

A Peter Lincoln Mystery

Stern Isles

by David M. H. Butler

A crack of lightning lit up the entrance to the subterranean dungeon. The black-capped sea tossed foam as it beat on the rocky shore below. Three men, heedless of the sudden onslaught dragged box after box up from their small boat and created a refuge below the ancient castle crag, surrounded by the dark pine and foreboding hills of the winged isle, known as Skye. They would not be stopped from achieving their grim mission.

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The gray clouds seemed to reach down and melt into the gray rock of Edinburgh's royal mile. An unseasonably wet week had turned the town cool and somber. It just reeked of the intrigue and adventure Peter Lincoln had seen portrayed in numerous tales of Scotland.

While others scurried for cover, Peter breathed in the moist air and looked around at the still mysterious city he had chosen for a fifth year of college. He'd only arrived a week ago from the States. Just one day before the rain began. He'd decided to come six weeks before classes started so he'd have time to explore his new world. Holyrood Park with its craggy Arthur's seat was quickly becoming one of his favorite haunts. There were some rock faces that he loved to climb and a bit of an old castle wall, called St. Anthony's "Chapel," where he could go to think. And, of course, Arthur's seat was magnificent for its 360-degree view of the area. His favorite direction was to look northward to the Firth of Forth, with the Castle to his left and the city below. If he shifted his gaze a bit west he could imagine the highlands and beyond to the gray, brooding sea encompassing the western isles.

A man stopped and asked Peter for directions. His friendly smile and twinkling eyes seemed to draw people to him. Peter ran a hand through his straight, black hair and thought for a second. It would seem natural for him to say, "Sorry. I just moved here." But the truth was Peter actually knew. He'd been studying the maps and taking walks and bus rides around town getting familiar with Edinburgh. Knowing his way fit very neatly into his field of study, forensic investigation. Or as he liked to think of it: tracking.

"Ah, so you're an American, I gather," the man said after hearing Peter's directions. "Where are you from?"

"I grew up in California, but I just finished four years at the University of Washington."

"Washington DC? That must be a far sight different than Edinburgh."

"Oh sorry. Washington State. That's the upper left-hand corner of the map." Peter flashed a grin and continued, "North of California and Oregon. You've probably heard of Seattle. That's where the University is located."

"Ah yes. The Space Needle," he announced proudly.

"The buildings are quite different, but this weather could make a Seattle native feel right at home!" Peter smiled. "What about you. Where are you from? I'd guess by your accent England. I'll go out on a limb and say southern England."

"Not bad, young man. I've lived most my life in London. But even the fabled rain of London didn't quite prepare me for this weather!"

As if on cue, some darker clouds seemed to be shifting his way and Peter said goodbye and started to head back to his boarding house on Pilrig Street. As he walked he decided it was too early to get stuck inside. He'd come here to meet people, not sit alone and read books. He switched plans and headed for the University. There would be some activity there and, if not, the library would be open and if he was going to end up reading, he could at least do it with some company.

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As he went through one building while taking a drier route to the library he passed the Language labs. His parents had instilled in him a love of French and he slowed down to read the postings on the bulletin board, idly wondering if there were any evening courses that he might take.

One flyer caught his eyes right away, a cruise in the Western Islands. Skye, Lewis, Uist. That would be great, but the sign up date was past and he continued his musing and reading.

"Here's something interesting," he said to himself. "McBride's Localisation service invites students to an open house at its facility tomorrow night."

It went on to say that McBride's was a full service software engineering and translation company. They had the ability to take software and documentation created in one country and "localise" it into any of 17 other languages. Their services were used by some of the biggest companies in Silicon Valley, France, Germany and India. They could even handle what they called "double-byte languages" such as those used in Japan, China and Korea.

Peter wrote down the address. This sounded like a very interesting business. It certainly didn't hurt that they were offering free snacks and drinks at the open house.

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"Welcome to McBride's." A pretty young woman in a business suit greeted Peter at the front door. "Please take one of these badges and write your name on it. We have a tour starting in a

few minutes. Meanwhile we have complimentary hors d'oeuvres and soft drinks in the conference room to your right."

Peter had expected that they might question him about his affiliation with the college, or want to know what language he was studying. He'd even rented the video "Les Parapluies de Cherbourg," the evening before in case he'd needed to pull off a passable French accent. But no questions were asked. Just welcome and have some snacks. McBride's was looking better and better.

As he walked through the door to the conference room, Peter was immediately struck by a beautiful woman with straight, chestnut-colored hair that fell to her shoulders. Something seemed to have amused her and she flashed a radiant smile as she talked to an older woman. The younger woman was wearing what Peter thought of as the typical power suit: a well-tailored black jacket and slacks, white shirt, with a red sash and very business-like black shoes.

"Well, I can't help it if she's standing right next to my favorite snacks," he said to himself mischievously. There were several platters of finger foods on three different tables, virtually identical.

He picked up a cracker and dipped it into the guacamole sauce. He started to look up, trying to act cool.

"Peter Lincoln?" the older woman asked.

Some of the guacamole slopped on his shirt. So much for cool. He was used to people being friendly, but knowing his name added a new dimension to things.

"Howdy," He grinned, applying a napkin to the spill. "I'm not sure I know who ..." Suddenly he realized it was the name tag.

"I'm sorry if I startled you. My name is Dorothy Kincaid. I met your father and mother at a party a couple months back." She extended her hand and, while shaking hands, the younger woman murmured something, nodded her head and walked away.

"Rats!" thought Peter, but he consoled himself thinking that he had probably been saved from making some ridiculous comment. Out loud he continued, "Professor Kincaid? Sure. My Mom has talked of you."

"Your Mother was showing me pictures of your family and she mentioned you were planning on studying in Edinburgh. But this is quite a surprise to see you here."

"Totally! I saw a flyer at the college and the word 'snacks' beckoned me. That and it sounds like a fascinating business. What brings you here? If I remember correctly you teach at the business school. At the University back in California."

"I'm flattered that you remember. We're here visiting my daughter, Marian. That was her who I was just talking to. She works here managing in-country projects or contracting off shore vendors. Some fancy title like that."

"Daughter? And I thought you were sisters or something."

"Oh! You are a shameless flatterer," Professor Kincaid scolded. "I should call my husband right over here and tell him what you said."

"I'm sorry," he laughed. "I meant to say she looked like your aunt."

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The tour was being conducted by the company's Chief Executive Officer who had flown up from London to be at the open house. It quickly became clear that like Scotland itself, McBride's was not an independent entity. In fact they had been bought up by a London based company called Global-Trans Ltd.

William Leith was a handsome and charismatic man. Exactly the kind of man you would want standing out in front of investors and analysts, explaining your company's earnings. The staff at McBride's seemed to genuinely like him. It probably helped that he had Scottish blood.

"Automation through computers has brought enormous efficiency," he was saying, as they passed a set of cubicles. "We can even pull pre-translated standard phrases from our database in London as easily as sending an email. Easier, in fact. Once connected to the system, the software will make the suggestion automatically based on the language you are working in."

"That's impressive, Mr. Leith," a man in the tour said, "But with all these computers, why then do you have that white board in that room with what looks like a schedule on it?"

Everyone turned and sure enough a large grid was laid out on the board with dates along the top and project code numbers down the left side.

"Oh that. Well, as you might guess, we work with a number of big clients at the same time. Recently we nearly lost a very important account because we couldn't respond to some of their requests. A little too much 'flying by the seat of your pants' attitude, I'm afraid. Management came up with the idea of a 'war room' where project managers can work out scheduling conflicts."

"Well he isn't afraid to tell it as he sees it," thought Peter.

At the next cubicle a woman sat by a computer. Her fingers seemed to fly over the keyboard. Leith stopped and introduced her.

"This is Sita Kumar, in just two short years she has become one of our top translators. Spanish, Italian, Bengali, and she is a wizard with our computer system." She turned and smiled at the tour group. "Sita came straight out of the University's language school. We'd love to find more like her. Maybe some of you here in this tour will consider McBride's when you graduate."

She was Indian Peter guessed. The jet-black hair, dark eyes and cocoa colored skin made it a fairly safe guess. "Whoa!" thought Peter, "My estimation of this company rises by the minute."

"Sorry. The connection to London closed for a few minutes while they did a file back up. But we're up and running now." Sita directed everyone's attention to a second monitor attached to her computer. "I'll show you an example of how we can translate either manually or with our translation databases. Anything you want to say before I start, Mr. Leith?"

"No. The floor is all yours."

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Back in the conference room as everyone was preparing to leave, Peter went to say good-bye to Dorothy Kincaid and her husband. As he walked up he saw their daughter Marian talking with a man. They both seemed a bit upset and Peter heard the man say in a low voice. "Seat of your pants attitude! Is that what he calls it. It was their poxie computers down in London that did us in."

"Robert, will you calm yourself. I didn't care for that statement much myself. But he has a point, you were trying to keep to many balls in the air and when the computer crashed, you got nipped. Don't worry, we all make the odd mistake."

"Ah, so you think you are so grand, now?" His temper flashed. "Is that why you left me? Don't want the boss thinking you hang around with people who fly by the seat of their pants?"

"Come on, Robert. I thought we were over that and back to being friends. We've got that trip planned next week and when we're back all this will be forgotten. I'll see you tomorrow." She gave him a gentle pat on the shoulder that seemed to make him flinch, and moved to talk to her mother.

"Hullo," Peter said to the Kincaid family. "Just wanted to say 'see ya' before I took off."

Marian made a short, appraising glance, gave him a curt nod, then turning to her mother and father said she had to run.

"Dang," thought Peter. But Mrs. Kincaid came through with the introduction that Peter was hoping for.

"Marian. Before you run off. I'd like you to meet Peter Lincoln. He's Walt and Jackie's son."

"Pleased to meet you." She extended her hand and he tried surreptitiously to dry his hand on his pant leg before shaking hands. "I've heard of your father. He's something of a famous detective, right?"

"He's something all right. I hope someday to be an investigator myself."

"Following in your father's footsteps?" Marian's father, Ian, asked.

"Funny you should mention that sir ..." Peter started. Marian gave a quick smile and motioned that she had to go.

"Nice to meet you Marian," he called to her. He felt a little foolish, but what the heck.

"You were going to say something about following in your father's shoes?" Ian Kincaid asked smiling.

Peter realized he'd been watching Marian walking out of the room. He turned to the Kincaids and smiled. "Oh yeah. My specialty, the thing that I'm really into, is tracking. You know following the path of someone or something. Seeing footprints, following them and trying to deduce what the person was doing when he made them. So, yeah, I like the idea that I'm following my Dad's footprints!"

"Your mother said you were a twin. What does your sister do?" asked Mrs. Kincaid.

"Joanie? She's living in Hawaii. She married a guy with an oceanography degree and they went over there and started a Whale watching business. She's too much! I have a younger brother, Jay, as well. He's going into his second year of college at the University of Oregon." He paused for a moment thinking about his far-flung family, he suddenly missed them very much. "How about your guys? Any others kids?"

"Just Marian. We've been teaching in California for five years. Marian was in the midst of college and it made it kind of hard. It's so nice to be back here with her for the summer."

"Well. This was really cool that we ran into each other!" Peter said.

