

‘I remember exactly where I was and what I was doing when I heard my father had died.’

‘I remember where I was too, when it happened to me.’

Charlie Kinnaird’s penetrating blue gaze fell upon me.

‘So, where were you?’

‘At Margaret’s wildlife sanctuary, shovelling up deer poo. I really wish it had been a better setting, but it wasn’t. It’s okay, really. Although . . .’ I swallowed hard, wondering how on earth this conversation – or, more accurately, *interview* – had veered on to Pa Salt’s death. I was currently sitting in a stuffy hospital canteen opposite Dr Charlie Kinnaird. Even as he’d entered, I’d noticed how his presence commanded attention. It wasn’t just that he was strikingly handsome, with his slim, elegant physique clad in a well-tailored grey suit, and a head of wavy dark-auburn hair; he was simply someone who possessed a natural air of authority. Several of the hospital staff seated nearby had paused over their coffees to glance up and nod respectfully at him as he’d passed. When he’d reached me and held out his hand in greeting, a tiny electric shock had shot through my body. Now, as he sat opposite me, I watched those long fingers playing incessantly

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with the pager that lay between them, revealing an underlying level of nervous energy.

“Although” what, Miss D’Aplièse?’ Charlie prompted, his voice exhibiting a soft Scottish burr. I realised he was obviously not prepared to let me off the hook I was currently hanging myself on.

‘Umm . . . I’m just not sure Pa’s dead. I mean, of course he *is*, because he’s gone and he’d never fake his death or anything – he’d know how much pain it would cause all his girls – but I just feel him around me all the time.’

‘If it’s any comfort, I think that reaction is perfectly normal,’ Charlie responded. ‘A lot of the bereaved relatives I speak to say they feel the presence of their loved ones around them after they’ve died.’

‘Of course,’ I said, feeling slightly patronised, although I had to remember it was a doctor I was talking to – someone who dealt with death and the loved ones it left behind every day.

‘Funny, really,’ he sighed as he picked up the pager from the melamine tabletop and began to turn it over and over in his hands. ‘As I just mentioned, my own father died recently, and I’m plagued by what I can only describe as nightmare visions of him actually *rising* from the grave!’

‘You weren’t close then?’

‘No. He may have been my biological father, but that’s where our relationship began and ended. We had nothing else in common. You obviously did with yours.’

‘Yes, although ironically my sisters and I were all adopted by him as babies, so there’s no biological connection at all. But I couldn’t have loved him more. Really, he was amazing.’

Charlie smiled at this. ‘Well then, surely that just goes to

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prove that biology doesn't play a major part in whether we get on with our parents. It's a lottery, isn't it?'

'I don't think it is actually,' I said, deciding there was only one 'me' I could ever be, even in a job interview. 'I think we're given to each other for a reason, whether we're blood relatives or not.'

'You mean it's all predestined?' He raised a cynical eyebrow.

'Yes, but I know most people wouldn't agree.'

'Me included, I'm afraid. In my role as a cardiac surgeon, I have to deal on a daily basis with the heart, which we all equate with emotions and the soul. Sadly, I've been forced to view it as a lump of muscle – and an often malfunctioning one at that. I've been trained to see the world in a purely scientific way.'

'I think there's room for spirituality in science,' I countered. 'I had a rigorous scientific training too, but there are so many things that science hasn't yet explained.'

'You're right, but . . .' Charlie checked his watch. 'We seem to have wandered completely off track and I'm due in clinic in fifteen minutes. So, excuse me for getting back to business, but how much has Margaret told you about the Kinnaird estate?'

'That it's over forty thousand acres of wilderness, and you're looking for someone who knows about the indigenous animals who could inhabit it, wildcats in particular.'

'Yes. Due to my father's death, the Kinnaird estate will pass to me. Dad used it as his personal playground for years; hunting, shooting, fishing and drinking the local distilleries dry with not a thought for the estate's ecology. To be fair, it's not entirely his fault – his father and numerous male relatives

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before him were happy to take money from the loggers for shipbuilding in the last century. They stood back and watched as vast tracts of Caledonian pine forests were stripped bare. They didn't know any better in those days, but in these enlightened times, *we* do. I'm aware that it will be impossible to turn back the clock completely, certainly in my lifetime, but I'm keen to make a start. I've got the best estate manager in the Highlands to lead the way with the reforestation project. We've also spruced up the hunting lodge where Dad lived, so we can let it to paying guests who want a breath of fresh Highland air and some organised shoots.'

'Right,' I said, trying to suppress a shudder.

'You obviously don't approve of culling?'

'I can't approve of any innocent animal being killed, no. But I do understand why it has to happen,' I added hurriedly. After all, I told myself, I was applying for a job on a Highland estate, where the culling of deer was not only standard practice, but the law.

'With your background, I'm sure you know how the whole balance of nature in Scotland has been destroyed by mankind. There are no natural predators, such as wolves and bears, left to keep the deer population under control. Nowadays, that task is down to us. At least we can perform it as humanely as possible.'

'I know, although I have to be totally honest and tell you that I'd never be able to help out at a shoot. I'm used to protecting animals, not murdering them.'

'I understand your sentiments. I've had a look at your CV and it's very impressive. As well as gaining a first-class degree in zoology, you specialised in conservation?'

'Yes, the technical side of my degree – anatomy, biology,

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genetics, indigenous animals' behavioural patterns and so on – was invaluable. I worked in the research department at Ser-vion Zoo for a while, but I soon realised I was more interested in doing something hands-on to help animals, rather than just studying them from a distance and analysing their DNA in a Petri dish. I . . . just have a natural empathy with them in the flesh, and although I have no veterinary training, I seem to have a knack for healing them when they're sick.' I shrugged lamely, embarrassed to be blowing my own trumpet.

'Margaret was certainly very complimentary about your skills. She told me you've been caring for the wildcats at her sanctuary.'

'I've done the day-to-day stuff, yes, but it's Margaret who's the real expert. We were hoping the cats would mate this season as part of the re-wilding programme, but now the sanctuary is closing and the animals are being rehomed, it probably won't happen. Wildcats are incredibly temperamental.'

'So Cal MacKenzie, my estate manager, tells me. He's not at all happy about adopting the cats, but they're indigenous to Scotland and so rare, I feel it's our duty to do what we can to save the breed. And Margaret thinks that if anyone can help the cats adjust to their change of habitat, it's you. So, are you interested in coming up with them for a few weeks and settling them in?'

'I am, although the wildcats alone wouldn't really be a full-time job once they're in situ. Is there anything else I could do?'

'To be honest, Tiggy, so far I haven't had much chance to think through future plans for the estate in detail. What with my job here and trying to sort out probate since my father passed away, I've been up to my eyes. But whilst you're with

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us, I'd love it if you could study the terrain and assess its suitability for other indigenous breeds. I've been thinking about introducing red squirrels and native mountain hares. I'm also investigating the suitability of wild boar and elk, plus restocking the wild salmon in the streams and lochs, building salmon leaps and so forth to encourage spawning. There's a lot of potential, given the right resources.'

'Okay, that all sounds interesting,' I agreed. 'Although I should warn you, fish aren't a speciality of mine.'

'Of course. And I should warn *you* that financial realities mean I can only offer a basic wage, plus board, but I'd be very grateful for any help you can give me. As much as I love the place, Kinnaird is proving a time-consuming and difficult proposition.'

