

# WINTER

## CHAPTER 1

Winter is a fickle mistress in the mountains of the Scottish Highlands. At times she lures you on with tantalising glimpses of snow-white hills, ranging forever like the gateway to an enchanted frozen world. Then, when the sky fills with grey, saturated clouds and soft rain shrouds the mountains, she becomes mysterious, gentle. She has great beauty, this mistress, and those she touches, those who travel in these high places, are left with an inescapable yearning to return.

Yet for all winter's gifts, for all her power to raise those who love her to unimagined heights, she has a cruel, cold heart, and her anger is something to be feared. On one particularly cold day in February the west coast of Scotland had become a battleground as moisture-laden air racing in across the Atlantic collided with a frigid air mass from the east. The Atlantic gales crashed against the wall of cold, disgorging their moisture in torrents of snow amid howling winds. For two men high in the mountains, a day that had started calm and clear had sprung a storm upon them, and their gentle outing had become a struggle for survival. Winter had them in her grasp and, like the jealous lover she is, was reluctant to let them escape from her embrace.

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Rory pushed forward into the blizzard. He strained to see the mountain ahead, but the snow blinded him and its jagged fingers pierced his cheeks with an agonising cold. He turned away from the wind and scraped shards of ice from his face. Looking down, he could see nothing but curtains of falling snow that reduced his vision to a monochrome texture and destroyed all sense of depth or perspective. It became impossible to discern the shape of the mountain ahead, let alone find a safe route above the cliffs, but a sixth sense told him that the ridge was narrowing and below him gaped a hungry void. He wondered where Angus had got to.

Ice rattled in Rory's dishevelled ginger beard. He knew now that his handful of years of summer hillwalking and half a dozen weekends in benign weather on the winter hills had been no preparation for what he was facing, in the teeth of a Highland blizzard and with a whole mountain between him and safety. Then he noticed something else: the light was beginning to fade. Soon the short winter day would be over, and he and Angus would be lost in the darkness.

Snowflakes found their way inside his hood and down into his jacket where they melted against his skin, making him shiver as the cold gradually bored its way inside him. As Rory fought to close his jacket, his fingers brushed against the cord around his neck that held his wedding ring, a little band of gold against the warmth of his chest. For a moment he felt Jen standing beside him, her head on his shoulder, just like she always did when the world got too much for him. Then the blizzard roared again and he was back on the mountain – but now he thought he could contain the fear wriggling like an electric worm inside his belly.

Rory turned anxiously and was relieved to see a stocky figure, dressed in an ancient battered cagoule, stumbling towards him through the snow. It was Angus, twenty years or more older and with so much more experience; he would know what to do.

Rory yelled against the wind. 'Angus, which way now?'

Angus, his face wrapped in the hood of his cagoule and his balaclava below that, bent forward to scrape away the accumulated ice. 'Let's awa' back to the bothy.'

Angus spoke calmly, as if suggesting another round of drinks on a Thursday night in the little pub in Inverness where the mountaineering club met. It comforted Rory to have the older man with him. When the mountains confront us with their savagery it is the companionship of others that keeps fear at bay.

Rory saw a reassuring grin flash across Angus's face. 'Ach, it'll be nae bother. Get that gizmo of yours oot. We'll be back in the bothy as soon as you know it.'

Rory visualised a hearth with a roaring fire in the grate and flickering candles on the mantelpiece. He grinned back and pulled the GPS out of his pocket. Then he looked in horror at the screen – it was grey and dead.

'Bloody thing has packed up.'

In that instant the storm seemed to redouble in strength. The world of swirling white grew around Rory until it swallowed him like an ocean with unknown depths.

Angus dropped his rucksack. 'I telt yer, you cannae rely on those bloody things.'

'I put new batteries in it only last week. It should be fine.'

The blank screen stared back at him in mute defiance and he watched Angus pull out his map and try to hang on to it as the

blizzard attempted to wrestle it from his hands.

Angus got the map under control and turned to Rory. ‘OK, where are we?’

‘I was following the arrow,’ Rory said, realising that he should have paid more attention to the device while it had been functioning. ‘Somewhere here, I think.’ He poked at a point on the map with his ice-glazed gloved finger, indicating somewhere high on the ridge.

Angus sniffed and scanned the maelstrom of snow. ‘Och well, nae sense in hanging about.’

There was a casual tone in his words, as if he were announcing that it was time to head home from the supermarket. But Rory detected a hint of anxiety in the older man’s demeanour and realised that Angus was pretending to be calm for his sake.

Rory watched as Angus tried to stare through the snow, looking for some feature that would give some clue to their position. Each time Angus scoured the mountainside for a reference point, the blizzard seemed to delight in increasing its ferocity.

At last he took a bearing with his compass and followed the needle into the whiteness. ‘This cannae be far oot.’

Rory knew this could only be a lie, told to bolster his confidence, for there was nothing visible in the heart of the storm to show where they were.

‘We’ve got to find that gap in the cliffs,’ Rory yelled.

Angus did not respond, but walked on, guided by the flickering needle. Rory swallowed, gathered his courage and followed.

The slope beneath them grew ever steeper as they began the descent. Rory gripped his ice axe in earnest, driving it hard into the snow with each step, anchoring himself to the mountain.

Sometimes he was completely blinded by the swirling snow, and feared that with the next step there would be nothing but air beneath his boot and he would plunge into the abyss. Although only a few feet away, Angus was sometimes lost for a few seconds in the white-out. Rory forced his trembling legs to move, stamping the spikes of his crampons into the snow and then driving in his ice axe as an anchor before taking the next step. This was the rhythm of his movement, the key to getting down the mountain alive and seeing Jen again. *Don't panic*, he thought, *just keep moving steadily*.

Angus called to him through the blizzard. 'Now just keep your weight over your crampons like I showed you. You'll be fine, yer ken.'

Angus could be patronising, especially when he went into his 'old man of the mountains' mode, dispensing sage advice to anyone who wanted to listen and sometimes to people who didn't. Right now, Rory didn't mind being patronised – in fact he found it rather reassuring. He just hoped the old man could get them off this mountain in one piece.

Suddenly Rory found himself on Angus's heels. The old man had stopped and was peering anxiously below him. 'Rory, I'm nae sure this is the way doon. It's too steep.'

Rory stood shivering. Angus stepped tentatively forward, and in a fraction of a second the ice beneath him sheared away. He fell, and his body spun away towards oblivion.

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Angus hit the ice-covered slope hard, driving the air from his lungs. His body tumbled with frightening speed as he rolled

down into the darkness, bouncing over the short steps of the mountainside. Instinctively he rolled on to his stomach and lifted his heels up to keep his crampons out of the snow, knowing that if they caught in the ice he would begin a deadly cartwheel.

Angus could feel his body moving faster as the slope steepened. *Grab the ice axe*, he thought, and looked up to find the tool already in his hands as if it had leapt there of its own accord.

In the moments that separate life from death, panic kills; only cold reason can push disaster back into its cage. *Not too fast now*. Angus pushed the curved blade into the surface with a gentle but insistent force. Too fast and the axe might grab at the ice and be ripped from his hands as the downward force of his body carried him away into oblivion. The steel bit, and a shower of ice crystals arced into the air. He pushed a little harder and felt the hook of the axe begin to dig in. *Harder now*. Angus drove the pick gradually in to the ice and found himself wrestling in a battle to control it as he fought the pull of gravity.

Perhaps he fell for ten seconds, perhaps thirty; time froze as he hurtled downwards, clinging to the ice axe, his only lifeline. The speed was frightening at first but he felt his body slowing as the ice axe bit into the slope. Then he regained control, felt the axe bite deeper, and his body stopped moving. A wave of relief ran through Angus's body. Only then did he dare to kick the crampon points on the toes of his boots into the ice. He was safe now and lay there for a moment, gasping, letting the air flood back into his lungs and feeling his strength return.

He looked up and not too far away he could see Rory looking down at him, eyes wide with terror.

*Oh, for fuck's sake*. Angus was angry with himself – he had

almost paid the ultimate price for a moment's carelessness. He thumped his axe into the snow above him and with a few grunts and oaths was soon standing beside his companion, puffing from the effort.

Rory was pale and shaking. 'I thought you were gone then.'

Angus grinned back at him. 'Nae worry. Take mare than that to kill me.'

That was a lie, but there are times for telling the truth and sometimes lies are better when the truth cannot be stared in the face.

'I ken where we are now. I mind this place. We're in the top of North-West Gully – I climbed it a few years back. There's nae way doon this way but I can find the descent route from here.'

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Rory watched as Angus set his compass to a new bearing, and the two men trudged off through the deepening snow in a new direction. The storm attacked again, rocking the climbers in their steps, tugging at them with its teeth in a rage, not wanting to let its quarry escape. The sky bulged, spitting forth great gouts of snow that fought to penetrate hoods and clothing. Rory's world shrank to the next few feet of snow. The battle for survival was the only thing that either of them knew.

Rory plodded after Angus until at last the older man stopped and yelled over the wind.

'This is it. We can get doon here.'

Rory tried to call back but suddenly realised that the effort of kicking his way through the snow had sucked the air from his lungs and left him gasping. 'You sure?'

Angus laughed again but this time it was with relief. 'Aye, I dinnae need one of those bloody gadgets to find my way about.'

At that moment the beast in the darkness roared with a rage that would not be denied and hurled both men face down into the snow.

Rory rose, blinded by the flakes, winded from the fall. 'Christ, let's get out of here.'

For half an hour they slogged downwards until, to Rory's relief, the gap in the cliffs they sought opened up before them and they moved more easily on safer ground. As they began to lose height they started to leave the kingdom of the ice monster. Every step took them further away from the wind and soon the furious gusts abated and they had left the storm raging above them. By this point the light had almost gone. Rory was grateful to be following Angus as their head torches painted small, bobbing pools of light before them with only the great empty darkness all around. Rory felt a growing respect for the old man. Despite his fall he had guided them safely down – his knowledge of the mountains had saved them both from disaster.

Experience in the mountains is hard won. You cannot buy it; you will not find it in shiny plastic bags on the shelves of warm, brightly lit outdoor shops. You will find it on a mountainside in the impenetrable darkness, you will find it when you have walked to exhaustion and home is still a long way off. Experience comes from overcoming mistakes – it is dirty, cold and wet, and it comes wrapped in fear.

Rory longed for the warmth and safety of the bothy far below. 'I wonder if Brian's lit the fire.'

'Lit it? He's probably in it.'

There was a calmness in Angus's voice that reassured Rory, and the pair chuckled. Only laughter has the power to push fear back into the dark corner of the mind.

Lower down the mountain they were out of the worst of the weather, and an eerie silence surrounded them. Even their footsteps became silent as boots sank deep into the snow. In this soundless white world, Rory felt as though he were floating down the mountain as everything became soft and insubstantial. Then the snow beneath his feet changed from soft and yielding to firm. He no longer sank into it but found himself walking on the surface. The pair started to move quickly, and though he could not see it Rory sensed the floor of the glen beneath them.

'Hold on.' Angus had stopped and was peering at the surface of the snow. He prodded at the surface, peering at small ripples that had formed, sparkling under the beam of his head torch.

Rory watched the old man, puzzled. 'What is it?'

Angus was silent for a moment. 'Sastrugi,' he said at last. 'Ken ripples are called sastrugi.'

Rory thought this an odd time and place for Angus to suddenly start giving a lecture on the nature of snow. 'So?' he grunted, patience wearing thin.

Angus wiped the melting snow from his face with the back of his sleeve. 'It means this snow was deposited by the wind, yer ken.'

'Oh right.'

Rory took a step down the slope but Angus held up his hand to stop him.

'It's what they call "windslab".' Angus turned, his beard

jewelled with melting snow. 'It's avalanche-prone, risky stuff on this slope. And it's been falling all day.'

Rory's mind filled with images of great blocks of snow tumbling down the mountain, carrying the hillside with them. His mind went back to a lecture on avalanches he'd been to at Glenmore Lodge, the mountain training centre in the Cairngorms. He remembered an earnest young man with 'No Fear' on his T-shirt talking about layers of snow, and bonding, and something called 'graupel'. But Rory had dozed at the time and dreamed of being beside a bothy fire far away from the lecture hall. Now he wished he'd paid a bit more attention.

'We'll have to go around it, then.'

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Angus thought of the long miles of walking it would take to avoid the slope, of the hours plodding through soft snow, and he remembered something too – he remembered that he was fifty-five not twenty-five. Thirty years ago he would have grunted and set off back over the hill, but not now. He knew he had to take the chance and go down. Round was not an option. Angus hated to admit that age had taken its toll and he was not as fit as he once was. Old mountaineers can fool themselves that they are still young, sometimes they even fool other people, but they don't fool the mountains. The hills are patient. They wait for old men and women to make mistakes and remind them of how many years have passed and what dues are owed. Angus felt the ache in his legs, felt how heavy they were.

'I'm too tired,' Angus admitted. 'Yer go around it. I'll have to chance it.'

Rory didn't budge. Perhaps he was unwilling to leave his companion. 'You're supposed to swim if you get caught in an avalanche, aren't you?'

'Go round, Rory, there's nae point in you taking the chance.' Angus was pleading with him now, not wanting to take the young man into danger, but he could see that Rory's mind was already made up.

Rory shrugged, shifted his rucksack higher on to his shoulders, and set off down the slope. 'Come on, you old fart. If we don't get there soon that bastard Brian will have burned all the coal.'

He would never admit it but part of Angus was pleased that Rory had not left him. He did not want to be alone in that place, but he was also touched that the young man would so easily risk his life to remain at his side. Mountain law is simple. You never leave a companion, even if you have to die together.

Now the snow began falling heavily once again. The sky and the mountainside lost their separation; there was no horizon, no sky, no earth, just a huge, all-consuming whiteness. They walked in silence, tense and afraid, listening for the slightest sound that the snow was about to slide. Angus's back ached from the hours of walking, and his brain wanted to shut down, to sleep, to be somewhere far away from this frigid nightmare. They were moving quickly now. The snow found a home for each pace they took; there was no need to worry about finding a secure place to step, no risk of turning an ankle. Sometimes it was hard to believe they were moving at all. They walked but nothing changed, no boulders passed, and all perspective vanished into the limitless white.

Angus stopped and rummaged in a pocket. He produced a bar of dark chocolate, broke off a piece and offered some to Rory, who took it gratefully. ‘Careful now, it’s bad for yer, all that sugar.’