"Maybe you could come over for dinner some night this week," Mr. Kincaid offered. "I'd be interested to hear more about your studies."

"Sure! Just name a day."

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When Peter arrived at the Kincaid's apartment the following Tuesday, he was met by Marian. She seemed rather distracted and as he followed her into the kitchen he noticed that the living room was piled high with camping and fishing gear.

"Big plans for the weekend?" He asked.

"Actually tomorrow," She sighed. "I've got a bucket load of things to get packed, but I'm close."

"You're going to be camping, I take it?"

"That depends," she replied. "We'll be going on a boating and fishing trip up near the island of Skye. But I'm kind of hoping to stop at an inn, especially if this weather keeps up."

"Sounds like a blast. I enjoy getting out into the Great Outdoors." You could almost hear the capitol letters when he said it.

"Me too," she said simply, "Come on. My parents are out in the kitchen."

Entering the kitchen, Peter stopped short. Sita, the translator from McBride's was there. She moved back a half step as the elder Kincaids turned and greeted him warmly.

"And I think you met Sita during the McBride's tour the other night?" said Marian.

"Uh huh. Yeah. Nice to see you again, Sita." They smiled and shook hands. "So, are you going on this trip with Marian?"

"Oh no! Two days on a tiny fishing boat is not my idea of fun," She laughed.

"I invited Sita over. I thought you might like to meet more people," Marian explained.

"Cool," replied Peter. He tried to decipher if there were any hidden meanings in her statement.

Mrs. Kincaid turned to the stove and opened the oven door. Peter could see a chicken and some potatoes inside. The aroma surrounded him and his mouth watered at the idea of home cooking.

At the table, it didn't take much prompting for Peter to try and explain his fascination with tracking. It started simply enough with some examples of how you could approximate the height and weight of a person who made a set of footprints, but quickly got philosophical.

"Imagine a foot print; human or animal. It's like the start of a story. A scuffmark at the front or back tells you the quarry's mental attitude, his physical state. You are looking at the past. The trick is to try and project the track into the future. Make a trail out of that track, so to speak." Peter realized he might be going a bit overboard. He decided to find a subject that his hosts could take part in. "I see you have one of those Scottish Independence posters. Did you go to that rally I heard about last week?"

"Yes, I did," replied Marian, "There were a couple very eloquent speakers who I think could help get the voters to turn out for a referendum on the issue."

"But with the global market really taking off, it seems like it would be better for countries to pool their energies. It kind of seems to me that England should try to stay together. That way..."

"England!" Marian nearly hissed. "We are in Scotland. Part of Great Britain, aye. But we are not part of England!"

"Oh, my! Did you notice that interesting pattern on the wallpaper?" Sita said, half kiddingly, trying to diffuse the tension.

"After that remark, I wish I could blend into it!" Peter said somewhat sheepishly. "Sorry. I can't believe I made such a foolish mistake."

"Don't worry Peter," Mrs. Kincaid said soothingly. "I once made the mistake of implying that San Francisco is in southern California. I had several students not only let me know that I was wrong, but questioned my credentials to teach, for making such a remark."

Marian had opened her mouth to say something, but she obviously rethought the idea. Getting up from the table she said, "Well I really do need to get ready for the fishing trip. If you'll excuse me..."

Sita turned to Peter. "Interested in going to a dance club? I told some friends I'd meet them there."

"Sure. That would be fun. But Professor Kincaid, can we help you clean up?"

"No, go on you two. Have a good time. And Peter. Please. You can call me Dorothy."

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At the club, there was a local band playing pretty good rock and roll and Peter danced with a number of different girls. Even better, one girl asked him to dance. He was back in his element. Smiling, telling jokes, people gathering around to talk with him. Why was he acting like such a love-struck puppy every time he came near Marian? She obviously had no feelings for him, at least not positive ones. But maybe that was what was throwing him. She didn't seem to react to him at all. He and Sita were standing outside, cooling off between two music sets and he decided to broach the subject.

"So, like, I thought Marian had broken up with that guy. But she's going on this two-day trip with him?"

"I think that they might be planning on getting back together. Robert has been making some changes and I think Marian is considering it. They definitely have been getting along better at work. Maybe this trip is a chance to see if things will work out," she explained. "You sure are a different guy out here than you were back at the apartment."

"I guess I was kind of a dork. Maybe I was trying too hard to impress Marian. But she must be preoccupied with Robert," Peter replied. "So what about you? Sita is a great name. Is it Indian? And your accent really has me thrown!"

"That's probably because I was born in New York City, lived in Montreal for a while then moved here when I was about twelve so my Mom could take care of her grandfather," she explained. "To make matters more interesting, my Dad is from Calcutta, India and my Mom is from Connecticut."

"Holy Doodle!" whistled Peter. Then added jokingly, "You must not even need a passport to get into half the countries of the world!"

"That's right. I just call ahead so that they have the red carpet cleaned." Sita gave him a wry smile and then added, "Now try not to let this go to your head, but you're a very fun guy to be around."

Peter laughed. "Oh yeah? And you are, hands down, the best dancer in the club. I mean it. Maybe we'd better go back in while our heads still fit through the door. The next dance is ours, no matter how many women swear they will kill themselves if I won't dance with them."

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The next days went by fairly routinely. That is to say, Peter started developing a routine. He would walk early each morning looking for a different place to have breakfast. He was hoping to discover a place that could become his favorite. But he didn't want to settle on a place too quickly.

After breakfast he would spend an hour trying to identify the local birds and plants. His four years in Washington had also kindled an interest in edible mushrooms. If his walk took him past a track in soft earth, everything stopped and Peter would squat down and try to read it.

He had set up with Sita to go dancing on Saturday. By then Marian would be back and he wondered if she might come along as well. He also wondered if she and Robert would really get back together. He was still trying to decipher that almost imperceptible shudder he had seen when she had touched him.

Thursday he was sitting in the University library reading up on the origins of the Scottish independence movement. He didn't want to make more silly mistakes around Marian, he told himself. Then growing tired of that, he thought about languages and on a whim found a book on the Bengali language. He looked for something simple to learn and saw a translation of the names of the Bengali numbers. He jotted them down thinking he could impress Sita on Saturday night.

On Saturday morning as he entered the restaurant for breakfast, his eye was attracted to the headline of the newspaper and he knew that his routine was about to be shattered. In large, bold type the newspaper proclaimed: "Software company bombed." Grabbing up the paper, his fears were confirmed: McBride's had been bombed during the night! The bomb had ripped a massive hole in the back of the building. A night watchman had been thrown through a window by the blast and was in serious condition.

Peter ran to the phone and first called Sita who said she was fine and had just heard about the blast. She was anxious to get in and see what damage might have happened to the computers. Next he called the Kincaids. It was Mr. Kincaid who answered and he reported that Marian wasn't back yet, so no need to worry. But there was something in his voice that said he was plenty worried.

"Is everything okay, Mr. Kin..."

"Thanks for calling Peter. I agree. I'm glad that so few got hurt as well," he said and promptly hung up.

"Okay," thought Peter. "Now he really has me worried."

He gulped down the breakfast that he had ordered and headed over to Marian's apartment.

Outside were several Police vehicles. And Peter's worries mounted further.

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At about 2 in the afternoon he finally got some answers. Mr. Kincaid called him at his boarding house. Peter had tried calling Sita but she was probably down trying to get into the building. He was pretty sure that the police weren't going to let that happen. Meanwhile he had tried to get some news from the radio, but it was all frustratingly vague. The only additional information it had given him was that a Nationalist group was taking credit for the bombing, claiming that the London based company was exploiting the workers.

"Peter?" said Mr. Kincaid, "I'm sorry that I cut you off but we had a roomful of police here. They are suspicious of the fact that Marian was gone when the explosion happened."

"But I thought she was coming back yesterday?" said Peter.

"That's right. She was suppose to come home, mid to late afternoon but she never showed up. She's almost 24 hours late. We are worried sick. Yesterday we were concerned that she hadn't called to let us know what was going on. We wondered if we should call the police. Now the police are looking for her and we are more afraid of what they'll do if they find her!"

"If you'll give me a few particulars, I'm ready to track her down myself," Peter offered.

"Would you? Let's meet for a cup of tea at the James Centre and I'll give you whatever you need. We can be there in 10 minutes."

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They met almost simultaneously at the teashop. Both Mr. and Mrs. Kincaid looked exhausted. But this was their only daughter and they weren't about to give in yet.

"Are you worried about a phone tap?" asked Peter.

"Absolutely. The police inspector showed us pictures of Marian at a nationalist rally and they say her companions are members of an extremist group. If they are taking pictures at rallies, they aren't going to think twice about tapping phones." Kincaid glanced around. "In fact, I

was thinking we might even be followed, but as long as we stay in a rather noisy place, I'm hoping we can talk."

"Then I take it you didn't tell the police everything?"

"That's correct. I want to give Marian a chance to tell us what happened before the police just drag her off to jail."

"Don't say that Ian!" Dorothy Kincaid gasped.

"What we told them was that she was due back tonight. That she was fishing in the western isles, we may have even implied that she was heading towards Elgol on Skye. The truth is she was going to be fishing between Mallaig and Glenelg. We don't dare call the outfit she was renting the boat from to see if she's back."

"Well, I called the train station before I left and there is a train connection I can make in 45 minutes through Glasgow that will get me to that area by 11 tonight. I just told them Skye, but you tell me the town and outfitter and I'll be there first thing in the morning. Depending on whether they've returned the boat or not, I'll make plans accordingly. But first we need to set up a safe way to communicate."

"We brought the address of the outfitter and we thought that Sita would make a good go between. But be careful, they may see who we talk to and start watching them as well."

"Sita! Dang! I forgot. We were going dancing tonight. I'll have to call her from the station and let her know what's up."

"Peter you don't have t..." Dorothy Kincaid started.

"No question, I want to. But now one more thing. If we believe that Marian couldn't have done it, we should start considering who might have. I think I'll see what Sita might be able to track down from the company's side of things. You guys just keep your ears open and let me know what you learn when I contact you. I'll call you at Vincent's restaurant on Prince's Street at 9:00 am tomorrow. I've had breakfast there twice now and they seem like a nice place where no one will be expecting you to get a call. If you're not there, I'll leave a message."

"We'll call ahead to Mallaig and get you a room. Check at the train station for a message from us." Mr. Kincaid slid a couple hundred pounds across the table. "It's all I have at the moment, we can settle up accounts when you get back. But if you find my daughter and get her out of this mess, there is nothing in the world you can't ask of me."

"Dad," thought Peter, "I hope the Lincoln genes don't fail me."

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"They won't let us into the building until Monday or Tuesday" Sita told Peter. "They're checking structural integrity and all that kind of stuff. I had some diagnostics running on the

system over the weekend and I would love to get in and just take the data home to see how far it got. We are going to have some very upset customers on Monday."

"Will McBride's move into temporary quarters? How will they deal with this?" Peter looked out and could see the train was loading. But he still wanted to set a few more things up with Sita.

"Nobody seems to know. Mr. Leith is flying back up from London to assess the situation. Many of us have been calling and emailing each other trying to put an action plan in place. If we could get a few of the critical computers out of that building we would just need to find a facility that could provide us with dial up access to the London office. It's going to depend on how much damage there has been."