'You must have known the estate would come to you one day?' I ventured.

'I did, but I also thought Dad was one of those characters who would creak on forever. So much so that he didn't even bother to make a will, so he died intestate. Even though I'm his only heir and it's a formality, it means another pile of paperwork I didn't need. Anyway, it'll all be sorted by January, so my solicitor tells me.'

'How did he die?' I asked.

'Ironically, he dropped dead of a heart attack and was helicoptered in to me here,' Charlie sighed. 'He'd already left us by then, borne upwards on a cloud of whisky fumes, so the post mortem indicated later.'

'That must have been tough for you,' I said, wincing at the thought.

'It was a shock, yes.'

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I watched his fingers grab the pager once more, betraying his inner angst.

‘Can’t you sell the estate if you don’t want it?’

‘Sell up after three hundred years of Kinnaird ownership?’ He rolled his eyes and gave a chuckle. ‘I’d have every ghost in the family haunting me for life! And if for no other reason, I have to try and at least caretake it for Zara, my daughter. She’s absolutely passionate about the place. She’s sixteen and if she could, she’d leave school tomorrow and come up and work at Kinnaird full-time. I’ve told her she has to finish her education first.’

‘Right.’ I looked at Charlie in surprise and immediately adjusted my view of him. This man seriously didn’t look old enough to have kids, let alone one who was sixteen.

‘She’ll make a great laird when she’s older,’ Charlie continued, ‘but I want her to live a little first – go to university, travel the world and make sure committing herself to the family estate is really what she wants.’

‘I knew what I wanted to do from the age of four, when I saw a documentary on how elephants were being killed for ivory. I didn’t take a gap year – just went straight to university. I’ve hardly travelled at all,’ I said with a shrug, ‘but there’s nothing like learning on the job.’

‘That’s what Zara keeps telling me.’ Charlie gave me a faint smile. ‘I have a feeling the two of you will get on very well. Of course what I should do is give this up’ – he indicated our surroundings – ‘and devote my life to the estate until Zara can take over. The problem is, that until the estate’s in better shape, it doesn’t make financial sense to pack in my day job. And between you and me, I’m not even sure yet if I’m cut out for life as a country laird.’ He checked his watch again. ‘Right,

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I must go, but if you are interested, it's best you visit Kinnaird and see it for yourself. It hasn't snowed up there yet, but it's expected soon. You need to be aware that it's as remote as it gets.'

'I live with Margaret in her cottage in the middle of nowhere,' I pointed out.

'Margaret's cottage is Times Square compared to Kinnaird,' Charlie replied. 'I'll text you the mobile number for Cal and also the landline at the Lodge. If you leave messages on both, he'll get one or the other eventually and call you back.'

'Okay. I—'

The beeping of Charlie's pager interrupted my train of thought.

'Right, I really must go.' He stood up. 'Email me with any more questions you have and if you let me know when you're going up to Kinnaird, I'll try to join you there. And please, think about it seriously. I really need you. Thanks for coming, Tiggy. Bye now.'

'Bye,' I said, then watched as he turned away and weaved through the tables towards the exit. I felt weirdly elated, because I'd experienced a real connection with him. Charlie seemed familiar, as though I'd known him forever. And since I believed in reincarnation, I probably *had*. I closed my eyes for a second and cleared my mind to try to focus on which emotion stirred first in me when I thought of him, and was shocked at the result. Rather than being filled with a warm glow about someone who might represent a paternal employer-like figure, another part of me altogether reacted.

No! I opened my eyes and stood up to leave. *He's got a teenage daughter, which means he's far older than he looks*

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and probably married, I chided myself as I walked through the brightly lit hospital corridors and out of the entrance into the foggy November afternoon. Dusk had already begun to fall over Inverness, even though it was only just past three o'clock.

Standing in the queue for the bus that would take me to the train station, I shivered – from cold or the tingle of excitement, I didn't know. All I *did* know was that I was instinctively interested in the job, however temporary. So I found the number Charlie had given me for Cal MacKenzie, pulled out my mobile and dialled it.



'So,' Margaret asked me that evening as we settled down for our customary cup of cocoa in front of the fire. 'How did it go?'

'I'm going up to see the Kinnaird estate on Thursday.'

'Good.' Margaret's bright blue eyes shone like laser beams in her wrinkled face. 'What did you think of the Laird, or Lord as he'd be called in English?'

'He was very . . . nice. Yes, he was,' I managed. 'Not at all what I was expecting,' I added, hoping I wasn't blushing. 'I thought he'd be a much older man. Possibly with no hair and a huge belly from too much whisky.'

'Aye,' she cackled, reading my mind. 'He's easy on the eye and that's for sure. I've known Charlie since he was a bairn; my father worked for his grandfather at Kinnaird. A lovely young man he was, though we all knew he was making a mistake when he married that wife of his. So young he was too.' Margaret rolled her eyes. 'Their girl Zara's sweet enough,

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mind you, if a little wild, but her childhood's nae bin an easy one. So, tell me more about what Charlie said.'

'Apart from looking after the cats, he wants me to research indigenous breeds to introduce to the estate. To be honest, he didn't seem very . . . organised. I think it would only be a temporary job whilst the cats settle in.'

'Well, even if it's only a short wee while, living and working up on an estate like Kinnaird'll teach you a lot. Mebbe there you'll start to learn that you cannae save every creature that comes into your care. And that goes for lame ducks of the human variety too,' she added with a wry smile. 'You have tae learn tae accept that animals and humans have their own destinies to follow. You can only do your best, an' no more.'

'I'll never toughen up to the plight of a suffering animal, Margaret. You know I won't.'

'I do know, dear, and that's what makes you special. You're a wee slip o' a thing, with a great big heart, but watch you don't wear it out wi' all that emotion.'

'So, what's this Cal MacKenzie like?'

'Och, he comes across a bit gruff, but he's a poppet underneath, is Cal. The place is in his blood an' you'd learn a lot from him. Besides, if you don't take this, where else will you go? You know me and the animals are gone from here by Christmas.'

Due to her crippling arthritis, Margaret was finally moving into the town of Tain, forty-five minutes' drive from the damp, crumbling cottage we were currently sitting in. On the shores of Dornoch Firth, its twenty acres of hillside land had housed Margaret and her motley crew of assorted animals for the past forty years.

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‘Aren’t you sad about leaving?’ I asked her yet again. ‘If it was me, I’d be crying my eyes out day and night.’

‘Course I am, Tiggy, but as I’ve tried to teach yae, all good things must come tae an end. And with the will o’ God, new and better things will begin. No point in regretting what was, you just have tae embrace what will be. I’ve known this was coming for a long time now, and thanks tae you helping me I’ve managed an extra year here. And besides, my new bungalow has radiators yae can turn up when they’re wanted, and a television signal that works all o’ the time!’

She gave me a chuckle and a big smile, although I – who prided myself on being naturally intuitive – didn’t know if she really *was* happy about the future, or just being brave. Whichever it was, I stood up and went to hug her.

‘I think you’re amazing, Margaret. You and the animals have taught me so much. I’m going to miss you all terribly.’

‘Aye, well you won’t be missing me if yae take the job at Kinnaird. I’m a blow o’ wind down the valley and on hand to give you advice about the cats if you need it. And you’ll have tae visit Dennis, Guinness and Button, or they’ll be missing you too.’

