

COLD GRAVE

CRAIG ROBERTSON



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COLD GRAVE

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

During his 20-year career in Glasgow with a Scottish Sunday newspaper, Craig Robertson has interviewed three recent Prime Ministers, attended major stories including 9/11, Dunblane, the Omagh bombing and the disappearance of Madeleine McCann, been pilloried on breakfast television, beaten Oprah Winfrey to a major scoop, been among the first to interview Susan Boyle, spent time on Dear Row in the USA and dispensed polio drops in the backstreets of India. His debut novel, *Random*, was shortlisted for the CWA New Blood Dagger.

Also by Craig Robertson

Snapshot
Random

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To Debbie, Harvey, Jade, Karen, Lewis and Victoria

November 1993

Everything was bathed in blue. That's what he remembered most: a cold, rich Persian blue that washed over land and sky and lake, and made it all shiver. It made it almost magical, like a neverland that was never quite dark and never quite light – and would never be quite the same again.

It shimmered, this strange new world, where you could walk on water and all sorts of astonishing possibilities lay ahead. Some of what might happen scared him but he was excited more than afraid. There was no uncertainty about what he was going to do; he'd already made his mind up about that and could feel the exhilaration and anticipation building in him.

The ice kingdom had winked at them on their arrival: a teasing glimpse framed between the old church on one side and the arthritic arms of a barren chestnut tree on the other. As they inched closer, almost fearful of its wonder, it unfolded before their eyes and they were assaulted by its sights and sounds. From the shore it looked like a Lowry painting, thick with matchstick people, graphite grey and black against the icy canvas, with only vague flashes of colour breaking up the monotone sketch. The collective breath of those gathered on the frozen lake fogged the air above them and offered a shimmering, enchanted border to the blue.

The noise was terrific. The sum of its parts was raw excitement, its constituents the roar of curling stones across the ice; the screams of children's laughter; and cheers from all corners. There were people everywhere, clad in ski gear, climbing outfits, jeans and kilts, every head covered in a hat.

Getting closer, they could see the ice world contained colours after all. A little girl in a scarlet jumpsuit sat giggling on a sled pulled by a panting Springer Spaniel; a green-kilted warrior whooped as he followed his curling stone down the hastily formed rink; two men with bright yellow hats and beaming red noses shared the national drink from a metal hipflask. Blues and browns and purples and oranges all whirled and birked and skirked in a cacophony of sound and fury.

The skaters, the curlers, the sliders and the walkers extended all the way to Inchmahome Island, a ghostly shape far across the ice. A carnival of people were taking advantage of something that hadn't happened for fifteen years and might never happen again. They'd been walking to Inchmahome, half a mile away across the lake, ever since word spread that the ice had frozen solid, possibly a once-in-a-lifetime chance both to defy and take advantage of nature.

By all accounts, the two days before had seen even more people on the lake – as many as 10,000, it was said. There were fewer now: some of them had gone back to work; others were scared off by temperatures that had crept back up towards zero. More were leaving with the approach of the day's end.

He was relieved that she had been easily talked into staying near the shore for a while to enjoy the last of the people-watching before they took their own turn to venture across to the island. It was nearly dusk and the fading light was accompanied by surface water dancing and glistening on the ice, signalling that the frozen bridge to the island might soon disappear. The sensible thing would have been to go immediately and not run the risk of waiting any longer but a smile and a wink were enough to persuade her of the benefits of waiting for it to be dark and quiet over there.

Only the brave and the reckless were still attempting the walk to Inchmahome. She was one of the brave and he was the other. God, she was only a few years younger but she had an innate wonder about h

that he envied. Life was still an adventure to her, a world to be explored. For him, it was already beginning to be a chore but he was compensated by the knowledge that he wouldn't need to be jealous of her innocence much longer.

Finally, as the numbers crossing the lake dwindled, he gripped her hand, feeling the threads of her pink gloves lightly tickle his bare skin, and they both took a deep breath before making their final stride. Suddenly it seemed so much further away, the expanding dusk adding distance and doubt.

'Ready?' he asked her.

'Ready,' she laughed.

Every step took them further from the shore, the lake deepening beneath them and making them both acutely aware that all that was holding them up, keeping them alive, was a quirk of science. Still they pushed on, through the diminishing crowds, deeper and darker into the lake.

