prologue

She was upstairs cleaning the last of her three guest bedrooms when she heard the crunch of automobile tires in the gravel forecourt. It surprised her. It was early Sunday afternoon. The weekend bed-and-breakfast guests had long since departed and it was too early for new ones to be arriving—not that she expected any; no one had booked. What with Christmas coming, and the winter gales roaring in off the Irish Sea, almost no one came to this remote valley in northwest Wales. The break was welcome; it had been a busy summer and fall. At middle age (she had turned fifty this very day), she had to admit it was nice to have things quiet down for a bit. In fact, the only reason the house had been full this weekend was because rich old Bryn Thomas, who’d been pestering her to sell him her farm ever since her husband, David, had died, had dropped dead himself. He’d married three times and there weren’t enough beds in Dolgellau to accommodate all the relations who’d flocked to the funeral—probably, she thought uncharitably, to find out what was in the will for them. Truth be told, Thomas had been after more than just her farm, but she was having none of that, either. She didn’t need Bryn Thomas’s money and she didn’t need his attentions. She knew what love was, even though she’d learned it late, and she wasn’t settling for anything less ever again.

She hurried down the low-ceilinged upstairs hallway to the guest room overlooking the forecourt and peered out the window. It was a foul day and the gusting northwest wind hurled rain and sleet against the windowpanes. Below, a small, new-looking silver car—she never had been any good at recognizing models—had pulled up to the house. The driver’s door opened and a man in a hooded anorak unfolded himself, arched his back as if he was stiff from driving, then bent into the car to retrieve a small parcel. It was hard to see much through the streaming window, but she thought he seemed an older gentleman. He closed the car door, put the parcel in his pocket, hunched his shoulders against the wind, and walked out of view toward the front door.

She gathered the dirty sheets she’d left piled in the hall, glad she’d made up the rooms already, descended the back stairs, left the sheets on top of the old scrubbed pine table in the middle of her big, warm kitchen, and hurried to the front hallway. She could hear the man stamping the water off his shoes on the flagstones outside.

“Goodness, forget that, and come in out of the weather,” she scolded gaily as she threw open the door. “You’ll catch your death!”

The man was bent over and turned slightly away from her, slapping the rain from his shoulders. He straightened, turned back, pulled back his anorak hood, and pushed a mane of silver hair from his forehead.

Fiona froze, transfixed by his clear blue eyes. His weathered face crinkled into a smile, and a voice she had thought she’d never hear again said, “Happy birthday, Fiona.”

Her right hand flew to her mouth. She staggered back from the door, groping with her left hand for the wall behind her. Reaching it, she gripped the arm of the old chair she kept there for guests to take off muddy boots, dropped into it, and closed her eyes.

A Few Years Earlier

one

In a life lived long enough, there are strange symmetries that we recognize only later, if we recognize them at all—moments when an experience or a perception has a parallel moment in another time, a balancing echo, years in the future, or perhaps years in the past, a moment when it feels as if a circle is closing, encompassing and completing something infinitely precious.

Often this circle begins, or ends, or sometimes begins anew with a slight disturbance in the world of the senses—a sound, a smell, a glimpse of something, an inkling vibrating just below the level of conscious thought. This is a world we civilized people have been taught to dismiss. When the French philosopher René Descartes wrote “Cogito, ergo sum” in 1637, those three words of Latin—*I think, therefore I am*—ushered in an era historians call the Enlightenment. In a sense, we still live in it today; it is a world in which the mind is elevated above the senses, where rational thought is judged superior to feelings. And yet, and yet . . . things happen in our lives that challenge this conceit: slight shifts occur in the firmament of everyday existence, the turning world hesitates imperceptibly, the known constellations of experience inexplicably blink—and everything is changed. These are moments that do not lend themselves to rational thought; they are entirely sensual.