I looked down at the three scrawny creatures lying in front of the fire: an ancient three-legged ginger cat and two old dogs. All of them had been nursed back to health as youngsters by Margaret.

‘I’ll go up and see Kinnaird and then make a decision. Otherwise, it’s home to Atlantis for Christmas and a rethink. Now, can I help you to bed before I go up?’

It was a question I asked Margaret every night and she responded with her usual proud reply.

‘No, I’ll sit awhile here by the fire, Tiggy.’

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‘Sweet dreams, darling Margaret.’

I kissed her parchment-like cheek, then walked up the uneven narrow staircase to my bedroom. It had once been Margaret’s, until even she had realised that mounting the stairs every night was a number of steps too far. We had subsequently moved her bed downstairs into the dining room, and perhaps it was a blessing that there had never been funds to move the bathroom upstairs, because it still lay in the toe-bitingly cold outhouse only a few metres from the room she now used as her bedroom.

As I went through my usual routine of stripping off my day clothes then putting on layers of night clothes before I climbed between the freezing cold sheets, I was comforted that my decision to come here to the sanctuary had been the right one. As I’d told Charlie Kinnaird, after six months in the research department of Servion Zoo in Lausanne, I’d realised I wanted to take care of and protect the animals themselves. So I’d answered an ad I’d seen online and come to a crumbling cottage beside a loch to help an arthritic old lady in her wild-life sanctuary.

Trust to your instincts, Tiggy, they will never let you down.

That’s what Pa Salt had said to me many times. ‘Life is about intuition, with a splash of logic. If you learn to use the two in the right balance, any decision you take will normally be right,’ he’d added, when we’d stood together in his private garden at Atlantis and watched the full moon rise above Lake Geneva.

I remembered I’d been telling him that my dream was to one day go to Africa, to work with the incredible creatures in their natural habitat, rather than behind bars.

Tonight, as I curled my toes into a patch of bed I’d warmed

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up with my knees, I realised how far I felt from achieving my dream. Looking after four Scottish wildcats was not really in the Big Game league.

I switched off the light, and lay there thinking how all my sisters teased me about being the spiritual snowflake of the family. I couldn't really blame them, because when I was young I didn't understand that I was 'different', so I'd just speak about the things that I saw or felt. Once, when I was very small, I'd told my sister CeCe that she shouldn't climb her favourite tree because I'd seen her fall out of it. She'd laughed at me, not unkindly, and told me she'd climbed it hundreds of times and I was being silly. Then, when she *had* fallen out half an hour later, she had glanced away from me, embarrassed by the fact that my prophecy had come true. I'd since learnt it was best to keep my mouth shut when I 'knew' things. Just like I knew that Pa Salt wasn't dead . . .

If he was, I would have known when his soul had left the earth. Yet I'd felt nothing, only the utter shock of the news when I'd received the call from my sister Maia. I'd been totally unprepared; no 'warning' of the fact that something bad was coming. So, either my spiritual wiring was faulty, or I was in denial because I couldn't bear to accept the truth.

My thoughts spun back to Charlie Kinnaird and the bizarre job interview I'd had earlier today. My stomach resumed its inappropriate lurches as my imagination conjured up those startling blue eyes and the slim hands with the long, sensitive fingers that had saved so many lives . . .

'God, Tiggy! Get a grip,' I muttered to myself. Maybe it was simply that – living such an isolated life – attractive, intelligent men were not exactly streaming through the door.

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Besides, Charlie Kinnaird must be ten years my senior at least . . .

Still, I thought, as I closed my eyes, I was really looking forward to visiting the Kinnaird estate.



Three days later, I stepped off the little two-carriage train at Tain and walked towards a battered Land Rover – the only vehicle I could see outside the front entrance to the tiny station. A man in the driver's seat rolled down the window.

'You Tiggy?' he asked me in a broad Scottish accent.

'Yes. Are you Cal MacKenzie?'

'I am that. Climb aboard.'

I did so, but struggled to close the heavy passenger door behind me.

'Lift it up, then slam it,' Cal advised me. 'This tin can has seen better days, like most things at Kinnaird.'

There was a sudden bark from behind me, and I twisted round to see a gigantic Scottish deerhound sitting in the back seat. The dog edged forward to sniff my hair before giving my face a rough-tongued lick.

'Och, Thistle, down with you, boy!' Cal ordered.

'I don't mind,' I said, reaching back to scratch Thistle behind the ears, 'I love dogs.'

'Aye, but don't start pampering him, he's a workin' dog. Right, we're off.'

After a few false starts, Cal got the engine going and we drove through Tain – a small town fashioned out of dour grey slate – which served a large rural community and housed the only decent supermarket in the area. The urban sprawl soon

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disappeared and we drove along a winding road with gentle, sloping hills covered in clumps of heather and dotted with Caledonian pines. The tops of the hills were shrouded in thick grey mist, and on turning a corner, a loch appeared to our right. In the drizzle, it reminded me of a vast grey puddle.

I shivered, despite Thistle – who had decided to rest his shaggy grey head on my shoulder – warming my cheek with his hot breath, and remembered the first day I'd arrived at Inverness airport almost a year ago. I'd left a clear blue Swiss sky and a light dusting of the first snow of the season on top of the mountains opposite Atlantis, only to find myself in a dreary facsimile of it. As the taxi had driven me to Margaret's cottage, I'd truly wondered what on earth I had done. A year on, having lived in the Highlands throughout all four seasons, I knew that when the spring came, the heather would bring the hillsides alive with the softest purple, and the loch would shine a tranquil blue under a benevolent Scottish sun.

I glanced surreptitiously at my driver: a stocky, well-built man with ruddy cheeks and a head of thinning red hair. The large hands that clutched the wheel were those of a man who used them as his tools: fingernails engrained with dirt, skin covered in scratches and the knuckles red from exposure. Given the physically punishing job that Cal did, I decided he must be younger than he looked and put him somewhere between thirty and thirty-five.

Like most people I'd met around here, who were used to living and working on the land and being isolated from the rest of the world, Cal didn't speak much.

But he is a kind man . . . my inner voice told me.

'How long have you worked at Kinnaird?' I broke the silence.

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‘Since I was a wee one. My father, grandfather, great-grandfather and great-great-grandfather afore me did the same. I was out with my pa as soon as I could walk. Times have changed since then and that’s for sure. Changes bring their own set o’ problems, mind. Beryl isnae pleased tae have her territory invaded by a bunch o’ Sassenachs.’

‘Beryl?’ I questioned.

‘The housekeeper at Kinnaird Lodge. She’s been workin’ there o’er forty years.’

‘And “Sassenachs”?’

‘The English; we have a load of poncey rich folk from across the border arriving tae spend Hogmanay at the Lodge. An’ Beryl’s nae happy. You’re the first guest since it’s been renovated. The Laird’s wife was put in charge and she didnae skimp on anything. The curtain bill alone must ha’ run intae thousands.’

‘Well, I hope she hasn’t gone to any trouble for me. I’m used to roughing it,’ I said, not wanting Cal to think I was in any way a spoilt princess. ‘You should see Margaret’s cottage.’

‘Aye, I have, many a time. She’s the cousin o’ my cousin, so we’re distantly related. Most folk are around these parts.’

We lapsed into silence again as Cal turned a sharp left by a tiny run-down chapel with a weathered ‘For Sale’ sign nailed lopsidedly to one of its walls. The road had narrowed and we were now driving through open countryside, with drystone walls on either side keeping the sheep and cattle safely corralled behind them.