‘Fuck it, I’ll be lucky to get off this mountain alive.’

After twenty minutes of stepping into nothing a huge dark shape heaved into view, like a ship sailing through a sea of mist. It was a rock formation Angus knew well.

‘Thank God, we’re almost doon. Let’s get on to that rock ridge. I dinnae like this snow.’

Lured by the security of solid ground, they hurried towards the rocks. Angus hauled himself up on to the rock and turned to Rory, who came towards him like a ghostly snowman. Then there was a crack, a sound that split the air, and Rory was gone.

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In an instant Rory’s world became a great churning mass of cold oblivion. It spun and rolled until down and up no longer had meaning. His torch was ripped from his head; he saw it bounce away until it vanished and the dark swallowed it. He clawed to escape the jaws of crushing snow around him, flailing with all his might to stay on top of the surface, kicking in desperation, all the time expecting the darkness beneath to suck him down and suffocate him.

*The rock, the rock. Make the rock.* The words ran through his mind like a mantra. He lunged, and his hand caught something solid, something not sliding down the mountain. *The rock! It’s the rock!* He pulled and kicked while the mountain shook and rumbled like a growling bear.

Suddenly he was out, gulping lungfuls of air in the darkness. Feeling solid ground beneath his feet for the first time in hours, there he lay, too exhausted to move, grateful for the jagged boulders that stabbed into his back. Far below the sound of the avalanche retreated and the beast was gone. A light bobbed down from above through the blackness and soon Angus stood over him, dazzling him with the torch.

‘Christ, are yer all right?’

Rory eased himself to his feet. His legs shook but as far as he could tell he just had a few bruises.

‘Aye, I think so. I don’t want to play this game any more. Let’s go home.’

Angus strode on but the avalanche had knocked all of Rory’s energy out of him. His body ached where the snow had almost crushed him or twisted his limbs at odd angles. He had felt no pain in the moments after he had crawled from the snow, but now every movement brought fresh agony and his body screamed for sleep.

By the time they reached the floor of the glen, the snow was turning to slush and wet sleet spattered their jackets. They walked in silence, too tired to talk, and only the need to reach the shelter of the bothy propelled them forward. They scoured the blackness for signs of a light.

‘Four hundred and twenty-five, four hundred and twenty-six.’ Angus counted off the steps, the only way to measure distance in the featureless night.

Rory stopped, the pain in his back increasing and his bruises from the fall aching more and more. ‘We’ve passed it. We must have.’

‘Nae, not yet, we’ve nae come far enough.’

‘We’ll never find it in this bloody snow.’ Despair overwhelmed Rory and he tore off his rucksack and sat down on a boulder. ‘Angus, I’ll have to rest for a moment.’

For twenty minutes Angus left Rory seated on the rock and scoured the area for the bothy. After what seemed like forever, Rory watched Angus’s torch beam come dancing through the blackness towards him. The older man did not need to speak. The look on his face told Rory the little shelter had eluded him.

‘Come on, Rory, it cannae be far now. Just another twenty minutes. We’ll find it.’

Rory staggered to his feet, wincing from the pain; even standing felt like a struggle. The rain had soaked them both through. A night out in this weather could prove fatal. They needed the bothy more than ever.

Rory lurched after Angus, legs crumbling with every step. He no longer scanned the blackness for any sign of light that might give away the position of the bothy – he simply followed the old man and trusted his ability to guide them home. But the path was buried under melting snow and half an hour later Rory’s legs gave way, pitching him forward into the slush. The avalanche, the cold and the darkness had taken their toll.

Moments later he felt Angus lifting him.

‘I’ve got to rest,’ Rory murmured.

Then the hallucinations began. He saw a light coming towards them out of the dark. It drew closer and closer, then an alien-like figure emerged from the glow and began to slowly beckon.

‘Oh, there you are,’ came a voice from out of the night. Beneath a fading head torch beam an emaciated figure dangled.

‘Brian!’ Angus called to the figure, his voice betraying amazement and disbelief. ‘What are yer doing oot here?’

‘Looking for you,’ Brian said casually, as if he’d been waiting to meet them in a pub or on a park bench.

His features were gaunt and drawn. He looked as if he hadn’t had a decent meal in years. Around his bony shoulders hung an ancient orange cagoule; it was saturated and held together by odd patches of material. Many years ago it might have been able to withstand a Highland storm but now it was worn so thin even the briefest shower would surely penetrate it. Brian had obviously been out for hours and looked as worn out as his gear. His grey hair hung limp, dripping water across a face that had been beaten into creased leather by years out in mountain storms. Another man might have been pleased to see his companions, might have extended his hand in greeting – smiled perhaps, or even thrown his arms about them – but Brian was not given to outward displays of emotion. On bothy nights, when the others grew boisterous after surfeits of whisky and beer, and songs were sung and tales told, Brian would be sitting in a corner, barely noticeable, like a scrawny spectre at the feast.

‘How far is the bothy?’ Rory demanded, too exhausted for pleasantries.

Brian turned and pointed. ‘There it is.’

Rory followed Brian’s torch beam. At first he saw nothing but as he stared into the blackness a ghostly shape gradually formed amongst the falling snow. Rory could see how they had struggled to find it. The bothy was a simple construction, made from the rough stone of the glen itself, so covered by lichen and moss that it looked to have grown from the ground

rather than having been built by human hands. From only a few footsteps away the bothy appeared to be a boulder or a stand of trees.

Rory bent his head in the low doorway and stepped inside. He stood for a second, dripping water on the floor as he took in the scene, thinking how wonderful it was to be out of the storm at last. It was as if he had stepped back to a time before electricity, before running water and before we complicated life with the trappings of luxury and convenience. In the semi-dark he made out a few embers of glowing coal in the dying fire. On the mantelpiece above the rough stone hearth, candles flickered from long-dry wine bottles. The room was lined with wood and boasted a few meagre bits of old furniture: a bench, a rickety table and a couple of chairs. In one corner two muffled bodies lay in sleeping bags. They stirred for a few moments on hearing the three men enter the bothy only to return, in seconds, to their slumber. The air was thick with the smells of drying socks, sweaty bodies, woodsmoke and recently eaten meals. If he had walked in off the street the cacophony of odours would have repelled Rory, but now, after hours out in the hostile blizzard, he thought he had walked into paradise.

Brian got to work as Rory and Angus climbed out of their dripping hill clothes. Brian still used much of the equipment he'd used for the last forty years. He had never made the transition from paraffin to gas. Now he produced his ancient brass Primus stove and went through a well-rehearsed ritual, lighting a small quantity of methylated spirits in the well beneath the burner to bring the stove to its operating temperature. He pumped just the right amount of pressure into the paraffin tank and waited

for the spirit's blue flame to heat the burner until it would light. The instant the stove caught, it filled the bothy with the smell of burning paraffin and a delicious purring sound: the sound of warmth and food and comfort. Rory watched Brian work with a silent, precise efficiency. Once he had the kettle on he set out two plastic mugs, one for Angus and one for Rory – nothing for himself until the others were fed. Then Brian produced some coal he had saved from the fire for their return. Wordlessly he took their dripping outdoor clothes and hung them over a makeshift pully as the coal fire spluttered into life. He filled the mountaineers with tea and soup until they were both warm and the feeling had returned to their toes. Only then did he eat a little himself.

It was well past midnight when Angus and Rory sat beside each other on the crude wooden bench before the dwindling fire. Angus puffed on his pipe as he watched the flames and Rory cradled his beer can. In the corner, Brian snored loudly, but for the pair it would take time for the adrenaline to leave their bloodstreams.

Rory sniffed. 'He never says much, Brian, does he?'

Angus inhaled the aroma of his favourite Irish Cask and blew a smoke ring out towards the chimney. 'Suppose not. Taciturn is the word, I believe.'

Rory winced as he felt his ribs. 'You mean miserable?'

Angus gave Rory a reproachful glance through the pipe smoke. 'He searched for us for three hours ken when we didnae come back. Yer've got to give him that.'

Rory glanced again at the sleeping figure and then looked down at the dwindling dregs of his beer. 'You're right. You know

what they say, “If you can’t say something nice, say nothing at all”.

Angus thought for a moment. ‘Is that Descartes?’

‘No, Thumper in the film *Bambi*.’

‘Oh aye, the rabbit.’

‘That’s him.’ He coughed and clutched at his ribs again. ‘So sad, that film. When *Bambi*’s mother gets shot by the hunters.’

Angus smiled and nodded, recalling a distant memory. ‘I mind when I went to see that film with my mother. Must have been six. There was nae a dry eye in the cinema. We went to the pictures every Saturday back then.’

Rory took a sip of his beer. ‘I can’t remember the last time me and Jen went to the cinema. We just get a DVD out. Romcoms she likes.’

‘Changed days.’ Angus sighed. ‘When I was a loon there were over thirty cinemas in Aberdeen. The Gaumont, the Astoria. All plush carpet. Gone now.’

‘That’s what turned me vegan, *Bambi*. I still can’t see why anyone would kill anything for pleasure. Let alone a deer.’

‘Didn’t yer no say there were too many deer?’ Angus tapped his pipe out on the hearth as the fire began to die.

‘I’m not against controlling them. I just can’t see why anyone would take pleasure in killing anything.’

Angus began to unroll his sleeping bag and rolled his fleece into a pillow. ‘Where would the Highland economy be without deerstalking? Would put a lot of folk oot of a job.’

Rory opened his mouth to argue but only a yawn escaped his lips. It was late and sleep was more important than discussion. He stood, wearily, and found another bruise on his

thigh in the process.

Angus blew out the candles and they both climbed into their sleeping bags. The room fell into darkness, lit only by the odd flicker from the dying fire.

As they settled down to sleep on the wooden floor of the bothy, Rory spoke. 'That was close today.'

Angus grunted and wriggled deeper into his sleeping bag. 'Aye, bloody close. Yer dinnae see snow like that these days. Winters aren't like they used to be.'

Rory yawned, his body craving sleep. 'Global warming. We're killing this planet. Suffocating it bit by bit.'

'Aye, I used to love the snow. The cold and the freshness of it. Jesus, I'm tired.'

Rory laughed. 'I don't know why we do this.'

Angus replied in the mumble of one whose brain is already wandering in the land of dreams. 'It's either this or watch *Strictly Bloody Fools Dancing*. Either way you wind up dead.'

Rory closed his eyes and tried to sleep, yet despite the exhaustion his brain was still working to understand the events of the day. Images of the storm played on the cinema screen of his eyelids. Horror filled him as he watched the ice give way beneath Angus and saw him fall towards the yawning cliffs. Worst of all, his mind took him into the jaws of the avalanche. He felt the darkness, the crushing weight and, as sleep drew closer, he reached out for the rocks that had hauled him from death.

In his mind Rory was back on the mountain tumbling over and over as the avalanche tried to swallow him. The scene played on repeat in front of his closed eyelids until, at last, his brain came to terms with the horror and let him drift off to sleep.

## SKY DANCE

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Beyond the bothy door, while the men dreamed inside, a stag ambled past in the moonlight. The snow had ceased falling and the glen was still and empty as the sky cleared and the frost descended. The stag froze for a second, catching the scent of humans and fire as he passed the bothy window. He did not know that next October he would linger too long on a hillock and a bullet would tear through his heart and leave him bleeding in the heather.

Far above the bothy, the storm's rage spent, the mountaintops were silent once more. Here and there a lazy wind tossed handfuls of spindrift into the air where the moonlight caught them for the briefest of moments. Only a few faint footprints in the snow remained of the climbers' struggle. All other signs had faded like the memory of a bad dream, and soon they too would sink into the night.

## CHAPTER 2

The old ghillie was quietly daydreaming in the passenger seat when the Land Rover screeched to a halt, sending his shoulder into the seatbelt with a bruising jolt so sudden that his deerstalker hat flew off. The driver, a large young man in a tweed jacket, mumbled something then picked up his binoculars and peered out of the car.

‘Och, Hamish, what are youse doing?’ the passenger said, retrieving his deerstalker from the footwell and cramming it on top of his shock of grey hair.

Hamish turned, his face round and flushed, and yelled, ‘Walkers, Donald! I said walkers!’

Donald was tired of being shouted at by the young keeper. ‘There’s nae need to shoot. I can hear ye perfectly well.’

Hamish rolled his eyes, grunted, and thrust the binoculars at Donald. The old keeper climbed stiffly out of the Land Rover and scanned the hillside. The vehicle had come to a halt outside the main entrance to Castle Purdey. Behind him loomed a great dark Gothic edifice, with turrets at its corners and castellated walls where fearsome gargoyles stared out with blind stone eyes. In front of him a vast lawn stretched away, circled by the gravel drive where the Land Rover stood, its engine throbbing. In the middle of the lawn there was a fountain, a naked cherub boy at its centre endlessly urinating into the pool below. The sound

of the tinkling water created an instant echoing response from Donald's bladder and he cursed the infirmities of age. Across the parkland, beyond where heavy beef cattle grazed, was a tall dark wood of old oak trees; beyond that a path led out on to the open hillside towards the mountains with a fringe of snow far above. He searched with the glasses across the pasture up through the wood to the hillside above but saw no walkers.

'Where are they, Hamish?'

Hamish sighed, and that was another thing the young man did that irritated Donald: he sighed a lot.

'There, can you not see them?' Hamish pointed in frustration. 'Near the wood.'

Donald saw two figures with large packs heading slowly up towards the trees. They were some distance away so he could make out few details. A tall, thin man was in the lead, followed a few yards behind by a shorter, stocky figure who moved a little more slowly.

'Och aye, I have them now.'

The sky was dull grey and a pair of ravens cawed their way into the air as the walkers entered the wood.

Hamish grunted and lowered the binoculars. 'Friday night. They're heading up to spend the weekend in the bothy. All the way up yonder just to spend a few nights in a bloody ruin of a place. Hillwalkers! Townies playing at being country folk. Thinking that they can tell us what to do on the land.'

A black Daimler shot through the gates and slewed to a halt beside the Land Rover. The door flew open and a tweed-clad figure bundled himself out on to the driveway. Lord Purdey stood there for a moment, puffing in indignation. He was stocky

and bald with the type of moustache normally only worn by wartime fighter pilots in B-movies. He thrust his fists into his sides and stood for a moment watching the walkers make steady progress up the track.

‘Again! What is it with these people?’ His accent was crisp, expensive.