A couple of hundred yards from shore, a noise stolen on the breeze made them turn to see a slight skater clad in black, a spinning silhouette against the falling gloom of blue. The girl whirled and another shadow stood twenty yards from her, filming the scene. She was mesmerising to watch: a vision that spun on one axle, arms high and locked together, then turned out gracefully in a wide arc before returning to her mark to spin once more, finally sliding to the ice like a dying swan.

There were dogs out there too, chasing wildfowl and their own tails as they slid and slipped across the surface, the darkness beginning to envelop them, scooping them up. She laughed to see them careering over the ice, giggling as they spun on their backsides, their paws unable to keep up with the haste of their minds. He tried to laugh along with her but he was tenser than she was, more nervous.

They picked their way round the bore holes that were dotted over the lake, peering down into the depths through the cracked circles left where the ice had been tested to make sure it was thick enough for the grand match, the great curling bonspiel that had been promised but had not taken place. Twenty thousand people had been set to descend on the lake for the once-in-a-lifetime match between the north and the south of Scotland but it had fallen an inch short of being held – six inches of ice were measured rather than the required seven.

Almost all the people they were passing now were on the return journey to the shore and the warm promise of the hotel bar. She gripped his hand tighter, the first sign of anxiety at their adventure accompanied by nervous laughter. He squeezed her hand in return, his own nerves having been replaced by adrenalin and a pounding in his heart in anticipation of what was going to happen.

The island's shoreline was just yards away now and they could see the tiny wooden jetty where the ferry tied up in the summer months. A few more steps and they'd be there. With a final, exultant leap they left the ice behind and landed with a crunch on the snowy shore of Inchmahome, celebrating with a hug and a look around to see who was still there. They were both thrilled to see there was no one in sight.

Just twenty minutes later, he was walking back across the ice on his own, every step washing away behind him, every footprint slipping softly into the lake. The crunch of foot on snow and the glide of a boot on the icy bridge to neverland disappeared without trace. All he and she had ever been were ghosts and every sign of them had become lost in the blue.

Almost all of the ice revellers had left the lake – just a noisy rump of curlers remained near the shore and a straggle of kids sliding recklessly on the wet ice by the edge. None of them paid any attention to the last shadow that walked back towards the hotel, the lone spectre that slipped into the night.

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CHAPTER 1

Nineteen years later.
Saturday 17 November 2012. Glasgow.

‘So tell me again why we’re going away for the weekend?’

Rachel Narey didn’t take her eyes off the road to answer him but instead exhaled testily, then shook her head.

‘What’s so hard to understand, Tony? We’re just going away for a day or two, just like any normal couple.’

Tony Winter let loose a snort of derision.

‘But we’re not a normal couple,’ he retorted. ‘Sometimes I’m not even sure that we *are* a couple. Not a public one at any rate.’

A patently false smile stretched across Rachel’s face as Winter watched her drum her fingers against the steering wheel. She was not only containing her anger but making a show of doing so – a tactic both designed and guaranteed to annoy him.

‘Well, we are this weekend,’ she finally and tersely replied, her brown eyes pointedly fixed on the road ahead. ‘You’re always moaning we never go out together, and now that we are, you can’t just be happy.’

‘Rachel, you haven’t even told me where we’re going.’

She blew a thin burst of exaggerated exasperation between pursed lips and shook her head. It had become a familiar pose of late and Winter wasn’t sure whether that said more about him or about her – or about them. All he was sure of was that it was becoming a pain in the ass. Where were they going? Maybe that was too big a question to answer.

‘Oh, for Christ’s sake. Shut up,’ she told him. ‘There’s a bar and a big bed. What more do you want?’

It was unarguably a winning combination and he laughed despite himself. Time for the voice of compromise and geniality.

‘Fair enough, you win. Right, driver, let the mystery tour continue. How long until we get wherever it is?’

Rachel smiled.

‘Not long. Another forty-five minutes or so.’

It had been a little over ten minutes since they’d left Rachel’s flat on Highburgh Road in Glasgow’s west end and they were now heading out of town on Great Western Road. Narey’s black Renault Megane held three bags in the boot, two of hers and one for Tony, plus his camera bag. Pack casual things for during the day but something smart for dinner was all the information she’d offered him. With a bemused shake of his head, he’d thrown jeans, trousers and shirts into the bag and given in.

Winter actually wasn't sure when they had become a couple, even if not in a conventional sense. Their relationship was a secret from just about everyone around them, much to his irritation. She was a detective sergeant in Strathclyde Police and he was a police photographer, a civilian. Fraternising with the lower species of the crime scene community wasn't exactly encouraged and, as far as Rachel was concerned, it was easier all round if no one else knew. He'd appreciated that – at first.