In the distance, I could see grey clouds hanging atop further mountainous terrain. The odd stone homestead appeared sporadically on either side of us, plumes of smoke belching from the chimneys. Dusk was fast descending as we drove on

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and the road became pitted with potholes. The old Land Rover's suspension was seemingly non-existent as Cal navigated a number of narrow hump-back bridges that straddled swirling streams, the tumble of rocks producing a froth of white bubbles as the water roared downwards over them, indicative of the fact that we were climbing upwards.

'How much further?' I asked, glancing at my watch and realising it was an hour since we had left Tain.

'No' far now,' Cal said as we took a sharp right and the road became little more than a gravel track, the treacherous potholes so deep that the mud within them splashed upwards and splattered the windows. 'You can see the entrance tae the estate just ahead.'

As a pair of stone pillars flashed past in the beam of the headlights, I wished I'd arrived earlier in the day so I could orientate myself.

'Almost there,' Cal reassured me as we twisted and turned and bumped along the drive. As the Land Rover proceeded up a steep slope, the wheels spun as they struggled for a grip on the loose water-logged gravel. Cal finally brought the car to a halt, the engine shuddering to a relieved standstill.

'Welcome tae Kinnaird,' he announced as he pushed open the door and climbed out. I noticed he was light on his feet, considering his physical bulk. He walked round and opened the passenger door for me, then offered his hand to help me.

'I can manage,' I insisted as I jumped down and promptly landed in a puddle. Thistle leapt out beside me and gave me a friendly lick, before ambling off to sniff around the driveway, obviously pleased to be back on familiar territory.

I looked up and in the moonlight, made out the sharp clean lines of Kinnaird Lodge, its steeply pitched roofs and

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lofty chimneys casting shadows into the night, warm lights glimmering behind the tall sash windows that peered out from the sturdy shale-rock walls.

Cal collected my holdall from the back of the Land Rover, then led me round the side of the Lodge towards a back door.

‘Servants’ entrance,’ he muttered, cleaning his boots on the scraper placed outside. ‘Only the Laird, his family and invited guests use the front door.’

‘Right,’ I said as we stepped inside and a welcome blast of hot air hit me.

‘Like a furnace in here,’ Cal complained as we made our way along a passageway that smelt strongly of fresh paint. ‘The Laird’s wife has put in some fancy heating system and Beryl hasn’t learnt how tae control it yet. Beryl!’ he shouted as he led me into a large ultra-modern kitchen, illuminated by numerous spotlights. I blinked to let my eyes adjust as I took in the vast, gleaming centre unit, the rows of shiny wall cupboards, and what looked like two state-of-the-art ovens.

‘This is very stylish,’ I said to Cal.

‘Aye, that it is. You should have seen this room afore the old Laird died; I’d reckon there was a hundred years o’ grime hidden behind the old cabinets, as well as a large family o’ mice. It’ll all fall down, mind, if Beryl cannae learn tae work those newfangled ovens. She’s cooked on the old range for the whole o’ her time here, and you need a degree in computer science tae use those two.’

As Cal spoke, an elegant, slim woman with snow-white hair scraped back into a bun at the base of her neck walked in. I felt her blue eyes – set on either side of a hawk-like nose in a long angular face – assess me.

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‘Miss D’Aplièse, I presume?’ she said, her modulated voice holding just a hint of a Scottish accent.

‘Yes, but please call me Tiggy.’

‘Likewise, everyone here calls me Beryl.’

I thought how her name belied her. I’d imagined a motherly type with an over-ripe bosom, reddened cheeks and hands as rough and large as the pans she juggled with every day. Not this handsome, rather stern woman in her immaculate black housekeeper’s dress.

‘Thank you for having me to stay tonight. I hope it’s not too much trouble whilst you’re so busy,’ I said, feeling tongue-tied, like a child addressing a headmistress. Beryl had an air of authority about her that simply demanded respect.

‘Are you hungry? I’ve made soup – about all I can manage safely until I’ve worked out the programmes on the new ovens.’ She gave Cal a grim smile. ‘The Laird tells me you’re a vegan. Will carrot and coriander suffice?’

‘It will be perfect, thank you.’

‘Well now, I’ll be leavin’ you both,’ said Cal. ‘I’ve some stag heads tae boil in the shed from yesterday’s shoot. Night, Tiggy, sleep well.’

‘Thanks, Cal, you too,’ I said, stifling an urge to retch at his parting words.

‘Right then, I’ll take you upstairs to your bedroom,’ said Beryl brusquely, indicating I should follow her. At the end of the corridor, we turned into a grand flagstone-floored entrance hall, containing an impressive stone fireplace, over which hung a stag’s head, complete with a magnificent set of antlers. She led me up the freshly carpeted stairs, the walls lined with portraits of Kinnaird ancestors, and along the wide landing above, then opened a door to a large bedroom, decorated in

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soft beige hues. An enormous four-poster bed draped with red tartan took pride of place; leather chairs with plump cushions sat next to the fireplace and two antique brass lamps standing on highly polished mahogany side tables gave off a soft glow.

‘This is beautiful,’ I murmured. ‘I feel as if I’m in a five-star hotel.’

‘The old Laird slept in here until the day he died. He’d hardly recognise it now, mind, especially the bathroom.’ Beryl indicated a door to our left. ‘He used it as his dressing room. I put a commode in there towards the end. The facilities were at the other end of the corridor, you see.’

Beryl sighed heavily, her expression telling me her thoughts were in the past – perhaps a past she yearned for.

‘I rather thought I could use you as a guinea pig; test the suite for problems, if you like,’ Beryl continued. ‘I’d be grateful if you’d take a shower and let me know how long it takes for the hot water to come through.’

‘My pleasure. Where I live at the moment, hot water’s a rare thing.’

‘Right then, we’re still waiting for the dining room table to return from the restorer, so the best thing is that I bring a tray up to you here.’

‘Whatever’s easiest really, Beryl.’

She nodded and left the room. I sat down on the edge of what felt like a very comfortable mattress and mused that I couldn’t quite work Beryl out. And this lodge . . . the luxury surrounding me was the last thing I’d expected to find. Eventually, I raised myself from the bed and went to open the door to the bathroom. Inside I found a double marble-topped sink, a freestanding bath and a shower cubicle with one of those

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huge circular shower heads that I just couldn't wait to stand under, after months of bathing in Margaret's chipped enamel tub.

'Heaven,' I breathed as I stripped off and turned on the shower, then spent an indecently long time beneath it. Stepping out, I dried myself, before putting on the gloriously fluffy robe that hung on the back of the door. Towel-drying my unruly curls, I went back into the bedroom to find Beryl placing a tray onto a table next to one of the leather chairs.

'I brought you some homemade elderflower cordial to accompany the soup.'

'Thank you. The water came straight through and was piping hot, by the way.'

'Good,' Beryl replied. 'Right, then I shall leave you to eat. Sleep well, Tiggy.'

And with that, she swept out of the room.

2

Not a glint of daylight appeared through the heavy lining of the curtains as I fumbled for the light switch to see what time it was. Surprisingly, it was almost eight o'clock – a real lie-in for someone who normally rose at six to feed her animals. I clambered out of the enormous bed and walked across to open the curtains, letting out a gasp of delight at the beautiful vista beyond the window.