Hamish shook his head sadly. ‘Friday night. Always bad for them is Fridays.’

The bald man thrust his head through the open window of the Land Rover and pressed his face so close to Hamish that their noses almost touched.

‘They won’t *find* anything, will they?’ This he whispered, although only the keepers were close enough to hear him. If he had wished, he could have used a megaphone and still maintained the same degree of confidentiality.

Donald shook his head. ‘Nae sir, nae sir.’ There was a pause, during which time it was just possible to hear the cogs in Donald’s head turning.

It was Hamish who said what the older ghillie was thinking. ‘As long as they don’t wander up on to the Black Moor, that is.’

Donald remained silent but nodded sagely.

Lord Purdey glared, his moustache bristling. ‘Now look, we can’t afford any ... ’ He searched for the right word. ‘*Embarrassments*, not with that RSPB arse sticking his nose in.’

Donald nodded and Hamish did the same.

Purdey fell silent and paced the driveway deep in thought. At last he turned and spoke pensively. ‘Donald, you remember, in my father’s day, we could have seen those map-and-compass chaps off. But now ... ’ He sighed.

‘Different days, sir. Right tae roam legislation.’

Purdey nodded slowly. ‘Right to wander about and make a bloody nuisance of yourself. Makes you wonder whose land this is.’

‘Och aye, that it does, sir,’ Donald said, binoculars focused on the two figures. ‘Suppose we could tell them some pish, like we’re shooting up there.’

Purdey sniffed, thrust his hands into the pockets of his yellow corduroy trousers, and began pacing again. ‘Shooting, yes, good idea. Tell them that.’

Hamish climbed out of the Land Rover, squeezing his bulk through the door. ‘I wish we could shoot hillwalkers. If this was America we could. That Donald Trump, that’s who we need.’

‘Och now, I don’t know about that. If this wis America they might fire back anaw,’ Donald added with a laugh.

Purdey smiled thinly and chuckled with them. ‘I’m not sure about Trump. He’d turn Scotland into a golf course and put a wall across the border.’

‘Would that be to keep the English out or the Scots in, do you think?’ Donald said.

Purdey’s smile vanished. ‘Head up there and tell those bloody map-and-compass Johnnies to clear off.’

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Rory could feel the sweat condensing against his back as he climbed the steep track that wound up through the woods and out on to the open hillside. Out of the shelter of the trees the wind picked up and he was glad to feel the cold February air against his cheek as he waited for Angus to catch him. Once

he had stepped out of the trees into the wind, with the open moorland before him and the snow-capped hills against the horizon, he knew he was in the mountains again. The wind was alive with the scent of heather and moor and the taint of distant snow, and it embraced him like a lost friend. The only sounds were the babble of a burn close by and the sighing of the trees as restless wind pushed its way through. The factory that enslaved him five days a week was far away; now he didn't have to take orders or follow ceaseless rules. Now the only things that mattered were the earth beneath his boots and the endless open sky. Now he could breathe. Now he was free.

The light was fading and the outlines of the hills softening against the bullet-grey sky when Angus arrived, his beard glistening with condensation and his face dripping with sweat.

'Jesus, that hill does nae get any easier, does it?'

Rory was used to waiting for Angus. He'd waited for him on mountain passes and summits across the Highlands, but he couldn't resist the opportunity to tease him.

'It's that pipe you smoke. No wonder you can't get up hills.'

Angus grimaced in mock pain. 'You're starting tae sound like Laura. Can't a man have one small pleasure in life? Albert Einstein himself said that pipe smoking contributes tae a calm and objective judgement in all human affairs.'

Rory shook his head in silent disbelief, popping a handful of raisins into his mouth. He offered some to Angus, who declined them.

'I suppose it's all relative.'

Angus stood for a moment scratching at his grey beard, a confused expression on his face. 'Was that an attempt at humour?'

Rory chewed slowly on the raisins, trying to decide if he could rescue the joke, but eventually he decided it was beyond help. ‘Probably not.’

By now Rory had cooled down and was beginning to feel the windchill. He zipped up his jacket. Rory didn’t set much store in material things. Expensive cars or flashy watches left him cold. What he really valued was a day in the hills with clear views or a night in a remote bothy beside a warm fire. He had only discovered hillwalking and climbing a handful of years ago – a novice compared to Angus – but he was already learning the value of good equipment. Out on the hills an expensive watch wouldn’t save your life, but a decent jacket just might. The trouble was, his wages at the factory didn’t stretch far enough.

Rory was shouldering his pack when he glanced down the hill and spotted a Land Rover making its way towards them. He was already angry before the vehicle got to them. The enemy was coming – the foot soldiers of the landowners, who tried to keep these estates as private empires where they could do what they wanted, destroying the wildlife and rendering the land barren. They met such men (and they were always men) over and over again in their wanderings. Angus always respected their authority but Rory had no time for them.

The Land Rover came to a halt. A big ginger ghillie, in the blood-sports uniform of tweed, leaned through the window.

‘Where are you off to, boys?’

‘What’s it to you?’ Rory snapped. ‘We’ve every right to be here.’

The young keeper glowered at Rory and stepped slowly from the vehicle until he stood towering over him. ‘You keep off the

Black Moor, we're shooting there.'

The two faced each other like dogs reluctant to give ground.

Angus put his hand on Rory's shoulder and spoke quietly to the keeper. 'We're awa' tae Glen bothy for a couple of nights.'

Rory ignored his friend and was in no mood to back down. He couldn't see why they should be challenged when all they were doing was walking where they had a right to go.

'We'll go where we like.'

An older ghillie called from his seat in the Land Rover to the increasingly furious estate worker, who had drawn himself up to his full height. 'Hamish, hawd on, come away in now.' Then he spoke to Angus gently, holding his palms out and offering a rueful smile as if keen to defuse the situation. 'Nae problem if youse heading for the Glen bothy. If you could jist mind tae keep off the Black Moor. It's for safety.'

'We're quite happy tae go a different way if it makes things easier,' Angus said. 'As long as we get tae the bothy.'

'Just don't go on the Black Moor,' Hamish insisted, his face still red.

Rory felt his hackles rise again. 'Why, what's on the Black Moor?'

'I told you, we're shooting there. Right, Donald?'

The older keeper began to nod but Rory butted in. 'What, tonight? It's almost dark.'

'*Vermin control*,' Hamish said through clenched teeth.

Donald called to the young man, insistent this time. 'Hamish, awa' back into the car now. We don't want tae start a rammy.'

Angus made another attempt to broker peace. 'We'll jist head tae the bothy now. We're nae after going on to the moor.'

Hamish took one last hard look at the two hillwalkers and turned back towards the vehicle.

Rory, as angry and red in the face as Hamish, called after him. 'And what do you call vermin? Hen harriers, red kites, golden eagles.'

'Youse'll find nothing fly up here now,' Donald replied, tone still quiet and reasonable. 'Those birds is protected, legal like.'

'I wonder what we'd find if we took a walk on the Black Moor,' Rory said.

Hamish took a step back towards them.

Donald's patience finally snapped. 'Hamish! Get in the feckin' car.'

The ginger gamekeeper snarled and shrugged and climbed back into the four-wheel drive. There was a crashing of gears and the Land Rover careered off across the hillside, leaving the walkers standing in a cloud of exhaust fumes.

'Purdey's men,' Rory said in disgust as he watched them drive away across the moor.

Angus patted Rory on the shoulder, as if to calm him. 'Aye well, we all have to make a living. Live and let live, yer ken, that's what I say.'

Rory set off up the track, calling back as he walked: 'That's just the problem. They live to kill, that's the name of their game.'

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They walked on in silence for a while, each lost in his own thoughts. The path skirted the Black Moor and then turned off Purdey's estate and on to the Muir estate. A fence clearly marked the boundary although it would have been easy to distinguish

them without it. The Purdey side of the fence was open, dead and empty moorland, while the Muir side was bursting with small trees and returning life as his estate encouraged regeneration.

Rory was holding the gate open for Angus when his eyes caught a white flicker in the heather 200 yards away. At first he thought he was mistaken but then a white wing rose from amongst the brown. A gull, he thought – but no, not here in the mountains.

Rory fumbled for his binoculars. ‘Angus! Did you see that?’

Angus followed Rory’s gaze and the bird rose a little.

Rory caught a glimpse of black on the tips of the white wings and a surge of excitement ran through him. ‘Hen harrier, get down, quick!’

They both ducked into the bushes and Rory fixed his binoculars on the bird. As if in answer it soared into the sky and Rory watched in awe as the sleek-bodied creature leapt upwards, claiming the air as its own. Now it moved too quickly for him to follow with the glasses and he dropped them just as the harrier turned on to its back and plummeted downwards so fast it seemed it must dash itself to death on the hard earth. When it seemed certain to crash the white wings twisted and once again the creature soared up into the sky.

Rory turned to Angus in delight. ‘It’s a male hen harrier. I’ve seen them before, but never like this.’

Angus watched the aerobatic display. Rory knew that the older man was a hillwalker to his core, with only a passing interest in the natural world, yet fascination was written on his face. ‘What’s it doing?’

‘There must be a female somewhere. He’s showing her how

good he is.' Rory's voice bubbled with excitement as he watched the bird tumble through the air over and over again.

'I've nivver seen the like. Look at the way it moves in the air.'

As they watched the harrier's dance they were spellbound in wonder and it was as if time had frozen around them.

To see a wild creature is to gaze at the heart of nature. Our land has been flayed, stripped bare until only the bleached white bones remain. The great forests of impenetrable secrets are no more. Our world has been levelled and buried beneath concrete and steel. Even what seems wild is an illusion – our hills are bare, wet deserts kept barren by the gnawing teeth of deer and sheep, relics of the Victorian era. We have no wilderness. We have buried the soul of the land beneath roads, factories and houses. What few wild creatures are left cling, shipwrecked, to the edges of our world.

Through all this destruction something has remained. For those who take the time to look, or are lucky enough to wander the empty places, there are glimpses of wildness to be seen. It is in the tail flick of an otter in the pool of evening, it is in the silent sweep of a barn owl as it heads off to hunt in the failing light, it is in the bright eyes of a pine marten fleeing into the forest, and it is in the dance of the harrier. We come from the land and the memory of it remains in all of us.

They watched for ten minutes until at last the female took to the air. She was larger than the male, her plumage a dull brown with ring markings on her tail. They were together in the air for a few moments and then she turned and the pair soared away over the near horizon.

Angus watched the birds until they vanished from sight,

and the two men sat in silence for a moment. Rory packed away his binoculars and was pleased to see the impression the birds' remarkable flight had made on Angus.

'Never in my life seen that,' Rory said.

Angus nodded. 'Nae, me neither. I didnae ken such things existed.'

Rory smiled at the old man and laughed. 'We'll make a twitcher out of you yet.'

Angus pushed his way through the gate and headed off towards the wood. Rory stood for a few moments, searching the skies for another glimpse of the bird, and his mind filled with images of the hen harriers.

'That was something. That was really something,' he murmured to himself. 'That was the sky dance.'

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As Rory stepped through the low door and into the bothy he felt as if he had slipped on an old, well-worn overcoat. The familiar smell of woodsmoke greeted him like an old friend and he thought how good it was to be at ease with the world.

Rory lit the candles and dumped a small but heavy carrier bag of coal beside the hearth. 'Shall I do the fire?'

Angus nodded, picked up an empty plastic water container and stepped outside, heading out into the dark glen for the burn close by. There was little need for conversation as the pair settled into a familiar routine: one would light the fire and the other fetch water.

Rory cleaned the old ash out of the hearth. Plumes of dust rose in the candlelight as he shovelled the cold embers into a

battered steel bucket. He layered some coal on the cracked grate, then added a few foil-wrapped firelighters, followed by some sticks of kindling he'd brought with him. Finally he topped off the arrangement with a layer of small pieces of coal. Rory always looked forward to lighting the bothy fire. It was the moment that transformed the cold, dark, abandoned cottage into a home. Over the past few years he'd learned a lot about bothy fires. He'd found out how unpredictable and temperamental they were. Sometimes they would roar into life; at other times they would barely smoulder and would sit dark and miserable for hours, like a sulking child. On his early bothy visits there had been times when the fire had refused to light and he had spent long, cold nights staring at a black hearth.

It was Angus who had shown him how to make a fire, taught him when to blow on it and when to leave it be to build heat. Rory had learned the dark art of bothy fire-making well, and now thought that he had surpassed his master – but, of course, Angus would never admit that.

The door burst open and Angus returned from the burn, breathing hard from the effort of carrying the sloshing water container. As Rory applied his match to the firelighter Angus came over to inspect his work.

'Aye, nae bad. Perhaps another dod of coal.' Angus could never resist making some minor suggestion.

A couple of years ago, when they began walking together, Rory would have been irritated by the old man's presumption that his seniority gave him the right to pontificate about all aspects of hill life, but now their friendship had grown he was simply amused.

‘It’ll be fine, just you wait and see.’

The fire had begun to flicker into life by the time Angus came to the table and set down a steaming plate of instant mashed potato and stewed steak. ‘Ah, I’m ready for this.’

Rory looked over disapprovingly. ‘Charred corpse, that’s what that is.’ Rory was eating a bowl of chickpea curry.

Angus paused between spoonfuls of gravy. ‘I believe it’s Aberdeen Angus.’

‘No animals were harmed in the making of this curry,’ Rory said.

‘Chickpea curry. Hope yer’ll be sleeping outside. I don’t fancy getting blown out of the bothy.’

Rory finished his meal and leaned back, content. ‘She makes a good curry, does my Jen. A little natural gas does you no harm.’

Angus shook his head sadly. ‘All that prime Aberdeen Angus out there and yer eating peas. Tae think I’d be sharing a bothy with a vegan.’

‘Couscous too. I’m well looked after.’

Angus snorted. ‘Couscous? What’s couscous?’ Without waiting for a reply he rose just as the kettle came to the boil. ‘Tea?’

Rory held up his mug. ‘Aye, thanks.’

Rory settled himself on the bench beside Angus and they sipped their tea and watched as the bright flames began to dance in the hearth. ‘There’s the bothy telly on.’

‘Aye, it’s only got one channel but it’s a braw show.’

The fire had worked its magic. The cold, rough dwelling they had entered was transformed by the firelight into a sanctuary not only from the cold wind prowling outside but also from the world itself. To spend a night beside a bothy fire is to journey

into dreams.

