
Prologue

There is beauty in death, a gentleness to the trauma of it that can't be explained unless one experiences it. Safety, protection, peace. It invites you in offering a sense of completion as it carefully wraps its arms around you. But to survive death and come back from it, is something else. To be pulled from its gentle embrace and to live through something so completely catastrophic, leaves a gaping hole in one's soul—a hole that is not easily repaired.

The water rushed over him in a torrent, pulling him into the center of the rapidly rising burn. He fought against it out of instinct and tried to swim away from the undercurrent to no avail. His arms and legs tired quickly, the violent struggle to remain afloat becoming increasingly difficult. The water pulled him under the surface again, this time lodging him between two boulders. His lungs burned from the need of air, but the instinct not to breath underwater was so strong that it overcame the agony of running out of oxygen. He knew, though, he would reach the break point soon and chemical sensors in his brain would trigger an involuntary breath that would be beyond his control. He would soon drown, as water filled his lungs. The

breath came with a neurological optimism and he pushed hard against the rocky bottom of the river with his legs, using his arms to disengage himself from the boulders and propelling himself upward and onto the shore. Choking on the water, he vomited. But it was too late. An immense feeling of well-being permeated him. It would soon be over. Heavy rain continued to pelt him, but he was unfazed by it as his last breath left him and he stared into the peaty brown water, seeing his own reflection in a wavy dispersion of vanishing circles. His bright blue eyes, unblinking and bulging round with fear, stared back at him accusingly. His lithe body, caught in the large rocks, reached out to him with limp, floating arms.

He screamed as the realization of the terror he felt suddenly solidified, the sound falling away in the echo of the silence of his watery grave, along with the brief moment of comfort. He was violently plunged back into reality. He dove into the water, clinging to himself, begging to feel the sense of serenity again. But it was too late. Death had already decided his fate. And death was not easily swayed.

In 1725, following the Jacobite rebellion of 1715, General George Wade was sanctioned by George I to form six watch companies to patrol the Highlands of Scotland. These companies were in charge of disarming the Highlanders, bringing justice to criminals and hindering rebels. The force was known in Gaelic as Am Freiceàdan Dubh, the dark or black watch, their motto Nemo Me Impune Lacessit. No one provokes me with impunity.

Chapter 1

London, England

R*evenge is sweet*, Lennox Chelton thought as she bit into a ripe strawberry, its sticky juices staining her full lips a pale red. Or at least the process of going about it was. Growing up, she wouldn't have considered herself a vengeful person, that was until the first letter came. Sealed in a brown Kraft envelope, it was waiting at the top of the steps leading to the door of her brownstone flat when she got home one afternoon a year ago. Her name was typed on the outside, the character spacing misaligned and tilted upward at a slight angle. She ran her finger over the letters, feeling the slight indentation of the typeface, unusual in this day and age of computers and printers. There was no return address. She didn't open it at first. Instead, she set it on the mantle of the fireplace savoring the mystery of it until her curiosity got the better of her and she slid a knife under the flap, slicing it open. The letter inside was also typed. its words catching her off guard. Actually, it was as if she'd had the rug pulled out from under her, and in that exact moment, who she was and who she would become was forever changed. The moral

fabric which made up her soul had suddenly been rewoven and the thread used to re-stitch it was bitter and cold. Two more letters would follow in the coming months, adding to the spiteful pattern of her unforgiving tapestry.

She set the stem of the strawberry down and picked up the crystal flute of champagne. Taking a sip, she looked over at the man who lay next to her. Not a lover in any sense, he bordered on an enemy. A very dangerous enemy. For now, he was no more than a means to an end and a way to quench the indemnification she so desired. She needed him as much as he needed her, and the idea of revenge was enough to push down her revulsion. His hand skimmed her bare thigh, the liver spots on his papery skin a sign of his advanced age even though he kept his general physique in rather good shape. "Happy New Year, *malyshka*," he said in his clipped English voice.

"We'll see if it will be one," she answered, standing up. She pulled a black silk robe from the nearby vanity chair and slipped it on before opening the bedroom door. A silver tray with a newspaper on it was sitting on a cart in the hallway. She picked up the paper, *The London Gazette*, the official newspaper of the Crown, and quickly skimmed through it, looking for the list of honours.

"So, did our friend make it in?" he asked.

She stiffened at the word friend. Friends were in short order these days. The name stood out in black, bold letters on the paper and a slight heat flushed through her body just looking at it. He was no friend. "He did, Colonel Alexander MacKay is to be dubbed a knight," she answered casually, hoping to hide the shaking in her voice.

"Then my hard work paid off. A word in the right ear is all one needs." He patted the spot next to him. "Come back to bed."

She ignored his proposal and sat down at the vanity, looking at herself in the mirror. Soon she would be a new person. Gone,

would be any trace of the sweet Irish girl most knew her to be, with her black hair and innocent face.

"Don't be getting any impetuous ideas. We've prepared too long for this," he said, coming up behind her. His hazel eyes met hers in the reflection of the mirror. His hand brushed down the length of her neck, giving it a tight squeeze when he reached the bottom. Too tight.