The Lodge was set on a hill overlooking a glen, the terrain falling gently down to a narrow, winding river in the flat valley bottom, then rising again on the other side to a range of mountains with an icing-sugar dusting of snow atop them. The whole landscape shimmered with frost under the newly risen sun and I opened the freshly painted window to breathe in a lungful of Highland air. It smelt pure – scented by the merest hint of peaty autumnal earth as grass and foliage decomposed in order to fertilise the new growth next spring.

All I wanted to do was run outside and lose myself in the miracle of nature at its finest. I threw on my jeans and jumper, added my ski jacket, beanie and my pair of sturdy boots, then made my way downstairs to the front door. It was unlocked and as I stepped outside, I revelled in the ethereal earthly

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paradise spread in front of me, miraculously untouched by either humans or their habitations.

‘This is all mine,’ I whispered as I walked across the coarse, frost-crisp grass of the front lawn. I heard a rustle from the trees to my left and saw a young roe deer with its large pointed ears, long eyelashes and auburn spotted coat leaping lightly between them. Even though Margaret’s deer enclosure was large and fashioned as best she could to mimic their habitat while the deer were rehabilitated, it was closely fenced in. Here, at Kinnaird, the deer had thousands of acres in which to roam wild and free, even though they still faced peril from human predators, rather than their natural enemies of yesteryear.

Nothing in nature was safe, I mused, not even humans – the self-fashioned masters of the earth: with all our arrogance, we believed ourselves to be invincible. Yet I’d seen countless times how one mighty puff of wind from the gods in their heavens could wipe out thousands of us at a blow during tornados and hurricanes.

Halfway down the hill, I stopped beside a rushing stream, swollen with last night’s fresh rainfall. I breathed in the air and looked around me.

Could I live here for a while?

Yes, yes, yes! came my soul’s reply.

Yet even for *me* the total isolation was extreme: Kinnaird truly *was* another world. I knew my sisters would tell me I was mad to cut myself off here, that I should spend more time with people – preferably some suitable males – but that wasn’t what made my heart sing. Being in nature made me feel alive, made my senses sharpen and soar, as if I was rising above the earth and becoming part of the universe. Here at Kinnaird, I

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knew that the inner part of me that I hid from the world could blossom and grow as I woke each morning to the gift of this magical glen.

‘What do you think of me coming to Kinnaird, Pa?’ I asked the skies above me, fervently wishing I could make that vital, invisible connection with the person I loved most in the world. Yet again, I was talking to thin air, both physically and spiritually, and it was deeply upsetting.

A few hundred metres from the Lodge, I found myself staring down from a rocky crag into a sloping, heavily wooded area. It was a private spot, yet as I scrambled down the slope to investigate, it proved easily accessible. This was the perfect place for Molly, Igor, Posy and Polson – aka the four wildcats – to have their enclosures.

I spent some time walking the area, knowing that the wooded back slope would provide the feeling of security that the wildcats needed if they were to become comfortable enough to venture out and, eventually, to breed. It was only ten minutes from the Lodge and surrounding cottages – close enough for me to provide their daily rations, even in the depths of winter. Feeling pleased with my choice, I made my way back up the slope to the uneven, narrow path that obviously served as an access road through the glen.

Then I heard the sound of an engine chugging towards me and I turned to see Cal hanging out of the Land Rover window, relief on his face.

‘There yae are! Where’ve you been? Beryl had breakfast ready ages ago, but when she went tae call you in your room, she found it empty. She was convinced you’d been taken in the night by MacTavish the Reckless, the Lodge’s resident ghost.’

‘Oh gosh, I’m really sorry, Cal. It’s such a beautiful

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morning, I came out to explore. I also found the perfect spot to build the wildcat enclosure. It's just down there.' I pointed to the slope.

'Then it was worth getting Beryl and her breakfast in a fuddle. Besides, it does her nae harm tae get her senses going, give her some excitement, if you know what I mean.' Cal winked at me as I heaved the passenger door closed. 'O' course, the problem is that she believes she's the *real* lady o' the Lodge, and I cannae deny that, in many ways, she is. Climb in an' I'll give yae a lift back.'

I did so and we lurched off.

'These roads get treacherous when it snows,' Cal commented.

'I've lived in Geneva all my life, so at least I'm used to driving in snow.'

'That's good then, as you'll be seein' a lot o' it for months on end. Look.' Cal pointed. 'Just beyond the burn in that birch copse is where the stags like tae take shelter at night.'

'That doesn't look like it gives much protection,' I said, looking at the sparse cluster of trees.

'Aye, and that's the trouble. Most of the natural woodland has gone from the glen. We're startin' tae reforest, but it'll all need to be fenced off or the deer will nibble away the seedlings. It's a huge job the new Laird's undertaken. Och, Beryl, don't do this.' There was a grinding noise as Cal tried to shift the Land Rover into gear. The car juddered for a few seconds, then ran smoothly again.

"Beryl"?' I repeated.

'Aye,' he chuckled, 'named after our housekeeper herself; this Landy's as tough as old boots, an' mostly reliable, despite its hiccups.'

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When Cal and I returned to the Lodge, I apologised profusely to the human Beryl for disappearing before breakfast, then felt obliged to work my way through the Marmite sandwiches she'd made for me – 'in lieu of the breakfast you didn't eat'. And I really wasn't a Marmite fan.

'I don't think she likes me,' I mumbled to Cal, as she left the kitchen and he helped me out by eating a couple of the doorstoppers.

'Ah, Tig, the poor woman's just stressed,' Cal said sagely as his huge jaws demolished the sandwiches. 'So now, what time train are yae thinkin' o' getting? There's a 3.29, but it's up to you.'

The ring of a telephone broke into the conversation, then stopped. Before I could answer Cal, Beryl arrived back in the kitchen.

'The Laird wishes to speak to you, Tiggy. Is it a suitable time?' she asked me.

'Of course.' I shrugged at Cal, then followed Beryl along the back corridor and into a small room that obviously served as an office.

'I'll leave you alone,' she said, indicating the handset that lay on the desk. The door closed behind her.

'Hello?' I said into the receiver.

'Hello, Tiggy. Apologies for not being able to join you up at Kinnaird. A couple of emergencies came up at the hospital.'

'No problem, Charlie,' I lied as I *was* disappointed.

'So, what do you think of Kinnaird?'

'I think . . . that it's one of the most incredible places I've ever seen. It's breathtaking, really, Charlie. Oh, and by the way, I think I've found the perfect place for the wildcats.'

'Really?'

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‘Yes.’ I explained where it was on the estate and the reasons behind my choice.

‘If you think it’s right, Tiggy, then I’m sure it is. So, what about you? Would you be happy to come with them?’

‘Well . . . I love it here,’ I said, smiling into the receiver. ‘In fact, I don’t just love it, I adore it.’

‘So, could you live there for a while?’

‘Yes,’ I replied without a pause. ‘Definitely.’

‘Then, well, that’s . . . fantastic! Cal in particular will be thrilled. I realise we haven’t talked money or terms yet – but are you happy for me to email you over something? Shall we say an initial period of three months?’

‘Yes, that’s fine, Charlie. I’ll read the email and reply.’

‘Great. I look forward to showing you round myself next time, but I hope Beryl made you feel comfortable in the Lodge.’

‘Oh, she did.’

‘Good. Well then, I’ll send that email and if you agree to come and work at Kinnaird, perhaps you could travel up with the wildcats at the beginning of December?’