"I'm sorry about breaking our date. I was looking forward to seeing you and dancing again."

"Me too. But duty calls," she replied. "Besides tonight is going to be crazy with everyone trying to make plans for Monday."

"I suppose so. But look. Keep my whereabouts to yourself. The Kincaids are worried about what might happen if the police find Marian first. They're even nervous about possible wire-tapping, and I'm kind of thinking they could be right. I'll call you sometime tomorrow around noon. Will you be home?"

"I can be."

"Good. I gotta run pretty quick here, but I have one last idea. Is anybody else at McBride's a candidate for suspicion? See what you can find out. Uh-oh, now I really have to run! See ya!"

"Take care of yourself, Peter!" she called, but the phone was already humming its mechanical tone.

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At the train station in Mallaig was a cryptic message from Professor Kincaid saying sorry, something had come up and he couldn't meet him but he could stay at a certain address for the night.

Peter thanked the station agent and took the paper. "Is this place close by?" he asked.

"Oh aye, ye canna miss it lad. It's just down the lane a-ways, turn left and follow your nose to the next corner. They'll probably have a light on for you."

After a couple of wrong turns he found the Bed & Breakfast and checked in. His room looked across the road at some shops and out towards the dark ocean. He figured he was only a few blocks from the outfitters where Marian and Robert had rented their boat.

He sat down on the bed and tried to think about what he would do in the morning. He wondered if the police were already ahead of him and maybe even had Marian in custody. He tried to imagine her plotting to blow up McBride's. She was pretty strident in her nationalism, but he didn't think it would go that far. Her parents in town, a job that she seemed to really enjoy, her talk about referendums; it just didn't add up to radical actions.

They were all the same thoughts he'd had on the train ride up from Glasgow. Though before it had started to get darker, several points on the trip had nearly taken his breath away. He looked down valleys at stone cottages as the train crossed arched bridges and got several glimpses of what the map called Rannoch Moor before the light gave out. He vowed to make the trip again under better circumstances.

With the competing images of beauty and the unknown leap-frogging each other, Peter finally drifted off to sleep.

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Something woke him the middle of the night. It took a few moments to even remember where he was. He looked at the clock; it was 4:30 am. Then he realized what it was: The whirling light of a police car was making a circuit across the ceiling and one wall of his room.

He jumped out of bed and sidled up to the window. Police were standing around a building kitty-cornered from the house Peter was staying in. He started pulling on his pants and shoes. The Kincaids with all their talk of phone taps and surveillance had him a bit jittery and he wanted to be ready in case they were coming for him,

There was suddenly a burst of commotion and a man was brought, struggling, from the building. His head was suddenly bathed in the blue flashing light of the police car.

It was Robert!

"Oh God!" groaned Peter. "They've caught them, and I was just across the street. I was so close!"

But no one else seemed to be coming from the house. There was an officer with a dog going down the alley beside the house. But his manner said that he wasn't expecting to find anything. Why wasn't Marian with Robert? He didn't know whether to be relieved or worried.

Just then there was some sort of flash and the officer holding Robert reeled backwards. It appeared that Robert had somehow clubbed the officer who swung his flashlight to protect himself. The captive started sprinting like a well-trained athlete towards the waterfront. It looked like he was still handcuffed. Another police car responding to the incident was rounding the corner, coming up from the waterfront, just at the moment Robert reached it. He tumbled across the hood and slid into the darkness on the far side of the car.

Peter decided it would be safe to join the growing throng of people who had come out to see what was happening. He hurried down the street to see if Robert was alive and maybe overhear if he had anything to say.

"Get a Medic!" he heard a policeman cry out to another officer. "Don't move him, his neck might be broken. I'm still getting a pulse."

A man dressed in a dark suit and tie walked over. He was absently tossing a matchbook from one hand to the other. Peter guessed he was the head detective. His salt and pepper hair was cropped close, his face, caught in the shadowy street light looked ruthless.

"Take good care of Mr. Cameron. He and I have a lot to talk about." He leaned down close to Robert's face, "Anything you'd like to get off your chest, young man? Where's the girl?"

"Sir. He's out cold." The police medic looked over at the detective. "And I'm extremely worried about his chances if we can't get him to a hospital right away."

"Not a trace of her," he fumed, "If I could find that other co-conspirator of his, I'd let this one go find his own hospital. But we need him. He's going to make our lives a whole lot easier."

Peter tried to tell himself that the guy was just doing his job. But if this was the same guy who had questioned the Kincaids, he could see why they were so distrustful of him. He inspired fear rather than compassion.

Peter also wondered idly where Robert Cameron had been heading when he started running. He had had at least three directions to choose from. Was there a reason he headed towards the water? Or was it sheer panic?

* * *

The sun was starting to lighten the sky by the time the ambulance had gotten Robert strapped in and hurried off to a hospital. Peter followed a small group of people who were heading in the direction of the waterfront. The street ended at a dock with a cluster of boats moored around it, could he have been heading for one of them? He decided to let some time pass before doing anything that might attract attention.

He headed back to the Bed and Breakfast to get his things and have breakfast. The proprietress was at the door as he came in.

"I heard it was a freedom fighter those jackboots mowed down," she said to him. No question where her sympathies lay.

"I overheard one of the policemen and it would lead me to agree with you," Peter said trying to play the fence, he certainly didn't want to say he knew Robert. "Getting a guy out of bed in the middle of the night seems a sad thing."

"Aye, like the King's brigands did at Glencoe to the MacDonalds."

She was referring to the seventeenth century massacre of the MacDonald clan by Captain Robert Cambell and his men, who had requested shelter in the clan houses. In the middle of the night they had slain almost every man, woman and child of the village. An act that was obviously not easily forgotten.

"That was sure a grim day. The police shouldn't forget how a deed like that screws up whatever good they might do," Peter said.

While he didn't go along with blowing up buildings, he felt a certain relief that the townspeople might not be overly forthcoming with information to the police. It might give him the extra time he needed to find Marian.

"Would ye like yer breakfast now? Seeing as how we're up. Here. Come on in and sit down, we'll get you fixed up."

* * *

It was going to be a pretty hectic morning. The ferry for Skye left at 8:45. If he missed that it would be noon before he could catch another one. That gave him an hour. He needed to talk to the outfitter and he'd promised the Kincaids he'd leave them a message by 9 o'clock. He'd hoped to give them any new clues that might turn up from his talk to the outfitter, but that was going to make things too tight.

He found a phone booth and called Vincent's restaurant.

"Howdy. I've got some friends meeting me for breakfast, but I can't make it. Could I leave them a message?" Getting the okay, he continued, "It's for Mr. and Mrs. Kincaid. Tell them that Robert got hurt last night and that I need to go over to Skye. His friend might still be there."

"Robert hurt, going to Skye," the man repeated.

"Um. Please add the part about 'his friend might still be there.' That will be important to them."

That completed, he picked up his rucksack and headed for the waterfront. He found Cuillin Fish and Trek Rentals just as they were opening. Their store sat at the foot of a dock. The walls were covered with tackle, paddles and life-vests. A man in overalls and a flat black cap was setting out some signs and equipment in front of the building, aided by a young girl that Peter guessed to be his daughter.

"Morning," greeted Peter. "I'm trying to find a friend of mine. She and her boyfriend were going to rent a boat here, but we haven't heard from either of them. Her parents are getting worried."

"Oh, aye. I think I know just who you are talking about and we've called the police about it," replied the man. "They rented one of our motor launches and never returned."

"Do you know where they were headed?" Peter wondered if this was how the police had located Robert.

"No but They've got three possible directions. We ask that our renters not go beyond the Point of Sleat on Skye, but most head up Loch Nevis or a lot of the overnights like to go up to Loch Hourn."

"I have a hunch I might be able to find your boat for you," said Peter.

"Aye, and how would that be?" the man asked with a hint of suspicion.

"I'm sure you heard the commotion last night. Well the guy they caught was the boyfriend."

"The freedom fighter?" asked the daughter.

"That's what people are saying," said Peter, non-committally. "If one of you can get away for 5 minutes, I'll show you where I think the boat is."

"Lead on, young man," said the father. "Athena, you've got the helm."

They walked down the two blocks to the other dock that Peter had noticed earlier that morning and out onto it. There were boats of all sizes and conditions. Peter crossed his fingers. It was just a guess after all.

"Good on ya, fella! There's me boat!" the man cried, pointing to a white boat with a cabin.

They went over to the boat and peered in. Nobody was onboard. They climbed on and looked around. Inside the cabin were several things including a duffel bag with some men's clothes in it that Peter guessed were Robert's. Also a radio that Peter recognized from the equipment in Marian's apartment. Peter picked it up and looked it over. There was nothing on it to point to Marian or her whereabouts. There was some fishing gear, which went with the boat, but not much else. Peter was following the man back out of the cabin when he noticed a napkin with a word written on it. He picked it up and slipped it into his pocket.

As they got off the boat, Peter suddenly realized that if they reported finding the boat, the police were going to find his fingerprints on the boat. He was pretty sure his prints weren't on file anywhere, but it made him a bit nervous. He decided to see how far he could push the freedom fighter sympathy.

"Would it be possible to keep quiet about my involvement in finding this boat?" He asked. "I sure don't want the police hassling me, just because I found this boat."

"Fella, your secret is safe with me. In fact I've got some people looking to hire a boat," he winked at Peter. "I'd hate to lose that revenue while the police paw all over of it."

"I've got to run and catch the train." actually ferry, he thought, but he wanted to be careful for the Kincaids sake. Fortunately the train station and ferry terminal were very close to each other. "But I sure hope I can get back up here during one of my school breaks and take out a boat like this myself. It's a beauty."

"You do, and we'll see what we can do to fix you up good and proper."

* * *

As the ferry pulled out of the harbor and headed across the Sound of Sleat toward the town of Armadale on Skye, Peter remembered the napkin he'd picked up on the boat. He pulled it out of his pocket. It was a small, white cocktail style napkin. Printed on it was the logo for the Inn at Ornsay. Scrawled along one edge was the word "noc" and "3 times." From their placement it looked like two separate phrases. But maybe as the person wrote it their hand slipped and it meant "Knock 3 times."

In any case, that gave him his next destination. He opened out his map to find Ornsay. Just up the coast was a tiny island called Ornsay and a town next to it on the mainland called Isleornsay.

"So what makes me think Marian is still on Skye?" Peter asked himself as he began reviewing his facts and conjecture. "Truthfully it's more instinct than fact. But my conclusion from the things left on the boat is that Robert was travelling without her." That flinch he'd seen Robert give when she touched him still nagged at him. He wondered why he was putting so much value in that small incident. Still he was suddenly very concerned for her safety. And Isleornsay was the only clue he had for the moment. His only other option was to think that she really had been involved in the bombing and that was too horrid to consider.

By his estimates he should be arriving in Isleornsay about 11 am. That gave him some time to scout around before he called Sita. Maybe he could stay at the Inn. But he felt a sudden rush of panic. What if they didn't have any new information for him. What would he do then. He knew from his training that panic can be your own worst enemy. One of his first teachers, a guy who ran his boy scout troop, used to say, "If you're lost or in trouble, and feel yourself panicking: Hug a tree."

