



CALLUM MACLEOD

A DCI CALLUM VANCE THRILLER

COLD IS THE LOCH

*Eleven winters in the dark.
One voice on the tape.*

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A DCI Callum Vance Thriller

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“Is fuar an loch a bhios sàmhach.”

*Cold is the loch that keeps its silence.
The peat remembers what the water hides.*

— TRADITIONAL WESTER ROSS PROVERB

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P R O L O G U E

The 04:12 Lay-By

— • —

THE RAIN IN Wester Ross doesn't fall so much as it hunts you down. Driven sideways off the Atlantic, it needles through wool, finds the gap between collar and throat, and turns the black tarmac of the A832 into a river of shattered blue light.

Detective Chief Inspector Callum Vance stood at the edge of the flooded lay-by, his hands shoved deep into the pockets of his soaked Crombie coat. Below the crumbling stone parapet, Loch Maree stretched out like a slab of wet slate between the mountains, swallowing the beam of the patrol car's headlamps.

"Time of the call?" Vance asked. His voice was rough, kippered by twenty-two years of Edinburgh murder rooms and three sleepless nights in Inverness.

Detective Sergeant Rory Fraser flipped shut his waterproof notebook, shielding it beneath his elbow. "Four-twelve, sir. Timber lorry coming down from Gairloch spotted the hazard lights through the mist. Thought somebody had gone through the wall into the loch."

Vance looked at the vehicle idling inside the ring of fluttering blue-and-white Police Scotland tape. It was a 1998 Volvo 940 estate, dark green, its paintwork blistered with Highland salt. The windscreen wipers were still dragging themselves back and forth across the glass with a rhythmic, asthmatic screech. Inside, the dashboard clock glowed pale emerald.

04:12. Except it wasn't moving. Someone had pulled the fuse on the instrument cluster at the exact minute the lorry driver dialled 999.

"Keys are in the ignition," Fraser said quietly, stepping closer so the uniformed constables thirty yards up the road wouldn't hear. "Heater's on full blast. No driver. No footprints going up the heather bank. And the boot was left on the latch."

"Registered keeper?"

"Plates came back SORN'd six years ago to a deceased crofter in Ullapool," Fraser said. "Whoever brought it down Glen Docherty tonight knew where every ANPR camera between Inverness and the coast is bolted."

Vance pulled a pair of nitrile gloves from his pocket, snapping them over his knuckles. For eleven months—ever since his transfer north from Gartcosh after the Calder inquiry imploded—he had been dealing with sheep rustling, seasonal missing hikers, and bar-room knifings outside the Moray Firth rigs. You didn't stage a ghost car on the shore of Loch Maree at four in the morning for a bar-room feud.

He walked to the rear of the estate car. The boot lid was resting half an inch above the catch.

Using the knuckle of his gloved index finger, Vance lifted the tailgate.

The boot liner had been stripped bare to the grey sheet metal. Set squarely in the centre, resting on a folded square of sterile blue hospital drape, sat a vintage brown leather Gladstone bag—the sort old country surgeons carried fifty years ago—and beside it, a brushed-aluminium Olympus microcassette recorder.

A tiny red LED on the side of the recorder was blinking in the dark. The tape spindles were turning on an endless loop, clicking softly every forty seconds as the magnetic ribbon reset itself.

"Sir," Fraser breathed, his torch beam trembling against the wet steel. "Don't touch it until—"

"Be quiet, Rory."

Vance leaned down into the shelter of the open boot. Over the hiss of rain on the loch and the rhythmic scrape of the wipers, a voice crackled through the tiny tin speaker of the Olympus.

It was a woman's voice. Hoarse, shivering, fighting to speak around the rattle of wind and running water.

"Callum... if you're standing by the milestone at Slattadale, look at the water. He said you'd come when the loch froze over. Please, Callum... don't let him shut the lid —"

A dry mechanical click. The tape rewound for three seconds, snapped taut, and began again.

"Callum... if you're standing by the milestone at Slattadale..."

Vance felt the blood drain from his face until the cold rain on his cheeks burned like salt. He didn't need voice analysis from Scottish Police Authority forensics in Dundee. He had heard that voice in his sleep every winter since 2015.

It was Morag Kerr.

And eleven years ago, on this exact stretch of water, Callum Vance had signed the deposition declaring her dead.

P A R T I

THE WATER REMEMBERS

— • —

C H A P T E R O N E

The Surgeon's Case

— • —

DR. ISLA KERR hated the sound of her phone ringing before dawn, because in the Highlands a pre-dawn call only ever meant one of two things: a tourist family had misjudged a single-track bridge in the black ice, or the peat had given up another secret.

Tonight, standing under the harsh halogen floodlights erected by the Scene of Crime Officers at Slattadale lay-by, she wished to God it had been the bridge.

Her white Tyvek forensic suit crackled in the gale coming off Beinn Eighe. Thirty feet away, DCI Callum Vance stood motionless beside the stone parapet, his back to the forensic tent, staring out into the black water of Loch Maree as if he expected someone to walk out of it.

Isla hadn't been in the same room—let alone the same crime scene—as Callum Vance since the Fatal Accident Inquiry in Edinburgh nine years ago. Back then, she had been a twenty-four-year-old junior registrar in pathology, gripping her mother's hand in the public gallery while Vance sat in the witness box and calmly explained why Police Scotland had found no body, no killer, and no proof that her older sister Morag had been murdered.

Now Vance was in her jurisdiction. And five minutes ago, before she had even pulled on her overshoes, he had played her the microcassette in the back of the green Volvo.

"Dr. Kerr?"

Isla blinked rain from her eyelashes and looked down at Claire Brodie, the senior CSI from Inverness, who was crouching beside the open boot with an ultraviolet lamp.

"The recorder's casing was wiped clean with isopropyl alcohol before placement," Claire said, her voice muffled behind her paper mask. "No latent ridge detail on the switches. No epithelial cells on the battery cover. Whoever loaded that loop tape knew standard SPA protocol inside out."

"And the leather bag?" Isla asked, keeping her voice clinical, anchoring herself to the routine she knew. If she thought about the tremor in Morag's voice on that tape, her hands would shake, and she couldn't afford shaking hands.

"Brass clasp is corroded with peat water, Doctor. Not loch water—humic acid staining around the hinges. That bag has been buried in a cut bank somewhere up on the moor and dug up within the last forty-eight hours."

Isla stepped closer to the tailgate, switching on her head-torch. "Have you X-rayed the Gladstone bag for a trigger mechanism?"