Something had changed somewhere along the way, from the secret first-night kiss to his semi-residential status in her Highburgh Road pad. It was one of those slow-moving rivers of a relationship and he couldn't pinpoint the place in the bend where his Facebook status changed from 'Single' to 'It's Complicated'. Hers remained resolutely 'Fuck off; it's none of your business.'

He glanced over at her, seeing her shoulder-length brown hair shine in the glow of the midwinter sun as she drove, and reflected, not for the first time, that whatever their status was, he had done a right for himself. It wasn't just that she was beautiful, although she certainly was. She had 'been there for him' too. Maybe he didn't really know what that meant, given that it was the sort of emotion claptrap that constantly eluded him, but he knew she had. When his demons came to visit, Rachel was always the one who chased them away.

She sensed him looking and turned to stare questioningly at him.

'What is it?' she demanded.

'Nothing. Just thinking. So, an hour or so from Glasgow, heading west. Can we get to Teuchterlan in that time?'

'Of course,' she answered playfully, 'given that anywhere north of Glasgow is for teuchters.'

'But not your proper Highlands, which would take much longer. Hm. Maybe Inverary or Crianlarich. You could just about do either of those in that time.'

She laughed.

'Keep guessing. And while you're at it, turn the heating up a bit, will you? It's freezing in here.'

She was wrapped up in a white woollen coat, buttoned almost to the neck, while he sat comfortably in an open-necked shirt. He'd long stopped trying to argue about their differing resistances to cold temperatures and determined he would sneak the dial back down when she wasn't looking.

A moment later, Rachel glanced in the rear-view mirror before signalling right at Anniesland Cross and taking the Bearsden road, almost immediately having to bat away further guesses from Tony about their destination. Arrochar? No. Stirling? No? Callander? No.

They slipped through Bearsden and onto the Drymen road, Tony continuing to be amazed at how you could be deep in the countryside just a few minutes after getting out of the city centre. In no time at all, it was all rolling hills, sheep, cattle and a twisting road to somewhere. Finally, Rachel pulled off the A81 and into the car park of the Lake of Menteith Hotel and he still hadn't worked out where they were going even though they'd arrived.

'This is it?' he asked her.

'Uh huh.'

'But we're nowhere. The middle of nowhere, in fact.'

'Shut up and get out. We are in what is known as "the country". You'll get to like it.'

Tony got out of the car in exaggerated wonder, sniffing the air and looking around, seeing only blue sky, trees and the church that loomed above them. They'd come no distance at all yet they were world away from the hustle and bustle of the city. He wasn't entirely sure that he liked it.

'Hear that?' he asked her.

'What?' Rachel looked around, puzzled. 'I don't hear anything.'

'Exactly. It's as quiet as the bloody grave.'

'Great, isn't it?' she grinned. 'Come on; stop moaning. I hear the sound of a pint being poured with your name on it.'

‘Ah, you always say the right thing. Okay, let’s go.’

~~The whitewashed walls of the hotel lay before them and Winter picked up his bag and one of Rachel’s, leaving his camera bag in the car’s boot. He’d return for it almost immediately; he never liked it out of his sight for too long. To his right, in the gap between the church and the hotel, he could see a dark, foreboding glimpse of the lake. It looked bloody freezing.~~

‘Tell me we aren’t going swimming?’

She grinned again.

‘You wouldn’t be tempted by a bit of skinny dipping?’

Winter shook his head.

‘Nope. Not even with you. It’s bound to be almost freezing over out there.’

‘Funny you should say that,’ she murmured. They skated along the icy paving stones, laughing, towards the front door, where a solid white porch supported on black pillars reached out to meet them. Winter dropped one of the bags and opened the door for Rachel, ushering her in with an exaggerated sweep of his arm.

They tumbled into the hotel, immediately hit by a wave of heat that contrasted with the bitter cold outside. An open fire crackled to their left, with tables near the raised hearth that struck Winter as being the perfect place to sit and sample the range of malts he had already spied in the well-stocked bar to their right.

‘I could get used to this sudden impulse for weekends away,’ he told her.

All Rachel offered in return was a shake of her head as she led them to reception to sign in.

‘Hi, we’ve got a lake-view room booked in the name of Narey for two nights,’ she told the bespectacled blonde woman behind the desk.

‘Ah yes, that’s right. We spoke on the phone. How was your journey?’

‘Fine,’ Rachel told the woman. ‘We’ve only come from Glasgow so it took no time at all.’