Rory blew the steam from his mug and took a swig of the brew. The tea was strong and hot and he relished the taste even though it seemed to him that powdered milk never managed to pull off its impersonation of the real thing.

‘I love a real fire. Me and Jen have just got central heating. When we get our place on the island, I’m getting a wood burner.’

They sat in silence for a while, Angus priming his pipe with his favourite Irish Cask tobacco and Rory swirling the tea around his mug.

Angus lit his pipe and turned to Rory as if something troubled him. ‘See what yer told me about those ghillies killing birds of prey, eagles and the like – is that true?’

Rory nodded slowly, and a sadness crossed his face. ‘Yeah, of course it is. Didn’t you know that?’

‘Nae. But it’s illegal. Those are protected birds, like the ghillie said.’

‘Of course it’s illegal, but who the hell knows what goes on up in these hills? There’s no one here most of the time.’

‘Cannae see why they’d want tae do it. What’s in it for them?’

Rory was surprised by Angus’s ignorance. ‘Open your eyes, man. Where we met the keepers, that’s grouse moor. You saw the butts, didn’t you?’

Angus blew a smoke ring, deep in thought. ‘Those wee shelters they hide behind to shoot birds? Aye, there’s hundreds of them.’

‘You know what they do?’

‘Aye, aye. Beaters drive the birds towards them and blokes with guns blast them oot of the air. I widnae fancy it myself

but each to their own. If they want to shoot grouse I dinnae see the problem.'

Rory rubbed his temples and felt a wave of despair overwhelm him. 'For Christ's sake, Angus. It's not the shooting of grouse that's the problem. It's the way a grouse moor has to be managed. They eliminate predators so that there is an artificially high number of grouse on the moors, so there's plenty to shoot. The problem is that the place then becomes a magnet for raptors. So there's no way you can manage a grouse moor without killing birds of prey.'

'Like that hen harrier we saw?'

'It's them it hits hardest. Hen harriers range far and wide, so even if they don't live on a grouse moor, they get drawn to them. There's only 400 breeding pairs in Scotland when there should be 5,000. It's worse in England – only a handful.'

The wooden door of the bothy rattled and opened slowly. Both men turned to see who was about to enter. A thin figure walked through.

'Oh, it's yourself, Brian,' Angus said.

Brian stood before them, wearing tattered woollen breeches and an old pullover that was little more than a series of holes held together with darning twine.

'Yes,' came the faint reply. 'It's me.'

Brian was now in his early sixties and had spent most of his life working as an accounts clerk for the NHS. In truth it was clear to everyone that he had missed his vocation. If ever a person had a gift for a role, it was Brian, who should have been an undertaker, for an atmosphere of deep, impenetrable sadness surrounded him. Anyone seeing him following a hearse,

or perhaps observing his skeletal frame staring vacantly into a grave, would know that whoever the dear departed was, their demise was greatly regretted by all concerned.

Silence deepened in the room while Rory struggled to find something to say, Angus having already given up any attempt at conversation with Brian. Eventually he resorted to that most British of conversational devices, the weather.

‘Rain kept off, then.’

Brian nodded and began to unpack his rucksack. His supplies for bothy trips were, as ever, meagre. He slowly unpacked a cheese sandwich and began to chew on it.

Rory attempted conversation once more. ‘Got a few hills planned this weekend, Brian?’

There was a prolonged pause while Brian swallowed a lump of cheddar and best white. ‘Maybe.’

A grey mist of gloom seeped out of Brian and slowly filled the bothy. Soon the only sound was a steady drip of rainwater coming through the roof. Before Brian arrived, the drip had seemed inconsequential and Rory and Angus had simply placed an old, rusting pan beneath it and got on with their lives. Now, however, the globules of water that fell from the ceiling took on monumental significance. Three pairs of eyes were transfixed on another silver drop of moisture slowly forming above them. The atmosphere grew tense as the drop grew in size and seemed for a few seconds to defy gravity before at last plunging into the saucepan below with a resounding splosh. They watched it fall and then looked up to the spot on the ceiling as the drip formed once more.

Brian sniffed, his eyes bright with excitement. ‘Fifteen

seconds that one took to fall! Two seconds less than the last one.'

Some things are inevitable. Rory did not yet know it, but it was simply a matter of time before, confined for hours in that tiny, remote shelter while Brian timed the water drops, he began to contemplate murder.

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A handful of miles away, in the great crenellated edifice that was Castle Purdey, Tabatha Purdey strode along the wood-panelled corridor of the mansion she shared with her husband, Charles. She pulled her shawl tighter around her shoulders, feeling the chill as she approached the door of the great hall itself. The 'big house', as it was known locally, boasted three large entertaining rooms, including one that was known as the ballroom; and it had eleven bedrooms, not counting the servants' quarters. It also had, for no reason that was apparent to Tabatha, two medieval-styled turrets complete with gargoyles who stared out across the Purdey estate like ugly, startled five-year-olds. What the house did not boast was central heating that could cope with the Highland weather. Somewhere down in the cellar, a great beast of a boiler did its best to consume the entire oil output of the North Sea every month while only raising the radiators to slightly above freezing. The house was full of draughts, doors that didn't fit and windows that rattled.

For the last twenty years, Tabatha – now in her fifties but still as strong as a rugby fullback – had been trying to persuade Charles, almost twelve years her senior, to move to London where it might be possible to spend an entire evening without experiencing frostbite or hypothermia. Charles, however, had

an unerring loyalty to this ancient pile where seven generations of Purdeys had shivered through 300 years of Highland winters. She paused outside the dining room door and allowed the four little dachshunds which dogged her every step to catch up. Through the thick oak door she could hear her husband's voice, doubtless recounting the shooting of some unfortunate beast.

Tabatha ran her eyes across the rows of stags' heads forlornly staring out from the walls where they hung in mute accusation of their killers. Almost as numerous as these poor animals were the portraits of generations of Purdeys, whose expressions seemed just as forlorn as the dead deer. They all had her husband's solid round face and stocky frame. There were Purdeys on horses, Purdeys in armour, Purdeys smoking and casually leaning against enormous cars. For some reason she couldn't quite put her finger on, not one of these dead Purdeys looked as though, all things considered, they'd rather be somewhere else.

She looked down at one of the dachshunds sniffing loudly at the dining room door. 'Queen Victoria has a lot to answer for, Toby.' The dog looked up at her and wagged its tail with that sort of uncomprehending cheerfulness that only small dogs seem to possess. 'I'd like to give that old bird a piece of my mind.'

Tabatha reflected that it was Victoria's passion for a mythical kilt-wearing, bagpipe-playing, hunting-and-shooting Scottish Highlands that had lumbered Tabatha (and a great deal more folk who should have known better) with all these stags' heads, tartan carpets and kilted halfwit husbands who would rather die of cold than abandon some misty Highland dream. Victoria had ushered into being the Highland sporting estate. Some landowners still clung to this way of life even today.

Tabatha opened the door and entered. A thick fug of cigar smoke hung in the air; it was difficult to see the far end of the room. Charles Purdey sat beside a roaring log fire in a huge leather armchair, well into his fifth brandy. Sitting opposite him was a thin, dark-suited man cradling a glass of whisky Tabatha had seen him reluctantly accept from the laird an hour earlier. He was Gerald McCormack, the estate lawyer and a Highland councillor – a man who would argue to the death over four pence.

The lawyer rose to his feet like a spectre rising from its grave. ‘What a lovely meal, Tabatha. So kind of you.’

This innocent remark provoked the dachshunds into a furious rage and they hurtled across the room and started to attack his trouser legs with a vengeance.

Purdey rose unsteadily. ‘Damn it, damn dogs. I don’t know what gets into them.’

He made several enthusiastic but unsuccessful attempts to strike the snarling dogs with a rolled-up newspaper. By now Gerald had spilled his whisky and was struggling to maintain his balance amid the sound of tearing trouser legs.

‘Enough!’ Tabatha yelled in a voice loud enough to get the attention of most of the stags nailed to the wall in the corridor.

Reluctantly the four dachshunds relinquished their grip on the lawyer’s nether garments and slunk off to sit beside the fire. Apologies were given and refused; a replacement whisky was offered and reluctantly accepted. Tabatha grabbed the arm of a heavy leather chaise longue and hurled it in front of the fire with the ease of a weightlifter before throwing herself down on to it with a sigh.

She looked at her husband in expectation, but he was busy

lighting another cigar. ‘Just the tiniest G and T, Charles,’ she said after a moment.

He rose, fumbling with his matches, and rushed over to the antique drinks cabinet. ‘Oh yes, Tabby, quite.’

‘I’m not a cat, Charles.’ Tabatha lit a cigarette and smiled at the lawyer.

Purdey shuffled over and handed her a drink. ‘Yes, of course, my dear.’

Tabatha leaned forward in a familiar way towards the lawyer, who cringed back into his chair, not being a person much inclined to intimacy of any kind. ‘Are you a country person, Mr McCormack?’ Tabatha took a swig of her gin and didn’t wait for his response. ‘Of course you aren’t. Look at your suit – well, what’s left of it. No one of any sense is a country person. We’ve a house in London, you know. It has heating.’

‘Tabatha isn’t Highland-bred, you see. Not like us.’ Purdey smiled at the lawyer.

McCormack stared at the fireplace, perhaps hoping it would swallow him. ‘No, Charles, I’m not. Where I grew up we had heating and you couldn’t perform an ice ballet in the bathroom.’

Purdey abandoned his cigar and turned back towards his wife. ‘I’m trying to preserve a way of life, my dear. I don’t want to be the Purdey who abandoned the estate and let it go to people like bloody Tony Muir.’

‘Tony Muir?’ McCormack asked.

Tabatha exhaled a huge cloud of smoke in surprise. ‘You mean he’s not told you?’

McCormack looked mystified, which gave Tabatha the opportunity to launch in. ‘His estate is next door to ours. The man’s

absolutely loaded. He's one of those green people. *Plants trees.*'

Purdey shook his head sadly. 'He doesn't even shoot. What's the point of having a Highland estate if you don't shoot?'

'So he's into forestry – timber, you mean?'

Purdey pointed so vigorously that brandy splashed on to his trousers. 'No, no, that I could understand. He wants to re-forest the place, bring back the native woodland, so there can be beavers and wolves running about. It's ludicrous.'

'Charles, times are changing,' Tabatha said.

But Purdey flushed with indignation. 'He's a bloody lunatic, running an estate in sympathy with the environment. All nonsense – *I'm* the real conservationist. How many red grouse do you think there would be if it weren't for my efforts?'

Tabatha stubbed out her cigarette with venom. She was tired of hearing her husband profess his environmental credentials. 'Until you shoot them, that is.'

'Yes, that's right. What else would you do with them?'

'I suppose he doesn't do any harm?' McCormack said, writhing in his chair. The leather armchair was 200 years old and the springs had seen better days.

Purdey slammed his glass down on to the marble mantelpiece, sending a shower of fine brandy into the fire. 'Harm! Of course he does harm. If his lot ever get into power there's my subsidies up the spout. How do you think I could manage to keep all my lands going if the public didn't pay for them? Answer me that!'

McCormack didn't answer, but Tabatha had to agree with her husband for once. 'You are right there, Charles. People have no idea how expensive privilege is.'

‘We’re losing everything this country stood for,’ Purdey continued without drawing breath. ‘And all for some fairy tale of going back to living alongside nature. The modern population can’t be sustained alongside wildlife. It stands to reason.’

Tabatha rolled her eyes, sensing that her husband was about to plunge head first into one of his rants.

‘Well, I won’t let it happen. He wants to bring back beavers – I’m going to prove they spread disease. The dirty little tree-cutters.’

McCormack squirmed again, but there was no escape.

Tabatha took a swig of gin. *Here we go. It’ll be the flag first.*

‘Do you see that flag?’

Purdey pointed to a tattered ensign hanging limply above the fire. The design on the red flag was faded but it was still possible to discern the figure of a nobleman flogging a peasant.

‘My forebears fought under that banner at Culloden,’ Purdey said with a gleam in his eye. ‘When all others wanted to retreat, the Purdeys stood firm. Our family motto is “ne’er take a backward step”. As the redcoats charged and the other clans ran we stood firm. That’s courage.’

Tabatha snorted. ‘Or pig-headed stubbornness.’

Enraged, Purdey reached beneath the banner and drew an old battered sword. He leaned forward with it as if the redcoats were charging towards him down the great hall at that very moment. ‘This is the Purdey sword! Three hundred years of history. Ne’er a backward step!’

McCormack leaned back into his chair, concerned that the furious aristocrat might decapitate him with a careless gesture. ‘What happened?’

Purdey lowered the sword; suddenly all the fight had left him. ‘Slaughtered to a man, of course. But at least they showed spirit.’

There was a knock on the heavy wood-panelled doors, which once more sent the demon dachshunds snarling across the room.

‘Boys!’ Tabatha said sternly, and the dogs scuttled back beneath her chair.

‘Come,’ Lord Purdey yelled.

Donald entered the room. He was carrying a large duffel bag.

‘It’s Friday, m’lud,’ Donald said quietly, keeping his eyes firmly on the polished wooden floor.

Tabatha looked up in alarm. ‘Is it? Already? It feels like it was Friday only yesterday.’

‘Thank you, Donald, but we don’t want to put you to any trouble.’ Purdey glanced across to his guest, who was offering a tentative yet benign smile at the old ghillie.

‘Och, it’s nae trouble, sir. I have the instrument here.’ Donald unzipped the holdall and began struggling with a collection of pipes and a tartan bag.

Purdey looked alarmed. Tabatha rose and attempted to shoo Donald away as though he were an errant child. The dachshunds began to emit a low growl.

To all this Donald was oblivious and swung the bagpipes on to his shoulder with obvious delight.

Tabatha was a formidable woman but even she went weak at the knees at the sight of Donald preparing to play. ‘Honestly, Donald, there’s no need for you to trouble yourself.’

The dogs were now snarling ferociously from beneath the

chaise longue where Tabatha had been smoking moments before.

Donald drew himself up to his full height. ‘Och, but ye know the tradition.’

‘Oh, what tradition is that?’ the lawyer said, brightening.

‘Every Friday night when Lord Purdey is in residence,’ Donald said with a respectful cough, ‘the head stalker – that’s massehl – must play him a lament after dinner. That has been the practice for over 150 years.’

‘Splendid,’ McCormack declared.

Tabatha deflated like an oversized balloon. *Victoria started it. Damned woman.*

Purdey slumped back, defeated, and finished his brandy in one huge swallow. ‘If you insist, Donald.’

