

'Superb'

PATRICIA CORNWELL

'Gripping'

PETER JAMES

NO.1 SUNDAY TIMES BESTSELLER

Clare Mackintosh

**At midnight,
one of them
is dead.**

**By morning,
all of them are
suspects.**



THE LAST PARTY

THE FIRST DC MORGAN MYSTERY

Clare
Mackintosh
**THE LAST
PARTY**



SPHERE

NEW YEAR'S DAY

No one in Cwm Coed can remember what year the swim began, but they know they wouldn't welcome the new year in any other way. They don't remember which year it was that Dafydd Lewis went in wearing nothing but a Santa hat, or when the rugby lads bombed off the jetty and drenched poor Mrs Williams.

But everyone will remember today's swim. There's been snow on the peaks since before Christmas, and, even with the protection from the mountains, the temperature in the town hasn't climbed above seven degrees. The lake itself is even colder. Four degrees! people gasp, at once gleeful and incredulous. We must be mad!

As if rebelling against the clear skies, wisps of mist curl above the surface of the water, their reflection giving the disorientating impression that the sky's been tipped upside down. Above the mist, the air is vivid blue, an echo of last night's moon suspended above the forest.

From the very top of Pen y Ddraig mountain, Llyn Drych seems more river than lake. It's long and serpent-shaped, each bend a flick of the dragon's tail it's said to represent. 'Drych' means 'mirror', and, when the wind drops and the water lies still, the surface shimmers like silver. The reflection of the

mountain stretches into the centre of the lake, so solid you feel you could step on to it, no hint of the black and fathomless depths beneath.

Along the path that winds its way up the south side of the mountain – from the dragon’s back to its head – ramblers stoop to pick a pebble from the path. They straighten, feel the weight of it in their hands, then look around sheepishly, before hurling the stone towards the water. Legend has it that Llyn Drych’s dragon rises up if its tail is hit – few ramblers can resist the myth.

Around the edge of the lake, pine trees stand sentry, their shoulders so close that, if one were felled, you could imagine them all toppling, one after another. The trees steal the view from the village of Cwm Coed, but they take the worst of the weather too, which feels like a fair exchange to the people who live there.

On the far side of the water – less than a mile from where the crowd is now gathering – a line of buildings squats in the foothills. The trees directly in front of them have been ripped from the ground, the wood used to clad the lodges and make the vast carved sign that stands at the end of the long private drive – each letter as tall as a man.

The Shore.

There are five of them, so far. Two-storey rectangular boxes, with timber-clad roofs and decks thrusting forward, extending out above the lake on stilts rising from the mist. Metal ladders glint in the winter sun, the pontoons bereft of the boats that tug at their ropes in summer.

Luxury lakeside lodges, the glossy brochure calls them.

Carafanau ffansi, Ffion’s mam says. Fancy caravans. Airs and graces.

A bloody eyesore, most of the villagers agree. And at that price!

For a place you can't even live in all year round. Owners are not permitted to make The Shore their primary residence, says the website. As if north Wales needs any more weekenders.

Soon, there'll be another row behind this first. Another, behind that. A spa, a gym, shops, an outdoor swimming pool.

'God knows why they can't swim in the lake.' Perched in the boot of her car, Ceri Jones pulls off her tracksuit bottoms, goose-fleshed thighs white against the dirty bumper.

'Because it's bloody freezing, that's why.'

The laughter comes fast and high – fuelled by last night's New Year's Eve party, by too much wine and too little sleep, by cold which forces its way through towelling robes and lodges itself into bones.

'Good night, though.'

There are murmurs of agreement.

'Chwarae teg.' Fair play. That lot at The Shore know how to throw a party. More importantly, they know to invite the locals. Curiosity wins over grudges, every time.

Splinters of ice cluster in the shallow puddles on the lakeshore, cracked by toes freed from fur-lined boots.

'There are still ten minutes to go. You'll get frostbite.'

'Can't even feel it. I think I'm still pissed.'

'This better sort out my hangover – I've got the in-laws coming for lunch, and they give me a headache as it is.'