"No trees near by. But I guess on a ferry I can't go very far." Just thinking about it brought him a certain calm.

* * *

Arriving at the head of the road leading down into Isleornsay, the bus rolled to a stop and Peter thanked the driver and descended from the bus. He was impressed at the efficiency of the Scottish transportation system. A train had arrived in Mallaig about the same time as he was boarding the ferry, and a bus was waiting in Armadale when they landed. The bus was headed north to Broadford, Portree and some of the other northern towns; that worked just fine for him.

He hitched his rucksack up onto his shoulders and headed into the village. It was tinier than he had expected and he was surprised to find that the Inn at Ornsay was located on the mainland, not the island.

The man he stopped for directions told him that the only way out to the island was to wait for low tide and walk over. Peter's enthusiasm for Scotland was about to explode. Some thick clouds were scudding across the sky but the weather was actually pretty good.

The Inn was a large white building with a pub attached. To his chagrin all their rooms were taken, but the receptionist said that they thought someone was checking out later in the afternoon. They could take his name and if he checked back later they'd let him know. Not knowing what else to do, he agreed.

"I'm trying to find my friends Marian Kincaid and Robert Cameron. Are they staying here? Her parents would like her to call if she is here."

The receptionist flipped open her reservation book. "Sorry. They checked out Friday around ten."

"Do you remember them? Anything out of the ordinary about them? We're kind of worried that they haven't called."

"I have a vague recollection of them. She was very pretty and he wasn't so bad himself. They were carrying foul weather gear. That's right; they came in by boat. On a fishing cruise, they were."

Peter walked into the pub and sat down at the bar. "Tea?" he asked the barman. A couple of middle aged locals were sitting at the bar as well. He turned to them. "You guys ever get tired of living in paradise?"

"These guys?" asked the barman, winking. "If you call this pub paradise, then they must be sublimely happy."

That brought on an animated conversation, which was just what he needed to take his mind off the tenuous set of clues that he was working with.

Reaching into his pocket to get some change, he pulled out the napkin. He looked around trying to imagine Marian and Robert sitting in this very room, one of them writing on a napkin. "What might cause you to write such a message," he mused. His eyes came to rest on the telephone. Still didn't get him very far.

"Any of you guys know what 'noc' means?" he asked his new found friends.

"Knock?" They repeated. "Like Knock castle?"

"I had meant n-o-c, but maybe that was just an abbreviation," he said. "Is there a castle nearby called Knock?"

"Ach, well 'tis a wee piece of a castle," one of the men replied. "Maybe three miles south. Just a couple lonely old walls overlooking the water"

"Aye and the kiddies have been saying that recently they've been seeing some lights flashing up there," said the other man.

"You're pulling my leg. Right? American looking for mysterious legends of ghosts and old castles. Feed him a bit of bull..." Peter trailed off.

"Just reporting what I've heard," the other replied with a twinkle in his eye.

"Well, if nothing else, it gives me something to look into" he thought to himself.

* * *

"Peter! Am I glad to hear you!" Sita said. "The Kincaids invited me to breakfast so I saw your cryptic message which we studied to pull every ounce of meaning from it. Then we heard about the raid on the B&B where Robert was staying last night. The news reports say he's in critical condition. Concussions, broken ribs, internal injuries."

"Yeah. Amazingly I saw it happen."

"Oh my God! You did!? I wondered how you could report on it before it ever appeared on any news media here. So where are you now?"

"I'm going to give you a number and have you call me back, from someone else's house. Okay? Here goes: Dooie, char, och, teen..."

"What's that? I'm not quite sure I ..." suddenly she realized he was speaking Bengali. "Um, I get it now, but please repeat."

It was fifteen minutes before the call came back.

"Peter! You amaze me! When did you learn Bengali?"

"Having ten words written down on a piece of paper is not learning Bengali. The only other option was French and I doubted that I would have stumped anyone for very long. I was really nervous that I might have pronounced them wrong and you would be calling Timbuktoo right about now."

Peter filled her in on his progress and then asked what she had learned.

"I can see why the police think it's an inside job. It sure looks like the bomber was targeting our computer hub. That's where our file servers are located as well as the bridges and switches that give us access both to each other and to the outside world. Now, there are two ways to look at that. The nationalists wanted to wreak havoc on a London-based firm and got real

lucky in their choice for planting the bomb. Or someone inside, trying to cover something up, bombed the lab and is trying to pin it on the nationalists."

"Any luck getting to your computer?"

"Not yet. But I'm working on a guy that is a building inspector. I'm going to head back down after this call and see if my evil little plan is working." They both laughed.

"He's doesn't know what he's up against," said Peter. "What about tomorrow, what kind of plans have you and your network of buddies cooked up for McBride's?"

"Mr. Leith has been on the phone all day, calling our biggest clients. A friend and I found some space at the printing factory that does most of the printing for our manuals. They have a couple spare offices where we can set up to do the most critical work. Mr. Leith has approved the idea and we have some of our technicians installing some rented equipment. It's been an exhausting weekend. But you know what? I'm kind of enjoying the challenge."

"I know what you mean. Well you be careful. Don't get yourself arrested for bribing a public official. I'll call again either early morning or else after work."

"I'm at my parents house. I could come back here for lunch tomorrow. Let me give you their number: our-fay, oo-tay, even-say."

Peter just about choked. "Sorry I don't speak pig latin," he laughed.

* * *

There was a direct way to Knock castle and a not so direct way. By road you had to cut up past a house on a short driveway. He stayed on the road trying to act like a tourist out for a hike. Just as he passed by the drive way he heard a dog bark. Nothing like announcing your entrance. Peter's other choice was to backtrack a bit, strike out across the scrub-like moors and come in by the beach. He found a point where a rise in the land hid him from the old castle walls and ventured out onto the scrub heading east to the water.

He had to skirt around some cows but soon found himself above a rocky beach. He dropped down to it, startling several oyster-catchers. The dark birds sqwacked and scurried away, their orange beaks never far from the sand, always seeking an opportunity to dine. Peter watched them for a moment then started making his way south, back to the castle.

He became aware of a number of prints in the sandy areas of the beach. It looked like there had been quite a bit of activity here. He could make out the scrapes of a boat keel high up on the beach. It hadn't rained for several days now, but the markings were starting to fade. He crouched down to inspect the various prints. They were all going either to or from the boat area in a single direction: Towards the castle. Pretty definitely three people, and one was a woman's sneaker. Peter got up and moved closed to the bank and bent over to inspect a clearer print of the sneaker.

A small crunching noise and a momentary shadow gave him a split second to react. He flattened to the ground as a dark-haired man swung a heavy piece of drift-wood, which made a thudding crack as it hit the rock embankment. It must have stung the man's arms and he staggered back a bit. Peter sprang straight from his flattened position into his assailant's abdomen. The man was a bit heavier than Peter but they were about the same size. His training had included Tai Chi, which he had mostly used for exercise and conditioning. But today it was going to have to serve him in a far greater capacity. He pulled back one arm and then let it shoot forward almost as if it had been released by a spring. He caught his assailant under the chin. At the same time his foot shot between the other man's legs. The man had nowhere to go but down. He grabbed some gravel and tried to throw it at Peter. It missed, but Peter had to leap to the side causing him to stumble on some loose rock. He turned his stumble into a roll and came back up on his feet as the other man was getting back on his own.

Flight was clearly out of the picture. He had to take this guy out if he was going to get to the bottom of this situation. Knock castle was definitely on his must see list. He charged the man but stopped abruptly two steps short, just as the man was throwing a punch. Thrown off balance, Peter easily grabbed his arm and had him somersaulting to the ground. The man lay still and Peter took a couple seconds to scope out his situation.

He pulled the shoelaces out the mans shoes and tied his wrists behind his back. He was at a loss for how to keep the man from being able to get up until he got the idea of taking his belt and looping it through his tied wrists and around a large piece of drift wood. The man was lying on his stomach. He angled the log over the body and set it on a rock so it wouldn't crush him.

He didn't have a lot of time for admiring his work. He found the man's tracks and followed them back to Knock castle. If his reading of the tracks were right, there was just a woman left to find.

* * *

When he reached the castle, it was like the men at the pub had said; a couple of walls, surrounded by nettles, and the hole of a window that looked out over the water. There was nothing remarkably disturbed here, except for signs that someone had climbed the wall. Probably as a look out. He must have missed something on his way up from the beach.

From above he looked down at the pattern made by the tracks on the beach. He had come up just a bit too soon. Most of the markings stopped about 10 feet further to his right. He started back down that way and then he saw it: A narrow crevice between two rocks. It looked like one of the rocks that formed the entrance might be moveable. Not wanting to take the chance that someone might shut him in, he took a moment to drag a heavy stone into the mouth of the crevice to make that more difficult.

From his rucksack he pulled a flashlight and ventured into the subterranean vault. This must have been the basement, maybe even the dungeon of the old castle. He found the small room

where his assailant must have been staying. There was a cot, a gas-lamp, a couple boxes, some food on a table.

"Comfortable enough," he thought.

But he didn't have much time for that. He pushed on farther down the hall and rounded a corner. There was a door with a large wooden brace holding it closed. Peter pulled the brace loose and hauled the door open. His light pierced the darkness of the room and lit up a figure on the floor.

There was a scream. It took a split second to realize what was going on and Peter reeled around and leaned against the door-frame with his back to the room. Marian was naked, only a clear plastic bag afforded her any warmth. There were no other furnishings, just some straw.

"Marian. It's me. Peter Lincoln," he called over his shoulder. He reached into his rucksack. "I'm afraid I've only got a pair of sweat pants and a tee shirt," he said tossing them through the door. "Do you need a light?"

There was a sob that could have meant yes or no. He pushed the light into the room. "I'm going out to the opening to keep watch. Get dressed fast and let's get out of here."

When Marian showed up at the opening she looked half mad. Her hair was matted, her face smeared with dirt and streaked with tears. Her hands were wrapped around under her arms and she was shivering.

"Here take my windbreaker," he said peeling off his coat. "We have got to get you somewhere safe. I'm going to take a look in the other guys room and see if any of your things might be there."

Marian lunged at Peter, Grabbing his arm. "Don't leave me. Let's just go. Please, Let's go."

It would have been easier with shoes. But he totally understood her fears. Besides he suddenly thought of a different pair of shoes they could make use of.

While Peter removed the guard's shoes and socks, Marian knelt by the water and splashed some water on her face. The guard was starting to stir and suddenly in a fit of anger, Peter took his pocket-knife and cut a slit from the man's pant waist to the inseam and dragged his pants and underwear off. The man yelped. He couldn't easily get to his shirt because of the log so he had to leave it at that.

"Sorry I don't have any plastic to give you. You'll have to find some other way to keep warm." Peter turned and saw Marian looking wide-eyed at him. He checked the man's pockets and pulled out his wallet. He flipped through it taking the man's drivers license and a small card with several numbers on it. He dropped the wallet back next to the man and tossed the ragged pants into the waves. "Let's go."