Donald put the chanter to his lips and a sound like a tortured whale escaped. At that instant the four dachshunds whimpered pathetically and bolted shrieking down the corridor. The dogs were the lucky ones; for the humans there was no escape. Donald was unique as a piper for he could summon from the instrument a sound so staggeringly awful that, in another age, his piping would have been used as a weapon of war (today it would be banned by the Geneva Conventions). Purdey drove his fingers into the arm of his chair and writhed.

When at last Donald took the pipes from his lips the instrument subsided like the death throes of some evil beast from the centre of the earth.

Tabatha leapt from her chair with amazing speed, thrust a glass of whisky into Donald’s hand, and propelled him out of the dining room while muttering her gratitude to the man.

McCormack mopped his brow with his handkerchief. 'My God, I never heard anything like that.'

Tabatha lit another cigarette and inhaled greedily. 'No one has ever heard anything like that.' She coughed as the smoke caught her lungs. 'Of course, the man went stone deaf a few years ago. Can hardly hear a thing.'

'Must have come as a welcome release,' McCormack said.



# SPRING

## CHAPTER 3

If you stood on the steps of Inverness town hall with your back against one of the two stone pillars that flank its ornate doors, on a Thursday night at half past eight precisely, you would see Angus Sutherland walking down the High Street to meet with the other members of the Highland Mountaineering Club. Angus had lost count of the number of times he had walked down the hill from his home in the Crown district to cross the river to where the club met in the narrow streets of the town's old fishing community. He was always punctual – something he was proud of. He thrust his hands deeper into the pockets of his jacket, feeling the chill wind blowing up from the River Ness. As he passed the Gellions pub, the town's oldest, a blast of music hit from the open door and the burly doorman nodded to Angus, having grown used to seeing him.

Usually Angus looked forward to his nights with his friends but tonight he felt uneasy as he headed towards the modern bridge across the river. Above him towered Inverness Castle. A Victorian creation, it now housed the courts that passed judgement on the people of the Highlands. Its ruddy sandstone bulk dominated the centre of the town, as if it had been erected as a threat to remind the residents of the Highlands to keep on the right side of the law. The new castle stood on the remains of the old – which Bonnie Prince Charlie had blown up on his

way to establish a range of gift shops across the Highlands, and, if the maps are to be believed, visit just about every mountain cave in existence. A tourist bus rolled past as Angus waited to cross to the bridge, its recorded commentary telling a busload of bemused Japanese tourists how a French soldier and his dog had set the explosives under the castle only to be blown across the river when they went off.

As he crossed the bridge Angus remembered when he had left Aberdeen to work in the Highland capital. Thirty years ago, the centre of Inverness was full of pubs and churches. On Sundays the city's residents were to be found in one or the other and frequently both. Now the church congregations were ageing and dwindling, and even the pubs, once packed, were closing down. The town had grown immensely since Angus had moved here. There had been only small one supermarket when he arrived, but the megastores of multinationals now circled the place like invading armies. The heart of the town, like cities up and down the country, was dying, with many old businesses replaced by charity shops.

Normally it took Angus twenty minutes to walk the mile from his house to the bar but tonight he slowed. Something was keeping him back. He stopped, took out his pipe, and leaned against the railings, watching the Ness catching the reflections of the street lights as it rushed by on its short journey from Loch Ness to the sea. His mind replayed the scene of Rory being swallowed by the avalanche. He watched again as Rory reached desperately for the rock and hauled himself to safety. Angus knew that if he'd been a foot further from the rock, or even six inches, the outcome might have been different. They'd been lucky.

Then a memory from almost thirty years ago flooded his mind and he was walking again on a sunlit day towards the savage cliffs of Ben Nevis with a tall, blond young man. James pointed to the ice-wreathed face of the mountain and grinned. Angus found his gaze drawn to a ragged ice gully that swept up the towering cliffs and on until it reached the summit.

He heard James say, 'It looks brilliant.'

Angus was standing at the foot of the climb, hammering a steel peg into a crack in the rock, and then he was watching James climbing, steadily hacking his way up the gully. The day was perfect: cold, sunlit, still. He could feel the rope running through his hands, then he heard James call down from above.

'I'm on belay. Climb when you're ready.'

Angus tore himself away from the memory as if it were a physical thing, slamming a door on a room he dare not enter. He was back standing beside the river, hands gripping the railings so hard they hurt.

He pushed the memory away. 'Stupid old git.'

He should head for the pub, he'd be late, but something kept him rooted to the railings. Thirty years was a long time to wander the mountains. He was slower now, less agile, and when he walked down a steep hill his knees creaked and sent bolts of pain up his legs. Years ago he'd looked at the old men in the mountaineering club and thought them grey, bumbling fools. Now that it was his beard that was flecked, his waist that had thickened, was that what they thought of him? Perhaps that's why fewer and fewer members came on a Thursday evening. When he'd joined the club it was vibrant with young men and women who loved the mountains but now there were few

young people like Rory. What did he think of him – an old fool, perhaps? After all, Angus had nearly led him to his death that winter's day. *Maybe I've become an irrelevant relic.*

'Don't do it, Angus!'

A woman's voice cut through his thoughts. He turned and Rory's wife Jen was smiling at him. She was small and slim and her long blond hair blew in the wind as she stood with her hands driven into the pockets of her padded blue jacket.

His face must have shown something of how he felt because she spoke to him again in her lilting Yorkshire accent, gently this time. 'Now then, are you all right, Angus?'

He couldn't tell her he had just been thinking about how close her husband had come to dying at the weekend. He couldn't tell her he was wondering if it was time to put the mountains behind him. He was the president of the mountaineering club, an important position.

He wasn't very good at lying. 'Er, I was just ... watching the river.'

He wasn't very good at guessing women's ages either; she was maybe thirty, and her large brown eyes seemed to be able to see right into his soul. 'Tha looks a bit shaken, Angus?' Jen said, reaching out and touching his arm.

Angus wasn't used to being touched by young women and he drew back. 'Nae, I'm fine.' *What would she think of me, an old man standing by the river struggling with memories?* 'Is Rory nae with you?'

Jen must have known he was changing the subject; she had worked long enough as a nurse to know when a man was trying to dip back behind a façade. 'Nah, I've just finished work.'

He'll be in't pub already.'

Angus detached himself from the railings and they began to walk the remaining few hundred yards to the little backstreet pub. 'Have you got any further with finding an island to live on?'

Jen shook her head and sighed. 'No, not really. His heart's set on it, though.'

Angus sensed she had doubts. 'Are you nae so sure?'

Jen bowed her head and watched her feet shuffle along the pavement. Angus couldn't see her face and wondered if she was trying to hide something. 'Aye, well, I want to go too, tha knows. But it's a big move.'

'I believe he hates that factory, though.' Angus knew Rory felt caged at work.

Jen stopped, looked at Angus, and nodded slowly. 'Aye, happen he does. I'd 'ave to leave the hospital.' Suddenly she brightened. 'Like my da used to say, if in doubt do nowt.'

Angus wondered if he was prying and saw that Jen was caught between her career and Rory's dreams. He had been so eager to divert the conversation from his own troubles that he hadn't been careful enough.

By now they were amongst the small riverside cottages that had been the homes of fishermen only 150 years ago. The streets were narrow here, and the houses huddled together, as if for warmth. The tiny bar in Celt Street was little more than an old cottage itself, with a triangular extension built on the rear to accommodate the lounge bar.

Jen smiled at Angus as she stepped nimbly up the steps and through the double doors. Perhaps both of them were happier to enter the bar and escape a conversation that was straying into

sensitive, personal places.

The lounge bar of the Thistle Inn was comfortable and warm. A deep-green tartan carpet covered the floor and the walls were bedecked with pictures of old Inverness and fierce warriors swathed in plaid. Just like most bars in the Highlands, it had been designed to appear as though Bonnie Prince Charlie had just left, harking back to a mythical time when kilted Highlanders strode about the glens in search of shortbread. It suited the small club of outdoor folk: it was unpretentious, and small enough that on some nights the club would have the place to themselves. Two tables had been pulled close together so people could gather round. The club was a jumble of folk of different ages, many of whom had been members for many years, but few had turned out for the club's weekly meet – Angus spotted only half a dozen or so members in the small bar.

Jen spotted Rory and kissed him affectionately on the cheek. He turned and smiled, and she sat down next to him. 'Made any plans?' she said.

Rory put down his pint. 'Not yet, I was waiting for Angus. He's late.'

Angus came back from the bar with a Guinness for himself, lager for Rory and red wine for Jen. He didn't need to ask; he knew them both so well.

Rory grinned and raised his glass in salute. 'What time do you call this?'

Angus glanced at Jen, hoping she wouldn't say anything. 'It's only ten minutes.'

Jen took a sip of her red wine. 'Nah then, Rory, stop mithering him. He were watchin' ducks. Isn't that right, Angus?'

Angus nodded, looking down into the creamy head of his Guinness, hoping that would be the end of the conversation.

Rory laughed. 'Ducks? Are you becoming interested in wild-life at last, Angus?'

Angus screwed up his face. Perhaps Jen decided it was time to change the subject to save him any more embarrassment, for she turned to Brian, who was sitting at the table in silence as usual. 'Ow do, Brian. Ow's it going?'

Brian nodded and smiled and looked as though he was going to speak for a moment, but then he decided against it and took another sip of his orange juice.

Jen turned back to the others. 'Nah then. What's tha planning for this weekend?'

Rory could never focus on anything for very long and brightened at the question. He was always keen to spend some time in the hills. 'I was thinking of maybe heading to a bothy Saturday night. What do you think, Angus?'

Angus had visited just about every remote shelter in the Highlands. He had spent long, solitary nights in the bothies of Scotland's north coast and shivered in the high bothies of the Cairngorms. His romance with these places began when he was a boy. As a ten-year-old he had followed his father's great rucksack, rattling with pans and provisions, up over the long hill track to a solitary cottage called Shenavall in the heart of the mountains. His young legs had almost given out before they arrived at the bothy door, but once inside he'd felt as if he'd stumbled into a secret world populated by wild mountain men and women.

The impressions of that night still lived with Angus now. He could smell the smoke and almost taste the fried bacon.

At night he'd lain in his sleeping bag, tired but struggling to stave off sleep, listening to the folk in the bothy as they swapped stories of adventures, laughed, drank and sang songs together. As he drifted off to sleep it was as if he were a continent away from the neat semi-detached house he shared with his parents and sister on the edge of Aberdeen.

Ever since that first, tantalising glimpse of another world, he had spent most of his adult life travelling the high places of Scotland, climbing on the cliffs or wandering along the high ridges. His days in the hills had been what gave his life colour; he'd treasured those days, but he realised now that perhaps that love affair was coming to an end.

'I believe I could do with a night in the hills,' he heard himself say, but the words had been spoken from habit. Something had changed.

Rory looked pleased a plan was being formed. 'Sounds good to me. Maybe a hill as well. Do you fancy coming, Jen? You're off this weekend.'

Jen looked a little doubtful. 'Aye, maybe. What's the weather doing? I don't fancy a soaking.'

'Sunshine and showers,' Brian announced to everyone's surprise.

Angus was thoughtful for a moment. 'Well, you know what that means.'

'It could do absolutely anything,' they all said in unison and laughed.

Brian drew himself up. Angus sensed another announcement was coming. 'Better in the west.'

Angus thought for a moment, running through all the

bothies he knew, searching for just the right one. ‘Have you been to Bearnais?’

Rory shook his head.

Angus remembered a small stone building set deep in the hills and surrounded by tall mountains. ‘It’s not too far from Loch Carron. Quite a walk in, you ken.’

‘I’m up for it.’ Rory turned to Jen. ‘What about you?’

Jen hesitated and swirled the red liquid about in her glass. ‘Aye, why not? I’ve not been away for weeks.’ Her face brightened.

The decision had been made but Angus felt a strange reluctance he couldn’t explain. ‘It’s a quiet, remote place. We probably won’t see another soul.’

Then the talk turned to hills and there was a spirited discussion on which was the most difficult bothy to get to.

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Rory was halfway through his second pint of lager when he noticed Angus had barely touched his Guinness and was sitting gazing far away. ‘You all right?’ Rory asked quietly.

Angus nodded and said, ‘I’m fine.’

Rory could see he wasn’t fine. He was about to press him again when, to his surprise, Angus pulled his pipe out of his pocket and stood up.

‘Let’s go outside, I need a smoke.’

The air was cold and the wind made Rory pull his jacket tighter as they stepped out into the narrow street. Angus filled his pipe with Irish Cask and they both stood in silence as he went through the ritual of lighting it.

Angus turned to Rory. ‘About last weekend ... I’m sorry,

that was my fault.’

Rory was surprised by how serious Angus had suddenly become. ‘It wasn’t your fault.’

Angus shook his head, almost dropping his pipe. ‘Nae, it was. I should have known that slope was risky.’

Rory could see Angus was tortured by what happened, but there was no reason for it – they had both known what they were doing when they decided to cross that slope. ‘Jesus, Angus, you can’t bloody blame yourself for that. I got out—’

Angus cut in with anger in his voice now. ‘You widnae have been there if it hadn’t been for me. What if you hadnae got out, Rory? What then?’

It was Rory’s turn to be vehement now. ‘These things happen. You know that. We’d never do anything if we worried about the risk.’

Angus was silent. Rory could tell that he was struggling to contain himself. He reached out and put a hand on the older man’s shoulder. ‘Angus,’ he said quietly, ‘don’t blame yourself. I knew the risks.’

Angus shook his head slowly, drawing on his pipe. ‘I saw you and Jen together and I thought ... What would I have said?’

Angus was quiet again and it seemed to Rory that his mind was somewhere else, perhaps a different place or time, but it was somewhere Rory couldn’t follow.

Angus smoked in silence for a few moments and when at last he spoke it was in a serious tone Rory had not heard him use before. ‘I’m thinking it’s time I packed this in, ken. I believe I’m a liability.’

Rory leaned against the pub doorway, watching Angus smoke.

There seemed a finality in his words. ‘Angus, don’t be ...’ Rory tried to find something to say.

Angus tugged at his grey beard and knocked out his pipe on the brickwork of the old inn. He turned and went quickly back into the pub. ‘I cannae do that again.’

Rory was left standing in the street wondering *what* Angus couldn’t do again.

