

1.

Scottish Highlands – Present Day

Annie Butler pruned the apple tree from the top rung of the wooden stepladder, lovingly shaping its last few branches. The tree would bear fruit next year thanks to her hard work.

She took a deep breath of crisp December air and gazed out across the bay. The orange sun had dropped down to meet the ocean as its waves tumbled headlong into the white sands of the beach. There wasn't a soul in sight, nothing to see but miles of deserted coastline. Sunset would be hers to enjoy alone. A fitting setting for her sixty-fifth birthday. Was she really a pensioner? She didn't feel like one; she had never felt stronger or fitter.

How her life had changed for the better, she thought. That hadn't always been the case though. The contentment and safety of the present was a distant cry from the troubles of her past. Disappearing hadn't been easy. It was over forty years ago now. Was there anyone still alive who remembered it all? Probably not, and besides, while it remained a well buried secret she was safe. She packaged her thoughts away into a compartment entitled *best forgotten* and stepped down onto the lawn.

The cobbled garden path in front of her led directly up to the cottage. The cottage (or croft, as the Scots would say) was set back on a green sloping hill that cascaded down to the sands of the beach. It had been nothing more than a wreck when she bought it. She had chosen well; the remoteness of the Highlands had served her needs perfectly.

She ambled along the garden at a pace only a retired person could afford before arriving at the cottage door. She twisted its black iron handle and stepped inside. The hallway was narrow but inviting, with cherry oak floorboards and dark wooden beams that ran across the walls and ceilings. She closed the door and unbuttoned the blue quilted jacket that fitted tightly to her slim frame. She adjusted the neck of her cream roll-neck sweater and stopped for a second to run her fingers through her blonde shoulder-length hair. Not a strand of grey in sight. Rare for a woman of her age, as her hairdresser had rather needlessly remarked. It was getting cold. She needed a drink.

She flicked the kettle switch and picked up her mobile phone from the wooden kitchen surface. One unread message displayed on the old reliable Nokia. They always offered her a new phone when her upgrade was due. Smart phone? Why in God's name did she need one of those? She didn't own a computer and she most certainly didn't do emails. She communicated the proper way, by mouth or handwritten letter, and she had no plans to change.

She would check the message later; she wasn't a slave to her phone like her son. Why couldn't he just switch it off when he was with her? Constantly texting and checking his messages. Still, he had a business to run and if that was his only fault she was leading a charmed life. She made herself a black coffee and reached for the bottle of single malt on the kitchen shelf. She poured a generous measure and made her way through to what she liked to call the glass room. Coffee in one hand, whisky in the other, she balanced herself finely to ensure not a drop of either was lost.

The glass room was an extension to the cottage, a large glass-fronted conservatory that looked out onto the bay. The glass doors could be folded back, exposing the entire room to the elements. The room was sparsely furnished with just an old leather sofa, a standing lamp, and a coffee table. No TV, no radio, no distractions. She could sit for hours looking at the ocean or watching the snow fall and pile up against the glass. This was a good place to think.

She placed the coffee and whisky down on the table in front of her. It was time for her birthday ritual. A ritual she would never share with anyone, not even her son. She walked over to a precise spot in front of the glass windows and stopped for a moment to look at the sunset. The sun slid finally into the ocean; it would be dark in minutes.

She switched on the lamp next to her, kneeled down, and gazed at the white floorboards down by her knees. She took out a screw driver from the pocket of her dark blue slacks and begun unscrewing the floorboards. Carefully, one at time, she removed three sections to reveal an opening. She leaned forward and reached down as far as her elbows. She had hold of it; it wasn't heavy. She lifted it carefully out of the section in the floor she had created, pushed the dusty floorboards to one side and stood up. The light brown satchel was made from the finest leather. It had two pockets on the front and a flap that covered the main section. She lifted it to her nose and sniffed it. The smell of its leather teased her nose like the aftershave of an old lover.

She perched on the sofa and placed the satchel next to her, took a mouthful of coffee, and then a long slow sip of the whisky. She savoured it before it slipped down, she could feel its comforting warmth in her throat. She picked up

the satchel and placed it on her lap. Slowly, she unbuckled the clasp and pulled back the leather flap to open the main section. She pulled out a wad of old handwritten letters and placed them on the table in a pile. All the letters had the same distinctive handwriting and the paper they had been written on was yellow and parched.

She picked up a handful of the letters and let them fall through her fingers dropping them back down onto the table. She didn't need to read them; she knew each word in every letter intimately. She just liked to touch and feel them. She wondered what he would look like now if he were still alive? Her son was the mirror image of him. He had inherited his father's looks and her grit and determination - doubtless a good combination.

He had given up asking about his father eventually. Probably because he knew she would never tell him. It was too dangerous. Luckily, they hadn't known she was pregnant when she ran. He was a loose end they knew nothing about and she was a loose end they couldn't tie up. There was probably a government file all about her archived in some secret location. She leaned back into the soft leather of the chair and closed her eyes.

The sound of the cat-flap opening in the glass jolted her from her slumber. Coco, her small but clever and affectionate tortoise-shell cat jumped up onto the table and looked up at her. What time was it? She pulled out the Nokia from her trouser pocket and eyed the screen while rubbing her eyes. 8pm. Christ, she had been asleep for two hours. The day's gardening really had worn her out. She scrolled to the unread message and opened the text. It wasn't from a number she recognised.

You've been found, Annie. Meet Lossy Mouth Bay. 10pm. RR.

The phone dropped from her hand and clattered onto the floorboards. Her stomach churned, she felt nauseous. She poured herself a large Scotch and stumbled across to the glass doors. Her legs were like jelly and her head was spinning. She looked out to the bay while gulping the whisky... She had always wondered. But it seemed so impossible. And if it was possible, why now, after forty years?

She scooped up the letters from the table and frantically jammed them back into the leather satchel before carefully placing it under the sofa. She reached down into the section in the floor and removed a brown cardboard box. She placed it by the sides of the floorboards and screwed them back into place. She opened the box and pulled out the automatic handgun from the crumbled paper inside. She released the gun's magazine and checked it. Fully loaded. She slid it back into the handle and it chinked as it locked into place. She stood up and pulled back the glass doors as far they would go and left them open. It was snowing outside. She would have to leave now if she was going to make it in time.