"Portable unit cleared it ten minutes ago. No wires, no detonator. Just dense organic matter and surgical steel."

"Stand back and keep the camera rolling," Isla said.

With a pair of sterile forceps, she depressed the tarnished brass catch. The stiff leather jaws of the surgeon's bag resisted for a heartbeat, exhaling a damp, earthy smell of wet sphagnum moss, formaldehyde, and old iron.

Inside, resting on a bed of preserved heather sprigs, lay three objects.

The first was a stainless-steel bone saw, its serial number ground off with an angle grinder.

The second was a laminated Police Scotland warrant card, cracked down the middle and stained dark brown at the edges.

The third was a sealed glass specimen jar containing a single human ring finger, pale and waxy from cold-water immersion, still wearing a narrow silver Claddagh band.

Behind her, footsteps crunched on the wet gravel. Callum Vance stopped at the edge of the plastic stepping plates.

Isla didn't turn around. Her throat felt as though it were lined with broken glass. She knew that silver Claddagh ring. She had bought it for Morag's twenty-first birthday in a tiny jeweller's on Rose Street.

"Isla," Vance said quietly, stepping closer to the glow of the floodlight. "Don't look at the ring. Look at the tissue."

Isla leaned six inches closer to the glass jar, her forensic training cutting through the shock like a scalpel. She shone her penlight directly through the preservative fluid onto the severed joint and the unwrinkled skin beneath the silver band.

Her breath caught.

"There's no adipocere formation," Isla whispered, her heart slamming against her ribs. "No post-mortem maceration. The lividity in the nail bed is less than thirty-six hours old."

She turned slowly to face Vance in the lashing Highland rain.

"My sister hasn't been dead for eleven years, Callum," Isla said, her voice shaking. "That finger was cut from a living woman yesterday."

And then she picked up the cracked Police Scotland warrant card with her forceps, turned it over under the floodlight, and read the name printed beside the bloodstained photograph.

CHAPTER TWO

The Eleventh Winter

— • —

THE PHOTOGRAPH ON the cracked warrant card belonged to Detective Inspector Kenneth “Kenny” Galbraith.

Vance stared at the smiling, ruddy-faced man in the laminated plastic while the generator for the scene floodlights thrummed in the ditch behind them. Kenny Galbraith had been Vance’s senior investigating deputy during the 2015 Loch Maree search. Six months after the inquiry closed, Galbraith had taken early medical retirement on a full pension, bought a renovated fishing lodge near Ullapool, and stopped returning phone calls.

“Where is Galbraith now?” Isla Kerr demanded, her pale eyes blazing above her surgical mask as she stripped off her outer gloves and stepped out of the tent’s taped perimeter. “His warrant card was reported lost during the original search in November 2015—it’s right there in the inquiry transcript. How does a lost warrant card end up buried in peat with a fresh amputation?”

“Rory,” Vance said without taking his eyes off Isla. “Get two armed response units out to Galbraith’s cottage at Braemore Junction right now. Tell them not to touch the door handle if the lights are out.”

DS Fraser was already sprinting toward the mobile command van where satellite signal reached through the mountains.

Vance turned back to Isla. Under the cold white glare of the arc lamps, she looked painfully like Morag—the same sharp cheekbones, the same stubborn set of the jaw when she knew a man was hiding something from her.

"You need to take that specimen jar back to Raigmore Hospital mortuary immediately," Vance said, lowering his voice. "If the tissue is less than thirty-six hours old, whatever anaesthetic or sedative he used on her will still be measurable in the marrow and the capillary blood."

"Don't try to manage me off this scene, Detective Chief Inspector," Isla said coldly. "Eleven years ago you sat in Crown Office and told the Procurator Fiscal that Morag drove her Fiesta into Loch Maree in a depressive episode because of university debts. You closed the file. You let my parents go to their graves believing she drowned herself."

"I didn't close the file, Isla."

"Your signature was on the final submission!"

"Because the Chief Superintendent pulled the diving teams off the water after nine days and ordered the case reclassified as a fatal misadventure," Vance snapped, stepping close enough that the rain dripping from the brim of his hat hit her shoulder. "Why the hell do you think I asked for the transfer to Inverness the week old MacPherson retired? I've had Morag's file in the bottom drawer of my desk for eleven winters."

Isla froze, searching his weathered face in the blue strobe of the patrol cars. For the first time, she noticed the deep hollows beneath his eyes and the grey scar along his jaw that hadn't been there in Edinburgh.

"You never believed she drowned," Isla whispered.

"Not for a single second," Vance said. "When we dragged her red Fiesta out of forty feet of water near Tollie Bay in 2015, the driver's seat was set for someone six feet tall. Morag was five-foot-three. Her feet couldn't even have reached the clutch pedal."

"That wasn't in the pathology disclosure," Isla breathed. "I read every page of the FAI bundle."

"Because the scene recovery log went missing between Dingwall police station and the Crown Office in Inverness," Vance said grimly. "And the officer who signed the vehicle recovery sheet at the dock that night was DI Kenny Galbraith."

Before Isla could answer, DS Fraser came running back down the tarmac, his face ashen in the rain.

"Gaffer," Fraser gasped, holding out his encrypted Airwave radio. "Armed Response just breached Galbraith's lodge at Braemore. We're too late."

"Is he gone?" Vance asked.

"No, sir," Fraser swallowed hard. "He's sitting at his kitchen table. And somebody's used a surgical bone saw on him."

C H A P T E R T H R E E

Ash and Peat

— • —

BRAEMORE LODGE SAT three hundred feet above the roaring gorge of Corrieshalloch, surrounded by black Scots pines that dripped incessantly onto the slate roof. By the time Isla arrived behind Vance's unmarked car at six-fifteen in the morning, the forestry track was choked with forensic vans and the flashing amber beacons of Highland Council gritters holding back the dawn frost.

Inside the kitchen, the smell of peat smoke was overwhelmed by the metallic tang of copper.

Kenny Galbraith sat upright in a high-backed Windsor chair facing the dark window overlooking the gorge. His wrists were bound to the wooden armrests with heavy-duty surgical catgut. Across the pine table in front of him, five cassette tapes had been laid out in a neat row beside an antique brass carriage clock whose hands had been superglued at **04:12**.

Isla knelt beside the chair, shining her forensic light across the livor mortis pooling in Galbraith's forearms.