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Later that night, Jen and Rory sat together on the sofa of their small flat on the edge of the town centre, watching with little interest the end of a panel show. The walls of the flat were covered with mementos of their lives in the hills. Friends smiled out at them from pictures of windy summits. Rock faces glowered down from some images, and in others ice-covered summits glittered in long-remembered sunlit winter days. Here and there Rory’s other passions spoke from the walls. There were images of pine martens, badgers, eagles and barn owls alongside the climbing photographs, as if these creatures were more friends from the outdoors.

Jen nuzzled her face into Rory’s neck, but Rory was distant and preoccupied. ‘Do you think Angus is right – we should think about disbanding the HMC?’

Jen swirled her coffee. ‘Well, if there are fewer and fewer members ... isn’t it kind of inevitable?’

Rory shifted on the sofa as though the thought made him uncomfortable. ‘Yeah, but Angus is very proud of the club and being president and everything.’

‘Tha have to be realistic. When that club started fewer

people had transport – they had to share lifts. Now everybody drives. There's not the same need for huts neither. Everywhere in't Highlands is accessible in a couple of hours' drive.'

Rory turned away from the TV and gave Jen a gentle squeeze. 'When we go to our island that could be the last straw for the club. Losing us could make up Angus's mind.'

Jen looked back at the TV, not wanting Rory to see the look in her eyes. A group of celebrities she'd never heard of were trying to unscramble the names of film stars on a board. 'Well, that might not be for a while yet.'

'Can't come soon enough though, can it, Jen?'

'No, love, no it can't.'

But moving to some remote island and living off carrots with no TV or internet and having to travel for over a day to get to a decent shop sounded like a nightmare to Jen. She had loved Rory from the first time they had climbed a hill together two summers ago. She liked how earnest he was and how much he cared about the planet. She even loved the fact that he was a hopeless dreamer, and, for a long time had thought that Rory's dream of moving to a remote island was simply a dream. At first she'd told him how great it all sounded, how much she would enjoy the solitude and being far from traffic fumes, not having to fit in with the nine-to-five routine. She had told him that because she thought it was one of his daydreams that would slip away like the idea for an organic brewery and his plan to become a woodcarver. But this particular daydream had taken root in Rory's mind. Now Jen's big worry was how to talk him out of it without it coming between them. As the credits rolled and he said something about bedtime she decided that now was

not the time – she'd just have to hope that something brought him to his senses.

She knew his moods now, how he could move from optimism to dark gloom in under an hour. She realised early on in their time together that unless he could counter the dark drudgery of his weekdays in BetterLife with weekends on the hills he would sink into a depression. Sometimes she went with him to the bothies he loved but in the winter she would stay at home and let him have his caveman times out in the wilds. Normally she didn't worry, but his close shave with the avalanche had given her an uneasy sensation – and, sometimes, when her work as a nurse allowed her time to think, she would feel her stomach churn. Those who adventure in remote places can see their fears and know when life hangs in a fleeting moment, but those who wait for them suffer a greater torment, for the imagination knows darker places than reality will ever see.

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Jen stopped for a moment and adjusted her hood as the rain intensified on the steep climb over the hill to the bothy. They had been walking for a couple of hours, and the forecast sunshine and showers had turned out to be a five-minute sunburst followed by two hours of heavy rain. Now water was beginning to find its way past the defences of her cagoule, seeping down her neck and wriggling like cold fingertips up the sleeves of her jacket.

Rory, as always, was striding on ahead. Looking down the hill Jen could see Angus plodding steadily upwards a few hundred yards behind, obviously struggling. She stopped to

let him catch up, not wanting the older man to feel he couldn't match her pace.

Angus came to a halt beside her. He was red-faced and sweating heavily underneath his waterproofs. 'Bloody hell, I'd forgotten it was this steep.'

Jen laughed. 'Aye, it's always steeper than tha thinks.'

The rain eased a little as they neared the crest of the ridge, although the wind increased and great sweeping curtains of rain swept across the sky. Rory was still ahead when he stopped, yelled something Jen couldn't hear, and pointed to the sky. Jen pushed the hood of her cagoule back and gazed upwards. A hundred feet above them a dark shape weaved out of the clouds.

'Eagle!' Jen yelled.

The huge bird soared out of the sky, so close now they could see the feathers on the tips of its wings spread like the fingers of a hand. Jen had seen golden eagles before but every sighting was special. For her no other bird symbolised the wild places so much as the eagle, with its majestic size and effortless mastery of the air. Every day she saw an eagle was a memorable day; to glimpse these wild creatures was a privilege.

She'd been with Rory when she'd seen her first eagle. Two years ago now – the first time they had gone out into the mountains together. She had thought him a little odd and awkward at first. He seemed never to settle in a chair but then she had seen him moving in the mountains and noticed he had a remarkable grace. Out in the hills he was at ease; up here she saw a different Rory, full of passion for the outdoors.

The eagle that day had taken her by surprise. She remembered him turning to her, eyes bright with excitement. 'Look, look

there,' he'd said. She had tried to follow his gaze but could see nothing. He'd laughed at her, told her she was blind. Then he had turned her gently towards the eagle, and stood behind her so that she could look along his arm to see where he was pointing. Then she'd seen it. It was like catching sight of God.

She had felt him close to her as they watched that bird. She could feel the excitement coursing through his hands as he too marvelled at the creature.

'Look up, Jen. You need to learn to look up.'

He was right, she'd known that; she had spent most of her life looking down. She'd been fastidious in school, worked hard at university, and when she'd started nursing she was always the one with her nose in books working for better grades. She had never been one of those girls coming back from a club late at night, laughing too loudly.

Rory had taught her to look up and she had loved him from that moment.

Back in the present, they watched the eagle until it vanished over a ridge, covering in only a few minutes a distance it would take them hours to hike. They walked on and at last reached the top of the ridge. Jen had never been to this part of the Highlands before and now the landscape opened up before her in an unending sea of rolling ridges, deep glens and snow-flecked summits.

Angus pointed. 'There's the bothy doon there.'

Far below, Jen could make out the grey slate roof of a building nestling in the valley floor.

Angus grabbed his map and peered at the scene below. 'That track was nae here last time.'

Rory pointed to another track. 'That looks new as well.'

'Bloody hell, I can see at least four new tracks.'

An hour later Jen felt the soles of her boots hit the hard gravel of the first track. From above, the roads had looked like thin grey lines, but close up they were wide enough for two lorries to pass and their surfaces were like compacted concrete.

'This place used to be quiet and peaceful,' Angus said in a low voice. 'Now look at it.'

The tracks were torn into the flesh of the earth. Great ditches either side showed black where the peat beneath the heather had been savaged by the steel teeth of a bulldozer. The streams that would have crossed the track were corralled into culverts or diverted away. What had been open hillside was now shredded by long, man-made scars.

Rory shook his head sadly. 'Look at the place. Devastated. Like I told you, these bloody hill tracks are everywhere.'

Rory led off the mile to the bothy and Jen followed with Angus close behind.

They had only walked a few hundred yards when something roared behind them – a massive, mechanical sound – and the ground shook. Jen turned. A digger the height of a double-decker bus was bearing down on them. The beast ground to a halt and stood with its diesel engine rumbling. The window of the cab about ten feet above them slid open and a cheerful-looking driver popped his head out.

'All right. Where are you geezers going?' The driver sounded like he had come a long way from south London.

'We're heading for the bothy,' Rory yelled up over the sound of the machine.

A bemused look came over the driver's face. 'Blimey, bit of a rough gaff that. You wouldn't catch me stopping there.'

Angus called up to the driver. 'What are all these new tracks for?'

The driver beamed, as though delivering good news. 'For the hydro schemes, mate. There's four of 'em 'ere.'

'Used to be such a quiet place, this.'

'Will you bury the tracks when the work's finished?' Rory asked.

The driver looked puzzled. 'Nah, mate, that's not on the cards. Why would you want to do that?'

It seemed so obvious to Jen. 'To restore it to the way it were, like.'

The driver scratched his head and surveyed the hillside. 'There weren't nothing here before we put the tracks in, darlin'. Place was just bleedin' empty.'

The driver was right. Before the hydroelectric schemes, the glen was empty and silent. Save for the sheep, the deer and the occasional walker, there was nothing. We have yet to learn that nothing is something.

At last they found the stone shelter nestling beside a small stream. It was a simple one-roomed building with a couple of crude benches and a table at one end. Jen was happy to sit on one of the benches and watch as the two men went into their well-rehearsed routine, unpacking stoves and pans and spreading out sleeping bags. She smiled to herself as she watched Angus setting up his little stove. Laura, Angus's wife, had told Jen that she wouldn't let him into the kitchen at home, yet out here he took a delight in sorting out his food and preparing a basic meal.

Laura never came to bothies – she had once described them as dirty little hovels – and couldn't understand how Jen could like them. Jen's hospital shifts meant that weekend leave was infrequent so she couldn't join Rory as much as she'd have liked. But she did enjoy bothies, even if they were rough, masculine places full of dust and spiders. Besides, Rory was always happy in a bothy, and she liked to watch him forget about life in the factory, even if only for a few hours.

At last darkness fell and the three of them relaxed in front of the small fire as the world shrank to the arch of their candlelight.

Angus blew out a circle of pipe smoke. 'I see they've finally stopped.'

Rory peered out of the window and into the darkness of the glen, searching for headlights. 'Yeah, they must have packed it up for the night.'

Jen looked at her watch. 'Six thirty. They'll be off home for their snap.'

Angus turned to her, looking quizzical. 'Fit?'

'Snap? It's Yorkshire for a meal,' Jen said with a laugh.

Rory was also laughing. 'One broad Yorkshire and the other an Aberdonian. It's a miracle either of you can understand the other.'

Angus shook his head. 'I'm nae broad at all, you ken. I've lost most of my Aberdonian. My faether spoke the Doric – yer two from south of the border widnae have understood him.'

There was a warmth in the way Angus spoke. He had no prejudice against them because of their English roots, unlike some Jen had encountered in her work at the hospital who saw nothing wrong with labelling her a white settler.

Angus put down his pipe. ‘This place used to be so peaceful. My faether brought me here when I was nowt but a loon. Now there’s great bulldozed tracks all over it’

‘I see them everywhere I go,’ Rory said. ‘New tracks tearing up the hills.’

Jen took a sip of wine and felt the rich liquid bring a warm glow to her stomach. ‘Aye, but these are for hydroelectric schemes. Maybe we has to accept ‘em if we want green energy.’

Rory shook his head slowly. ‘No, no way. The amount of energy these hydro schemes generate is tiny. Not worth the damage they do. They’re everywhere you go.’ He turned to Jen. ‘You remember that remote bothy we went to last year when we saw the seal pups in Sutherland?’

She remembered a long boggy walk and rain beating on the windows out of night so dark it seemed able to swallow light. Then, in the morning, they had walked to a small shingle beach and crouched in the heather watching tiny helpless seal pups being tended by their mothers. Rory had been so excited. He had grown up on Merseyside, beside a river so polluted it was slick with oil. Seeing somewhere so wild had made him like a small boy again and she had laughed at him.

Jen nodded.

‘Well they’re building a bloody space-launch site there. It’s a disgrace.’ Rory stood, as if the thought of it made him restless.

Angus scratched his beard, something Jen realised he often did when troubled. He took a puff on his pipe while he formed his words. ‘It’s nae that simple, you ken. Sutherland’s population has been in decline for a long time. The whole area is struggling to survive. It’ll bring jobs, revive the area. I don’t want tae see

the place spoiled, same as you min, but what can yer do?’

There was silence for a few moments until Angus spoke again. ‘Do you ken how few folk are coming tae the club these days?’

‘Aye, ’appen it’s been quiet these past weeks,’ Jen said.

‘When I started climbing,’ Angus said, ‘you went to a club if yer wanted to find the whereabouts of a bothy or a climb. Yer asked folk. Now it’s all online. Folk don’t meet each other any more.’

Rory shovelled a few lumps of coal on to the fire, which hissed gratefully back. ‘People still meet in bothies, places like this. Maybe this is the last bastion of the real world.’

Jen laughed. Perhaps Rory was right; perhaps these crude shelters did give people refuge from a world full of noise and technology.

‘It’ll pick up in the summer, you’ll see,’ Rory said.

Angus suddenly became grave. ‘Well, if it disnae I am seriously thinking we’ll have to disband the HMC.’

‘Oh, come on. It’s not at that stage yet,’ Rory said.

There was something different about Angus, Jen thought. In the space of only a week he’d aged, grown less sure of himself. This was a new Angus. The old Angus had always been confident and determined but somehow he had lost the old drive.

Rory got to his feet. ‘You need some tea, man. Cheer you up.’ He picked up the kettle and stepped out of the low wooden door to fetch water.

Jen watched Angus staring into the fire. ‘He really respects you, tha knows.’

Angus looked surprised. ‘Really?’

‘Aye, says he knows nowt about the hills compared to thee.’

Angus smiled and made an odd embarrassed grunt. Jen was pleased to see he’d brightened a little.

The door opened and Rory came back into the sanctuary of the bothy sloshing water from the kettle. ‘There’s someone coming, I could see a head torch.’

Jen lit the stove and put the kettle down on to the hissing flames.

There was a rattle and the door burst open. A young man, dressed in brand-new lightweight kit, entered the bothy backwards, filming himself with his phone. ‘Here I am, day twenty-three, entering Bearnais bothy,’ he muttered into the device.

He turned the camera on the three bothy dwellers sitting by the fire. ‘Here are some people staying in the bothy.’

There was a beep from a device clipped to his waist, and then an electronic voice spoke. ‘You have stopped. You have stopped.’

The young man pulled down his hood and grinned.

Angus whispered to Rory, ‘Bloody hell, he looks about twelve.’

Jen called over to the young man. ‘Nah then, Luke Skywalker, does tha want a brew?’

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Monday morning arrived like an unwelcome guest and Rory’s weekend visit to the bothy retreated into memory. The factory corridor was long and the polished floor echoed with the footsteps of incoming workers. Rory followed the long line of men and women. Most would be heading for the mind-numbing tedium of the production line, others for only marginally less

mundane jobs in offices with doors marked Engineering or Product Development. It didn't really matter where you were going on this production line of humanity; whatever you were doing you were a cog in the machine of this vast American multinational. BetterLife was the biggest commercial employer in the Highlands, and the only real option if you weren't in the council or the NHS or didn't want to spend your life making endless hotel beds.