For Fiona Edwards, this is how the circle began: out of the corner of her eye one Saturday evening in early spring, Fiona, who was standing at her kitchen sink at the time, sensed a flash of color—blue—down at the main road, by the gate leading to the long, sinuous lane that wound up the hill to Tan y Gadair Farm. The farm had been named, centuries earlier, after the mountain whose cliffs reared up from its back pasture: Cadair Idris—“the chair of Idris,” a mythological Welsh giant. The window above the sink faced away from the mountain and offered a panoramic view of the pastoral vale far below the farm. This April evening, with the setting sun low in the west, the meadows glowed a nearly neon green, and the ancient stone walls that edged Fiona’s lane seemed burnished with gold. This was her favorite time of year, the long-awaited end to the dreary, wet days of winter, a time of possibilities. Besides the view, though, Fiona liked the fact that she could see her guests coming and be outside to greet them when they arrived.

*Ah,* she said to herself, *that will be the Bryce-Wetheralls, at last.* Year after year, Fiona Edwards’s eighteenth-century stone farmhouse bed-and-breakfast had won awards from the Welsh Tourist Board, the Royal Automobile Club, and the Automobile Association, and one reason was the warmth of her welcome. Guests at Tan y Gadair often wrote in her guestbook that she made them feel as if they’d “come home” to a place they’d never been before.

The Bryce-Wetheralls were a couple from Manchester. They’d called earlier to say they were having car trouble and might be late. Her other guests had already checked in, had tea, and gone into town for supper. An unusual patch of warm weather at the end of March had started the tourist season early this year.

Fiona didn’t hurry. The farm lane was nearly half a mile long. It rose and dipped and twisted around granite outcroppings and through oak copses and was out of sight from the farm for much of its length. She finished tidying up the afternoon tea dishes, put aside her apron, and walked through the old house toward the front hall. In the mirror above the sideboard in the dining room, she checked her appearance and frowned. A petite forty-three-year-old, she still had her looks, but there were unmistakable wrinkles now—especially since David’s illness: two worry furrows between her brows, crow’s-feet at her eyes. And there were random, coarse strands of gray hiding in the naturally blond hair that fell just to the base of her neck. She parted it in the middle and had it cut so that it curved around toward her chin on each side, a little trick to hide the fact that her jaw was losing a bit of definition. On this particular evening, she was wearing a simple white cotton blouse tucked into a pair of snug blue jeans her daughter had nagged her to buy. Her husband hated them; made her look like a hussy, he’d said. *Good,* she’d thought, *maybe you’ll be more interested.*

Reaching the front hall, she retrieved a pair of garden shears from the basket on the floor by the umbrella stand, threw a paisley wool shawl around her shoulders, and stepped out into the fading afternoon light to cut narcissus and grape hyacinth from the border garden while she awaited her late arrivals. The garden was her pride and joy. The house stood on gently sloping ground, facing west. In the far distance, between two rocky foothills, you could see a sliver of the Irish Sea and the reed beds and sand of the Mawddach estuary. She’d had fill hauled in to create a level forecourt and had it surfaced with pea gravel so guests could park close to the house. The new forecourt was supported by a low stone retaining wall and it was just three steps down to a broad lawn and the gardens she’d created from a former sheep meadow. A gnarled old apple tree anchored one corner. The western exposure wasn’t ideal, but in the summer the southern sun got high enough that it cleared the crest of Cadair Idris by midmorning and her flowers flourished. Because of the warm spell, the crocuses had bloomed and were already fading, but the daffodils and narcissus were thriving, the hyacinths were out, and the tulips would soon bloom as well. In a few more weeks, if the weather kept on like this, the border garden would be a riot of herbaceous flowers: spires of delphinium in several shades of blue and white; pastel columbine; multicolored lupines; pale pink oriental poppies, their blossoms like crepe paper at a party; ground-hugging tufts of alyssum and dianthus; clusters of scarlet Sweet William; sprawling clouds of lavender, and much more. Behind them all, where now there were only bare canes, there soon would be vigorous, old-fashioned ivory-pink “New Dawn” roses, intertwined with the saucer-sized blue blossoms of clematis, clambering over the stone wall that surrounded the garden and protected the tender plants from storms off the Irish Sea.