"Time of death?" Vance asked from the doorway, careful not to cross the threshold before the laser scanner finished mapping the floorboards.

"Core temperature and rigor in the masseter muscles put him between midnight and two a.m.," Isla said, examining the ligature marks. "Which means the killer finished here, drove the green Volvo forty minutes southwest to Loch Maree, staged the lay-by at Slattadale, and waited for the timber lorry to pass at 04:12."

"He wanted us to find the car first," Vance murmured. "He wanted you and me at the loch before we came here."

Isla stood up slowly and pointed her gloved finger at the cast-iron Aga stove at the far end of the kitchen. The heavy chrome lids were raised, and a pile of charred paper and melted VHS plastic smouldered in the ash pit.

"Galbraith was burning his private archive when the killer walked in," Isla said. "Look at the soot on his right cuff. He wasn't ambushed in his sleep—he knew someone was coming for the 2015 files, and he was trying to destroy them before they got here."

She leaned over the pine table and examined the five microcassettes lined up beside the clock. Each had a date written on the white paper label in faded blue fountain-pen ink:

*14 NOV 2015 — 19 NOV 2017 — 14 NOV 2019 — 14 NOV 2021 —
14 NOV 2023*

"Every two years," Isla whispered, her stomach twisting. "On the anniversary of the night Morag vanished."

"Proof of life," Vance said, his voice dangerously low. "Someone was keeping her alive and sending Galbraith a recording every second November to guarantee his silence."

"Or Galbraith was the one collecting the rent," Isla said. She looked closer at the dead detective's right hand. His index finger had been severed at the proximal joint—matching the cut on the finger in the jar at Loch Maree—and tucked into his breast pocket was a folded prescription slip from a private clinic in Inverness.

Isla lifted the corner of the paper with her tweezers. Even with half the letterhead singed by the stove, she recognised the four-digit NHS Highland pharmacy code stamped at the bottom.

"Callum," Isla said, her pulse racing as she stared at the batch number of the veterinary-grade ketamine listed on the slip. "This batch of anaesthetic wasn't stolen from a hospital ten years ago. It was dispensed seventy-two hours ago from the secure controlled-drugs vault at Raigmore."

Vance stepped into the light of the kitchen doorway. "Your hospital."

"My department," Isla corrected, her blood turning to ice. "Only three people in the entire Northern Constabulary pathology unit have the dual-key passcode to that vault. And one of them is my chief of service."

CHAPTER FOUR

The Old Garrison Road

— • —

BY NINE O'CLOCK, a raw grey daylight had crept over the Moray Firth, doing nothing to warm the glass-walled incident room on the third floor of Burnett Road Police Station in Inverness.

Vance stood before the digital whiteboard while DS Rory Fraser pinned up the high-resolution blow-ups from Loch Maree and Braemore Lodge.

"Let's strip away the theatrics and look at the logistics," Vance told the twelve detectives assembled in the room. "Eleven years ago, on the fourteenth of November 2015, twenty-one-year-old Morag Kerr drove north from Inverness toward Gairloch to interview former staff of the old Balblair Residential Assessment Centre for her postgraduate criminology dissertation. She never reached her bed-and-breakfast. Her car went into Loch Maree. Yesterday, someone severed the ring finger from her left hand while she was still alive and left it in a surgical bag for Dr. Kerr and me to find."

A murmur ran through the room. Most of the younger constables only knew the 2015 case as a cautionary tale whispered in the canteen—the inquiry that had ruined a rising Edinburgh detective's career when he accused a senior Highland officer of tampering with evidence.

"Sir," said DC Kirsty Munro from the cyber unit, raising a printout. "We ran the pharmacy dispense log Dr. Kerr flagged at Raigmore. The ketamine and surgical suture packs were signed out on Tuesday evening at 19:40 under the credentials of Professor Alistair Dunbar,

Head of Forensic Medicine.”

In the corner of the incident room, holding a untouched paper cup of black coffee, Isla Kerr stiffened. “Alistair Dunbar has been my mentor since my first week at Raigmore. He was the one who hired me when nobody in Edinburgh would touch me after the inquiry.”

“He was also the Crown Pathologist who signed the provisional drowning certificate on your sister’s empty car in 2015,” Vance said quietly. “Kirsty, where is Professor Dunbar right now?”

“His wife reported that he left their house in Culcabock at eleven o’clock last night after receiving a phone call on his landline,” Munro replied. “His Mercedes was picked up by an ANPR camera heading west on the A835 toward Garve at 23:48. It hasn’t crossed another camera since.”

Vance walked over to the ordnance survey map of Ross-shire taped to the side wall. He traced a finger along the A835, past Garve, past Loch Glascarnoch, to the point where the old eighteenth-century military road branched off into the forestry plantations before Braemore.

“He went to meet Galbraith at the lodge,” Vance said. “Galbraith gets spooked, starts burning the records in the Aga, and somebody walks into that kitchen with a surgical kit signed out in Dunbar’s name.”

“You think Alistair killed Galbraith?” Isla asked, stepping forward. “Alistair is sixty-eight years old with arthritis in both wrists. Look at the cortical bone striation on Galbraith’s phalanx—whoever used that saw had the upper-body strength of a man half his age.”

“Which means Dunbar didn’t go to Braemore to kill Galbraith,” Vance said, tapping the vast, roadless expanse of moorland between Loch Glascarnoch and Loch Maree. “He went to pay him off—or to warn him that the keeper of the cage had gone rogue. And now Dunbar is either dead in a forestry ditch or he’s leading us straight to where Morag has been held.”

Vance grabbed his coat from the back of his chair. “Rory, get Mountain Rescue drones up over the forestry tracks between Loch

Glascarnoch and Fannich. Isla, you're with me. Before Dunbar left his house at eleven last night, he took a call on a BT landline—which means even if the caller used a payphone or a burner, the exchange logged the trunk route."

They were halfway down the concrete stairwell toward the car park when Vance's personal mobile vibrated inside his jacket.

It wasn't an Inverness number. The screen flashed **01445 — Gairloch Exchange**.

Vance hit answer and put the phone on speaker between himself and Isla in the stairwell.

At first there was only the sound of wind whistling through cracked slate and the rhythmic drip of water onto stone. Then an old, patrician voice spoke—breathless, terrified, and unmistakable.

"Isla? Thank God... they let me make one call."

"Alistair?" Isla gripped Vance's forearm. "Alistair, where are you? Is Morag with you?"

