which rolled-up notes could be sent from room to room. Subsequent generations had kept the tubes, despite the advent of mobile phones and intercoms. It felt right, somehow, a part of the house's soul. If Light wanted to say something to someone without leaving her room, she simply wrote a message, rolled it up, put it in a tube (there was a pile by her bed for this purpose) and then held it inside the left pipe using the slot provided. Some invisible force she did not understand (science was not Light's forte) would take the tube and whisk it down to the kitchen, or to another room, or to the hall.

Light opened the tube that had just landed on her bed and unrolled the message inside:

Good morning. You'll get through this.

Love, Butler.

Light smiled. Even now that she had moved rooms, Butler always found a way to wake her up in the morning. She had a wing of the house to herself now – something she would have been excited about a few years ago, imagining herself sliding down polished corridors in her socks, and having midnight feasts every night with … well, with Butler, she supposed. But

Light found that, with her father gone, the magic had gone out of these dreams.

Light added the message tube to her pile and slid out of bed. The window was covered with a light filigree of frost which formed swirling patterns on the glass. But the morning was bright – late-autumn sunlight played magician's tricks on the world outside, causing patches of the lough to shine like polished silver. Light narrowed her eyes against the glare and peered out at the grounds and the lough – a lake that stretched to the horizon, almost the whole way across Northern Ireland. She was three floors up, at the top of the old mansion, and she could see all the way down to the lush green trees by the shore and the red-brick, crenellated folly one of her ancestors had built. On the seamless surface of the lough, a pair of swans glided sedately. Far away over the water, black clouds boiled.

In the early morning, with the sun shining, Light could just about forget it was her father's funeral today, or at least trick her mind into not thinking of it. She was enjoying the view of the lough and the gardens when something strange caught her eye. Standing together on the lawn below her window was a group of ravens, arranged in a perfect circle. They were big – Light wasn't sure she'd ever seen such big ones, even when she'd visited the Tower of London with her father – but that wasn't the only strange thing about them. They stood perfectly still, as if keeping watch over the house, or waiting for someone within it to come out and meet them. Light stared at them for some time, but they showed no inclination to move, only stood, heads cocked, eyes sharp, as if awaiting instruction.

Light turned away from the window, feeling disconcerted. She took her funeral outfit from the wardrobe – a simple black skirt-suit with a white blouse. She hung the suit on the brass knob on the wardrobe door, then laid her black patent-leather shoes on the floor beneath it. The effect was a little uncanny: as if an invisible girl was standing there. Deciding that her imagination was definitely on overdrive this morning, Light took off her pyjamas and put on the blouse, then shrugged herself into the jacket. She looked at herself in the ornate mirror set into the wardrobe which was a relic of the seventeenth century when the house had been built. Silvery tarnish marked the corners of the mirror, framing Light's face. The contrast between the black fabric and her snow-white hair was startling. Her skin was white and glowing as the moon.

Because Light was an albino, she usually disliked dressing in black, but for the funeral she was making an exception. Putting on the skirt, she thought she looked like a black and white photograph – where her mother and father had been invaded by the colours of the world (the blue of the sky was in her father's eyes, the green of the earth in her mother's) she had been left untouched, white, with only a touch of pink in her eyes. An observer would notice that those eyes were usually shining and intelligent – except occasionally when they would go blank, as if Light was tuning into some private, internal channel.

As satisfied as she would ever be with her appearance, Light took off the funeral outfit again, and put on her usual tracksuit and T-shirt.

The suit was itchy.

It could wait.

She left the room and headed down through the old house to the front door. Given the brightness of the day, she picked up a pair of sunglasses from the hall table to protect her sensitive eyes.

There were no tears, despite the approaching funeral. She was aware that the staff talked about her, that some of them thought she didn't care about her father just because she didn't cry all the time. But Light *did* care: she simply had to remain strong because at the edge of her mind was a terrible, vacant grief that demanded to be let in. And mixed in with the grief was fear – abject terror at the idea of being left alone. This maelstrom rushed around the borders of Light's consciousness like high-altitude winds, and she was dimly aware that if she let it in, if she cracked open the door of the pressurised plane that was her personality, it would rip apart everything within, pulling it around and out.