'Kill or cure.'

'I'll take either.'

The first of two klaxons rings through the crisp air, and a cheer goes up.

'Ready?'

'As I'll ever be!'

Coats and robes are cast aside, towels draped over waiting

arms and hot water bottles readied for the return. There's a rush for the shore – a tangle of white limbs and bathing suits, brave bikinis and judicious woolly hats – and excited chatter so loud they wonder if they might miss the second klaxon. But when it sounds there's no mistaking it, and they let out a whoop and a 'Blwyddyn Newydd Dda!' as they run towards the lake, screaming as they reach the icy water.

When they're deep enough, they plunge. Mind over matter, through the low-lying mist. Cold clamps a vice around their chests, mouths opening in shock as their breath is wrenched away. 'Keep moving, keep moving!' cry the veterans, dopamine pumping smiles to their faces. Ripples become waves, the movement of people this way and that, as the wind picks up and sends shivers across shoulders.

As the mist begins to clear, a woman cries out.

It stands out among the screams of excitement, sending shivers of a different kind down the backs of those waiting on the shore. Those still in their depth stand on tiptoes, straining to see what's happening, who's hurt. The rescue boat dips its oars into the water. In and out, in and out, making its way towards the commotion.

Out of the mist floats a man.

Face down, and quite unmistakably dead.

PART ONE

ONE

NEW YEAR'S DAY | FFION

Ffion Morgan scans the prone figure beside her for signs of life. The man is tall, with broad shoulders, and black hair cropped close to his skull. On the back of his neck, where a shirt collar might lie, is a small tattooed name. *Harris*.

Ffion clears her throat, testing the silence with a tiny, tentative noise, as though about to make a speech she isn't sure how to start. The man doesn't stir. That makes things easier.

There is, however, the small matter of the arm.

The arm is big. It has smooth dark brown skin, stretched across the sort of bicep Ffion always wants to bite, although clearly now is not the time. It lies diagonally across Ffion's stomach, its hand hanging loosely by her hip. Habit makes her check the man's fourth finger and she's relieved to find it bare. She looks at his watch. Eight a.m. Time to split.

She shifts her legs first, shuffling them sideways a millimetre at a time, before bending her knees to drop her feet to the floor, all the time keeping her torso still, like a contortionist folding herself into a box. She waits a moment, then presses her upper half into the mattress as she slides slowly towards the edge of the bed. The manoeuvre is practised, honed over the past year, thanks to whatever misplaced gene

it is which makes men cast out a proprietorial arm in their sleep.

The owner of this morning's arm gives a grunt. Ffion counts to fifty. If he wakes, he'll suggest breakfast – or coffee, at least – despite neither of them wanting it. Not with each other, anyway. Ffion blames Generation Z. All those *feelings*. There was a time when men showed you the door before they'd even tied a knot in the johnny, but now they're all *woke*. It does her head in.

She tries to recall who the arm belongs to. *Harris* doesn't ring a bell. It begins with M, she's sure. Mike? Max? She fishes for pieces among the murky depths of the previous evening's drinking, reeling in a memory of straight white teeth, a shy smile, a desire to please which she found as attractive as it was unusual.

Mark?

She tears a piece of skin from the inside of her top lip. Fuck fuck fuckitty fuck. She hates it when she can't remember their names. It feels . . . slutty.

Marcus!

Ffion grins at the ceiling, relief making her giddy. Rule number one: always know who you're spending the night with.

Marcus.

Recalling his name unlocks the rest, New Year's Eve unfolding in all its drunken, glorious splendour. Marcus Something-or-other (surnames don't count): a sky-diving instructor (*I'll sort you and your mates out with freebies*) who matched her shot for shot and slipped a hand around her waist when he leaned forward to make himself heard above the noise of the bar. *Shall we head somewhere quieter? We could go to mine . . .*

Ffion closes her eyes and indulges in the memory of the tingle of Marcus's thumb on her bare skin; so full of promise. For a second she thinks about rolling over and waking him up and—

No second helpings. Rule number two.