* * *

Marian still hadn't spoken since the one outburst at the opening to the dungeon. Peter had had her walk along the waterline, so the waves would quickly erase their tracks. When they were around a bend, they headed up the bank and onto the moor. Peter checked to make sure their tracks were sufficiently covered and they plodded slowly over the moor. The shoes barely stayed on Marian's feet, the laces were missing and they were much too big for her. But the ground was too unforgiving to try and walk on it barefoot.

"I've got an idea," Peter said. He pulled out his handkerchief and ripped several strips from it. "Maybe with my extra pair of socks and these as shoelaces, it will be more comfortable."

As she put on her makeshift footwear, Peter started to grapple with their next problem: Transportation and a safe place to stay. He worried that the guard might get loose or have friends near-by. The moor was not an easy place to hide in. He took a deep breath and let it out slowly and to himself he thought, "Don't panic."

He looked back at her. Her mouth was open as if to say something, but she just stared at him. He sat down next to her and swallowed. He didn't have the words to try and talk about the horror she must have been through. Should he try to comfort her? He took a chance and put a hand on her shoulder, but the only word that came out was, "Ready?"

She leaned against him, bringing a hand up to his shoulder. "Oh, Peter. When I heard you say your name back there in the dungeon, I was sure I was dreaming. I don't think I started to believe it was real until just a few moments ago."

Peter felt a tear well up in his own eye. "It's real, Marian and, if we can connect up with the right people, this will soon be over. Do you want to see a doctor?"

She shook her head.

"I'm not sure there's a police station at Isleornsay," Peter started, "but maybe in Broadford..."

"No! Not the police. I have an inkling of why I was kidnapped and it wasn't just for money. If the police find me ..." she paused. "No, I won't spend any more time trapped like ... that."

Peter had a picture of the detective in Mallaig bending over Robert Cameron. No compassion in his actions. She shouldn't have to suffer that. Narrowing the options helped him make some plans.

"Then let's get started. We'll hitch or catch the bus to Kyleakin where we can take the ferry over to the mainland. I don't think Mallaig is safe." He liked having a plan, thin as it might be. "We'll need to come up with some disguise before we hit the road."

"We can spend the night in Dornie," Marian said, "I have an old friend who lives there, she just had a baby. But I think they could put us up for a night."

"Baby? H'mm that's giving me an idea!" He exclaimed. "We could use my rucksack to make you look pregnant. Tie your hair up in some kind of scarf. And bob's your uncle, we are a couple who are heading to the mainland for a medical appointment."

* * *

To the careful eye, it might have been a stretch to believe she was pregnant. But with an arm in the middle of the back and a bit of acting they pulled it off. It took two rides and each time they were standing on the side of the road their tension mounted. The second ride was with a couple of German tourists staying on the Island who were going to see Eilean Donan castle. That would take them across the ferry and put them in the relative safety of Dornie.

While waiting for the ferry, they were parked near a phone booth. Peter got out and made a couple quick phone calls. One to the Inn at Ornsay, where he told the barman that there had been some trouble at Knock castle and he should call the local constable and tell him to look for a guy on the beach. Now that they were relatively safe, he didn't want the guard stranded there. Especially if the tide was coming in. The second call was to Sita's parents.

"Hold on," Mrs. Kumar said, "Sita is here for supper."

"Hey Sita! Wow, I'm glad you were there. I can't talk long, but tell the Kincaids that I found Marian and she's with me."

"Oh my God, That's great! You did it," Sita cheered. "And I managed to get my computer about an hour ago. I just need to set it up in the morning."

"I knew you could do it! I hope the building inspector is still in one piece," Peter replied. "Look, Marian's a little shook up right now and I should get back to her, but we're leaving Skye and will be home as soon as possible. I'll call if anything comes up."

As Peter stepped from the phone both a uniformed policeman greeted him. "Excuse me sir, Just making some routine checks. May I see some ID please."

"Aye," said Peter. He wasn't ready to pull off a Scottish accent, so he would keep his comments terse. He pulled out the driver's license of the guard from Knock castle. There wasn't a photo and the description could be Peter, at least the dark hair, dark eyes and height of 5 ft 10, give or take a bit. He thought about his family and let that keep him relaxed.

"Thank you, Mr. Orrin," the policeman said, handing back the card.

Peter nodded and stuffed the license back into his pocket. Getting back to the car, he smiled at Marian. No sense worrying her with details. Besides the boat was ready for boarding and they'd soon be off the island.

About a half mile before Dornie, Marian told the couple that her doctor lived in one of the private houses, waving vaguely at a couple houses along the road. They got out and waved to the couple as they drove off.

"We've got about a half mile to go," Marian said indicating a small road that lead off towards what looked like an inlet or lake.

Once out of sight of the main road, Marian removed the rucksack. They hadn't been able to talk about what mattered most to them during the rides. But the very fact that they hadn't been able to say much more than "How are you doing, honey?" and "Don't worry, I'll be fine." for the last couple hours had helped Marian regain some composure. The one time she had started to cry, it just fit right into the act.

"How well do you know this person?" asked Peter. "Your parents became alarmed when the police showed them pictures of you at a protest rally. They think the police could be monitoring your home phone and maybe even your friends."

"Why didn't you tell me sooner!" cried Marian. "I don't want to put Allison at risk." she turned as if to run.

"Whoa. Hang on. I agree we should be careful. How about this: That house ahead has a B&B sign in the window. We can stay here for the night. Once we're settled in, I'll go get you some clothes.

They were met at the door by a middle-aged woman. She looked a bit leery of them at first, but Peter's smile and explanation of a hike while nodding his head towards a valley across the loch, quickly eased any apprehension she might have had.

"Ach, it looks as if you've walked yourself ragged!" she said, her voice was gentle. "Come in, My name's Mrs. Frazier. I'll fix you a pot of tea while your cleaning up. The young missus could use a good soak I imagine."

* * *

Once in their room, they sat for a moment on the end of the bed. It felt like the first time that day that they could relax. At least for a short while.

"So how did you find me?" asked Marian, "I go between thinking of the black horror and then that sudden shaft of light and your voice."

He told her about hearing of the bombing; talking to her parents; Robert's capture in Mallaig, a story that seemed to shake her; then finding the boat and its clue that sent him to Isleornsay and ultimately to Knock castle.

"You scared me for a minute there on the beach. I thought you might kill Donald, the guard. But at that point I was still thinking it might be a dream and I wondered why I had conjured you up as my savior." She smiled at him, "No offense."

Peter shrugged. "No big. But go ahead and take a bath. Relax a while. And then I'm dying to hear your story. You said you had some inkling of why you were kidnapped, and that intrigues me."

She came back about 15 minutes later, with her hair wrapped in a towel. Having nothing else, she was still wearing Peter's tee-shirt and sweat pants. But she looked better.

The proprietress knocked. "I've got your tea. I imagine, you would like to have it in your room."

Peter opened the door and Mrs. Frazier brought in a small folding table with a pot of tea, two cups and a plate of cookies.

"Oh, you're a saint, Mrs. Frazier," sighed Peter. "One other thing. Is there somewhere I could buy my wife some clothes? Most of hers were stolen a few days ago."

"Aye, there's a Mace store in town. Not much to choose from, but you can get something there. But tell you what, I have some clothes that don't fit anymore, and I'm starting to believe that they never will. Let me see if I can't find you something, so you don't have to go out tonight."

When she left the room, Marian turned to Peter. "You sure let the word 'wife' roll off your tongue pretty easy."

"All in a day's work, ma'am," he said.

Mrs. Frazier came back with a pair of khaki pants and a flower print blouse. She also had an old pair of blue cloth loafers.

"I noticed that pair of boots you were trying to walk in. See if these fit you," she said. "And now you'll be fit for polite company."

They thanked her and Mrs. Frazier left the room, closing the door behind her. Marian turned to Peter. "The kindness of strangers," she said with a tear streaming down her cheek.

* * *

There was a small TV in their room and they turned it on softly to help disguise their conversation. They sat cross-legged on the bed, sipping the last couple mouthfuls of tea. From his rucksack, Peter produced an apple and some cheese which they split.

"So what happened," Peter asked, "Were you separated from Robert, or was he part of the kidnapping?"

"He was in it deep. I'm not sure where the beginning of this story even is, but here goes. I think you know that Robert and I used to be a couple. We were both strongly in favor of Scottish independence and attended a number of rallies and demonstrations. Robert's involvement became more intense and he would talk about violence and revolution. I was still in the 'vote the bastards out' camp, and our differences on such a huge part of our lives finally drove us to break up a couple months ago."

"That makes a good beginning. Go on."

"Here's where a whole bunch starts to run together. His separatist group had been talking about a bombing. Being his former girlfriend, the group's leader thought I might be a threat to all of them. Especially once they decided to target McBride's. The group leader convinced Robert that he had to find a way to get me out of the picture. So Robert started trying to show me how he had changed. He'd quit the group he claimed. I took the bait; hook, line and sinker. He proposed this little trip. Totally platonic, he said. Let's just see if we can't get back what we once had, he said" She looked up defiantly, as if expecting some form of scorn.

"The night I saw you and Robert at McBride's, you touched his shoulder, and I wondered why I saw him flinch. I've mulled that over several times, but now it makes sense to me. He knew what was coming and he was feeling guilty."

"I didn't notice that. But almost as soon as we were on the boat, I sensed he was distracted. Then the morning we checked out of the Inn. The plan was to get out by 8 or 8:30 and he kept hemming and hawing. First we had to go buy some salmon eggs, then write a postcard and take it to the post office. I think he wanted to be sure I was seen coming and going by as many people as possible. Maybe he wanted to make me look agitated and a bit nervous, so that people could be persuaded that I was the mad bomber. Because that is what I was being set up for."

"But you were kidnapped? How were they going to make you the bomber?"

"Fairly simply. Let me go stir crazy in that hell-hole and deliver a raving mad woman to the police. Just the kind of person who could bomb buildings. From the few scraps of conversation I heard, Robert was to go back with a story that would make him look innocent and keep suspicion aimed at me. But your story about Robert being captured at Mallaig concerns me. I was thinking about what that could mean while taking my bath."

"Any conclusions?"

"The person who masterminded the bombing doesn't want either of us around. He must have tipped off the detective to Robert's whereabouts, maybe to keep the location of the dungeon under wraps for as long as possible, he just told the cop that there were two of us. It's very possible that he didn't know the location of the dungeon."

"Plausible. Any guesses on the mastermind."

"Almost certain," she said. "And where we might catch him."

Peter was startled at the matter of fact way she announced this. "Who? And how?"

"I don't think McBride's was chosen as a bombing target by chance, I think the group that did it was paid to do it. Paid by Mr. Leith who is trying to cover up a bungled translation job. After the bombing he gets sympathy, he gets time, and it's the nationalist group that gets the blame. I heard a few snatches of conversation and had two days of solitude to work this out."

"And you said you think you know where we might find him?"

"Well, he'll be in the limelight in Edinburgh. But the rest of the group that Robert belonged to, had a rendezvous spot in the hills above Loch Ness. An old lodge that has been closed up for several years. It's a likely spot for a pay-off."

"This is news I should get to Sita and your parents! It's late now, but in the morning we'll get another message off to them."