‘Good, good,’ the receptionist replied brightly. ‘Now, let me get your key. You’re in Osprey.’

‘All the rooms are named after the area and the wildlife,’ Rachel whispered to Tony, seeing the look of confusion on his face.

‘How come you know so much about this place?’

‘I’m a detective,’ she answered. ‘It’s my job to know things.’

The receptionist returned before Winter could question Rachel further and they took possession of the large wooden fish, with a key attached, that was offered to them. ‘It’s a great place you’ve got here,’ Rachel was saying enthusiastically, looking around her. ‘I’ve always meant to come. Have you worked here long?’

‘Oh, it will be nine years now,’ the woman replied. ‘It’s a smashing place to work, I must admit.’

Rachel smiled again, thanked the receptionist and they made for their room.

‘Very nice,’ Winter hummed appreciatively as they got inside, the bottle of Prosecco on the table and the large double bed immediately catching his eye. But even they were quickly overtaken by the view across the lake from the floor to ceiling window.

‘Wow,’ he admitted. ‘Quite a view. I’m glad I brought my camera. You did well choosing this place.’

Rachel didn’t answer. Instead she walked over to the window and gazed out at the expanse of lake and the island on the horizon. The lake circled in front of them, almost but not quite coming together in the distance, the island neatly in the middle between either shore, before the lake widened again beyond it.

She watched a pair of ducks scudding low across the glassy surface of the lake, the waters rippled only by a trio of snow-white swans that were gliding gracefully at speed with fifty yards of water behind them. It was a stunning scene but the beauty was lost on her. All the time, her eyes kept being

drawn to the tree-topped skyline of Inchmahome as it blinked at her above the mist.

~~She stared at the island, lured by its darkness and mesmerised by its secrets. A shiver ran through her that she tried and failed to suppress. She was well aware that Tony, obsessively fascinated as he was with capturing Glasgow's darkest moments through his camera, would have a very different view of Inchmahome from hers. If only he knew what she knew.~~

He had always had this thing about seeing beauty in death as he photographed it but Rachel had never been able to understand his thinking. For her, working on the streets of the no mean city meant death was anything but beautiful. It was ugly, and the more brutal the death, the uglier it was. She looked across the lake, beyond the serenity and splendour of the slowly swelling surface and saw on something hideous. She suddenly regretted their trip there, wondering whether they'd be better tucked up together in Highburgh Road instead. She was starting something and she had no idea where it would end – or even if there would be an end.

Lost in her worries, she didn't hear Tony sneaking back across the room until he was behind her and his arms slipped through hers. She was still shivering.

'You cold? Want me to turn the heating up a bit?

'Hm? Yes, please. Full blast.'

'Paradise, isn't it?' he asked as he muzzled into her neck.

'Yeah. Paradise.'

CHAPTER 2

'I just can't sleep.'

'Laurence, have you been taking your medication?'

There was silence on the other end of the phone.

'Have you, Laurence?'

'Sometimes.'

'Why only sometimes?'

'Oh, for God's sake. Sometimes I just don't want to sleep.'

'The dreams again?'

'Yes.'

'We've been through this, Laurence.'

'I know but it's the lake. I keep dreaming about the lake. I just can't . . . just can't stop myself. It's the time of year. It gets to me.'

'Laurence, we are going to have to schedule something. I thought we were making progress with this but sense a relapse that could be quite damaging.'

'You always want to schedule something. It's not doing me any good. I can't sleep and when I do sleep it's worse. She's there all the time. I can't stop thinking about her.'

'Calm down.'

'Don't tell me to calm down. You don't understand. No one can understand.'

'Laurence . . .'

'No. Don't talk to me. Enough.'

CHAPTER 3

Glasgow

‘Christ, it’s freezin, man. It’s colder than a witch’s tit out here.’

‘Tell me about it. My bollocks are like ice cubes, Pedro. How much longer are we gonnae stand o this fuckin corner?’

‘Telt ye already. Till we shift all this gear.’

‘Fucksake.’

Pedro cupped his hands together, blowing on them hard in a vain attempt at heat, and glared out Marky from under his hoodie.

‘Stop moanin, man, will ye? We’re makin good money so shut your hole.’

‘Am just saying.’

‘Aye, well gonnae no, Marky, eh? These student bastards are pure minted and they’re taking the stuff like it’s sweetsies. We’ll be oot of here in nae time.’