It took only a few moments for Fiona to gather a bouquet for the table. While she waited for the Bryce-Wetheralls in the garden, she looked back at the house. When she and David moved in—what, nearly a quarter century ago now—her father-in-law had let the place run down. Hard not to, really: one old man trying to keep a hill farm going. The original farmhouse had been built with massive oak timbers. The beams holding up the ceiling on the ground floor were more than a foot thick and blackened with age. The exterior was built of huge blocks of hard, igneous rock, quarried from the slopes of Cadair Idris. The second story huddled under a steeply pitched slate roof punctuated by three gables. Squat stone chimneys were attached at the south and north faces of the original building like bookends. The inglenook fireplace in the dining room—formerly the kitchen—was so big you could stand up inside it—at least she could—and even with your arms fully spread you still couldn’t touch its sides. Afternoon sunlight flooded through the big casement windows set into the thick stone walls of the front rooms. Smaller windows nestled under the three gables on the upper level.

Running a bed-and-breakfast had been her idea. David had the farm and she wanted something of her own to manage. David balked at first, but raising hill sheep is a marginal existence, even with the government subsidies, and Fiona’s business started making money right from the beginning. The first thing she’d done was have all the leaky old windows replaced with double glazing; there was nothing atmospheric about drafty rooms. Then she upgraded the bathrooms and managed to rearrange the upstairs so that her two spare bedrooms had their own bathrooms. A few years ago, they’d been able to build a two-story addition on the northern end of the house, creating a luxury bedroom and bath upstairs and a new sitting room for her guests downstairs. Then, as they were able to take in more guests and charge more for the luxury of the accommodations, she’d had the new kitchen built in a one-story shed addition overlooking the valley and the approach to the house. She’d had the masons use old stone for the walls of both additions and oak for the lintels above the windows, to match the old part of the house. Another winter or two of weathering and you wouldn’t be able to tell old from new.

She had been standing there, feeling a bit “house proud” for several minutes, but still no car had arrived. Odd, she thought; probably just someone turning at the gate. People were forever getting turned around coming out of Dolgellau, the small market town a few miles up the valley. It was situated at the point where the Mawddach and Wnion rivers joined before meandering west to the estuary and the sea. A seven-arch stone bridge was built in 1638 across the Wnion, and the town’s growth was fueled first by the wool industry in the eighteenth century and then by a brief gold rush in the nineteenth. The town revived again in the Victorian era when vacationers flocked to the mountains to pursue a new fad, hill-walking.

The name Dolgellau, a typical Welsh tongue twister, baffled English speakers: “How do you pronounce this place?” they’d ask. The answer, roughly, was “Dol-geth-lie,” though even that wasn’t quite right. Welsh is a Celtic language full of consonant pairs and combinations that don’t sound anything like they look. Awkward-looking on the written page, Welsh is musical when spoken; it sounds a bit like water flowing over rocks in a fast-moving stream. It had taken Fiona, who was English, years to master it after she married David, who had been born and raised in this valley. Even now, she sometimes had to struggle to keep up with native speakers.

Almost as twisting as the town’s name were its narrow, one-way streets and alleys, squeezed between old stone town houses, shops, and hotels built long before anyone envisioned cars or buses. Strangers often found themselves heading west up Cadair Road toward Fiona’s farm when they meant to be going east toward England.