They turned off the lights and got under the covers. Peter did his gentlemanly best to give Marian her privacy and lots of room. He tucked a hand under his pillow and his thoughts raced over the events of the day, the darkness of the room lulling him to sleep. As he drifted off he heard Marian shift slightly and whisper, "Thank you, Peter."

* * *

After breakfast they asked Mrs. Frazier about bus schedules. They had their choice of a bus north to Stromferry, where they could pick up a train to Inverness or a bus south to Invermorison on Loch Ness, where they could catch another bus to Fort William or Inverness. They figured they'd grab which ever bus came first.

Mrs. Frazier had fixed them each a bag lunch, with a sandwich and a few carrots. She also gave them an old plastic bottle and filled it with water.

"We owe you more than we could ever repay you, Mrs. Frazier," said Marian, and she gave her a quick hug.

They walked into town and finding a restaurant near the bus terminal decided it would be safer to wait inside. Breakfast had only been an hour before, but they could have some tea to pass the time.

They sat talking quietly together, weighing the merits of Inverness over Fort William. They were leaning towards Inverness as it seemed less direct and therefore less likely that anyone would expect them to go there.

Peter looked up, as he had done several times, checking for the bus. Two police cars went by.

"Been some trouble in town?" he asked the waiter in his usual friendly manner. "Or is there some sort of convention going on?"

"Aye. They've been asking everyone if they've seen any strangers in town. People are saying it's got something to do with that bombing in Edinburgh."

"They still haven't caught those guys?" asked Peter. "But, say! Being an American, do you think that makes me a stranger?"

The man laughed. "If that makes you a stranger, then this town is crowded with them. But I hear they are setting up road blocks and checking the buses, so your bus will probably be a bit late in pulling out."

"Just our luck," Peter sighed. "But we're on vacation. No schedules tying us down this week."

He turned to Marian. "Well, Honey. Shall we go buy a magazine or something to keep us occupied."

In her best American accent she replied. "Okie doke."

* * *

"That's a pretty admirable gift you have there, Mr. Lincoln," Marian said as they walked the small side street towards the town center. "I'm quite sure that guy would have been your best friend if you'd talked for a few more minutes. You're relaxed, friendly, words just flow out. And yet I know that all the while your brain is focused on the objective of getting us away safe."

"Thank you, Mrs. Lincoln," Peter replied. "And may I say, that after your harrowing ordeal, I commend you for the amazing strength you have displayed."

She gave him a quizzical look. "There you go again with that 'wife' and 'Mrs. Lincoln' stuff."

Peter slowed down. He turned nodding toward a shop on his right. Under his breath he said, "There's a policeman on the left hand side of the road. He is wearing a black overcoat. Do not look in his direction. I saw him before in Mallaig. We do not want to raise his suspicions."

Peter slipped his arm around her, letting his shoulder partially block her head. He turned so that they were looking into the window. Peter held his breath and used the reflection of the window to keep track of what the detective was up to. Seeing him glance their way, he leaned and gave her a husbandly kiss on the top of her head. He felt her stiffen slightly, but she understood and raised her arm up around his waist.

Another woman and a dog were walking by the inspector and when he turned his attention to them, Peter started walking again. They came to a corner and headed downhill towards the waterfront.

"If we can't take the bus out of town, we may have to hike out," said Marian.

"That's not a bad idea. But right now we have got to find a place to hide," Peter said. "We are not going to make it out of town by any easy means this morning."

They arrived at the waterfront without incident and began looking for something to use as a hiding place. They stayed up close to a sea wall to stay out of view and walked towards a grove of evergreens at the far end.

"Here. Sit on this boat and I'll pretend to take a picture of you. You tell me what you see in one direction and I'll scope out the other. We don't want any snoopy eyes seeing where we are going."

Peter reached into his pocket and took out his wallet and held it up to his eyes. Marian smiled in spite of her worry and sat on the boat. They decided that they weren't being watched and walked up into the trees. The grove was pretty thick and the thick bed of needles afforded them a comfortable place to sit.

Peter pulled out a card from his pocket. "Huh. I'd forgotten about this card I'd found in the guard's pocket. I just noticed it when I pulled out my wallet."

"What is it? Looks like a business card from here."

"It is. But on the back are letters n,o,c and their morse code equivalent: Dash dot; dash dash dash; dash dot dash dot. Those are the same letters I found on the napkin. Do you think this could have been their code to say 'all systems go'?"

"That could be. Robert was fooling with the searchlight just before we landed there by that castle crag..." Marian took a breath. "Let's talk about something else."

After about an hour Peter crept to a spot where he could get a view of the main road through Dornie. A line of cars indicated a roadblock had been set up and they were checking everyone.

"Its going to be a long day," thought Peter.

* * *

About 7:30 pm they decided to take the chance of leaving their hideout. The ever-changing plan was now to get to her friend Allison's house and see if she could help them get out of town. They'd been sketching out the plan almost all day long. A glen across the loch from her house met up with a track that would take them to Loch Affric. From there they could probably hitch a ride to Inverness. But they couldn't travel without any provisions

They skirted along the water's edge, finally coming out just below the main road a few hundred yards from the road, which passed their B&B and would take them to Allison's. A couple young boys were packing up some fishing gear. And Peter offered them each a couple pounds if they would walk with them and let them carry some of the fishing tackle.

It wasn't a big disguise, and perhaps a bit risky if the boys talked about it later, but anything to keep them from looking like strangers to the watchful eye of the police was what Peter was after.

Once they got out of sight of the main road, they thanked the boys, and went on alone. Allison and her husband's house was about half a mile down and just before they got there Peter told Marian to stay hidden in some trees while he went on to investigate the situation.

Reaching the door, Peter knocked. A pretty, red-haired woman holding a baby answered the door. A tall dark-haired man came up behind her when he saw Peter.

"Are you busy? Did I catch you at supper or with guests?" Peter asked.

"The Bed and Breakfast is back down the road. We don't have any room here," The man said. "Not since the baby anyway."

"I'm a friend of a friend," Peter started. "She could use your help. But we need to be very careful."

"Are you talking about Marian? We saw in the news that she is wanted in connection with that bombing. Is she here? Is she okay?"

"She's fine. Have the police contacted you?" Peter asked. "Are any of them still around?"

"They were by this afternoon. But they just asked if they could look in our barn," Allison replied, "But please, don't just stand here on the porch, come in."

"If it's safe then I should go get Marian." He ran back down the road and told her it was clear. They hurried back to the house where they drank a cup of hot tea and hammered out the details of their escape from Dornie.

* * *

Being so far north there was still quite a bit of light in the sky, but both Peter and Marian felt they should start right away. If those two boys said anything it wouldn't take too long for word to spread. They just needed two days supply of food, a couple blankets, better shoes for Marian, if possible, and a map.

Allison and her husband Mark offered them an improvement on their plan: Horses. They had a paddock on the far side of the loch where they kept a couple horses and were tending a couple more for a friend. Mark would drive around, easily getting by any roadblocks, while Marian and Peter took a boat across the loch. Mark would accompany them for the first night, then bring the horses back. That would leave them with about 8 to 10 miles to hike on foot.

Plans set, they put them into action immediately. Mark left to saddle the horses. Allison found an old rucksack for Marian and they divided up the food and each took a blanket. Allison had a pair of sneakers that fit Marian pretty well and they decided that would have to do.

Dusk was settling in on the loch as they slipped the boat into the water. Peter turned to Allison. "One final favor? Could you call Sita's parents and have them relay the message that we're still safe and we'll call from Inverness? Also tell them that they should be wary of Leith." He handed her a copy of their phone number.

They could hear a car crunching its way up the stone roadway. They were not interested in finding out who it was. Peter fit the oars into the oarlocks and with a couple strokes had them well out from shore. It wasn't a wide loch, so their only concern was avoiding drawing undue attention to themselves.

A thin mist was developing over the loch and it gave the receding shoreline a dreamlike quality. A few bats were wheeling overhead collecting their nightly supply of insects. Knowing how voices carry over water, they traveled in silence. Though Marian did lean forward and tapped his knee, pointing out Eilean Donan castle as it came into view, shrouded in the mist, seemingly rising from the loch.

He felt goosebumps rise on his arms. It was a beautiful sight. But maybe it was equally inspired by Marian's casual touch. He mouthed "Whoa!" and started rowing again.

Mark and Allison had given them some landmarks for orientation, so on reaching the other side, Peter figured out where he was and then skirted the shore until they came to the small dock where they were to tie up the boat. Mark was there to greet them.

"Sure enough. They are still stopping cars down in Dornie. Hope that doesn't last much longer!" said Mark. "The horses are across the road, let's get started."

The horses snorted as they swung into the saddles. The three riders picked their way on a tiny track along a small, rock-strewn stream leading to the pass at the top of the glen. They stopped and looked back briefly at the lights of Dornie and Skye and then started down the other side. Mark had ridden this trail several times and he easily got them to the Glen Affric trail. By midnight they were at a three-sided camping shelter on the edge of a small loch.

As they let the horses drink some water and wiped them down with a towel, Marian and Mark got into a discussion of the Independence movement and weighed the pros and cons of different parliamentary systems. Even after his studies the week before, Peter felt totally unable to participate in the conversation. It probably would be easier to speak Bengali with Sita. He contented himself to listening and learning.

Finished with the horses, they rolled up in their blankets under the shelter and used their rucksacks for pillows. Peter listened to the gentle sounds of the horses shifting about and hoped that Inverness might be the end of their running.

* * *

Peter was the first one up in the morning. He went down to the shore of the loch and splashed some water on his face. He could see the ripples of fish rising to the surface. He rocked back on his heels reflecting on the fear that was sending them on this long march and the beauty it was letting him see.

He heard the other two stirring and went back to see if they were ready for some breakfast. Marian was yawning and, seeing Peter, gave him a sleepy smile. Peter smiled back and thought, "Yup. And the beauty it's letting me see."

"What's on the menu, Mr. Lincoln?" she asked him.

"Well we don't have a microwave for the quiche. Will bread, some fruit and a thermos of coffee be acceptable, my dove?"

After breakfast, Mark took the horses and started back for Dornie and the young fugitives shouldered their packs and began the next leg of their trip. The way headed down from the loch. They had several miles through open country side, but for at least half the way they would be in forested terrain.

* * *

By mid-morning they'd covered about 2 miles. Peter had stopped a couple times to inspect different flowers. Marian called one of them a bog-cotton, it had a white tuft atop a stem. The other Peter recognized from his pouring over the wild flower book as a Monkey flower: A small yellow flower that liked moist areas.

A thumping noise suddenly caught Peter's attention. It was a helicopter, they only had seconds to react.

"Get down as close to the ground as possible, and don't move a muscle!" He shouted. "Movement or our shadows are what they can detect most easily from the air. We need to project the shadow of a rock or shrub."

They both sat down and hugged their legs.

"If they miss us on this pass, I think they will make a second pass in the opposite direction. Once they are out of sight, get behind that rock and stay down. Wait for my signal."

The helicopter thundered over the ridge and raced over their heads. From the corner of his eye, Peter could see the insignia of the police on the side of the helicopter as it passed over them and continued up the trail. In less than a minute it was obscured by the shoulder of a hill.

"Go!" shouted Peter.

Marian sprinted for the boulder, while Peter scrambled behind a low shrub. He grabbed onto the spindly trunk and mentally tried to become one with the bush.