"Listen to me carefully, child, because the tide is coming into the sea-cave and my legs are tied," Professor Dunbar gasped over the line. "You were never supposed to look at Balblair House. We thought Galbraith burned the admission ledgers in ninety-eight, but Morag found the fourth register—the one with the names of the boys from the procurator's shooting syndicate."

"Alistair, tell me where she is!" Isla cried.

"She isn't in a house, Isla. She's been right under the water line at —"

A heavy iron door slammed in the background, echoing like a gunshot down a concrete tunnel. Footsteps splashed through ankle-deep water.

Then a second voice came onto the line—calm, educated, speaking with the clipped vowels of an Edinburgh advocate.

"Good morning, Chief Inspector Vance. You have six hours before the sluice gates at Glascarnoch Dam open for the evening hydro release. If

you bring a single patrol car past the cattle grid at Achmasheen, both the Professor and Miss Kerr will be thirty feet underwater before you reach the shore. Come alone. Bring the fifth tape from Galbraith's table."

The line went dead.

P A R T I I

BENEATH THE HEATHER

— • —

CHAPTER FIVE

The Procurator's Secret

— • —

INSIDE VANCE'S UNMARKED Vauxhall Insignia, the speedometer needle hovered at ninety miles per hour as they tore west along the shore of the Beaully Firth.

Isla sat in the passenger seat with her laptop braced against her knees, plugged into the encrypted forensic server at Raigmore while DS Rory Fraser—following five miles behind in an unmarked telecoms van—fed them live intercepts from the Gairloch telephone exchange.

"The call didn't come from a coastal sea-cave," Isla said, staring at the acoustic spectrogram she had recorded from Vance's speakerphone. "Alistair was trying to give us a forensic clue without the kidnapper realising it."

"How?" Vance kept his eyes fixed on the twisting tarmac ahead as the Highland hills rose dark and jagged through the windshield.

"Listen to the background reverb when the iron door slammed," Isla said, replaying the three-second audio clip at half speed. "He said '*the tide is coming into the sea-cave*', because his captor was standing right behind him and wanted us searching the Gairloch coastline thirty miles away. But there's a sixty-hertz electrical hum underneath the dripping water. Sea-caves don't have high-voltage three-phase transformers."

Vance's jaw tightened. "The hydro-electric tunnels under the Fannich mountains."

“Built in the 1950s by the North of Scotland Hydro-Electric Board,” Isla confirmed, pulling up an engineering map on her screen. “Miles of decommissioned inspection galleries, surge shafts, and valve chambers cut straight into the living rock around Loch Glascarnoch and Loch Luichart. When the main dam opens its spillover sluices at four p.m., the old inspection adits flood to the roof inside twenty minutes.”

“And the fifth tape from Galbraith’s kitchen table?” Vance asked, glancing at the evidence pouch wedged into the centre console between them. Before leaving Burnett Road, he had swapped the real 14 NOV 2023 microcassette for a blank duplicate in the property locker—a move that would cost him his badge if the Professional Standards unit caught wind of it, and save two lives if they didn’t.

“Play it now,” Isla said, picking up a portable microcassette player from her kit bag. “If that man is willing to kill Alistair Dunbar and Morag to get this specific tape back, whatever Morag recorded in November 2023 isn’t just proof of life.”

She slotted the tiny cassette into the deck and pressed play.

Static hissed through the car interior as they climbed the steep gradient into Strathbran. Then Galbraith’s voice—drunk, slurred with single malt—echoed from two years in the past:

“Speak into the mic, lassie. Tell him the date on the Scotsman newspaper so he knows I haven’t put you in the peat yet.”

A pause, followed by the clink of a chain against concrete. Then Morag’s voice, older, harder, stripped of the terror from the 2015 recording:

“It’s Tuesday, the fourteenth of November, twenty twenty-three. Prime Minister Sunak reshuffled his cabinet yesterday. And you can tell Lord Advocate Gregor Haldane that I still have the negative of the photograph taken in the dormitory at Balblair House on Christmas Eve, nineteen ninety-seven—wrapped in oilcloth inside the stone cairn where my father scattered my grandmother’s ashes.”

Isla clapped a hand over her mouth, a sob tearing through her chest.

Vance gripped the steering wheel until his knuckles turned white.

Lord Gregor Haldane. Formerly Procurator Fiscal for the Highlands and Islands. Currently sitting on the High Court bench in Edinburgh, and the very man who had signed the warrant shutting down Vance's Loch Maree dive operation in 2015.

"My God," Isla whispered, tears spilling down her cheeks. "She wasn't begging for her life on those tapes. For eleven years she's been blackmailing them back—convincing Haldane and Galbraith that if her heart stopped, an accomplice on the outside would release the Balblair evidence."

"Except there never was an accomplice on the outside," Vance said grimly as the barren, windswept expanse of Loch Glascarnoch appeared through the mist ahead. "And three days ago, whoever guarded her realised she was bluffing—so he cut off her ring finger to force Galbraith and Dunbar to hand over the tapes and tell him where your grandmother's cairn is."

Isla looked up, wiping her eyes fiercely. "Do you know where my father built that cairn?"

"Tell me," Vance said.

"Half a mile above the old Kinlochewe hotel," Isla said. "Right on the ridge overlooking Loch Maree."

CHAPTER SIX

A Witness in Kinlochewe

— • —

THEY COULDN'T GO to the cairn first—not with the hydro sluices at Glascarnoch Dam scheduled to open in four hours. If Haldane's enforcer was waiting at the cattle grid above Achnasheen, any deviation from the rendezvous would mean an immediate execution inside the flooded valve chamber.

At twelve-forty, Vance pulled the Insignia into the gravel forecourt of an abandoned timber yard two miles east of Achnasheen, hidden beneath a dense canopy of Sitka spruce. Two minutes later, DS Rory Fraser slid his unmarked transit van in beside them.

"Gaffer, we've got a massive problem," Fraser said, jumping out into the drizzle with a tablet in his hand. "Word just came down from Crown Office in Edinburgh. Lord Haldane personally contacted the Assistant Chief Constable twenty minutes ago. He claims you stole a critical piece of production evidence from the Braemore murder scene and that you're mentally unstable due to your personal history with the 2015 Kerr inquiry."

"Has the ACC issued a stand-down order?" Vance asked calmly.

"Worse, sir. He's dispatched a Divisional Firearms unit from Dingwall to intercept your vehicle on the A832 and relieve you of duty." Fraser swallowed hard, looking from Vance to Isla. "They'll be at the Achnasheen roundabout in eighteen minutes."