Fiona gathered up the flowers and returned to the kitchen sink to trim them . . . whereupon the blue color reappeared beyond the window, not as a car but in the form of an enormous royal blue knapsack attached to the shoulders of a lanky, middle-aged man who was now striding up the lane toward the farm. Fiona was used to seeing walkers; one of the tracks to the mountain’s summit went right past the farm. But most British walkers and climbers didn’t carry backpacks as big as this one, and anyway Cadair Idris was a day hike. What’s more, while the mountain was within the boundaries of Snowdonia National Park, it wasn’t really on the way to anywhere, so she didn’t imagine he was a through-walker. That the man had fetched up here was puzzling—all the more so when he ignored the signpost for the trail to the mountain and carried on right into her courtyard.

She finished arranging the flowers, placed the vase on the table in the breakfast room, and went to the front of the house, arriving just as the walker knocked. She opened the door to a man who filled the doorway, and then some. He was well over six feet tall, lean, and very fit. She could tell this because, given the warm weather, he wore very little: sturdy and well-worn hiking boots, abbreviated khaki hiking shorts, and a sleeveless black T-shirt made of some lightweight material. His longish brown hair was sun-streaked blond, and he was very tan. Sweat drenched his shirt, and he looked like he hadn’t shaved in several days. Despite this, he was arrestingly handsome.

He bent slightly at the waist, leaned on his walking stick, which had a curved handle made of ram’s horn, flashed a shy grin, and said, “Hi. Are you Mrs. Edwards?”

“I am, yes . . .”

“I saw a picture of your farmhouse in the window of the Tourist Information Center in Dolgellau and I wondered if you might have a single room available tonight? Well, actually, two nights.”

“I’m afraid I don’t,” Fiona said. “Didn’t they tell you?”

“The Information Center was closed when I got there. Wasn’t supposed to be, according to the posted hours.”

“That Bronwen!” Fiona said, shaking her head. “Whenever she has marketing to do, she just closes the Information Center early and off to the shops she goes. It’s disgraceful.” And it was; she had caused Fiona trouble more than once. Because of all the awards Fiona had won, the Tourist Information Center featured her farmhouse in their window, but the truth was that once the season started, Tan y Gadair was almost always booked solid. She’d had to turn a lot of people away.

Fiona was trying to place the man’s accent. Clearly not British. North American, she guessed, but where?

“You’re Canadian, then?” she asked.

“American.”

“Really! We don’t get many Americans way out here.”

“Been here before. Stayed across the river, at Ty Isaf.”

“With Graham and Diana? They’ve moved away now, you know.”

“So I discovered.”

“Only to be further misled by our esteemed Tourist Information Center. Look, I’d love to have you, but I’m completely booked. I have a room available tomorrow night—Sundays are often slow—but not tonight.”

“I understand,” the walker said.

“Look here,” Fiona said, “why don’t you step inside and I’ll just call Janet, at Rockledge. Perhaps she has a room tonight; then you could come here in the morning.”

“That’s very kind.”

“No trouble at all; I’ll just be a tick.”

The man watched her go. She was nearly a foot shorter than he, but she carried herself in a way that made her seem taller. Her hair swung like a silk curtain across the nape of her neck as she walked. He guessed her to be several years younger than he, and he noticed, with an ache of longing that surprised him, how good she looked in those tight jeans.

Fiona scurried into the kitchen and dialed her neighbor, a mile back up the road. After several rings, Janet finally picked up.

“Dolgellau 531,” Janet said, using the old way of answering. Janet was getting on in years and hadn’t taken to all-numerical telephone numbers. She was also hard of hearing.

“Janet!” Fiona shouted into the phone. “Fi here. Look, I’ve got an American walker chap at the door who needs a room, but I’m booked solid; have you one free? No? Well, yes, I know: the season’s started early this year. Yes, I’m busy, too. No, Bronwen’s gone and closed early again and this fellow’s walked all the way here. I know, I know; it’s just not right, is it? Okay, Janet, must run. Thanks awfully; thanks. Bye!”

Fiona returned to the front hall. “I’m afraid Janet’s booked as well. I’m so sorry.”

“I heard. Thanks anyway. Sorry to have troubled you.”