Sure enough the sound of the helicopter rotors were heading back their way. Peter hoped they wouldn't keep this up all day. His guess was that the police would expect them to be farther away by now and this sweep of the helicopter was just a precautionary measure on their part. The other possibility was that the police had gotten the information from Allison or from a tapped phone. Then they were in for a rough couple miles until they reached the forest.

The helicopter swept over them and back over the ridge. The sounds and whirlwinds that it caused died away.

"Okay," said Peter. "Let's go, but be ready to stop and drop into a crouch at a moments notice. If you're near a tree or rock, try to use it as a shield."

"I can't believe it!" exclaimed Marian, as she got up and hurried over to Peter. "We are on open ground and we escaped being seen!"

"We fooled them. But I would, like, feel so much better if we had a bit more cover to protect us."

"Peter. I don't think my parents know how good an investigator and bodyguard they hired."

Peter's heart soared at such praise. "Wow! No pay could ever match what you just said ... Um, I mean, Thanks."

* * *

They heard the copter a couple more times, and they dropped into position each time, but it seemed to be sweeping neighboring valleys and never came overhead again. As they entered a wooded pathway Peter finally felt once again like he could breath easily. They picked a sheltered spot and stopped for lunch.

As they sat eating the cheese and dried fruit, Peter worked up his courage to talk about something that had been on his mind, in one form or another, for a long time, probably since he saw her at McBride's.

"You know how I've gotten pretty tongue-tied, especially at first, when I tried to talk to you? Well I just wanted you to know that... Okay, so what I am trying to say is that..."

"Is this another tongue-tied conversation?" Marian smiled.

"Kinda. You see, I would have come searching for you without your parents asking. In fact I guess I kind of asked them. I think you are really nice, you have a strong character, you like doing outdoor kinds of things..."

"Oh Peter! I'm really flattered and I owe you my life. Literally. And if you're trying to say you like me. Well that is obvious, and I like you too, but..."

Peter didn't want to hear what was going to follow that "but" and he hurried to divert the need for finishing the line. "I just was trying to say that ruling out the scary bits, I've really enjoyed having this time to get to know you. And see so much of Scotland as well!"

She laughed. "Ruling out the scary bits, I've enjoyed it too."

Thinking about it, Peter realized that one of the scariest bits for him had been starting that conversation.

* * *

Around mid-afternoon they figured that they were nearing Affric Lodge, where they hoped to find a day hiker who might give them a ride. They had been skirting Loch Affric on a well worn trail for a couple miles. There had been no sign of the helicopters since lunch, but they both felt a bit of apprehension about who they might meet along the trail.

"If they are young, say college age or maybe a retired couple, I think we'll be fine," Peter said, partially trying to work it out in his own mind. "Anyone else and I think we should proceed with extreme caution."

"And if we don't see anyone?" Marian said, half teasingly. "We haven't seen anyone yet."

"It's called a lodge. Don't people come out to it? Like just for a drive?"

"Guess we'll find out. If not, I suppose we keep walking."

A minute later their conversation became academic. Through the trees they saw two men, wearing light packs and dark blue suits. A third person was a bit further back. They also detected the squawk and crackle of a walkie-talkie.

"We've got one chance," cried Peter. "Head for the water. If they haven't seen us, we've got a minute before they'll be here."

They had a couple hundred yards to cover and not much to hide them. They came to a small hummock about half way there. And on a signal from Peter, they both dropped to their stomachs behind it. Peter was running out of ideas. He could only hope for luck. He couldn't fight the police. That would be a one-way ticket back to America. Helping a friend couldn't be such a grand offence. He figured that someone could bail him out of that small bending of the rules.

He heard the crunch of the men's boots stop on the trail above them. They looked at each other silently, each praying that the sound of their boots would begin again and fade into the distance.

"You head for the water and skirt the water's edge to the lodge," Peter whispered. "Give me a few seconds, and I'll lead them off in the opposite direction."

Marian was shaking her head to say no, when they heard a voice call out:

Peter! Marian! It's me Sita!"

Peter experienced the same feeling that Marian had back in the dungeon: Is this a dream? He looked at Marian. Neither was ready to believe their ears.

"And your Dad, Marian!" boomed the voice of her father. "There is a policeman with us, if that's what scared you, but it's cousin George. The police know you weren't involved in the bombing."

"Dad?" said Marian, standing up. "George?"

"Sita?" said Peter following suit.

The four ran to each other and practically jumped into each other's arms. Sita slipped dragging Peter to the ground with her. The four started laughing, as much from relief as anything else.

"Great!" laughed Peter, "Four days and hundreds of miles, several escapes and I'm brought down by my own friends!"

"I told you I'm not meant to be out in the wilderness," she quipped.

He got up and dusted himself off. He and Marian looked at each other.

"Thank you, Peter! You've been grand!" she said, and they too, gave each other a hug.

George Kincaid was still standing back up on the trail watching them. "Everyone's all right?" he asked.

* * *

Driving back to Inverness where George had picked up Ian Kincaid and Sita from the train station, they filled each other in on the details of the last few days.

The big news was that Sita had found evidence to support Marian's statement that Mr. Leith had been involved in planning the bombing. She took the evidence to the Kincaids who called their cousin in Inverness to help them get the evidence to the proper authorities.

The most incriminating item was a fax that Robert had sent to Leith. Usually there wouldn't be a record of the fax, but Robert had used a multi-function machine that also could be used as a scanner, printer and copier.

"You know how I was investigating all the errors we were having in our network connection from London? Well, turns out that this screwy machine was our main problem. It really wasn't meant to be on a network. We've lost hours and hours in down time to that foolish device."

"But how did that help you find this fax?" asked Peter.

"Each time it failed, it would cache a copy of the fax onto the server for sending later. When I was reviewing the diagnostic reports, the header portion caught my attention since it listed Robert and Mr. Leith. Robert never seemed to have anything to do with Leith and I was just curious. Well the fax was a diagram of the McBride's office with the computer lab pointed out."

"So was Robert the person who planted the bomb?" said Peter, "Or was it Mr. Leith?"

"Almost definitely not Mr. Leith. He was in London. But the police are trying to see if he has transferred any money recently," said Mr. Kincaid. "It seems to have been a group effort based on some tips the police received. But only Leith and Robert have been caught"

"Well I can tell you without a doubt it was a group effort!" said Marian. "And I think I can tell you exactly where they can be caught."

"At that lodge above Loch Ness you were telling me about?" asked Peter.

"Exactly," replied Marian.

* * *

Early the next morning in Inverness, Marian and Peter were asked to meet with the Bomb investigation team. The team had flown up from Edinburgh once they had heard of Marian's information about the group's possible whereabouts. Sita and Ian accompanied them to the meeting.

Peter recognized the head inspector. He was the same man he had seen in Mallaig, leaning over Robert Cameron and again in Dornie, when they had escaped him by acting the young married couple.

The inspector introduced himself as Galloway. He looked at Peter, recognition seeping in slowly. "Haven't we met before?" he asked. Then he snapped his fingers. "Dornie! That was you and the girl in Dornie!"

"The name is Marian," she said with a bit of heat.

"Oh yeah. Sorry. I guess I'm still thinking of you as the quarry." An apology came hard from the determined inspector. "But I have to give you credit, Lincoln. You walked right under my nose. Not a lot of people have gotten away with that. I didn't think anyone could get out of Dornie without me knowing it."

"Well, I'm amazed that you tracked us to the Glen Affric trail." Peter paid compliment with compliment. "I've got to give your boys credit. The helicopter caught us out in the open"

"But they didn't report seeing you? Were you wearing camouflage gear? Or were those fly-boys just blind."

"Nope. They simply pretended they were rocks," said Sita with more than a touch of pride in her voice. That brought a few quizzical looks. While Marian picked up the story and explained Peter's trick that had kept them virtually invisible, Peter continued his quizzical look at Sita.

"The funny thing is," said Sita. "Is that they were looking for you because we had learned about Mr. Leith. Once the police confirmed they no longer considered you a suspect, we told

them where we thought you were. You weren't being hunted as an outlaw, but to bring you home. When the copter couldn't find you, we decided to try hiking."

"Then there is the issue of a man found on a beach on Skye. He was missing his trousers and in a rather compromising position," Galloway said. Peter raised his eyebrows, as if to say 'intriguing'. "Local constable told us he'd gotten a tip and found the man. He was in such a hurry to get some clothes he led the constable to an abandoned cellar. I wish they'd held the man. We heard about him last night and got a team over there. Finding Ms. Kincaid's belongings and that back room helped us establish what really happened."

Sita and Marian's father had heard about her ordeal and Peter's part in saving her. At the mention of the backroom by the gruff inspector, they looked at Marian to see how she would react. She noticed and smiled.

"I won't forget that black room very soon, but I think these past couple days, having to fend for myself -- well ourselves, really -- has helped me avoid dwelling on that part of the ordeal. As much as I wanted to be home and safe, this trip helped me get my sanity back."

"Now what about this raid on Stronlarig Lodge?" asked Peter. "I'd like to offer my services to help your team track the last of the gang."

"Kid," said the inspector, "You proved that you can think on your feet. But this is a police operation. The service we need from you is all the information you and your friends can give us regarding these men and their whereabouts."

Peter resolved to find a way to get in on the hunt, but kept it to himself.

"Okay. So you have some names for us?" The man's bulldog efforts were not winning him friends. The people he was looking for had kidnapped Marian and blown up a building, an act which they were preparing to frame her for doing. But there was still the patriot in Marian that didn't want to have this unfeeling policeman just come in and start ordering them all around.

"I'll tell you what," Marian said somewhat imperiously. "I'll tell Peter where and who to look for and you can try to keep up with him!"

Galloway's face turned red. His eyes flashed with an angry spark. "You don't want to cross me. This is not some game; but if you think it is, you won't win! The law looks very dimly on blackmailers."

George Kincaid helped break the tension. As a local policeman he had been assigned to help the investigation team get what they needed from local agencies. "The law does not look dimly on a citizen volunteering his efforts. Especially one who is going to school for law enforcement. We can clear this up right now by agreeing to that one small request. Peter helps us get to the hideout, we do the arresting."

The deal was struck and the team prepared to head out for the mission. Peter made one suggestion. He felt in a bit of an awkward position, but if he was going along, then he was going to do more than just fill a seat.

"I think that at least some of us should be dressed casually. A mix of a couple of the women officers and male officers in hiking garb would allow us to get a lot closer than a team of dark jump-suited officers."

One of the women officers backed him up. "It's a good idea, boss. We have a couple of us go in as pony trekkers, maybe even continue past the hideout, and we've got the blokes in a hammerlock."

To his credit, Galloway had put aside his anger almost as fast as it had flared. "Agreed. Patricia and Helen, why don't you go with Officer Kincaid and Lincoln and get your pony patrol underway. Give us a signal when you're in position."

As they were leaving the station, Ian Kincaid clapped Peter on the shoulder. "Good luck, son. We'll see you back in Edinburgh."

Peter turned to Marian. "You really stuck your neck out for me back there. Thanks a bunch!" He leaned over and gave her a quick kiss on the cheek. "I'll see you all soon."