‘That sounds perfect.’

After a polite goodbye, I ended the call, wondering whether I’d just made the best or worst decision of my life.

After I’d offered profuse ‘thank yous’ to Beryl for her hospitality, Cal gave me a quick glance at the rustic but charming cottage I’d share with him if I took the position. Then we climbed into Beryl the Land Rover and set off for Tain station.

‘So now, are yae comin’ up wi’ the cats or no?’ Cal asked me bluntly.

‘I am, yes.’

‘Thank the heavens for that!’ Cal thumped the wheel. ‘The

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cats are the last thing I needed on my plate, along wi' everything else I have tae do.'

'I'll be arriving with them in December, which means you need to start organising the building of their enclosure.'

'Aye, and I'll need serious advice from you on that, Tig, but it's great news you're comin'. Are you sure you can cope with the isolation?' he said as we bumped along the road that led out of the estate. 'It's no' for everyone.'

At that moment, the sun chose to emerge from behind a cloud, lighting up the glen below us, which was swathed in an ethereal mist.

'Oh yes, Cal.' I smiled, feeling a bubble of excitement rise up inside me. 'I know I can.'

3

The following month passed in a flash; a month that contained a lot of sad farewells as Margaret and I said painful goodbyes to our beloved animals. The deer, two red squirrels, hedgehogs, owls and our one remaining donkey were all seen off to their new homes. Margaret was far calmer about it than I was – I wept buckets after each one left.

‘Tis the circle of life, Tiggy, it’s full of hellos and goodbyes and yae’d do well to understand that as soon as you can,’ she’d advised me.

Numerous emails and phone consultations concerning the wildcat enclosure ensued with Cal, who then engaged a company to construct it.

‘I’m tae spare no expense, apparently,’ Cal told me. ‘The Laird’s applied for a grant and is determined the cats should breed.’

From the photos he sent me, I could see it was state-of-the-art – a series of pavilion-like cages linked by narrow tunnels and surrounded by trees, vegetation and man-made hidey-holes for the cats to explore. There would be four pavilions in total so they could all claim their own territory and the

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females could be kept away from the males if and when they became pregnant.

I showed Margaret the photos as we had a glass of sherry on our final evening together. 'Lord! They could house a couple o' giraffes comfortably in there, let alone a few scrawny cats,' she chuckled.

'Charlie's obviously dead serious about his breeding programme.'

'Aye, well, he's a perfectionist, our Charlie. Shame he had his dream snatched away when he was so young. I don't think he's fully recovered since.'

My ears pricked up. 'From what?'

'I shouldn't ha' mentioned it, but that sherry loosened my tongue. Let's just say, he's been unlucky in love. Lost a girl to another, then married that wife o' his on the rebound.'

'Have you met his wife?'

'Only once in person, which was at their wedding over sixteen years back now. We exchanged a few words but I didn't like the cut of her. She's very beautiful, mind, but just like in the fairy tales, physical beauty doesn't always translate into inner beauty and Charlie always was naive when it came to women. He was wed at twenty-one, in the third year of his medical degree at Edinburgh,' Margaret sighed. 'She was already pregnant with Zara, their daughter, y'see. I'd reckon Charlie's whole life before that had been a reaction to his father's behaviour. Medicine and marriage gave him an escape. Mebbe this is Charlie's time now,' said Margaret, taking a final swig of her sherry. 'He's certainly due it.'



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The following morning, I fussed around in the back of Beryl the Land Rover, which currently contained Molly, Igor, Posy and Polson, who were yowling and screeching in protest from within their cat boxes. It had been a job and a half to get them loaded, and despite my thick jumper and heavy-duty gloves, my wrists and arms sported several deep scratches. Although Scottish wildcats are roughly the same size and colouring as domestic tabby cats, that is where the similarity ended. They weren't known as 'Highland tigers' for nothing. Polson, in particular, had a tendency to bite first and ask questions later.

Yet despite their grumpy and often vicious natures, I loved them all. They were a small flicker of hope in a world where so many native species had given up the ghost. Margaret had told me that to prevent them from mating with domestic cats, several breeding programmes around Scotland aimed to produce purebred kittens in order to re-wild them at a later date. As I closed the doors on the cats' growls of indignation, I felt the weight of responsibility as one of the guardians of their future.

Alice, my pet hedgehog – named so because she had fallen down a rabbit hole as a baby and I'd rescued her from Guinness the dog's jaws as he pulled her out – was in her cardboard box on the front seat, along with my rucksack containing the few clothes I owned.

'Ready to go?' asked Cal, who was already sitting behind the wheel, eager to get off.

'Yes,' I gulped, knowing that I had to walk back into the house and say goodbye to Margaret, which would be the most heartbreaking moment of all. 'Can you give me five minutes?'

Cal nodded in silent understanding as I ran back into the cottage.

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‘Margaret? Where are you? Hello?’

She was nowhere to be seen, so I went in search of her outside and found her sitting on the ground in the centre of the empty wildcat enclosure, with Guinness and Button standing guard on either side of her. Her head was in her hands and her shoulders were shaking.

‘Margaret?’ I walked over to her, knelt down and put my arms around her. ‘Please don’t cry, or I know I will.’

‘I cannae help it, lassie. I’ve tried tae be brave, but today . . .’ She took her hands from her face and I saw her eyes were red-rimmed. ‘Well, today really is the end o’ an era, what with the cats and you leavin’.’

She reached out a gnarled, arthritic hand, the type one associates with evil witches in fairy tales, yet it conveyed the opposite: kindness itself.

‘You’ve been like a granddaughter tae me, Tiggy. I can never repay you for keeping my animals alive and well when I didn’t have the physical strength tae do it alone.’

‘I’ll come and see you in your new bungalow soon, promise. We’re not that far apart, after all.’ I took her in my arms and gave her a last hug. ‘It’s been a pleasure and I’ve learnt so much. Thank you, Margaret.’

‘The pleasure was all mine. And talkin’ o’ learning, you be sure to visit Chilly while you’re there. He’s an old gypsy who lives on the estate, and a regular goldmine about herbal remedies for animals an’ humans.’

‘I will. Goodbye for now, darling Margaret.’ I stood up and, knowing I was about to cry too, walked swiftly towards the gate. Cal appeared by my side.

‘You just make sure those cats o’ ours beget a few bonnie kittens, won’t you?’ Margaret called out as, with one last

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wave, I climbed up into Beryl and headed into the next chapter of my life.



‘This is your bedroom, Tig,’ said Cal, dumping my rucksack on the floor.

I looked around the small room, its low ceiling threaded with veiny cracks and bulges in the plaster, as if it was exhausted from holding up the roof above it. It was a) freezing cold and b) spartan, even in terms of what I was used to, but at least it contained a bed. And a chest of drawers, on top of which I placed Alice the hedgehog, still in her travelling box.

‘Can I bring her cage in here too?’ Cal offered. ‘I can’t cope wi’ her in the sitting room. If she escapes in the night, I might step on her an’ squash her by mistake on the way to the lavvy! Isn’t she meant tae be hibernatin’?’

‘She would be in the wild, but I can’t risk it,’ I explained. ‘She’s not put on enough weight since I rescued her and she’d never make it through the winter. I’ve got to keep her nice and warm, make sure she keeps feeding.’