Light needed a moment outside before facing anyone. She wanted to delay the start of the day – delay the moment when her father's empty coffin would be lowered into the ground. She opened the heavy front door of the house and stepped out onto the lawn, shivering slightly at the cold. The crows were still standing on the lawn and now they turned to look at her. She frowned at the black birds, unable to remember ever seeing so many of them in one place. As one, silently, the birds flapped their wings and took to the sky, sculpting for a moment a twisted black silk flag that hung, shimmering, in the air, and then flew off over the lough.

Light set out across the lawn – emerald-green and so perfectly flat that you could play croquet on it if you wanted to.

Light didn't.

Before her lay the woods. To her left, the gardens of the estate ran all the way down to Lough Neagh; to her right, they rose until they merged with Mount Carmel, a medium-sized hill with delusions of grandeur. At this time of year, the hill was covered with purple bracken – in combination with the green grass, it reminded Light of a lump on someone's head. Lough Neagh, on her left, was grey and still, vast and foreboding. They said that the lake had just appeared one day, back in the time of the Celts. A flash flood. They said there was a village drowned underneath it, and that on a clear day when the water was still you could see the houses. Light had never seen them.

She walked to the lough and sat down on a rusted iron bench that looked over a grey, pebble beach. The water hung over the stones clear and pale blue, wavering like gas flames. The dark clouds over the lough seemed closer and higher, threatening heavy rain later. To her right and in the

distance, Light could see the squat buildings and church spire of the village of Toome. The village had a town hall and an eel fishery, and little else.

It was a beautiful place, Light's home, but it was deathly dull.

Light took a deep breath, preparing herself for the day ahead. In a barely acknowledged part of her mind, the black birds had disturbed her, reminding her of the bizarre circumstances surrounding her father's disappearance. Nearly nine months before, her father had left to go to the Arctic, for research purposes. It had been six months, three weeks and four days since he had last been heard from. He wasn't an amateur, one of those foolhardy explorers who get themselves killed as a short cut to a reputation. In fact, he'd been to the same research station more or less every year since before Light was born, conducting experiments to measure the impact of rising $C0_2$ levels on the sea water of the far north.

This time, taking his cue from research which had been done in America, he had packed several cases of iron filings. In theory, dropping these into the sea would increase the plankton population, which in turn would remove carbon dioxide from the water. Sadly, it remained a theory, with no evidence that Light's father had carried out his research. Since his disappearance there had been no emails, no satellite phone conversations. The high frequency Morse code paddle and receiver he had installed in Light's room had gone dead. Worse, his blog entries had ended. Light could no longer turn on her laptop and read her father's musings – could no longer think about the blog, in fact, as the memory seemed to have grown thorns and she could no longer touch it.

After some months had passed, her father's lawyer had recommended declaring him dead. Usually, when someone disappeared, the family had to wait seven years before the law would consider them officially deceased. But in exceptional circumstances an earlier application could be made. Since Neagh House was run – and the salaries of its staff were paid – from Light's father's accounts, the circumstances were deemed sufficiently exceptional. And anyway, the Navy had searched his research station and the surrounding ice. If he was alive, they would have found him.

When death had been declared Butler had become Light's guardian, and the executor of her trust fund – it seemed that her father had drawn up a will and left it in his solicitor's care. The will specified quite clearly that in the case of death or disappearance, Butler was to have custody.

Light had asked Butler if he thought her dad was really dead. He had mumbled an answer that was intended to be positive – something about resourcefulness, and pig-headedness – before seeing the hard look in Light's eyes and trailing off into a silence that spoke more honestly of Light's father's fate.