Vance looked at the young sergeant. "You have a young family in Nairn, Rory. If you get back in that van right now and report that you lost visual contact with us in the forestry tracks at Strathconon, your

pension is safe."

Fraser stared at him for a beat, then reached into the back of his van and pulled out a heavy canvas bolt-cutter, a pair of encrypted short-range tactical earpieces, and the keys to his cousin's battered mud-caked Land Rover Defender parked behind the sawmill shed.

"My granddad fished Loch Maree for forty years, sir," Fraser said quietly, tossing Vance the Defender's keys. "He always said the Edinburgh lawyers treated the Highlands like their private hunting estate. Let's go get Dr. Kerr's sister back."

Isla looked at the young detective with fierce gratitude, then turned to the map spread across the Defender's bonnet.

"Look at the hydro schematic for Loch Glascarnoch," Isla said, tracing the blue subterranean lines running beneath the mountain. "There are four decommissioned surge chambers along the old five-mile tunnel feeding the Mossford power station. How do we know which one they're in before four o'clock?"

"We ask the only man alive who maintained those gates for thirty years," Vance said, pointing to a solitary stone cottage marked at the foot of the dam wall. "Dougie MacRae. Former hydro board superintendent—and the witness who swore in 2015 that he saw a green Volvo estate towing a horsebox up the dam track the night Morag disappeared."

Ten minutes later, the Defender bounced down a rutted peat track behind the towering grey concrete wall of Glascarnoch Dam. Rain hammered against the corrugated iron roof of Dougie MacRae's cottage.

When Vance rapped on the back door, it swung inward an inch on oiled hinges.

"Stay behind me," Vance whispered, drawing his collapsible baton as he pushed the kitchen door open.

An eighty-year-old man in a tweed waistcoat sat on the floor against the dresser, pressing a blood-soaked tea towel to a gash above his temple. His shotgun cabinet had been pried open with a crowbar.

Isla stepped inside, dropping to her knees beside the pensioner and shining her penlight into his pupils. "Mr MacRae, I'm a doctor. Hold still."

"Never mind my thick skull, lass," Dougie wheezed, grabbing Vance's coat lapel with a gnarled, trembling hand. "He was here forty minutes ago. Took the master brass key to Adit Number Three—the old peat-flume gallery below the western spillway. And he wasn't some stranger from Edinburgh."

"Who was it, Dougie?" Vance demanded.

"Young Lachlan Shaw," the old man spat blood onto the flagstones. "Gregor Haldane's stepson—the one who runs the deer-stalking syndicate up at Kinlochewe Estate. He had the old professor in the back of a black Hilux, and he told me if the police came sniffing before dusk, the water would wash the whole slate clean."

CHAPTER SEVEN

The Second Tape

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“**LACHLAN SHAW,**” ISLA breathed as she rapidly bandaged Dougie MacRae’s scalp while Vance radioed Fraser on the encrypted short-wave channel. “I know that name. Three years ago, a Romanian seasonal worker from the Kinlochewe sporting estate was brought into Raigmore mortuary after an alleged quad-bike accident in a ravine. Alistair Dunbar insisted on performing the post-mortem himself behind locked doors.”

“Because Haldane owned Alistair,” Vance said grimly. “Ever since 1997 at Balblair House.”

Before leaving the cottage, Dougie MacRae pointed a shaking finger toward the cast-iron cistern above his pantry sink. “Look behind the ballcock, Chief Inspector. Kenny Galbraith came by here on Tuesday night looking like the devil himself was on his heels. Paid me five hundred pounds in cash to hide a tin biscuit box if anything happened to him.”

Vance reached up into the cold water of the cistern and pulled out a greaseproof-wrapped watertight tobacco tin. Inside lay a ledger page torn from the 1997 Balblair Residential Assessment Centre logbook, and a second microcassette labelled in red ink: **MASTER — DO NOT ERASE.**

While Fraser kept watch on the ridge above the dam road for the approaching Dingwall firearms unit, Isla and Vance climbed back into the Defender and slotted the red cassette into the player as they tore up the western service track toward Adit Number Three.

The voice that filled the cab wasn't Morag's, and it wasn't Galbraith's.

It was a recording from a hidden Dictaphone inside Professor Alistair Dunbar's office at Raigmore Hospital, dated four days earlier.

"You have to end this, Gregor," Dunbar's voice trembled on the tape. "Morag has developed a severe systemic infection in her left hand from the damp in the old lodge cellar. If she doesn't get hospital antibiotics within forty-eight hours, she'll die of sepsis—and if she dies, I'm walking straight into Callum Vance's office in Inverness with the Balblair ledger."

Then a younger, icy voice—Lachlan Shaw—replied over the recording:

"My stepfather isn't in charge of cleaning up your messes anymore, Alistair. You'll sign out the ketamine from Raigmore tonight. We'll take her finger, use her old voice tapes to lure Vance and the sister into the hydro adit at Glascarnoch, and pin Galbraith's murder on a rogue detective who couldn't let go of an eleven-year-old obsession."

Isla stared at the cassette deck, her face white with fury. "It was a trap from the very first minute at Slattadale lay-by. Shaw didn't bring us here to trade for the fifth tape. He brought us here to die in the tunnel with Morag and Alistair so he can close the book on 1997 forever."

Ahead through the driving rain, the concrete portal of Adit Number Three loomed out of the hillside like the mouth of a concrete bunker, half-hidden behind birch scrub and rusted razor wire.

Parked in the flooded drainage ditch twenty yards from the iron grille was a mud-splattered black Toyota Hilux.

And bolted to the steel frame of the tunnel entrance was a digital hydro-board telemetry box, its red LED display counting down the automated spillway pressure release:

00:42:18.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Blue Lights on the A832

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BEFORE VANCE COULD bring the Defender to a halt beside the tunnel mouth, DS Rory Fraser's voice crackled urgently through their earpieces from the high ridge overlooking the main road a mile below.

"Gaffer! Three armed response X5s from Dingwall just ran the roadblock at Achnasheen. And Lord Haldane is riding in the lead command car with Chief Superintendent Ross. They're tracking the transponder on Dr. Kerr's phone!"

Isla instantly ripped the SIM card from her iPhone and hurled the handset into the roaring peat burn beside the track.

"How long until they find the turn-off at Dougie's cottage?" Vance asked into his collar mic, grabbing the heavy bolt-cutters and a waterproof halogen torch from the back seat.