Cal brought in her cage, and having settled Alice back into her home and given her a sachet of her favourite cat food, I felt so tired that I sat heavily on my bed, wishing I could lie down on it.

‘Thanks so much for your help today, Cal. I couldn’t have got those cats down the slope to the enclosures by myself.’

‘Aye.’ Cal’s eyes swept over me. ‘You’re a wee fairy, aren’t you? Doubt I’ll be askin’ you tae help me mend fences or chop the wood for the fires this winter.’

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‘I’m stronger than I look,’ I lied defensively, because I really wasn’t. Physically anyway.

‘Aye, well, I’m sure yae have other strengths, Tig.’ Cal indicated the cold, bare room. ‘This cottage needs a woman’s touch,’ he hinted. ‘I haven’t a clue.’

‘I’m sure we can make it more cosy.’

‘You want something tae eat? There’s some venison stew in the fridge.’

‘Er, no thank you, I’m a vegan actually, if you remember—’

‘O’ course. Well.’ He shrugged as I gave an enormous yawn. ‘Mebbe you need some sleep.’

‘I think I do.’

‘There’s a tub in the bathroom if you want a soak. I’ll wait until you’ve had the first hot water.’

‘Really, don’t worry. I’m for my bed now,’ I replied. ‘Night, Cal.’

‘Night, Tig.’

Finally the door closed behind him and I sank backwards onto what was a deceptively comfortable and well-broken-in mattress, pulled the duvet over myself and fell asleep instantly.



I woke up at six o’clock – heeding both the freezing temperature and the call of my internal alarm. Turning on the light, I saw it was still pitch black outside and the inside of the windowpanes had frozen over.

Not needing to dress, because I was still in my jumper and filthy jeans, I pulled on an extra cardigan, my boots, beanie and ski jacket. I walked into the heavily beamed sitting room, which also housed a generous inglenook fireplace. Grabbing

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the torch that Cal had shown me hung on a hook by the front door, I switched it on and braced myself to venture outside. Navigating my way by torchlight and memory, I went to the large barn that contained a cold room, to fetch the pigeon and rabbit carcasses to feed the cats. As I entered, I noticed Thistle, asleep on a bale of straw in one corner. At my approach, he roused himself and stretched sleepily before ambling across to greet me on his impossibly long legs and shoving his pointed nose into the palm of my outstretched hand. As I looked into his intelligent brown eyes, fringed with grey fur that gave the almost comical impression of shaggy overgrown eyebrows, my heart melted.

‘Come on, boy. Let’s see if we can find you something to eat too.’

After retrieving the cats’ food and selecting a juicy bone from the slab for Thistle, I made my way outside again. Thistle attempted to follow me, but I reluctantly pushed him back into the barn.

‘Maybe another day, darling,’ I told him. I couldn’t risk spooking the cats when they’d only just arrived.

I walked across the frosted lawn and down the slope towards the enclosures. The inky blackness of the sky was the most intense I’d ever seen – without a chink of human-made light. Using the torch to guide me down the slope, I reached the entrance to the enclosures.

‘Molly?’ I whispered into the darkness. ‘Igor? Posy? Polson?’ I turned the handle out of habit, then I remembered that here, where visitors might come in the future, there was a keypad above the lock to prevent people entering the enclosures at random and disturbing the cats. Forcing my brain to remember the code that Cal had told me, I pressed what I

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thought was the right combination, and on the third try there was a small click and the gate finally slid open. I closed it behind me.

I called the cats' names again, but there was nothing; not the faintest sound of a paw on a crackling leaf. With four huge pavilions, the cats could be anywhere and they were all obviously in hiding, probably sulking.

'Hey, guys, it's me, Tiggy,' I whispered into the utterly silent air, my breath appearing in misty waves in front of me. 'I'm here, and there's no need to be afraid. You're safe, I promise you. I'm here with you,' I reiterated, then waited again to see if they'd respond to my voice. They didn't, and after investigating each pavilion and listening for as long as I could without dying of exposure, I distributed the kill, exited through the gate, and walked back up the slope.



'Where ha' you been so bright and early?' Cal asked me as he emerged from the tiny kitchen with steaming cups of tea for us both.

'I went to check on the cats, but they didn't come out. The poor things are probably terrified, but at least they heard my voice.'

'As you know, I'm not a fan o' cats in general. Selfish, scratchy, antisocial buggers whose loyalty lies with whoever feeds 'em. Give me a dog like Thistle any day,' Cal commented.

'I saw him in the barn this morning, I gave him a bone from the cold room,' I admitted, sipping the strong brew. 'Does he always sleep there?'

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‘Aye, he’s a working dog, like I said, not some pampered townie pooch.’

‘Couldn’t he sleep in the cottage sometimes? It’s awfully cold out there.’

‘Och, Tig, you’re too much of a softie. He’s used to it,’ Cal admonished me mildly as he walked back towards the kitchen. ‘Want some toast and jam?’

‘I’d love some, thanks,’ I called, as I entered my bedroom and knelt down in front of Alice’s cage to open the gate. I saw two bright eyes peering out of the little wooden hut she liked to burrow in. One of her tiny legs had been badly broken in her fall down the rabbit hole and had never fully recovered. She limped around her cage like a pensioner, even though she was less than a few months old.

‘Good morning, Alice,’ I whispered. ‘How did you sleep? How about some cucumber?’

I went back into the kitchen to retrieve the cucumber from the fridge – which I saw needed a thorough clean to remove the green tinge of mould from the back and the shelves. I also noticed the sink was full of dirty pots and pans. I pulled the toast out of the grill and spread it with margarine on the cramped work surface, which was littered with what must have been a good week’s worth of breadcrumbs.

Typical man, I thought to myself. Even though I wasn’t anal about cleanliness, this was beyond my tolerance levels and my fingers itched to set to work. After feeding Alice, I sat with Cal at the small table in the corner of the sitting room and ate my toast.

‘So what do yae usually give the cats o’ a morning?’ he enquired.

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‘Today, I threw in the pigeons and a couple of the rabbits I brought with me.’

‘Well, I’ve got a mound o’ deer hearts for yae stored away in the freezer. I’ll show yae – it’s in a shed in the courtyard at the back o’ the Lodge.’

‘They’ll love those, Cal, thanks.’

‘I don’t get it, Tig. You say you’re a vegan, so how can yae cope with handlin’ dead meat every day?’

‘Because it’s nature, Cal. Humans are evolved enough to make conscious decisions about our diet and we have plenty of alternative food sources to keep us alive, whereas animals don’t. Alice eats meat because that’s what her species does, and likewise the cats. It’s just the way it is, though I admit I’m not a fan of handling deer hearts. The heart is the essence of us all, really, isn’t it?’

‘I cannae comment; I’m a man and I like the taste of red meat between my teeth, be it offal or the best cut o’ steak.’ Cal wagged his finger at me. ‘And I’m warning you, Tig, I’ll never evolve, I’m a carnivore through an’ through.’

‘I promise that I won’t try to convert you, though I will draw the line at cooking you lamb chops and stuff.’

‘Besides, I thought all you Frenchies loved your red meat?’

‘I’m Swiss, not French, so maybe that explains it,’ I countered with a grin.

‘Margaret told me you’re also a bit o’ a boffin, aren’t yae, Tig, with your degree an’ all? I’m sure you could be getting a well-paid, high-flyin’ job in some lab, instead of nurse-maiding a few mangy cats. Why Kinnaird?’