Marcus's bedroom has the sparse, anonymous feel of a rental. Magnolia walls and vertical blinds; a scratchy carpet bristling with static. Ffion sweeps her right foot across it and finds her pants. Her left foot yields a sock, and, as the breathing beside her steadies, she slides out from under Marcus's arm and on to the floor with all the grace of a sea lion.

The blue top she was wearing the previous evening is by the wardrobe, her jeans a few steps behind it. The classic clothes trail: Ffion is nothing if not predictable. With luck, she'll find her shoes kicked off in the hall, her jumper in a puddle by the front door.

She dresses swiftly, stuffing her socks into her jeans pocket for speed, and hunts fruitlessly for her bra, before chalking it up as a loss. A quick wee, and a peek in the bathroom cabinet (a box of condoms; a half-squeezed tube of haemorrhoid cream), then she checks for her car keys and skedaddles. The pavements are frosty, and she zips up her coat. It's khaki green and covers her from chin to ankle, its warmth and practicality the trade-off for looking like a sleeping bag with feet. As she retraces her steps to her car, she does the traditional alcohol-units-into-hours calculation and concludes she can just about get away with it.

It's after nine when she gets home, and Mam's making porridge. Two swimming costumes hang on the radiator.

'You've never missed a New Year's Day swim before.'

Elen Morgan's voice is neutral, but Ffion has thirty years' experience interpreting her mam's stirring techniques, and the way she's snatching at the wooden spoon right now doesn't bode well.

Sixteen-year-old Seren bounces out of a pile of blankets on the big chair by the window. 'They found a—'

‘Let your sister have some breakfast before we get into that.’ Mam’s sharp voice cuts across Seren.

Ffion looks at Seren. ‘They found a what?’

Seren looks at Mam’s back and rolls her eyes.

‘I saw that.’

‘God, you’re good, Mam.’ Ffion lifts the kettle from the Aga, sloshing it to check how much water’s in it before moving it on to the hot plate. ‘Did you ever think of joining the Secret Service? I imagine “eyes in the back of your head” are right up there with jiu jitsu and fluent Russian.’ She plugs in her phone, dead since the previous evening. ‘How was the swim, anyway?’

‘It wasn’t.’ Seren shoots a defiant look at Mam. ‘I was only in up to my knees when they made us all get out.’

‘How come?’

‘Well, if you’d been there, you’d know,’ Mam says tightly.

‘I overslept.’

‘At Mia’s?’

Ffion gives a non-committal *mmm*. Seren – sharp as a tack – looks between Mam and Ffion, instantly alert to the possibility of drama.

‘Because I’m told she was at the party till late.’

Mia Williams. Two years ahead of Ffion at school: the sort of age gap which gives you nothing in common in your teens, and everything in common a decade later. They are friends by default, rather than choice, Ffion always thinks; who else would they drink with, if not each other?

‘Mam, I’m a grown—’

‘And Ceri left early and saw your car heading out of the village.’

Ceri Jones, the postwoman. Is it any wonder, Ffion thinks, that she prefers to do her socialising away from the town? You can’t fart in Cwm Coed without it making the front page.

‘I had an errand to run.’ The kettle whistles, harsh and insistent, as though challenging Ffion’s lie. She finds a clean mug and drops in a tea bag.

‘On New Year’s Eve?’

‘Mam, stop being—’

‘I worry about you. Is that a crime?’

‘I’m perfectly safe.’

‘That’s not what I mean.’ Elen turns to look at her eldest daughter, voice low; expression loaded. ‘It can’t make you happy, Ffi.’

Ffion holds her gaze. ‘It does, actually.’

Mam settled down too young, that was the trouble. Elen was seventeen when she’d met Ffion’s dad, nineteen when they married. She’d never slept around, never even dated anyone else. How could she possibly understand how good no-strings sex could be? How *liberating*?

‘Anywaaaay . . .’ Ffion changes the subject with a single, drawn-out, word, turning to Seren for sibling solidarity. ‘Why weren’t you allowed to swim?’

‘Because someone only bloody died!’ The gossip bursts out of the girl like water from a dam.