"Twelve minutes, maybe fifteen if I drop a felled larch tree across the lower culvert with the winch on the transit van," Fraser replied without hesitation. "Go get them out of that tunnel, sir. I'll buy you twenty minutes."

"Don't get yourself shot, Rory," Vance ordered.

He and Isla sprinted through the driving sleet to the rusted iron portal of Adit Number Three. The padlock had been sheared off hours ago, replaced by a heavy steel chain wedged from the *inside* of the solid storm door.

"He's sealed the main entrance from within," Isla said, shining her torch into the narrow ventilation culvert four feet up the concrete

retaining wall. “Wait—look at the moss on the overflow grate. Someone crawled through the turbine bypass duct less than an hour ago.”

Vance wedged the jaws of the bolt-cutters around the two corroded iron bars of the ventilation grate and threw his entire weight against the handles. With a screech of rusted metal, the first bar snapped. Another wrench of his shoulders broke the second.

Cold, subterranean air—thick with the smell of wet concrete, diesel, and river silt—washed over their faces.

“Stay five paces behind me,” Vance whispered, pulling himself up into the four-foot-high stone duct. “If you hear a gunshot in an enclosed concrete tube, drop flat into the drainage channel and cover your ears.”

Isla climbed in right behind him, clutching her trauma kit against her chest.

For two hundred yards they crept on hands and knees through the pitch-black bypass pipe while the mountain groaned above them with the weight of ten million tonnes of Loch Glascarnoch water pressing against the dam wall. Ahead, a faint orange glow flickered through a rusted inspection hatch, accompanied by the deafening roar of seepage water cascading into the main surge chamber below.

Vance peered through the perforated steel grating of the hatch.

Thirty feet below, in a circular concrete cavern crossed by a narrow catwalk of rusted iron mesh, two figures were chained to the central valve stanchion above the dry flood basin.

One was Professor Alistair Dunbar, slumped semi-conscious in his torn tweed jacket.

The other was a thin woman in a stained woollen jumper, her dark hair cropped short, her left hand wrapped in a blood-soaked surgical dressing. Even after eleven years in the dark, her eyes were fierce, scanning the catwalk above her like a caged wolf.

Morag.

Isla bit down hard on her gloved knuckle to stifle a cry.

And standing at the far end of the catwalk, calmly threading a steel cable around the manual release wheel of the main floodgate while holding a double-barrelled Beretta over-and-under shotgun, was Lachlan Shaw.

P A R T I I I

THE SILENT GLEN

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CHAPTER NINE

Anatomy of a Lie

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DOWN IN THE surge chamber, the acoustics carried every syllable off the curved concrete walls.

“You always were a sentimental old fool, Alistair,” Lachlan Shaw called out over the rush of water, checking his wristwatch as he tightened the turnbuckle on the floodgate wheel. “If you and Galbraith had put her in the peat behind Balblair House in November 2015 like my stepfather ordered, none of us would be standing in the cold today.”

Morag Kerr lifted her chin from the iron stanchion. Her voice was raspy, raw from dehydration, yet carried the exact cadence that had haunted Vance’s memory for over a decade.

“You didn’t keep me alive out of mercy, Kenny Galbraith didn’t either,” Morag spat across the concrete pit. “Galbraith kept me alive in that cellar at Braemore because he knew the day Gregor Haldane made the High Court bench, Haldane would have him killed to tidy up the 1997 file. I was his life insurance policy.”

“And a very expensive policy you turned out to be,” Shaw replied smoothly, checking the shells in the breech of his Beretta before snapping it shut. “Until Galbraith got greedy last week and demanded half the proceeds from the Kinlochewe wind-farm lease. That was when I realised an insurance policy only works as long as the policyholder has a pulse.”

Up in the ventilation duct, Isla touched Vance’s shoulder and pointed silently toward the far wall of the cavern.

To reach the catwalk where Shaw stood, they had to descend an iron ladder bolted to the shadow behind the main turbine pipe—thirty feet from Morag and Dunbar, with zero cover once they stepped onto the mesh walkway. Worse, the digital pressure gauge on the bulkhead wall read **00:14:00** until the automated hydro spillover opened the upper penstock.

Isla leaned close to Vance's ear, barely breathing the words:

"Look at the way Shaw is holding the shotgun under his right arm. When I examined the Romanian estate worker's file three years ago, Shaw had suffered a detached retina in his left eye from a recoil accident. He has no peripheral vision on his left side."

Vance looked down at the catwalk. The iron maintenance ladder descended directly onto Shaw's blind left flank, masked by the thunderous spray of a leaking flange on the four-foot intake pipe.

"Can you get the keys to the handcuffs off Dunbar's belt or use the bolt-cutters on the chain around Morag while I draw him toward the sluice wheel?" Vance whispered.

"The padlock on Morag's chain is hardened boron steel—bolt-cutters won't bite through it in time," Isla whispered back, her eyes darting to the rusted cast-iron flange where Morag's chain was bolted into the century-old lime mortar. "Wait—look at the mortar around the anchor bolt. The humic acid in the peat water has rotted the concrete around the pin. If we use the bolt-cutters as a lever bar behind the eye-bolt, we can wrench the entire anchor out of the wall."

Down below, footsteps echoed suddenly down the main adit tunnel from the surface.

Shaw spun around, raising the shotgun toward the outer storm door.

"Put the gun down, Lachlan!" a deep, patrician voice boomed through the outer iron grille.

Isla and Vance froze on the ladder.

Standing outside the barred storm door in a Barbour wax jacket, flanked by two men in private estate ghillie greens—not Police

Scotland officers—was **Lord Gregor Haldane**.

C H A P T E R T E N

The Quarry at Glen Docherty

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“YOU TOLD ME Vance and the sister were already inside the trap!” Lord Haldane shouted through the iron bars of the storm door, his silver hair plastered to his forehead by the Highland rain. “One of Vance’s sergeants just dropped a sixty-foot larch tree across the dam road and blocked the Dingwall firearms unit at the bottom of the hill! Vance is out here somewhere!”

“He’s not on the surface, Gregor,” Shaw called back coldly, stepping behind the steel turbine housing so he had cover from both the door and the walkway. “I’ve been watching the track on the thermal scope for twenty minutes. And why the hell did you bring the estate ghillies here? The whole point was for the police to find Vance and the women drowned when the four o’clock sluice opens!”