Once it was decided that Light's father was officially dead, Butler told Light that they would hold a funeral 'in absentia'. She'd asked why they couldn't just have it at the church in the village, and he had smiled – the

only time in those first months that she saw him smile – and told her that it meant a funeral without a body.

Light's mother Amaruq had died years before, and Light had never known her except in three photographs that stood on the fireplace in the front room. These images – one a simple portrait, the second a shot of mother and baby and the third a candid photo of Light's parents dancing – showed a beautiful young woman with green almond-shaped eyes and skin so pale as to be almost translucent. She was beautiful.

Light knew her father missed her mother terribly. He had never married again, or even had a relationship, to the best of Light's knowledge. Her mother had been the love of his life, and he had no intention of replacing her.

Light's mother had also been taken by the Arctic, after wandering from the station and freezing to death on a much earlier research trip with Light's father. They had never recovered the body – her father had found her and gone back to the station to get a snowmobile and a stretcher. But by the time he came back she was gone, perhaps taken by a polar bear. It was strange that she should have been so careless – because Light's mother was an Inuit, and knew the snow well. Light's father had met her in Iqaluit, on one of his earliest research trips, when his ship stopped for provisions before entering the iceberg-filled bays leading to the fabled Northwest Passage. He had left Iqaluit with tinned food, a rifle, several furs and a wife. They had spent the whole of one dark winter together, on the ice. When they realised that Amaruq was pregnant, they knew immediately what the child would be called – they chose the name that, in the permanent darkness and cold, represented to them what they most missed.

When they came to Northern Ireland, Amaruq was close to giving birth. The villagers had never taken to this Inuit woman – and only reluctantly to Light herself. There was much whispering after Light's mother's death. 'Imagine,' people said, 'an Eskimo freezing in the snow!' And at Light's school, the playground chants had made themselves:

Your mum is an eskimo.

Got frostbite and lost a toe.

Got frostbite and died, oh no!

Your mum is an eskimo.

Distracted by grief, Light's father had brushed off the tales of her bullying, saying that she would 'make friends eventually', as if the making of friends were an easy thing, like shaping clay on a wheel.

Light's mother had come from the territory now called Nunavut, in northern Canada, and this was the homeland of the Inuit peoples. Light's

father had taught her these things at an early age, shown her slides and photos of the Arctic and spoken to her in Inuktitut, the guttural, liquid language of the North. Light spoke Inuktitut pretty well, though she was far from fluent. It was a language of strange sounds and long words, all the consonants seeming to come entirely from the back of the throat, as if the early Inuits had invented the language when their tongues and lips were numb with cold, forcing them to speak in Gs
and Ks.

Yes, Light knew the Arctic well.

It was just that she had never been there.

It was strange, really: her mother came from the Arctic and her father went there often, but Light had never seen it with her own eyes. She could speak its language, knew some of its customs – yet had never so much as felt its snow beneath her feet.

The school in the village had not worked out, of course. Light was too unconventional, too different-looking with her white skin and pink eyes. But she enjoyed her home-school lessons with her father and Butler – they were interesting teachers who covered an eclectic range of subjects: philosophy, map-reading, mathematics, languages. One day Light might be conversing in Arabic with the slightly bemused owner of one of Belfast's Lebanese takeaways, specially flown in by helicopter for the day. The next she might be orienteering through the woods, avoiding dummy landmines. She could locate a book in her father's library using the Dewey Decimal system, which she knew by heart, but she could also drive a jeep through a bog – and dig it out if it got stuck. It was an interesting education.

When Light entered the kitchen later, Maeve, the cook, grabbed her and raised her eyebrows. 'Into the drawing room with you, child! Butler is looking for you, and he's in a bit of a kerfuffle.'

'Oh, no,' said Light. She helped herself to a pastry from Maeve's table.

'Oi! Hands off that. It's for the wake.'

'Sorry Maeve. S'very good.'

Maeve was dressed as usual in a stunning ensemble: a midnight blue dress and sparkling vintage heels. She was fashionable at all times, even when cooking – something which men were largely oblivious too, and women enviously admired.