“No, no trouble at all,” Fiona replied. “Look, may I at least offer you a cup of tea?” She realized she was drawing out the exchange.

Though the man had few words, his voice was a soft and rumbly baritone; she had the curious sensation of being warmed when he spoke.

“No thanks. It’s getting late. I’d better find someplace to stay tonight.”

He turned, paused, then turned back to her again with that same shy smile. “Lovely meeting you, though,” he said. And then he was off.

Fiona returned to the kitchen and watched him as he turned down the lane. The man had beautiful legs—long, hard, and muscular, but in the way a dancer’s legs are muscular—articulated, but elongated, not massive. Like many Welsh farmers, her husband was dark, fairly short, and big-boned: a strong, sturdy man well suited to raising hill sheep, but also, she had often thought, rather coarsely made. David plodded when he walked; this American chap, now; he was graceful. No, that was too feminine, she corrected herself: *lithe,* that was it. He moved smoothly and easily despite the heavy pack.

As she watched him leave, she realized there was something else about her visitor that had affected her, something she struggled to pin down. Though he seemed a cheerful sort, Fiona couldn’t help but sense something beneath the easy smile. Sadness—that was it. It was just the most fleeting of sensations, barely perceptible. But it clung to him like a fragrance.

two

Alec Hudson was tired. Bone tired. Soul tired. Tired in that way you are when you think you’ve reached your destination at last but discover there’s yet another hill to climb. He’d been walking all day. In fact, he’d been walking for nearly three weeks, all the way from London’s Heathrow Airport to this remote valley in North Wales.

He thought of it as a pilgrimage, this walking; each day was like a prayer, each step a kind of incantation. It was as if the horizon toward which he walked, and which kept advancing ahead of him, was an ideal he strove for but could never attain. He was not entirely sure what ideal the horizon represented, but he thought it had something to do with love, with duty, with keeping faith. Maybe he was doing penance.

From Heathrow, he had walked a few miles south to the river Thames and then followed the footpath along its banks upstream to the west, halfway across England. When the river turned north toward Oxford, he kept his heading, climbing up to the edge of the rolling Berkshire Downs. Here he followed the Ridgeway, a track cut into the brilliantly white chalk soil of the downs by ancient feet more than five thousand years ago—before Rome, before Greece, at the dawn of recorded history. By the end of the first week, he was in the southern Cotswolds, roughly halfway between the once-Roman cities of Cirencester and Bath. At the Tormartin interchange above the M4 Motorway, a truck driver picked him up and carried him across the older of the two bridges spanning the broad mouth of the Severn River. Alec had been standing in the sun with a handmade sign that read, *Just across the bridge*.

“Not supposed to do it,” the driver said, “but Reg, I says to myself, a bit ’ard for the bloke to fly across the river wot wit that bloody great thing on his back, innit?”

Alec tried to pay the bridge toll but the driver wouldn’t hear of it. He dropped Alec off on the other side of the Severn, near Chepstow Castle, before driving west to Cardiff to deliver a load of kitchen cabinets from Devizes. Alec turned north to follow the twisting valley of the river Wye, which for part of its length serves as the border between England and Wales. He stopped briefly at Tintern Abbey, the picturesque ruin Wordsworth had immortalized, and then walked on to Monmouth. From there he headed west to the narrow and peaceful Llanthony Valley, and followed a single-track road north all the way to the crest of Hay Bluff, high in Wales’s Black Mountains. A few miles farther along, he rejoined the meandering river Wye and followed it to Builth Wells, reaching the town at the end of his second week and marveling at how much landscape one could cover simply by putting one foot in front of the other, mile after mile, day after day. He’d calculated that he averaged between two and three miles an hour, depending on the terrain. Up most days with the sun, he put eight to ten miles behind him before lunch and another eight or ten, sometimes more, before calling it a day. From Builth Wells, he pressed north and west up into the bleak moorland of the Cambrian Mountains, reaching Machynlleth, on the river Dovey near the Welsh coast, toward the end of the third week. He’d been lucky; with the exception of a few misty mornings, he’d had clear and exceptionally warm weather the whole way. As he strode north, spring advanced with him. Daffodils bloomed in cottage gardens and along the roadside. Wild garlic sent up plumes of delicate white umbrels. Primroses burst lemon yellow from the chinks in stone walls. He noticed that in many species of plant, the yellow-flowered varieties seemed to blossom first, as if to add more light to the dun-colored landscape and heat to the weak spring sun.