“Because the old hydro superintendent at the bottom of the dam wasn’t dead when the first patrol car reached his cottage ten minutes ago!” Haldane snarled, rattling the chained iron door. “Dougie MacRae told the uniformed constables on the open radio channel that *you* took the key to Adit Three! Within twenty minutes every detective in Northern Constabulary is going to know your name!”

Silence fell over the surge chamber for three seconds, broken only by the roar of the high-pressure leak.

Shaw lowered the shotgun an inch, his expression hardening as he stared at his stepfather through the bars.

“Look at what you’re saying, Gregor,” Shaw said softly. “Dougie MacRae saw *me* take the key to rescue Professor Dunbar after you

discovered Dunbar had kidnapped Morag Kerr. After all, it's *your* name in the 1997 Balblair ledger. I was eleven years old in 1997. Why would I drown three people over a crime committed by a High Court judge?"

Haldane staggered back half a step against the wet rock wall outside the grille. "Lachlan... unlock this gate right now."

"I don't think so, Father," Shaw said, raising the Beretta and firing a single deafening blast of buckshot through the iron grille.

Outside the bars, Lord Haldane crumpled backward into the mud as the two estate ghillies scrambled wildly back up the concrete steps in panic, terrified by the echoing roar inside the tunnel.

And in that same deafening instant—while the thunder of the twelve-gauge blast was still reverberating off the granite dome and Shaw's ears were ringing—Callum Vance dropped the last eight feet off the maintenance ladder onto Shaw's blind left side.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

What the Peat Preserved

— • —

VANCE HIT LACHLAN Shaw low across the ribs like a rugby flanker, driving him sideways into the iron guardrail of the catwalk just as the second barrel of the Beretta discharged into the concrete ceiling.

Pulverised stone and sparks rained down into the flood basin. The shotgun spun out of Shaw's hands, clattering through the gap in the mesh walkway and vanishing into the dark sump twenty feet below.

While the two men slammed against the slick wet iron of the catwalk, Isla dropped down onto the lower concrete plinth beside the central stanchion.

"Isla!" Morag gasped, her voice cracking as her surviving right hand reached out and gripped Isla's sleeve with desperate strength. "Is it really you?"

"I'm here, Mo. I've got you," Isla sobbed, wedging the heavy steel head of the bolt-cutters behind the corroded iron eye-bolt anchoring Morag's chain and Professor Dunbar's handcuffs to the pillar.

Above them, the digital hydro timer flashed **00:04:10**, and a low, subterranean vibration began to shake the granite floor beneath their boots. Deep inside the mountain, the hydraulic rams of the Glascarnoch spillover were beginning to lift.

On the catwalk ten feet overhead, Lachlan Shaw—twenty years younger than Vance and fuelled by adrenaline—drove a savage elbow into Vance's bruised jaw and pulled a six-inch deer-gralloching knife from his belt sheath.

"You should have stayed in Edinburgh, old man!" Shaw snarled, slashing downward toward Vance's throat.

Vance caught Shaw's wrist with both gloved hands, the razor-sharp steel stopping half an inch from his carotid artery as his boot heels slipped on the wet iron grating.

Down on the plinth, Isla threw her entire body weight against the three-foot handle of the bolt-cutters. The century-old lime mortar groaned, cracked, and held fast.

"Isla, leave me and unchain the girl!" Professor Dunbar coughed weakly, blood flecking his lips from the shotgun pellets that had ricocheted off the ceiling. "The penstock valve is opening!"

A terrifying roar echoed from the upper intake tunnel. A wall of black, foaming peat water exploded through the lower grates into the basin, rising to Isla's knees inside five seconds, ice-cold and dragging at her boots like iron weights.

"Pull with me, Mo!" Isla screamed over the thunder of the torrent.

Morag braced both bare feet against the concrete stanchion and grabbed the top of the bolt-cutter shaft with her good right hand. Together, the two sisters wrenched backward with every ounce of strength left in eleven years of grief and fury.

With a sound like a rifle shot, the rusted six-inch iron anchor pin tore free from the crumbled stone wall.

C H A P T E R T W E L V E

No Way Off the Moor

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FREE OF THE stanchion, Morag didn't run for the ladder.

As the freezing black water surged past their waists in the flood basin, Morag looked up through the iron grating of the catwalk—where Lachlan Shaw had Vance pinned flat on his back over the edge of the rail, the deer knife pressing down toward Vance's chest—and picked up the loose five-foot length of heavy iron chain still attached to her wrist cuff.

Climbing three rungs up the submerged service steps beneath the catwalk, Morag shoved the iron anchor pin up through the open steel mesh directly behind Shaw's boot and yanked it downward with both hands.

Shaw's ankle twisted violently through the grating. With a howl of pain as his shinbone snapped against the iron crossbar, his weight pitched backward.

Vance drove both boots up into Shaw's chest, breaking the grip on the knife and sending the blade skittering across the catwalk.

"Callum, the upper hatch!" Isla shouted from the maintenance ladder, supporting Professor Dunbar under one arm while the churning brown water rose within four feet of the catwalk floor. "The water pressure has jammed the outer storm door! The only way out is the ventilation duct!"

Vance scrambled to his feet, blood pouring from a cut above his eyebrow, and grabbed Shaw by the collar of his tweed shooting coat to haul him toward the ladder.

"Let me go, you bastard!" Shaw screamed, thrashing wildly as the torrent slammed against the underside of the catwalk, threatening to tear the entire steel structure from its wall brackets. "If I go to prison, I'll tell the newspapers everything Dunbar did at Raigmore! I'll drag her name through every court in Scotland!"

Shaw lunged for the fallen hunting knife near the edge of the railing. The rusted iron handrail—weakened where the shotgun blast had sheared its mounting bolts—gave way with a metallic shriek.

Vance lunged forward and caught Shaw's wet sleeve, hanging half over the boiling abyss as thousands of gallons of Highland floodwater thundered into the lower discharge shaft.

For two seconds Shaw hung suspended above the black maelstrom, his eyes wide with sheer animal terror. Then the stitched seam of his waxed sleeve ripped clean away in Vance's gloved fist, and Lachlan Shaw vanished into the roaring throat of the Mossford turbine chute.

"Callum, move!" Morag yelled from the lip of the ventilation duct ten feet above.

As the catwalk tore loose from the eastern wall and folded into the rising flood, Vance leaped for the upper rungs of the iron ladder, hauling himself into the four-foot stone bypass duct just as the surge chamber filled to the crown of the arch with a boom that shook the mountain.