"What about me?" asked Sita. "Haven't I done something commendable?"

"Oh yeah. Thanks for knocking me down the other day," he laughed and kissed her on the cheek as well.

This year in Scotland was stacking up to be a pretty great deal. That is, if University didn't start getting in the way.

* * *

In the town of Whitebridge, they found a pony trekking outfit and arranged the use of 4 horses and a carrying van to get them closer to the trailhead.

As they drove up the glen, Peter turned to the others and asked, "Any chance that Galloway is going to storm in before we get there. Go in with helicopters or something?"

"Oh, go easy on the boss," said Patricia, shaking her curly, red hair. "He's a cold-blooded and ruthless policeman, but he recognizes a good plan when we propose it. And, besides, bottom line, he wants to get these guys."

Arriving at a turnout in the road, they parked the van and unloaded the horses. Peter's horse was a golden color with a white patch on his face. He checked the buckles, pulled out a faded baseball cap and swung up into the saddle. "Com'on Pardners, ah'm mighty anxious to git on up the trail a piece," he said in his best western drawl.

They only had about a mile to ride. They came to a small wooden bridge with a few sheep grazing in the rocky fields around it. There were several unpainted buildings as well as the old white lodge.

According to Marian there were at least three men who could be here. The man called Donald, who had been guarding her at Knock castle; a man named Gordon, who Marian had met at several rallies and was leader of the group of rebels; and then there was a third who Marian didn't know but who had been involved in her capture. His accent was more Yorkshire than Scottish and his manner had made him seem like a newcomer to the group. The other lead she gave them was she thought the hideout was in a barn.

Keeping their best tourist faces on, they oohed and ahed as they passed the buildings, but kept a steady, unhurried pace. Just a bunch of trekkers out enjoying the high country. Peter was keeping one eye on the ground looking for signs of people. They kept any important comments to themselves to make sure no one heard them discussing the lay of the land. Once they got further up the trail behind a ridge of trees and into a clearing, they stopped and pulled out canteens. As they drank they compared notes.

They were pretty unanimous in their decision that a building sitting next to a wooded area was the likely candidate for the barn that Marian had heard her abductors mention. It would afford them a pretty easy escape route into the trees, if that was necessary, and it also afforded a pretty good view down the valley. The four of them had probably been watched for the last half mile. There were also traces of tire tracks, probably from a couple motorcycles, but it was hard to tell where they came from or went to.

Peter looked around. "Where does this glen lead? Could they get over that pass easily on motorcycles?"

"Easily enough, I suppose," replied George. "It might be a tad steep on the other side, but it leads down to some landrover tracks. From there you could get to the A9 and down to Edinburgh just as pretty as you please. Are you thinking that's how they came in?"

"Um, no. More how they might try to escape."

Helen had the cell phone and she made a call to the other group. They said they were about 10 minutes away and that the trekkers should get into position in the trees behind the target.

They decided that just in case the men got through the first line, they should have someone as back up. Leaving Patricia with the horses, the other three snuck up into the wooded area behind the barn. They found a well-beaten trail that had almost certainly been made by the men to make escape easier. They took up positions on either side of it.

Peter leaned against a tree as he crouched down and noticed it move. He looked up and noticed it was dead. He started to move away from it so that he wouldn't cause it to fall and alert their quarry. But then he got another idea, and promised himself to be extra careful.

George Kincaid was at a higher spot that looked out over the barn. He gave a short hissing noise. "I can see the other agents they're advancing up the road," He whispered. "They're dressed like hunters, but I don't think they are going to be fooling anyone too long with those automatic weapons."

A minute later there was a shout from within the barn, followed by the sound of a single gunshot. The barn fell silent for another minute. At the sound of gunfire the agents started sprinting up the road, trying to get into firing range and find cover.

Suddenly a back panel of the barn dropped to the ground and two men raced out on knobby-tired motorcycles.

* * *

The mufflers crackled in a noisy staccato as they roared up the trail. Peter jumped to his feet and leaned against the dead tree. It leaned, making a cracking noise, but didn't break free. Peter threw his back into it a second time, just as the first rider shot by. This time the tree snapped and dropped with a whoosh into the path.

The second rider was caught off guard. The tree caught the bike just above mid tire and sent the man over the handlebars. The rider seemed to have had some experience at off-road biking or else fear of being caught gave him a shot of adrenaline that kept him going. He was able to roll back onto his feet and without missing a stride, start running.

Helen was calling in the status, Kincaid was moving cautiously towards the barn. That left it up to Peter and Patricia to deal with the two fleeing men. Peter hauled up the bike and gave it a quick look over. The handlebars were a bit crooked and the headlight smashed, but it would still run. The impact had caused the tree to break, so Peter was able to easily get it over the obstacle. He jumped on the kick-start and the bike roared to life.

Peter came out of the wood and into the clearing where Patricia and the horses were. The man who had been fleeing on foot was on the ground and being handcuffed by Patricia. Peter pulled up to find out what she could tell him.

"I guess this guy thought I'd be a push over and that he could take one of our horses," Patricia said, pulling off the man's motorcycle helmet and handing it to Peter. "He didn't figure on meeting a well-trained police agent."

Peter looked down at the captive. It was Donald. Once more on his back with his hands bound. He could almost feel sorry for him. At least this time he still had his pants on.

"The other guy is heading up the path. Be careful. It is pretty rocky and he looks like he's had a lot of practice. I'll get one of the others and we'll back you up on horse."

Peter nodded and started slowly up the trail, gaining speed as he gained confidence. He had a pretty good clue to the man's position; a thin cloud of dust thrown up by the tires was a pretty good indicator.

He popped up over a ridge. The stream that paralleled the path widened out into a small loch, surrounded by a wonderful green moor. His quarry wasn't too far ahead; he had stopped. Maybe waiting for Donald. Peter was suddenly struck by two competing thoughts: With his helmet on he might be able to fool the other guy, but once he caught up with him, what was he suppose to do? Ask him to give up?"

The man saved Peter the trouble of deciding. He must have realized that it wasn't Donald on the other bike for he took off. The bike reared up slightly from the speed at which he started off. He had stopped with his bike turned slightly as he waited, so that when he started riding, he headed off the trail and into the moor. Peter marveled at the mans riding ability. The man put a foot down and spun around, heading at an angle to get back on the trail.

Suddenly it was like the earth dropped out from underneath him. The motorcycle stopped and sank into a bright green spot on the moor. For a moment the rider looked almost like he was running in mid-air; he hands and feet pawing wildly, futilely. Then he came down hard on his side. The man got up and tried to move, but his right leg just buckled and he fell back to the ground.

Using his motorcycle as a shield, Peter pulled out his wallet and pointed it at the man. The same wallet he had used as a camera in Dornie. He hoped it would look dark and menacing. "If you have a weapon, I would like you to toss it away from you." Why didn't he just say, "please," he admonished himself.

The man opened his coat. Peter tightened his grasp on his wallet. The man called, "I don't have a gun on me. See?" he spread the coat wide, "It's on my bike."

"You're Gordon, right? How's the leg?" called Peter. He still wasn't sure how close he wanted to get to him. The man just pulled off his helmet, laid back and groaned.

It was another 10 minutes before Helen and Patricia showed up. Peter was inspecting the half-submerged motorcycle and Gordon was still lying on his back, gritting his teeth and trying to keep from moving his leg.

* * *

Back at the barn where the gang had been staying a couple intriguing bits of information were learned. There was a third man, named Alan, with them. He had been shot and left for dead. Fortunately for him the gunshot wasn't fatal and while a medic treated him, he had been offering up information as if he was asking a minister for absolution from his sins.

He had been a go-between for Leith and the nationalist group. They weren't to know about Leith's involvement because of his London connections. They'd never have gone for the plan. But Alan was a northerner and therefore chosen as the courier for an undisclosed nationalist sympathizer. He was suppose to be bringing them money from Leith, but after his capture it put Alan in a very difficult spot. He couldn't get the money and he didn't dare say why. Then

when Gordon and Donald saw the police, they assumed that he had tipped them off and had shot him.

The story that interested Peter the most was that Leith had paid Alan to drop a tip to the police about Robert Cameron's whereabouts in Mallaig. Since Robert worked at McBride's, when Leith learned he was a member of the group, he panicked. He had asked Robert to send him building plans a few days before setting up the rendezvous and then became scared that Robert would put the two together and spoil his plans.

Later, Peter was sitting on the railing of the bridge that led into the lodge, watching the beehive of activity as police collected evidence and put the wounded men onto a helicopter.

"A penny for your thoughts," asked George, walking up and leaning back against the railing.

"Oh. You know. Scotland. The last few days. The future."

"If you ask me, the last few days portend a pretty bright future," replied George "Are you ready to head back to Inverness? We should take the horses back."

"That would be great. If there's a train, maybe I can be back in Edinburgh by this evening. I think I'm ready for a bit of peace."

* * *

The band was coming to the frenetic ending of an old B-52's tune. Even on the terrace of the dance club they could feel the reverberations. It was coming up on midnight and the evening was starting to wind down.

"Did you hear the news?" Sita asked the others. "Robert died yesterday morning. He never regained consciousness. He was living solely by the benefit of respirators and drip tubes for the last five days. I think his heart finally quit."

"I wonder if I could ever have faced that guy again?" pondered Marian. "What he did, the way he betrayed me ... Och, To hell with him."

"But I've been curious about McBride's. Will they stay open?" asked Peter.

"Global-Trans, our parent company, is guaranteeing our payroll for the time being. Talk is that the local management is considering buying back the business. One of our major clients is thinking about investing some venture capital," said Marian. "Bottom line, we have several contracts that we have to honor and we have the people to do it."

"That's great to hear," said Peter.

"As for me. I'm not sure. I'm thinking about going to America with my parents when they return at the end of the summer. I'll see if I can get a green card and work there. There is also the chance I could go work in Global-Trans Paris office. We'll see."

"Don't stay away too long. Scotland needs people like you."

Marian gave Peter one of the appraising looks he was getting used to seeing her give him. He smiled.

They stood silently for a few moments.

"Well I should get back to my parents," Marian said, then raising her drink to Peter and Sita, she added, "To good friends."

They raised their glasses, exchanged hugs and Marian was off.

"Good friends," Peter mused, watching her go. "I guess that's not so bad."

"There are worse things than having to settle for Marian as just a friend."

Peter turned, he hadn't realized that he'd spoken out loud. "What's that?" he said taking a sip of his drink to hide his embarrassment.

"She could still think of you as the dork who doesn't know the difference between England and Great Britain."

Peter barely kept from spitting out his drink. Sita jumped back laughing.

"Sita, you are too much! You may be just about the best friend I could imagine."

"Best friend? Huh. I guess that's not so bad," she said, mimicking Peter's earlier remark.

He looked at her with a crooked grin, trying to read any extra meanings in what she had said. She smiled back and gave him a push against his shoulder.

"Oh come on! Don't start that bashful thing with me. I couldn't stand it," she chided him good-naturedly. "I've still got a dance or two left in me. How about you?"

"Ms. Kumar. I would be delighted."

They linked arms and started back towards the dance floor. As they reached the door he turned and putting a hand to her cheek, he gave her a kiss. To his delight she kissed him back.

The End

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