When evening came on, Alec alternated between bed-and-breakfast accommodations and camping out. Often there wasn’t a choice. After ten or more hours of walking he stopped wherever he ran out of steam. Sometimes it was a village with a place to stay; sometimes it was in the middle of nowhere and he pitched his tent. During the day, he’d stop in a village to shop so he always had a picnic dinner if he needed it: some salami, a chunk of farmhouse cheddar, a small loaf of chewy brown granary bread, an apple, sometimes even a bottle of red wine.

The people he met asked him where he was going. That was easy: North Wales. They asked him why he was walking, and that was a harder question to answer. “It just felt like the right thing to do, under the circumstances” is what he usually said, and when he told them the story, people seemed to understand.

“THERE’S SOMETHING I need you to read,” Alec’s ex-wife had announced from her hospital bed a year earlier.

He and Gwynne had been divorced for years, lived on opposite sides of the country, in fact—he in Seattle, she in Boston—but they had never quite managed to fall out of love. Alec had tried, but it didn’t work: Gwynne Davis was the kind of woman who lit up rooms when she entered. Part of it was sheer presence: she was six feet tall in her stocking feet and another three inches taller in her signature stilettos. Part of it, too, was spirit. She radiated an almost childlike joy of life. She wasn’t just lively, she effervesced. In the early days, at least, it had been magical, as if he were being showered with fine particles of delight.

They had met in the mid-1970s, in New York—the city where he was born and raised. His friend Karen, whom he’d known since high school and who, it seemed to him, had been matchmaking for him ever since, had decided he spent too much time alone writing his books and announced one day that she had arranged a double date. There was no denying Karen; she assumed capitulation. Karen had met Gwynne while shopping at Bergdorf’s on Fifth Avenue, where Miss Davis, as she was known, worked in the fashion office. *Well,* he’d thought glumly, *at least she’ll be well dressed.*

“You’ll like her,” Karen had said. Then, employing yet another of her endless supply of non sequiturs, she added, “She’s tall.”

Then the day had come and he was standing, somewhat uncomfortably, in the designer lingerie department, which was just outside the fashion office. Karen had left him there while she went to find his date. Alec was idly thumbing through one of the racks, wondering how the prices for things so flimsy could be so breathtakingly high, when a slightly husky female voice behind him said, “Don’t you think those will be a little small for you?”

He turned to respond, tilting his head down to the place where women’s faces generally were, and found himself staring directly at the woman’s chest. He raised his head slowly, his jaw dropping as he did so, until he was almost certain he was actually looking *up* into the woman’s hazel eyes. Uncharacteristically, he was speechless.

“Alec,” he heard Karen’s voice say, “meet Gwynne.”

Anticipating the usual question, she put her hands on her hips and said, “The answer is, six feet even. Six-three in heels.” Then she flashed him a dazzling smile.

Still trying to recover, Alec blurted, “It’s just that I’ve never . . .”

“No, I don’t suppose you have,” she said. Then, opening a little window into herself, she leaned a little closer. He could smell her perfume—something earthy—as she whispered, “Relax; it’s really nice to meet a tall man for a change, even a speechless one.”

Then she turned to Karen and said, “Are we having dinner or are we all going to stand here and starve to death in the lingerie section?”