Rory slammed a coin into the coffee machine and hit the button for black. There was a mechanical gurgling and a dark liquid poured into his cup with the plastic aroma of chemically simulated coffee. He popped the top on to his cup, sighed, and tramped off down the corridor. Yesterday he had been a free man; today he was a worker bee heading into the hive. The latest memo had said that you had to walk on the right-hand side of every corridor, just like they drive on the right in America. This, the memo had said, was for 'staff safety' and to 'ease the passage of personnel in the production unit'. Rory resented being told how to walk down a corridor by corporate America.

In a few years' time this corridor would probably be full of robots beeping along in orderly lines, and folk like him would be out of a job. Until then, however, the corporation did its best to turn its human workers into machines.

At last he came to the small, windowless laboratory where he would spend the next eight hours. Inside, the hum of the air conditioning greeted him and he reluctantly wedged himself into the plastic chair. There was nothing natural here. Everything was hard metal or plastic. He had learned a few tricks over his two years in this place that got him through

the day. Trick number one was to look at the clock as little as possible. Trick number two, he put on headphones and vanished into a podcast. It didn't matter what he listened to; the podcasts opened up an unregulated world into which his mind could retreat and he could explore at will. Most of all he listened to stand-up comedy. Even while his fingers were typing up the results of thousands and thousands of tests his mind could be in a cellar in New York listening to a comedian undermining the very system that Rory hated. It was his little secret world, and when he couldn't escape to the hills he would go there in an attempt to preserve some sanity.

The morning slipped past him in a glacial tide of figures until at last lunchtime approached and he could head down to the canteen. The company had introduced a vegan option on the menu after he had badgered them for months, but he didn't trust them to have avoided all animal products so he always brought his own lunch. Today Jen had made him a couscous salad. She was a vegetarian, but he could never persuade her to take the final step and turn vegan – she liked cheese too much for that. He ate with one hand and opened the browser on his phone with the other.

There was news on Twitter about legislation heading for the Scottish parliament that would mean landowners would have to get planning permission for hill tracks. Rory had been following this for months. At least that would be a start in controlling the unregulated growth of hill tracks across the mountains of Scotland – better than the current position, where any hill track was acceptable provided there was an agricultural reason for it (which was often dubious at best).

It saddened him that the tracks they had seen at the weekend must have already had planning permission. Maybe the new legislation would be a beginning.

The memory of the hill tracks slashing across the landscape, and the rumble of the earth movers ripping up the hillside, flooded into Rory's memory. He stood in the treeless glen again and saw the barren hillsides rolling endlessly away, a wet, green desert. The mountains bereft of life, empty of creatures save for countless sheep and deer, their teeth nibbling any attempt by the forest to return. This was the earth scoured, lifeless, near dead. *What could this place be like?* he wondered. *What if the trees came back?* Then he stood in that glen again but saw a different place. This time there were trees reaching up high above him like a rolling sea, their twisted boughs hung with lichen, birds flitting to and fro as they sought out seeds and insects. On the forest floor roamed wolves and lynx while the air itself was thick with insects and the calls of birds and animals. *It could be like that,* he thought, *not everywhere, but at least somewhere. We have sacrificed this land to the gods of greed. We should ask these mountains for forgiveness and give them back their children.*

Rory was lost in thought when he became aware of someone sitting opposite him at the table. He looked up and saw a thickset, middle-aged man. His skin was slightly tanned and he wore a beige suit. Rory realised at once that he was one of the managers BetterLife had brought over from America. They always wore beige, as though any other colour might make them stand out as an individual. When Rory started at the factory two years ago, he had tried to talk to these people, but with few exceptions he

found them to be corporate clones. Most, from what he could tell, had little life outside of work and no family connections; they were married to the company. Rory had labelled them ‘the beige people’.

The American made eye contact. ‘Hi,’ Rory said.

The American hesitated eating his steak. ‘Hi.’

Rory could see he was struggling to find something to say. Eventually the American spoke again. ‘Did you have a good weekend?’

Rory realised that the American hadn’t the slightest interest in what he’d done over the last couple of days. Perhaps he’d read the question in some company manual about how to talk to underlings.

‘I went to a bothy.’

The American chewed his steak. ‘Bothy?’

‘They’re basic shelters in the mountains. No power or running water, just a house with a fireplace. Old shepherds’ cottages,’ Rory said between mouthfuls of couscous.

The American looked at him in amazement. ‘And you sleep there? Don’t the old shepherds mind?’

Now it was Rory’s turn to grin. ‘No, I mean they used to be shepherds’ cottages, years ago. But not any more.’

‘Oh right. So what does it cost?’

Rory shrugged; it felt like he was passing on a secret. ‘They’re free.’

The man in beige struggled with that idea even more. Things are never free in corporate America. ‘So you just book, right?’

‘No, you just show up.’

‘What if there’s someone else there?’

‘Sometimes there is, sometimes there isn’t. You just kind of share.’

‘So anyone could just show up. Sounds a bit like the Wild West.’

Rory cast his mind back over a hundred bothy nights and nodded. ‘Yes, sometimes it is.’

They lapsed into silence and Rory returned to browsing Twitter. There were lots of photos from mountain people he knew, mostly of folk grinning beside bothy fires or waving in spectacular snow scenes. Mountaineers are fascinated by snow’s ability to transform landscapes. Then he read a comment about a west-coast farmer who had spoken at a conference, warning that sea eagles would migrate to the east coast of Scotland and bring catastrophe to the farming industry.

Rory knew there was no evidence for this, but the landowners’ lobby was powerful and would make claims without the slightest scientific support.

He couldn’t resist tweeting back: ‘It sounds like pretty much anything could bring an end to Scottish farming. Sea eagles could do it, beavers, a rise in the butterfly population or a vegan cycling past.’

Then he got up from the table and headed off for another four hours in his work cell.

## CHAPTER 4

The glen was silent that morning, filled with the dull grey light of winter, as Donald steered the Land Rover up the hill on to the higher slopes of the Black Moor. The hard gravel of the track jolted the steering wheel painfully in his hands, but, despite the discomfort, he was glad of these hill roads.

Donald looked over to the passenger side where Hamish sat awkwardly, his big frame wedged into the seat, typing a message into his phone.

‘I’m awful glad we dinnae have to walk all the way up here. I’m glad we put these tracks in, Hamish boy.’

Hamish didn’t look up, intent on his phone, playing with his ginger locks with his free hand. ‘Aye, right enough.’

‘Whit? Speak up.’ Donald watched Hamish typing. ‘Youse always on that bloody phone.’

Hamish shrugged. ‘Donald, will you get off ma case? Everyone my age uses the phone all the time. Have you even got a phone?’

Donald fumbled in his jacket and produced an old phone. ‘Of course I have. Who you messaging anyway?’

Hamish grinned mischievously. ‘I’m just telling some lassie how gorgeous she is, and letting me mum know what time I’ll be home for tea.’

‘This yer bird, then?’ The phone slipped from Donald’s

fingers and fell into the footwell. 'Bugger.'

Hamish laughed. 'No, just some girl I met in Thurso when I was on the deerstalking course last year. They fair go for the tweed, you know.' Hamish stroked his jacket affectionally.

Donald shook his head. Two weeks in a classroom and the young man thought he knew everything. How could he make him understand things that took a lifetime to learn? Hamish was young and ambitious and, just as young men always do, he wanted everything and he wanted it now and wasn't too worried about how he got it. It had taken Donald a long time to work his way up to head stalker, many years of patiently learning his craft. It was thirty years now since he'd taken the train north from his home in Glasgow and made a life here among these hills. That's a long time out in the wind and rain. He'd been back to Glasgow a few times but felt like an outsider there amongst all the clamour and the people. The place of his birth held little for him now, save memories of his father staggering about drunk and swearing at him, or of his mother, pale, sad-eyed and slowly turning her back on the family.

They reached the end of the track. Donald brought the vehicle to a halt and turned off the engine. Excited barking exploded from the back as the three spaniels riding in the cage, realising that their time to roam the hills was at hand, bounded about with excitement.

'Quiet!' Hamish yelled.

Donald stepped out of the Land Rover. The cold March wind took him by surprise and his fingers quickly numbed as he shrank into the comfort of his tweed jacket. Great grey clouds rolled above them, and white waves of snow wandered across

the mountains, dusting the tops as they passed.

The dogs leapt out on to the track, their noses filled with a thousand scents and tails wagging with uncontrollable excitement. Hamish handed Donald a shotgun and carefully examined the weapon he held in his own hands, heavy and cold and smelling of oil. The stock was engraved with hunting scenes and thistles.

Hamish turned the gun over in his hands. 'Have you ever wondered why Scotland has the thistle as an emblem? I mean, the English have got the rose, the Welsh have got pretty daffodils—'

'Aye, an' we've a flower that can stab yer in the arse,' Donald cut in. 'Says a lot about Scotland, that.'

Donald cast his eyes across the hillside. Where they had parked, the yellow grass, flattened by the snows of winter and starved of life by cold and darkness, was clear of snow. Above them the browns and yellows of the heather and grass gradually gave way to white. At first the snow lay in patches here and there, filling hollows and crevices that sheltered it from the sun. Higher, the air became frigid, and the patches of snow began to join together until the ground had turned white and the northern land was locked in winter.

'Let's not go too high. We'll never see the buggers in the snow,' Hamish called to the older man, speaking loudly and only when Donald was looking his way. The young man had learned to cope with his companion's disability, although Donald noticed that he avoided his baggiping as if it were a curse.

Donald rubbed his hands against the cold, watching as Hamish set off up the hillside without waiting for him, fit and

keen and impatient. They kept a couple of hundred feet between them as they traversed the slope, close enough so that nothing could escape them but far enough away that an errant shot would fall harmlessly into the heather. They moved together across the hillside as they had done countless times before, dogs and men moving as one unit. Occasionally one of them would call a dog to turn or bid it stop and wait for the group. Mostly there was no need. At times a telepathy existed between men and dogs, a relationship born of thousands of years of hunting together.

‘Three o’clock!’ Hamish yelled.

Donald turned and saw the flash of white as a mountain hare – hiding until the men and dogs had come too close – broke cover and bolted across the open moor. Donald spun as the hare rose, bringing the gun to his shoulder and firing in one movement. The impact of the shot lifted the hare skyward before it fell to the ground and lay writhing for a few seconds before death claimed it. Donald felt no emotion whatsoever as the animal died. He took no pleasure in killing, but it had to be done.

‘Nice shot,’ Hamish yelled over the wind. ‘You might not be able to hear but by God you can still see.’

The two men laughed, and Donald picked up the lifeless creature and put it in his bag before they moved on. They carried on like that for an hour or so, taking a hare every few minutes. Their pace was slow and deliberate, for this kind of killing is not something to be rushed. High on the hills, when the mountains are thick with snow, the white fur of the mountain hare allows it to vanish like a ghost; but low down, where the grass lies bare or when the winter snow is only fleeting, it is easy for both man and eagle to spot against the purples and browns of the heather.

After an hour they came to a flat area where the tussock grass and dead heather of the winter gave way to short green grass. The remains of low walls, like the skeletons of whales stranded long ago on a beach, showed where houses had once been. Some gable ends remained standing like stubborn old men, memories of chimneys and hearths. In other places the taller structures had long since given way to the weather and lay as fallen corpses.

Hamish cast his eyes across the ruins. 'What do you think used to be here?'

'Houses, yer nugget. People used to live here.'

Hamish was looking at his phone when he spoke. 'In olden times, like? I wouldn't fancy it. Must have been a rough life up here.'

Donald lit one of his acrid liquorice roll-ups and let the smoke filter down into his lungs. 'Yer think so? I was brought up in the Gorbals. I'd have taken my chances up here given the choice. We was always broke an' ma da was on the swally.'

But Hamish, leaning against one of the ruined gable ends, was intent on his phone. 'No signal again.' He glanced up and looked at the fallen walls. 'Who'd want to live up here in the hills?'

Donald spat out a mouthful of smoke. 'Yer eejit. Do yer not know people used to live all over these hills? Look in any glen and yer'll find ruins like these.'

Donald looked at the ruins and they stirred a distant echo of a memory. Once there had been families living here, a small community of folk who made their living from the land. A poor people but not an ignorant people, whose children

were educated in schools dotted in the villages below. Folk who loved these places.

Hamish stood on one of the walls and held his phone aloft. 'Ah, one bar! Why did all these people go, then?' His phone made several pings and he peered at it intently.

Donald couldn't believe the young man's level of ignorance and was beginning to lose patience with him. 'Have you nae heard of the Clearances? The landowners shifted folk off the land to raise sheep. Scattered them across the world, Canada and the like.'

Recognition flickered across Hamish's face. 'Oh, we did something about that in history right enough.' He jumped down off the wall. 'I wasn't into history. All those bloody battles and dates.'

Donald tossed his cigarette into the grass. 'Aye, we better get moving again.'

The dogs tumbled over the walls and licked at his feet, anxious to be running again. As they fanned out on the Black Moor, it occurred to Donald that here he was, clearing the hills of hares for a rich man just as people were cleared from this place hundreds of years ago. In all that time not much had changed.

Folk forgot but perhaps stones remembered. Somewhere in this jumble of stones that were once people's lives, Donald wondered, did a memory remain of a day when the air filled with smoke and weeping? A day when lives were uprooted and the glen fell silent as the empty houses crumbled?

They walked on in silence, seeking out the hares and killing as many as they could. A few evaded the shots and bounded

away across the moorland to the safety of the summit. Most, disturbed by the dogs, were quickly dispatched by the guns.

At length they huddled together in a shooting butt for a break from the wind. Donald fumbled in his bag and produced some biscuits, which he offered to Hamish, but the younger man silently waved them away and busied himself with his phone again.

‘No signal. You know the problem with this moor? It’s too small. I wish we had the forested section to the east of the river. That bit of Muir’s land where the bothy is.’

Donald looked at Hamish, surprised. ‘Do yer nae know the story?’

For once Hamish gave Donald his full attention. ‘What story?’

Donald settled himself comfortably against the wall of the shooting butt, knowing the tale he was about to tell might take a little time. ‘Well now, haud on, it wis over forty years ago. When Lord Purdey was nae much older than youse ...’