Marky smiled at that, a manic nodding driven by the cold and the thought of cold cash. His faded Lacoste trainers did a little Ali shuffle on the frosted pavement, a wee dance at the thought of soon being able to buy a real pair. The fact that they were making the dosh from the university poofers just made it all the sweeter.

‘Cool, Pedro, cool, man. I’m seeing a wee burd later and am gonnae need my dick in good working order. No gonnae be any use if it freezes and draps aff.’

Pedro swore under his breath. Sometimes Marky did his head in.

‘Gonnae shut your moanin gub, Marky? Am wantin out of here as quick as possible anaw, man. But it’s no ’cos I’m worried about you getting your Nat King. We’re wantin to be oot o’ here afore someone sees us, know ah mean?’

A muscle on Marky’s cheek twitched the way it always did when he was nervous.

‘Gilmartin’s boys?’

‘Naw, the Salvation Fuckin Army. Course Gilmartin’s boys. No exactly gonnae be chuffed if he hears we’re undercutting his troops, is he?’

Marky did another Ali shuffle but this time it wasn’t one of excitement.

‘He’d go mental, Pedro. Absolutely radio rental. Just as well he disnae know, eh?’

‘Too right, Marky boy. Who’s this wee burd you’re seeing anyway?’

Marky pulled himself deeper inside his dark grey hoodie, turning his head slightly away from Pedro’s flinty gaze.

‘Och, ye dinnae know her,’ he muttered, his feet dancing a slower beat.

‘Whit’s her name?’ Pedro persisted.

‘Disnae matter.’

‘Whit’s her name, ya wee nobber?’

‘Clarice.’

Pedro snorted in disbelief, a malicious grin appearing on his unshaven face.

‘Clarice? That wee skanky blonde thing fae the Springburn that’s always got love bites aw o’er her neck?’

Marky reddened, his cheeks marked by a furious blush that defied the cold.

‘Naw,’ he protested. ‘It’s no her.’

‘It fuckin is, innit? Ya dirty wee bastard. She’s hingin, man.’

‘She’s awrite. She puts oot; that’s good enough for me.’

‘Fucksake, man, she puts oot for half of Glasgow. Just as well we’re making top dollar oot here ’cause you’ll be needin it for clap cream.’

‘Piss off.’

Pedro could barely contain himself, a huge smirk stretching across his lean features as he wallowed in Marky’s discomfort.

‘Tellin you, Marky man,’ he laughed, ‘You keep shaggin her and ye’ll no need to worry about the cold damagin your tadger. Anyway, shut it. Someone’s coming.’

‘Sweet,’ Marky muttered, glad of the diversion.

The dark figure coming towards them was on the side of the street sheltered from the streetlamp neon glow, seemingly taking advantage of its gloomy shadow. It was a young guy, fairly tall and broad, casting regular glances over his shoulder to make sure no one was following him. Marky let out a little nervous laugh, glad to see the predictable nervousness on the part of the prospective buyer.

‘Sweet,’ he repeated softly, his hands rammed into the pouch pockets of his sweatshirt.

‘Awrite?’ the stranger asked, nodding his head at them by way of greeting.

‘Awrite,’ Pedro replied, taking a half-step back into the shadow of the corner and letting the stranger follow.

‘You’re the guys, aye?’

Pedro and Marky exchanged quick self-satisfied glances. Aye, they were the men. Marky could almost smell the leather of his new Lacostes, and Pedro was happy they’d soon be done for the night’s cash in pocket.

Neither of them saw anything more than a flash of silver in the moonlight, a fleeting, gleaming glimpse that passed from the guy in the long leather coat to the pair of them. The man paid Pedro first and then did the same to Marky before either could move. It was the first time that night that Pedro had felt any warmth and for a few dizzying seconds he liked the hot feeling that flared and tickled inside him. Marky was different: he’d felt the blade once before, remembered its sting and hated it instantly.

The guy had turned and begun to walk away before it dawned on Pedro and Marky that he had left without buying anything. By the time they realised he’d taken the money and the gear from their pockets, it was far too late for them to do anything about it.

Pedro clutched the hole in his stomach, the blood seeping between his fingers, and Marky giggled nervously, wondering how he was going to explain to Caprice that he probably wasn’t going to be able to see her that night.

Neither of them were badly hurt; flesh wounds that stung and ran red but that had missed all the vital bits inside. If the stranger with the flashing blade had wanted it, they’d both be fighting for their lives. Instead, they had been given a painful warning and they knew they were out of the dealing business for good. At least it would be warm in the hospital.