P A R T I V

RECKONING ON LOCH MAREE

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CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The Bothy by the Black Water

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WHEN THE FOUR of them crawled out through the shattered ventilation grate into the freezing Highland rain on the hillside above Glascarnoch Dam, the forestry track below was ablaze with blue lights.

DS Rory Fraser was standing beside his mud-splattered transit van while four paramedics and eight armed officers from Inverness—not the Dingwall unit Haldane had tried to commandeer—rushed up the embankment with thermal blankets and stretchers.

Outside the flooded tunnel portal, Lord Gregor Haldane lay strapped to a spinal board under armed guard, clutching his shattered shoulder while a Detective Superintendent from the Police Investigations and Review Commissioner read him his caution under the Criminal Procedure (Scotland) Act.

Isla wrapped two foil blankets around Morag's shivering shoulders inside the back of the heated ambulance, refusing to let go of her sister's right hand while the paramedic irrigated the wound on her left.

"You kept the voice steady on those tapes for eleven years," Isla whispered, pressing her forehead against Morag's damp hair. "How did you survive down there?"

Morag looked past the open ambulance doors toward the dark mountains of Wester Ross.

"For the first four years, Galbraith kept me in a soundproofed root cellar beneath an old shooting bothy three miles north of Braemore,"

Morag said softly. "He brought me books from charity shops in Ullapool. Medical textbooks, maps, old newspapers. He thought he was keeping me quiet. He didn't realise I was memorising every receipt, every delivery driver's voice, every crack in the masonry."

Vance stepped up to the rear step of the ambulance, a strip of surgical tape pressed over his bleeding brow.

Morag looked at him for a long moment. The anger that might have been there had burned away long ago, replaced by the stark clarity of a survivor.

"You left your warrant card number pencilled inside the lining of my father's coat at the 2015 inquiry, Callum," Morag said quietly. "My dad told me three weeks before I disappeared that if anything ever went wrong with my Balblair research, you were the only clean copper between Edinburgh and John o' Groats. That's why I said your name on the tape when Shaw forced me to record the bait."

"You knew I'd recognise the milestone at Slattadale," Vance said.

"I knew you'd look at the seat adjustment in my Fiesta," Morag replied with the faintest ghost of a smile. "And I knew Isla wouldn't stop until she looked at the pathology."

Isla squeezed her sister's hand, then paused, a cold furrow creasing her brow as she looked from Morag to Vance.

"Wait," Isla said slowly. "Morag... on the 2023 tape we played in the car, you told Haldane that the negative of the 1997 Balblair photograph was hidden inside the stone cairn above Kinlochewe where Dad scattered Gran's ashes."

Morag shook her head against the ambulance pillow. "Dad never scattered Gran's ashes above Kinlochewe, Isla. We scattered them off the pier at Ullapool when we were twelve."

Isla's breath caught. "Then why did you say the cairn above Kinlochewe on the tape?"

"Because there *is* a stone cairn on the ridge above Kinlochewe," Morag said, her eyes darkening as the ambulance doors began to swing shut. "Galbraith built it in the winter of 2016. And what's buried underneath those stones isn't a photograph."

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Cold Is the Loch

— • —

TWO DAYS LATER, the storm finally broke over Wester Ross, leaving a powdering of fresh November snow across the high peaks of Slioch and Beinn Eighe while Loch Maree lay flat and black as polished obsidian in the valley below.

Callum Vance and Isla Kerr stood together on the wind-scoured heather ridge half a mile above the old Kinlochewe road. Around them, a white forensic marquee flapped softly in the mountain breeze as Claire Brodie and her Inverness CSI team carefully lifted the heavy quartzite stones of a shepherd's cairn one by one.

Morag was recovering under armed guard in a private room at Raigmore Hospital; Professor Alistair Dunbar had given a forty-page dying declaration to the Crown Office before undergoing emergency surgery; and Lord Gregor Haldane was currently sitting in a remand cell at HMP Barlinnie, facing life imprisonment for conspiracy to murder, abduction, and attempting to pervert the course of justice.

To the newspapers in Glasgow and Edinburgh, the case of the century was closed.

Except for the cairn on the ridge.

"Sir," DS Rory Fraser called from inside the forensic tent, waving Vance and Isla forward. "We've reached the peat layer three feet below the base stones."

Vance and Isla stepped into the tent and looked down into the rectangular trench excavated from the dark Highland turf.

Wrapped in heavy blue tarpaulin—the same industrial grade used by the forestry estates around Gairloch—lay three shallow graves arranged side by side.

Isla knelt on the stepping plate and folded back the corner of the first tarpaulin.

Inside lay skeletal remains clothed in the rotted remnants of a 1990s school blazer from Balblair Residential Assessment Centre. Clutched between the ribs was a corroded brass identity disc stamped with a number: #04.

“Galbraith didn’t build this cairn in 2016,” Isla whispered, looking at the peat staining on the cranial sutures and the root growth through the wool fabric. “These bodies have been in the ground for over twenty-five years. Galbraith only found them in 2016—and added something of his own on top.”

She reached down with her gloved forceps and lifted a sealed waterproof Pelicase wedged between the second and third skeletons.

Inside the case, dry and untouched by the Highland damp, lay a brass signet ring engraved with the crest of a sitting Member of the Scottish Parliament, four unspent 9mm Luger cartridges, and a handwritten list of seven names titled:

THE HEATHER SYNDICATE — GLENCOE & WESTER ROSS.

Only three of the seven names had been crossed out: *Galbraith. Dunbar. Haldane.*

And written at the very bottom of the page, in fresh black ink dated less than a week ago, was an eighth line:

DCI Callum Vance — Inverness.

Outside the tent, the wind howled down off the snowfields of Beinn Eighe, rattling the canvas walls. Far below in the glen, the black water of Loch Maree shimmered cold and silent in the fading northern light.

Isla rose to her feet beside Vance, staring at the four remaining names on the list.

“It wasn’t just Haldane and his stepson,” Isla said quietly. “There are four more of them out there in the Highlands, Callum. And they

already know we have the box.”

Vance slipped the photographed evidence sheet into his coat pocket and looked out across the vast, roadless wilderness stretching south toward Glencoe.

“Good,” Callum Vance said. “Let them come.”

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END OF BOOK ONE

The DCI Callum Vance & Dr. Isla Kerr investigation continues in:

BLOOD ON THE HEATHER

A DCI Callum Vance Scottish Crime Thriller — Book 2