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The fire in the great hall roared and spat as Lord Purdey stared at his hand of cards. He glanced up at Tony Muir, who was calmly folding his deck into his pocket. Muir had long hair and sported a goatee beard and moustache. His jacket had broad lapels and he wore it over a flowered shirt with flared jeans. Purdey thought he looked incongruous in the high-backed leather chair, like a prog-rock star who’d hit it rich with his first album and splashed out on a stately home he had no idea what to do with.

Purdey wore a kilt and was grateful for his heavy tweed jacket when the wind rattled the dark windows. He looked down at his cards for the third time, pleased to see such a high suit.

He smiled across at Muir with all the evil intent of a crocodile. 'Your call.'

Muir leaned back in his chair, deep in thought, and hung one leg over the arm. 'Yeah, I'm giving it some thought, man.'

Inwardly Purdey grinned. Muir had no class at all. This son of a biscuit maker – a *baker*, in fact – was new money, and he wouldn't know class if it hit him in the arse. It was only a card game but Purdey would enjoy humiliating the little hippy. He looked down on the pile of notes on the table (which must, by now, amount to several thousand pounds) and imagined it snuggling warmly in his jacket pocket.

Muir flicked back his hair and threw another wad of money on the table. 'OK, I'll see you.'

Purdey smiled gently, like a cat might smile at a mouse, and slowly placed his cards on the table for Muir to see.

Muir's eyes widened. 'OK, you got me, take it away.' He looked frustrated now and he got up as if to head home.

'Not *leaving* already, are you?'

The young businessman shrugged. 'It's late, man.'

Purdey eyed him carefully, noted how tired he looked, a bit drunk perhaps. This would be the perfect time to teach him a lesson.

'Come now, just another hand before bed.'

Purdey poured another brandy, and Muir shrugged.

'All right, but let's put some sounds on.' He walked over to the stereo system and moments later Pink Floyd's *Dark Side*

*of the Moon* echoed through the large wood-panelled drawing room as he sat down cross-legged and began rolling a joint on the album's cover. 'Can't get enough of this band.'

Purdey dealt out the cards and picked up his hand. *Saints preserve us*, he thought. *Another great hand*. They began betting again. As Purdey looked on, Muir drifted away on a cannabis cloud, carelessly adding his stakes to the pile.

With the money piling up, Purdey noticed in alarm that even the cash that he had won was running low. The baker's son seemed to have an endless supply of folding money in the pockets of his absurd denim jacket and appeared only too happy to ladle it out. Purdey glanced at his hand; it was good, not perfect but pretty good. He looked at Muir, but his eyes were glazed – probably on some psychedelic trip. He was about to be taught a lesson. You can't play poker from the far side of the moon.

Muir's vacant expression turned to a slow, knowing smile.

'You're bluffing, Muir – don't think I don't know it.' Purdey's voice echoed around the hall.

Purdey took another sip of brandy and slammed the glass down on to the table. At the sound the deerhound at his feet stirred and opened one eye, as if fearful that the house was under attack; reassured, it drifted back to sleep.

Muir smiled at Purdey through the gathering cloud of dope smoke. 'All right, I'll raise you 500 pounds.' He took another blast of the joint and coughed. 'Don't worry, man, it's just a game. If you don't have the cash on hand to take me on tonight, we can just forget about it.'

Purdey grunted, the ends of his moustache twitching.

He'd be damned if he would be outdone by some fool who looked like Dylan from *The Magic Roundabout*.

'A Purdey never takes a backward step. I tell you what I'll do. I'll match your 500 pounds with land. I'll see you, and if I lose, all the land to the east of the river is yours. Is that fair?'

Now it was Muir's turn to look uneasy. 'I can't expect you to do that.'

Purdey scowled at Muir sitting across from him in his hall, all flower power and cockeyed confidence. 'I think you'll find I know just fine what I can and can't do.' He leaned forward across the table, his eyes bulging, prodding at the baker's son with his finger. 'All the land to the east of the river, between both our estates. See you!' With that he slammed his fist down on the table with such force that the deerhound rose from the floor and walked away on stiff legs.

Muir sighed. 'Well, if you insist.'

'Oh, I do insist, I most certainly do.'

Muir casually laid out his cards face up on the table. They were all spades and all five were in sequence. 'A straight flush. What I'm wondering is, can you top that with a royal flush?'

Purdey's face darkened. He could not have looked grimmer if he had been standing on the battlefield at Culloden and had spotted a redcoat with a Kalashnikov. He rose and hurled his cards into the fire.

Muir watched the cards burn. 'Now we'll never know. I won't hold you to—'

Purdey cut in, sensing an insult. 'I'll not let it be said that a Purdey doesn't keep his word.'

With that he lifted a napkin from the table and began to write.

That evening Muir walked unsteadily out into the cold Highland dawn with 2,000 acres of the Purdey estate crumpled in his back pocket.

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For once Hamish had no thought for the text messages from a girl from Thurso on his phone. 'Bloody hell, he lost the place on a card game?'

Donald nodded. The wind was picking up now and he zipped up his coat. 'Aye, but if youse fancy keepin' yer job I widnae remind him of it.'

The young man nodded and put his phone back into his jacket pocket. Suddenly he looked up at a flash of movement. 'Bloody harrier.'

Donald produced a small pair of binoculars from his pocket. The white wing of a bird fluttered for a moment above a burn. 'I see him. Think it's the same male we saw last week.'

Hamish picked up his shotgun. The bird was well out of range but Donald saw that he might have a chance if it came closer. Only a few feet above the grass, the harrier hugged the ground in its flight, rising and falling with the contours beneath its black wing tips showing occasionally as the bird hunted for voles and grouse. The two ghillies followed the bird's movements as it came closer. Just as it appeared to be about to fly over them, the creature veered away and climbed high with beats of its powerful wings. The bird effortlessly covered hundreds of yards of moorland, moving with grace and ease through its domain. Soon it was a dot in the distance and then it was gone.

Hamish put down his gun. 'He saw us.'

‘Aye, they’re canny birds.’ Donald lit another cigarette and let the smoke escape from his mouth until it was taken by the wind.

Hamish stared into the distance. ‘Numbers are down.’

‘Aye,’ Donald sighed, ‘and that bird’ll be part of the reason.’

‘Purdey won’t be happy.’

‘Maybe the breeding season will be good this year.’ Donald hurled his cigarette stub into the heather.

Hamish picked up his bag and gun. ‘No bonus for you and me if there aren’t enough surplus grouse for the guns.’

‘We are doing OK keeping the hares doon. At least that should mean the grouse are healthy. Keep doon the risk of tick infection.’

‘That’s all very well, but vermin like that damned harrier will hit us hard. That bloody bird’ll not cost me money.’

The young man opened his jacket and took a white plastic bag from the poacher’s pocket, which he passed to Donald.

Donald eyed the bag suspiciously. Peering inside, he found four dead voles – sad, limp things. ‘Haud on. Have yer baited these?’

‘There’s enough in any one of those to take out that bird, no bother.’

Donald looked up, eyes wide. ‘Are you a header? You could get the jail for these.’

Hamish snatched the bag back. ‘Oh come on, who’s going to see us out here? Besides, what are we supposed to do? Purdey wants his grouse numbers keeping up, and getting rid of a couple of those harriers could make all the difference.’

Hamish got up from the butt and walked quickly out on to

the moor, pursued by Donald.

‘Hamish, I’m having nothing to do wi’ this.’

Hamish turned, his fist clenched. ‘Everybody does it. How the hell are we supposed to do our jobs without getting rid of predators?’

Donald was about to reply when something glinted on the hillside a few hundred yards away. All his years on the hills had given him a sixth sense for anything moving and he knew instantly they were being watched.

Donald froze. ‘Hamish, there’s someone on the hill.’

The big keeper stopped in his tracks and hid the bag of voles in the heather. ‘Who is it?’

Donald was peering through his binoculars by now and he could see a man lying in the grass; moments later he recognised him. ‘Jesus. It’s that RSPB bastard.’

Both men turned and strode to the Land Rover. Ten minutes later they were standing in Lord Purdey’s office.

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Purdey listened to what they had to say, and then rose from his chair in a rage.

‘What, the RSPB on my land again?’

Donald nodded. ‘Aye, sir.’

‘But I told them everything we do here is above board.’ Purdey paced his office. ‘Right, I’m going to have it out with them. With me, men.’

Purdey stormed downstairs and made his way to the garage, his keepers struggling to match his determined pace. He slammed his Daimler into gear, floored the accelerator, and

hurtled out of the driveway with the two startled keepers in the passenger seats. He headed up the road and moments later spotted a small white van headed down the hill towards him with the blue logo of the RSPB on its side. Purdey slammed on the brakes and leapt from the car.

The occupant of the invading vehicle, a man in his thirties in a green fleece, lowered the window. Purdey thought he looked like a prize-winning prat; the very sight of the man sent his blood pressure through the roof.

Purdey wagged his finger. ‘Look here, have you been spying on my men?’

The young man smiled back, undeterred. ‘Not spying, sir, just monitoring activities.’

‘But I explained to you chaps a few weeks ago that nothing untoward occurs on my estate.’ Purdey tried to sound authoritative, but was nonplussed to see that it had little effect on the cheerful little RSPB fellow.

There was another diplomatic smile. ‘Well, you see it’s our policy to monitor estates.’

‘How dare you monitor *my* estate? I’ve told you nothing is wrong and that should be an end to it. I won’t stand for this, I can assure you.’

With that Purdey turned on his heels and marched back to the car. The young RSPB man waved and drove off.

Purdey watched him go, also giving a hand gesture (although his wasn’t a wave). Donald and Hamish looked at each other. There was silence in the vehicle for a few moments as Purdey chose his moment.

‘I don’t suppose that if that RSPB chap were to go on to the

Black Moor he'd find anything ... ' Purdey paused, choosing his words carefully ' ... *untoward*, would he?'

Donald and Hamish glanced at each other again; it was Donald who spoke. 'Nae, nothing at all.'

A silence hung in the air like a malevolent fart; no one could see it but everyone knew it was there. Purdey waited. He knew that Donald had answered too readily and sensed that there was something else to be said.

Hamish fidgeted with his phone. 'Well, nothing except maybe a few voles.'

Purdey turned in the driver's seat, puzzled for a moment. He so rarely had to dirty his hands with the *details* of his estate. 'What? The bloody moor is teeming with voles.'

Hamish coughed, and appeared to have difficulty forming his words. 'Yes, sir ... but these are ... poisoned voles. For the vermin, you see, harriers and the like.'

Donald spoke up now. 'They're taking a toll on yer grouse, sir.'

Purdey thought for a moment, wondering how best to tackle the problem. Then he smiled to himself as the solution coalesced in his mind. 'I have it! Attack is the best defence.'

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The afternoon was cold and a fine rain filled the air like goose down. Simon Partington sat in his car and let out a long, disappointed sigh as he looked out at the rain coursing down the car windows. He was a large, soft-faced man with long dark hair. When he entered journalism he had seen himself as arts correspondent for the *Guardian*, interviewing pale, interesting

young women about their singing careers. Yet here he was, a junior reporter for *Caledonia News*, in the middle of nowhere watching the rain.

Three hours earlier, in the warmth of the Inverness office, his boss had approached him with a beaming smile waving a press release. Simon's heart had fallen the moment he saw that grin. Last week that grin had sent him to report the mysterious disappearance of several dustbins in Nairn. The week before that he'd used three years of university education to report on late-blooming daffodils. The resulting headline had been predictable. 'Fury as daffodils fail to bloom.' His boss was particularly fond of the word 'fury'. Simon wondered if he'd bought a job lot of the word cheap somewhere, as he used it at every opportunity. 'Fury as bins go missing.' 'Fury as nothing much happens.'

This particular press release had brought him here, parked outside some crumbling edifice of a stately home that looked as if it had just escaped from a Hammer horror film. On the lawn opposite the house a cherub stood above a pool smiling and peeing endlessly. His car had misted up and there was a faint smell of slowly decaying fairy cakes, the origin of which was a four-month-old sponge cake that had rolled under his seat but which he had never been able to find.

At last a rotund man with a big moustache came running from the door of the house of horror, carrying a big white sign with alarmingly red letters on it. He was being pursued by a younger, powerful-looking blond woman who was surrounded by a swarm of tiny braying dogs.

Before he opened the car door he heard the woman shout, 'Please don't make a fool of yourself again, Charles.'

Simon was stepping out of his car when he saw the small army of dachshunds charging towards him with the sole aim – he could see it in their eyes – of tearing him limb from limb. He hurriedly closed the door. For the next few minutes the couple fought to control the animals. Every few seconds a dog would leap at the window, all teeth and wild eyes, only to fall back to the driveway. After a few moments the woman managed to corral the beasts and drag them, yapping and snarling, back into the castle.

Now it was safe, Simon stepped out of the car and instantly felt the chill of rain sinking into his clothes. He saw a large hand thrust towards him.

‘Charles Purdey, young man. My life is being made a living hell by the RSPB spying on me. You probably think of the RSPB as a group of harmless cranks, feeding twittering birds and that sort of thing. Well, let me tell you, I don’t get a moment’s peace. They are up and down the roads of my estate almost constantly and they have *absolutely no evidence* I’ve done anything. And furthermore—’

The reporter pushed a microphone in the general direction of the enraged aristocrat, whose diatribe against the injustices heaped on him by the stormtroopers of the ornithological world seemed unending.

When Purdey finally drew breath, the reporter got in a question.

‘So it’s a campaign, is it?’

Purdey thought for a moment and suddenly his eyes twinkled. ‘Why yes, I suppose it is. Great idea. I’ll start the campaign against the persecution of landowners. It’s the CA—’

The reporter looked up from his notes and read back to Purdey. 'I think the CAPL.'

Purdey beamed at the young man. 'That's it – the CAPL. Got a ring to it. Prince Charles can be the patron.'

*Blimey*, Simon thought. *Maybe this is an actual story, at last!*

'So Prince Charles is the patron of the organisation, is he?'

Purdey hesitated. 'Well not yet but I'm sure he will be. He's patron of all kinds of things and we went to Gordonstoun together, you know.'

Simon tried to summarise what Lord Purdey had said. 'So the RSPB are persecuting landowners?'

Purdey grinned. 'That's it in a nutshell. It's all these lefty vegans, you know. They just don't understand the countryside.'

*Lefty vegans*, Simon scrawled in his notebook. *What a quote!*

'Can we have a photograph?'

Purdey grinned at the young man. Moments later the laird was grinning like a baboon beside his large white sign, now hammered into the ground. It read:

RSPB NOT WELCOME HERE