CHAPTER 4

Twenty minutes after unpacking and Rachel successfully swatting away Tony's attempts to christen the bed there and then, they were sitting in the Lake of Menteith Hotel's Port Bar. Winter was happily sipping a large Balvenie DoubleWood and throwing occasional glares in the direction of the young couple who had possession of the seats nearest to the fire. His attempt at mind control failed to bud, and they remained seated.

Rachel had a glass of Petit Chablis and was looking round at the goose-grey panelled walls and wooden floors, the framed photographs and sketches of yesteryear and the curling stone that was warming on the hearth. Her eyes kept wandering through the large windows to the lake and the island beyond.

They'd sat there for twenty easy minutes, saying little but savouring the rare opportunity to relax when Rachel looked up to see an older man passing the window, wearing a heavy jumper underneath a dark bodywarmer, a bobble hat snug on his head. He was carrying gardening tools and his breath frosted before him. He seemed to be heading purposefully, if slowly, along the shoreline.

'Right,' Rachel suddenly announced. 'Let's go for a walk.'

'A what?' Winter asked unbelievably.

'A walk.'

'You *never* walk. Anywhere. You don't do walks.'

'Well I do now. Come on, shift your lazy arse and get a jacket on.'

'You're kidding me, right?'

'No. Move.'

Winter shook his head incredulously and threw the last of the Balvenie down his throat, feeling the burn sting and soothe in one go.

'Okay, whatever. But I'm beginning to think the real you has been abducted by aliens.'

Their feet were soon crunching along the pebbled path that dissected the lawn in front of the lake. Rachel setting a fierce pace in the direction the old man had taken. As they swung anti-clockwise to the end of the hotel, the lake on their left, Rachel saw a bobble-hatted head nodding up and down by a bush some forty yards away.

'Oh, hello,' Rachel said casually as they reached the place where the gardener crouched. 'Didn't see you there. Nice day, isn't it?'

The man stood up, failing to conceal a groan of old age as he did so.

'Yes, beautiful,' he replied cheerily. 'Bit cold for some, I suppose, but I like it. Not many people venture along here in this weather though. They tend not to wander too far from the bar.'

Smart people, Winter thought irritably.

'Oh no, it's lovely out at this time of the year,' he heard Rachel replying, not believing his ears. 'We like to work up an appetite for dinner. I'm Rachel, by the way, and this is Tony.'

'Dick Johnson,' the old man replied, shaking off a glove and offering each of them his hand in turn. 'Nice to meet you.'

The man was in his mid-sixties and had a whiskery white moustache that reminded Winter of Tony.

Weir, the television presenter who used to do programmes about Scottish towns and the countryside shows that always seemed to be repeated at two in the morning. Dick Johnson had a red whisky no like old Tom as well.

‘How long have you worked here?’ Rachel was asking him.

Johnson puffed out his cheeks, raising his eyes to the heavens as if counting, even though Winter was sure he knew to the day just how long.

‘Twenty-four years,’ he answered finally.

‘Twenty-four years,’ Rachel echoed with a sweet smile. ‘You must love it to have stayed here that long.’

‘Well,’ he looked almost bashful, ‘I do but don’t tell them up at the hotel or else they’ll be wanting me to do it for nothing.’

The gardener smiled at Rachel and Winter could see that the old rogue was smitten – not that Winter could blame him.

‘Oh, I won’t,’ she laughed. ‘Although . . .’ she deliberated as if trying to work something out, ‘you’ve worked here that long you must have seen all sorts of things, I’ll bet.’

Something in the way she phrased it jarred with Winter. What the hell was she getting at? A look of wariness passed over the old man’s face as well and his eyebrows knotted in a measure of confusion.

‘Aye, I suppose I have,’ he said slowly. ‘Nothing too exciting though, mainly weeds and wildfowl. That’s how I always describe my job: weeds, wildfowl and water. Not that people stop to ask to often.’

‘All the Ws,’ Rachel laughed. ‘What about whisky?’

A smile spread across his weather-beaten face.

‘Well, that’s the way I like my water best. A splash of it in a good malt.’

‘Tony likes a malt, too. Don’t you?’ she asked him rhetorically. ‘What was that you had earlier?’

A rushed waste of a twelve year old, Winter thought moodily.

‘A Balvenie DoubleWood,’ he told the old man.

Johnson nodded thoughtfully, as if to leave no doubt that whisky was due proper consideration.

‘Aye, a nice enough drop. Maybe a touch sweet for my taste but good and spicy too.’