Mam cracks the tea towel at Seren. ‘Watch your language.’

‘Ow!’

‘I’d be keeping my head down if I were you, young lady. You know full well you weren’t to go to that bloody party.’

Ffion looks at Seren. ‘You were at The Shore last night?’

The girl’s chin juts out defensively. ‘Everyone was there.’

‘I don’t give a monkey’s if the Queen of Sheba was there – I told you to stay away from that place!’ Mam’s voice rises, and Seren looks as if she might cry.

‘Someone drowned?’ Ffion says quickly.

Mam drags her attention away from Seren and gives a curt nod of confirmation.

‘God. Who?’

Elen dishes up the porridge, mixed with stewed apple and with a swirl of cream on top. ‘A man, that’s all we know. Face-down, so . . .’

Ffion’s phone chirrup into life, the screen flooding with texts and missed calls. She scrolls past the *Happy New Year* messages, until she reaches that morning’s.

Did you hear about the body in the lake?

Do you know who it is?

Where were you last night???

She presses the blinking icon to listen to her voicemail. At any other time of year she’d put money on it being a visitor who drowned. Someone not used to the cold, or to swimming outdoors; someone who didn’t grow up around water. Cwm Coed sees them every year, pouring out of the campsites and on to the lakeshore as though it’s Bournemouth beach, throwing themselves off the jetty and letting their kids loose on cheap inflatables.

But the New Year’s Day swim is strictly for locals. No one wants incomers, driving an hour or more in anticipation of the smug status update they can post on Facebook afterwards. There’s no advert, no T-shirts, no sponsorship. No official organiser.

No safety measures, Ffion thinks grimly. She knows there’s a faction of the community who will say they’ve been proved right by today’s tragedy; people who refuse to attend the swim because it’s dangerous. *All that running and laughing and falling over; the water so cold it’ll freeze your lungs. And all with drink inside*

from the night before. It's only a matter of time before someone drowns.

Ffion's phone is full of drunken voicemails from Mia and Ceri, shouted over a backdrop of fireworks, and one from Mam that morning – *We're leaving for the swim – lle wyt ti?*

'I heard it was old Dilwyn Jones,' Seren says.

'In a tuxedo?' Mam says. 'In forty years, I've never seen that man out of a cardigan.' She lowers her voice as she turns towards Ffion. 'They moved everyone away from the body as soon as they could. He was—' She breaks off. 'He was in a bad way.'

'Someone said his face was all smashed in.' Seren rises out of her blankets, eyes wide, deliberately ghoulish. Her hair is even redder than Ffion's, with the same frizzy curls you can't do a thing with. Ffion mostly fights hers into a messy bun, while Seren leaves hers loose, to settle on her shoulders like a big ginger cloud. She's pale, smudges of last night's make-up around her eyes.

'Stop your gossip, Seren, and eat your porridge. Your bones'll be cold till lunchtime.'

'I only got in as far as my knees.'

'You've bones in your legs, haven't you?'

'Someone will have been reported missing, though, surely . . .'

Ffion starts to say, but then she reaches the final message in her voicemail and her pulse quickens. She unplugs her phone. 'I have to go.'

'You just got home!'

'I know, but . . .'

Ffion jumps up to pull a clean top off the airer, wondering if she can swipe a bra without Mam seeing. Half a dozen socks fall off the rack, one landing neatly in the porridge pot.

'Ffion Morgan!'

Thirty years old, with a marriage and a mortgage behind her,

yet Mam's tea towel is still a force to be reckoned with. For the second time in as many hours, Ffion beats a hasty retreat.

As she pulls away, the car's exhaust coughing in protest, she dials one-handed, balancing her phone on the passenger seat. Leaving the village, she pulls out in front of a car: a Sunday-best couple on their way to visit family, three bored kids in the back. The driver leans on the horn, staying on Ffion's tail, making a point.

'Mia?' Ffion says, when the voicemail kicks in. She puts her foot flat on the accelerator. 'It's Ffi.' Her pulse buzzes in her temples. 'If Mam asks you where I was last night, tell her I was with you.'