While Karen and Gwynne talked over the evening’s plan, Alec registered what his date was wearing: over a pair of tight black jeans, which he had trouble believing anyone made that long, she had tossed an old, award-bedecked Boy Scout shirt she’d found in a secondhand store on the Lower East Side. She’d sewn in dramatic shoulder pads and replaced the khaki buttons with red ones to match some of the award patches. The oversized shirt was cinched tight at her narrow waist with a thin red leather belt. Several of the top buttons were unbuttoned and she wore a modest black silk camisole beneath. Wrapped several times around her swanlike neck and then draped carelessly over both shoulders was a long, black silk crepe scarf that echoed the jeans. Her high heels matched the red belt. Her long, softly wavy, light-brown hair had reddish highlights and fell to her shoulders. She wore no jewelry, which, given her professional position, surprised him. The only makeup he could detect was a hint of color on her lips and possibly a blush that highlighted her cheekbones.

Later he would realize that the whole outfit was classic Gwynne: creative, mischievous, unpretentious, and yet—on her, at least—stunning. The fact that she could put things together in a way that looked fabulous but cost almost nothing drove the other women in the fashion office crazy and delighted Bergdorf’s president. She was his “goldenhaired girl” and he had plans for her.

Alec fell for her immediately. A few weeks later, his mother asked, as mothers do, “Is she pretty?” He thought about this for a moment and answered, “No, not pretty, Mom . . . striking. Beautiful in a handsome sort of way—the way Katharine Hepburn is beautiful.” What was captivating about Gwynne, what galvanized nearly everyone she met, was the energy she radiated. She was luminescent.

Now, more than twenty years later, she was dying and Alec was at her side. The doctors thought they’d caught her breast cancer but the malignancy had spread. Alec had come east to care for her. She hadn’t eaten anything solid in two months. For more than a week, she hadn’t been able to drink anything and keep it down. The veins in her arms, hands, and legs, through which she’d been receiving fluids, had collapsed. Her skin had become mottled—a sure sign, the nurse told him, that she was dying. And yet her spirit seemed undiminished, even as her body withered. Each morning she’d wake up, flash Alec that searchlight smile, and say, “Well, I guess I’m not dead yet!” The nurses adored her. One said, “She’s incredible: we go in there to care for her but she ends up making *us* feel better.”

On this particular morning she gestured to a manila envelope on her tray table. The label said “Last Will and Testament.”

“Ah,” he said, making light of the situation the way they always did, “instructions for distributing your vast fortune.” It was a joke; Gwynne was not wealthy.

“Read it carefully, love,” she said. “You’re my executor.”

Alec read the will. The terms of her bequest were pure Gwynne: both generous and mischievous. Her modest assets were to be equally divided among the members of her family and his—she had always said his zany family felt more like hers than her own. But there was a catch: the money could only be used to do something that the beneficiaries had never felt they could afford to do. And it had to be fun.

Alec leaned across the hospital bed and kissed her. “That’s perfect,” he said. “That’s you.”

“Keep reading,” she ordered, smiling as if she had a secret. A few paragraphs later came this: “I direct that my ex-husband and executor shall scatter my cremated remains atop Cadair Idris in Wales.”

He looked up, dumbfounded. True, Gwynne was part Welsh, and they had climbed the mountain together years earlier, but still he was stunned. “Why there?” he asked.

“Because,” she said, “climbing it was the hardest thing I’ve ever done physically and the thing I’m most proud of.”

Alec had never known. Gwynne was secretive about many things.

The next day, when the doctors confessed there was nothing more they could do for her, Gwynne asked Alec to take her home to her own bed. A week later, after a terrifying descent into dehydration-induced confusion and paranoia, she slipped into a morphine haze and quietly died in his arms. She was fifty years old, a year older than Alec. They’d always joked about him being her “boy toy.”