‘Sounds like you know your stuff, Dick. Well, listen, we’re nearly done with our walk and I know Tony is going to fancy another whisky in the bar. Maybe you could join us for a wee half once you’re done?’

The man smiled brightly at the thought and Winter could see that the prospect of a warm fire, whisky and a pretty young woman was an easy choice to make after pottering about on the frozen shore all day.

‘Well,’ he hesitated, ‘Ella, my wife, will have my dinner ready. But . . . sometimes I take the long way home, if you know what I mean.’

Winter sighed inside. He was never shy of sharing a drink with someone but he’d just rather not be sharing Rachel with this old geezer and his war stories. Rachel, however, in a sudden burst of unfamiliar sociability, had other ideas.

‘Great,’ she breezed. ‘Well, we’re going back now and Tony can set them up. What would you like?’

Johnson thought about it for a moment before shaking his head wistfully.

‘Ah well, you can’t always get what you want. But I’d happily settle for a Glen Garioch. It’s a nice wee cheap half.’

‘Ach, sometimes you *can* get what you want,’ Rachel mock-scolded him. ‘What’s your favourite? I know it’s not the Glen Garioch.’

‘Well . . .’ Johnson deliberated. ‘They do have a 1975 St Magdalene that really hits the spot. It’s

whisky for high days and holidays though. I really couldn't . . .'

No, of course you couldn't, Tony thought. Sly old bugger. He'd seen the St Magdalene on the malt vault list and knew it came in at £12 a measure.

'Okay, what's going on?' he asked Rachel as they walked back towards the hotel, the whisky choice having been settled.

'Going on? What are you talking about?'

'Why are we talking old Tom Weir in for a drink?'

'His name's Dick and he's a nice old man. Stop being such a grouch and show some respect.'

'Rach . . .'

'Oh, come on,' she cut off any further argument. 'Do you fancy one of those St Magdalene yourself?'

'Well . . . I suppose I could be persuaded.'

'You usually can,' she smiled. 'What are you looking so miserable about anyway?'

Winter didn't have a face that naturally inclined towards a smile. A grimace was his default setting. It wasn't so much that he was never happy; it was more that his brain had never got around to letting his face know.

They had only been settled back in the bar a matter of minutes when the sound of shoes scraping on the doormat signalled Dick Johnson's arrival. He pulled off his hat and nodded to the barman, a tall, angular and balding man in his late fifties, who didn't seem at all surprised to see him, before pulling up a chair beside Rachel and Tony. The malt was already on the table and Dick surveyed it for an age before he even picked it up. He then embarked on a seemingly well-practised routine of holding the glass to the light and drawing in a deep breath of the cratur, smiling at the smell of it.

It reminded Winter of his favourite Gaelic word, *sgriob*, the tingle of anticipation on the lips before tasting whisky. Winter had his own form of *sgriob* but it was for something different entirely. His mind drifted briefly back to the streets of the city he'd left behind that morning and the dauntless possibilities it offered for fulfilling his particular itch: stabbings, beatings, high flat jumpers, drug overdoses, murders, all waiting to be photographed. Hell mend him but he missed it.

Rachel's words snapped him out of his obsessive wonderings and brought him racing back into the hotel bar.

'Tony, could you go and get my jumper from the room? The green one. I'm still chilly from being outside.'

Winter sighed, wondering how she could still be cold given the heat from the fire but glad enough not to have to sit out the agonising wait to see if Johnson was ever going to get round to drinking his expensive whisky.

'Sure.'

'Ta. It's in my white bag.'

Tony left Rachel with the gardener, a raise of his eyebrows receiving an ironically sweet smile from her in return. However, the jumper wasn't in the white bag, nor was it in the black one. It still wasn't in the white one when he looked a second time and it was a good five minutes before he found it peeped away in a drawer. Rachel had a mind like a vice and it was very unlike her to have forgotten where she had put something such a short time before. He was more inclined to believe she hadn't forgotten it at all. Back in the corridor that ran the length of the restaurant and passed the bar, he could see Rachel and the old boy were still deep in conversation. As he got nearer, he saw Johnson get to his feet.

'My dad worked here at that time,' he heard Rachel saying. 'He told me about her. Long time ago now though. Won't you stay a bit longer?'

'No, sorry, it's time I was going,' Johnson sounded irritated. 'Ella doesn't mind me taking the long way home but she gets annoyed if I go round the lake twice, if you know what I mean.'