She was also beautiful. Something men were not at all oblivious to.

She was tall, with pale blue eyes and delicate features, and Butler became comically tongue-tied in her presence.

Maeve had been hired in the upheaval of six months ago, in order to take up some of the cooking and cleaning while Butler was engaged in the search for Light's father.

Light had expected a round, rosy-faced mothering type, kindly and possibly corpulent. Instead, on the day Maeve arrived, Light met an impossibly elegant young woman with film star looks, dressed in a skirt, a cashmere cardigan and pearls.

This would have been less unusual if it had not been snowing heavily at the time, and the village a half hour walk away.

The home-help agency had sent Maeve to the house to meet them. Light and Butler had been having a snowball fight in the garden – both of them dripping wet and shrieking. Light had just chased Butler round the corner of the house and onto the front lawn, where she unleashed a hard-packed snowball aimed at his face. (She had been brought up by two men and could throw hard and true.)

But Butler ducked and the snowball flew over his head. At precisely that moment an elegant young woman in designer clothes and high heels was walking up the gravel path towards the front door. The snowball hit her on the neck.

Light stared, horrified. The agency would have to send someone else.

Again.

But Maeve had simply dusted the snow off her collar, kicked off her high-heeled shoes and ducked down to form a hard, perfectly round snowball that two seconds later caught Light in the vulnerable gap between her jeans and her jumper, dripping cold slush down her legs.

'You must be Light,' she'd said. 'It's a pleasure to meet the lady of the house.' Then she'd stooped to gather up more snow.

'Pleased to meet you,' said Light, making a snowball of her own while skirting around, keeping herself a moving target. Butler was moving fast too, piling an arsenal of snowballs into the crook of his left arm.

Soon afterwards, all three of them had been soaked.

There was an interview of sorts, later, around the fire – with Maeve swamped in a pair of Butler's trousers and one of his T-shirts. Maeve made her way through three hot chocolates. 'Chocolate,' she said, conspiratorially, 'is a weakness of mine. Well, that and snowball fights.'

Butler had asked a few half-hearted questions about food and cleaning, but she had really been hired as soon as that snowball left her manicured hand.

Back in the kitchen and the present, Maeve waved her hand in front of Light's face.

'You're day-dreaming,' she said. 'Go and make yourself useful.'

Light put down her cup and wandered over to the drawing room, where Butler was leaning over the table, pushing small bits of food around on a silver platter. He was wearing a morning suit: bow tie, black pin-striped

trousers and a long black jacket that split into a tail at the back. He looked like an enormous blackbird. At the moment, his smart outfit was ruined a little by his rolled up sleeves, which revealed the elaborate tattoos running up his forearms. These tattoos were abstract and tribal, and Light could never be sure what they represented – sometimes they looked like blackbirds, sometimes like sea creatures or thorns. As a child she had been convinced that they moved slightly when she wasn't looking.

Light wasn't sure where Butler was from: his features were vaguely oriental, but she didn't think he was Japanese or Chinese. It was possible he came from the North, like her mother, but she hadn't dared to ask: from a young age, she'd seen the way his voice went sharp if someone asked and he would always say, 'Northern Ireland. Like you.'

'Hi, Butler,' Light said. 'What are you doing?'

Butler turned. '*Vols au vents*,' he said. 'For the wake.' He looked her up and down. 'You're still in your tracksuit and T-shirt. As outfits go, it's a little irregular.'

'Actually,' said Light, 'I wear it almost every day.'

'Very amusing,' said Butler, witheringly. 'Perhaps when you have a successful career as a stand-up comic, you can support me in my dotage.'

'Don't be silly, Butler. I'll just put you in a home.'

Butler feigned a hollow laugh. 'What are you doing here, anyway?'

'Maeve said to make myself useful.'

'Well then, go and get dressed,' he said.

And with that, Butler turned and swept out of the room, his coat tails swishing.