It had taken him a full year to book a flight to England to honor her request. It felt so very far away. He thought that by taking her there he was somehow abandoning her. This was selfishness on his part, he knew: even in death he wanted her close to him. The box holding Gwynne’s ashes sat on a shelf in his bedroom, admonishing him. “I know,” he’d say to it. “I will. Soon. I promise.”

When spring came again he knew it was time. Gwynne loved springtime in Britain—the sheer range of greens splashed across the landscape, the emerging wildflowers, the hawthorn hedgerows in frothy bloom, the exuberant birdsong, the tiny lambs bouncing stiff-legged across daisy-dappled meadows.

Gwynne hadn’t asked him to walk; that had been his idea. It seemed only fitting: the two of them had spent so many magical days walking through the English countryside during their marriage; it was where they’d always been happiest, a place where the troubles between them vanished, at least for a time. Yet Alec also knew the long walk was something he had to do to save himself. The divorce had been hard enough—something both of them later agreed they should have been smart enough to avoid. But they had always been able to pick up the phone and hear each other’s voices, listen to each other’s troubles, poke fun at each other’s foibles, those quirks and habits only someone you’ve lived with a long time ever truly understands. They could laugh, and they did, often.

Now there was no more laughter. The finality of Gwynne’s death, its unfairness, the incredible velocity of it, had left him stunned and numb. Then again, numbness was a protective device Alec had developed early in life. His father had been the kind of alcoholic who dealt with his own inadequacies by being verbally abusive to his family, tearing them down so as to make himself feel bigger. If you let it get to you, the viciousness was corrosive. His mother, who worked to support them, lived on tranquilizers to lessen the hurt. His younger sister simply withdrew into a world of her own. Alec, who was often the target of his father’s tirades, learned to go numb. It can’t hurt you if you don’t feel it. He also learned how to cope with chaos, the everyday condition of his family. In a crisis, Alec became icily calm and coolly rational. He could be counted on when everyone else dithered, ducked, or collapsed altogether. But he was not an automaton; he had inherited a big heart from his mother and fell naturally into the role of caretaker. Years earlier, he and Gwynne had agreed that this caretaker characteristic was one of the things that had drawn her to him, like a flower turning to the sun. But it had burned them, too; her need for care and his eagerness to provide it eventually drove them apart. When cancer struck and she was dying, she joked that at last her need for his care was legitimate.

“No, Gwynne,” he’d said, “it’s a gift you’ve given me.”

In the year since her death, he’d felt perpetually adrift. It was only in her absence that he realized how much—despite their divorce a decade earlier—she had been an anchor in his life. He struggled with verb tenses now when he thought or spoke about her: Gwynne is, Gwynne was; she will, she would have.

Gwynne had made him the beneficiary of a small annuity and he lived on that, writing poetry, none of which he liked. His heart, his emotional condition, seemed controlled by the changing seasons, the darkness increasing as summer slipped into fall and fall into Seattle’s notoriously bleak winter. Weeks became months and his friends advised him, gently and with affection, that it was time he “moved on.” He didn’t know how. Thinking about it rationally didn’t help.

And then one day it came to him: he needed to do it physically. He needed to carry Gwynne home to Wales, like a pallbearer. He needed to walk. The effort, the pain, the weeks spent moving toward the mountain at walking speed would be the cure. When he got there, he knew he would be able to let her go.

ALEC REACHED THE bottom of the long lane from Tan y Gadair and stopped where it joined the paved road. He leaned on his walking stick—“Hazel,” he called it, because that was the wood from which it had been made, long ago, by a craftsman in England’s Lake District, a man who’d also died of cancer. He thought about the long walk back to Dolgellau. Then it dawned on him: it wasn’t that the walk back to town was long, it was that it was wrong. He had reached the end of his pilgrimage. He’d known it the moment he’d seen the Tourist Information Center photograph of Tan y Gadair, with the mountain behind it. This was where he was meant to stay.

He turned around and began the climb back up to the farmhouse beneath the mountain. He had a proposal to make to Mrs. Fiona Edwards.