The old man put his hat back onto his head and began pulling his coat around him.

~~‘Thanks for the drink. I don’t mean to be rude but . . . but I really do need to go.’~~

Johnson waved a curt goodbye to the balding barman, who seemed to be listening in on the conversation, and opened the door to leave, pausing reluctantly on the mat.

‘What was your dad’s name? I might remember him.’

Rachel hesitated.

‘Narey. Alan Narey.’

Johnson looked hard at her before exchanging a curious glance with the man behind the bar. ‘No, I guess my memory’s not what it was. Thanks again.’

Winter waited until the door had closed behind Johnson, a blast of cold air sweeping across the table, before he began his own interrogation.

‘Right, answers. First, your dad used to work here?’

‘No, just around here. For a while.’

‘What did . . .’

‘I’ve got an idea,’ she said interrupting him. ‘We’ve got an hour before dinner, why don’t we head back to the room until then?’

‘What did you mean by . . .’

‘Tony, maybe you didn’t understand me. I meant *back to the room.*’

The penny dropped.

‘Ah. *Back to the room.* Why didn’t you say so?’

Tony led the way back to Osprey and its large, comfortable bed, not seeing the pensive look on Rachel’s face as she glanced back at the door through which the old man had departed.

CHAPTER 5

'Have you seen it?'

'Of course I've seen it.'

'That's all you have to say about it?'

'What do you expect me to say? You think I'm going to fall to pieces, don't you? Think I'm not going to be able to handle it.'

'Are you?'

'I don't know. I don't bloody know. Who is doing this?'

'Who do you think it is?'

'Christ, I don't know. How the hell am I expected to know? It could be anyone. But why now? Why would do something like that now?'

'Are you going to be okay?'

'No. Probably not. I've not been doing too well as it is. And now this.'

'You have to stay calm.'

'That's easy for you to say. I couldn't believe it when I saw it. My nerves . . . they're not good. I don't know what to do.'

'Do nothing.'

'I can't.'

'You must.'

'I'm sorry. I don't think I can do that.'

CHAPTER 6

Sunday morning broke cold but bright, the sun streaming through the windows as soon as Rachel pulled back the curtains. She stood and stared across the calm, glassy surface of Scotland's only lake though even if it was a lake by name, it was as much a loch as any other – at the island that now stood clear and green in the middle distance. The mist that had formerly framed it had disappeared but the place was no less foreboding, to her at least. It seemed bigger than before, almost as if it were nearer. The island had certainly come to her in the darkness of her dreams and now it looked as if it had sneaked closer while the curtains were drawn.

'You'll see it better with these' came Tony's voice from behind her. She turned to see him standing a couple of feet away with a pair of binoculars in his hand.

'Where did you get those?' she asked him, aware of the note of envy in her voice. 'You didn't bring them with you, did you?'

'No. I got them from reception.'

'Oh. Can I have a go with them?'

'Sure, in a minute. I want to . . .'

He got no further, as Rachel took the binoculars from him and turned back to the window, fiddling with the focus until the island was clearly in view.

'Yeah, go ahead. Help yourself,' she heard him saying. 'Don't mind me.'

At length, she grudgingly lowered the binoculars and handed them over, ignoring the look of consternation on his face.

'It's time to go for breakfast anyway,' she said.

'Hold your horses,' he told her. 'Breakfast's going nowhere and I want a look as well. You can just make out the abbey on the island. Pretty amazing, isn't it?'

'Priory,' she corrected him. 'It's a priory not an abbey.'

'Whatever. I'm going to try to get some photos of that later. How do you get across to it?'

'You can't, not in the winter,' she told him. 'There's a ferry that takes you across during the summer season but the only way to get across in winter is if the lake freezes and you can walk there. But that's happened only three or four times in the last seventy years.'

'You wouldn't catch me walking over there on the ice. No chance. How come you know so much about this?'

'Listen, I'm starving. And I can smell bacon.'

Winter could feel an impatience growing in him at her evasiveness and wondered what the hell she was up to. He decided that, for one last time, he would let it go.

'Rach, you are avoiding far too many questions for my liking but okay. I'm hungry too.'

After filling themselves with sausage, bacon, black pudding, eggs and toast washed down with mugs of tea, they returned exhausted to the bedroom and collapsed on the sofa overlooking the bay window and the lake beyond.

Rachel got her Martina Cole novel from the bag and sat with her knees pulled up to her chin, her eyes occasionally stealing fleeting glances above the pages to the view through the window. Tony

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