‘Actually I did work in a zoo lab analysing data for a few months. The money was good but I was miserable. It’s the quality of your life that counts, isn’t it?’

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‘Aye, given what I’m paid for all the back-breaking hours I work, I need tae believe that!’ Cal gave a deep chuckle. ‘Well, it’s good you’re here, I’ll be glad o’ the company.’

‘I thought I’d give the cottage a spring-clean today, if that’s okay.’

‘It could do with it an’ that’s for sure. Thanks, Tig. I’ll be seeing yae later.’

With that, he shrugged on his old Barbour and stomped towards the door.



I spent the rest of the morning down with the cats – or, in reality, without them, because no matter how much I looked for them in the dens carefully concealed in the foliage, I couldn’t spot them.

‘What a disaster it would be if my charges died in the first week,’ I said to Cal when he popped into the cottage at lunch-time for one of his mega sandwiches. ‘They’re not touching their food.’

‘Aye, that it would be,’ he grunted, ‘but they looked like they had enough fat on them tae sustain them for a few days at least. They’ll settle down, Tig.’

‘I hope so, I really do. Anyway, I need to do some shopping for food and cleaning supplies,’ I said. ‘Where’s the nearest place for that?’

‘I’ll come with you tae the local shop now. Give you a driving lesson – Beryl takes some getting used tae.’

I spent the next hour navigating Beryl and learning her eccentricities as we drove to the local shop and back. The shop proved a disappointment, selling goodness knows how many

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varieties of shortbread for passing tourists, but not much else. At least I was able to get potatoes, cabbage and carrots, some salted peanuts and lots of baked beans for protein.

Back at the cottage, Cal left me to it, but having searched for a mop and a broom with no success, I decided there was nothing for it but to go up and ask Beryl if she had some equipment I could borrow. I walked across the courtyard towards the back door of the Lodge. Knocking brought no response, so I opened the door and stepped inside.

‘Beryl? It’s Tiggy from the cottage! Are you here?’ I called as I walked along the passage towards the kitchen.

‘I’m upstairs, dear, sorting out the new daily,’ came a voice from above. ‘I’ll be down in a few seconds. Go and put the kettle on in the kitchen, will you?’

I followed Beryl’s instructions and was just searching for a teapot when she walked in with a whey-faced young woman, who was wearing an apron and a pair of rubber gloves.

‘This is Alison, who’ll be keeping the Lodge spick and span when the guests arrive at Christmas. Won’t you, Alison?’ Beryl spoke slowly, enunciating her words, as if the girl was hard of hearing.

‘Yes, Mrs McGurk, tha’ I will.’

‘Right, Alison, I’ll see you tomorrow morning at eight sharp. There’s a lot to be done before the Laird arrives.’

‘Yes, Mrs McGurk,’ the girl repeated, looking positively terrified of her new boss. She nodded a goodbye then scurried out of the kitchen.

‘Dearie me,’ commented Beryl as she opened a cupboard and pulled out a teapot. ‘Not blessed with brains is our Alison, but neither am I blessed with a wide choice of staff round

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these parts. At least she can walk to work from her parents' croft, which – during the winter – means everything.'

'Do you live close by?' I asked Beryl as she spooned tea leaves into the pot.

'In a cottage just across the glen. I presume you don't take milk with your tea?'

'No.'

'Is a piece of my homemade Millionaire's Shortbread allowed? It does have butter in it.' Beryl indicated a tempting rack of biscuits covered in thick layers of caramel and chocolate. 'After all, the local dairy is on the doorstep and I can personally vouch for the fact that the cows are very well cared for.'

'Then thanks, I'd love a piece,' I said, deciding now was not the time to try to explain it was the fact that newborn calves were torn from their mothers, who were continually kept pregnant to provide unnatural levels of milk for humans, that I objected to. 'It's mainly meat and fish I absolutely won't eat. I do have the occasional lapse when it comes to dairy; I love milk chocolate,' I admitted.

'Don't we all?' Beryl handed me a slice on a plate with a glimmer of a smile and I felt we had taken a tiny step towards bonding, even if it was at the expense of my principles. 'So, how are you coping at the cottage?'

'Well,' I said, savouring every bite of the fabulously buttery shortbread, 'I've come to ask if you had a mop and broom and possibly a vacuum cleaner I could borrow so I could give it a good clean?'

'I have indeed. Men do seem to enjoy living like pigs in their own muck, don't they?'

'Some men, yes, though my father was one of the most

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fastidious people I've ever known. Nothing was ever out of place, and he made his own bed every morning, even though he had – *we* had – a housekeeper to do it for us.'

Beryl eyed me as though she was reassessing my status. 'So you're from gentry, are you?'

It was a word I wasn't familiar with. 'What does that mean?'

'Sorry, Tiggy, your English is so good that I forget you must be French, from that accent I hear.'

'I'm Swiss actually, but my native language is French, yes.'

'I meant that I was wondering if you come from nobility,' said Beryl. 'Given the fact that you say you had a housekeeper.'

'No, or at least, I don't think so. Me and my five sisters were adopted by my father as babies, you see.'

'Is that so? How fascinating. Has your father told you where you were originally from?'

'Sadly he died just over five months ago, but he left each of us a letter. Mine tells me exactly where he found me.'

'And will you go to this place?'

'I'm not sure. I'm just happy being me – I mean, the "me" I've always been, and having wonderful memories of my sisters and adoptive father.'

'And you don't want anything to disrupt those?' said Beryl.

'No, I don't think I do.'

'Who knows? One day you may wish to, but for now, I'm sorry for your loss. Now, the mops and brooms are in the cupboard down the passageway on your left. You can take what you need, as long as you bring them back when you're finished with them.'

The Moon Sister

‘Thank you, Beryl,’ I said, touched by her words of comfort about Pa.

‘Anything else you require to make that cottage of yours more habitable, let me know. Now, I must radio Ben, our handyman, and get him to top up Chilly’s firewood.’

‘He’s the old gypsy who lives on the estate?’

‘That’s him.’

‘Margaret said I should meet him.’

‘Well, he’s always in, dear. He’s doubled up with arthritis, and how he survives the winters out there in the glen, I’ll never know. At least he has his log cabin that the new Laird built him in the summer. It’s insulated, so he’s warm.’

‘That was kind of Ch—the Laird.’

‘Well, I’ve already said to him that for Chilly’s own safety, he really should be moved into the village by the social services. The problem is, every time they’ve made the trek out to assess him, he’s gone into hiding and no one can find him. Next time they come, I’m not going to give him any warning,’ Beryl sniffed. ‘It also means that one of us has to check on him every day, take him food and fill up his log basket. As if we don’t have enough to do. Anyway’ – Beryl reached for the radio pack – ‘I must get on.’

After collecting a mop, broom and vacuum cleaner, I manhandled them across the yard, not helped by Thistle criss-crossing excitedly in front of me.

‘Hey, Tig,’ came a voice from the bowels of the shed in the courtyard. ‘I’m in here, boiling a couple of stag heads. You putting a brew on any time soon?’

‘Yup, but you’ll have to come out of there and get it – there’s no way I’m setting foot inside while you’re doing that,’ I called back.

LUCINDA RILEY

‘Cheers, Tig, two sugars, please.’

‘Yes, your Lordship,’ I replied. ‘I’ll just put my bucket and mop down, if you don’t mind.’ I bobbed a curtsy before opening the door to the cottage.