She gave him a sly smile, not reacting to the lump that formed in her throat from the choking pain it caused, and raised an eyebrow. "When will the investiture be?"

"Now that we know he's in, at the end of the month. The queen will finish her holiday in Balmoral with a ceremony at Holyroodhouse in Edinburgh."

"Not at Buckingham?" she asked. She hadn't been to Scotland in over twelve years and the thought of going back sent a shiver up her spine.

"No, this investiture will take place in Scotland."

"You should have told me, Viktor," she said coolly.

"There was no point. We didn't know if he would receive the honour and there was no need to get ahead of ourselves. It doesn't change the plan. Your job is to go in and make contact, that's all. Retribution will come later." He pulled a cigarette from a case and lit it, taking a long draw off of it.

"You're right." She smiled, not wanting him to see her rattled. "It doesn't change anything. Will you still be able to get me a ticket?"

"My friend will handle everything." His eyes bored into her. He was having doubts about bringing her on, she could read it in his face.

She stood up, untying the belt on the robe and letting it fall from her shoulders to puddle around her feet. She sat on the edge of the bed, spreading her legs and allowing him the access he so desired. It was all part of the deal. She could endure

anything as long as it propelled her closer toward her goal. Revenge would be sweet; however, the road to it was hell.

Rain pelted down on Lennox on the cold January day as she made her way along Edinburgh's Royal Mile toward the Palace of Holyroodhouse. She closed her red umbrella when she got to the entrance and pulled her invitation from her purse, handing it to the palace guard. Viktor Sokolov had lived up to his word. Each honouree was allowed up to three guests and she was now the invitee of a Mrs. Elizabeth Atkinson, member of Northumberland County Council. She was receiving her M.B.E. (Member of the British Empire) for her services to local government. The guard scanned the invitation and waved her forward. She checked her wet umbrella and coat at the front table and made her way to the toilets. Her heart beat madly in her chest, not so much for her upcoming assignment but more for just being back in Scotland. The last time she had been in Edinburgh, she had been with her father. He had brought her to the city for the day. They only visited the outside of the palace, as the tour inside had been too expensive, yet she was still impressed with its grandeur. The chains of her past weighed down on her, reminding her of the importance of her job today. She pushed the thoughts down and rinsed her face with cold water. She was still taken aback when she saw her reflection in the mirror. Gone, was her jet-black hair. She had dyed it platinum blonde last night. Her new job and assignment called for a new girl. She tucked a silver lock behind her ear, adjusted the black net fascinator on her head and reapplied her red lipstick. She could do this. Her assignment today was easy; she had only one thing to do—make contact.

She made her way through the gathering crowd to the Great Gallery, the largest room in the palace. The walls were hung with portraits of the real and legendary kings of Scotland. Chairs had

been set up around a dais for the audience. A gentleman was carefully checking the table holding the various insignia to be handed out. She chose a seat close to the platform where she could get the best view of who was coming and going.

The room was filling up quickly when she spotted three men dressed in dark green and blue kilts. She recognized two of the men from the photographs Viktor and his men had shown her earlier in the week. A blond man named Gabriel Gordon, whom they referred to as the angel, and a brown-haired man named Sinclair Stuart. Her stomach clenched. These were her targets. They belonged to a secret organization run by Alexander MacKay called The Watch. An organization which claimed to be doing good. They considered themselves something equivalent to valiant vigilantes, but she knew they were anything but virtuous. They were liars. The men took their seats on the opposite side of the dais, facing her. She could tell they were on guard, scanning the audience with watchful eyes. She felt a pair settle on her, the man in the group she couldn't identify. She crossed her legs at the ankles gracefully and pretended to be busy reading the program. A hush settled over the crowd as the Lord Chamberlain entered and motioned for everyone to stand up. The queen followed, attended by two Gurkha orderly guards. The National Anthem was played and afterward the audience was seated. Lord Chamberlain cleared his throat as he began to call the recipients forward one by one. A gentleman placed the insignia on a velvet cushion for the queen to award to each honouree. As the recipient stepped toward the dais, she would place the medal on a special pin they were given to wear, so it could be easily hooked onto their clothing. Then she would offer them a few words.

"Mrs. Elizabeth Atkinson, for services to local government," Lord Chamberlain announced. A striking elderly woman in a bright green dress walked forward. Lennox pretended to snap a picture of the woman but instead took one of the man whose eyes kept coming back to her. Dark and brooding, his face held a

permanent scowl. The minutes ticked on and she sent a text to Viktor along with the picture.

Lennox froze when she heard the next name. "Military Colonel, to receive the honour of Knighthood. Sir Alexander MacKay, for his service to the Ministry of Defense."

He stepped into the room and walked up to the dais, giving a slight bow to the queen before kneeling on the investiture stool. He was also kilted in full Scottish regalia in the same tartan as the other men. He was more handsome in person than in his pictures; salt and pepper hair framed a strong face, along with a lean and angular body. She shook her head. A year ago, she didn't even know the man's name. Now she knew him for who he really was. He wasn't a knight or some kind of hero; he was a murderer. The queen picked up her father's sword and touched him on the right shoulder then the left shoulder with the flat end of the blade. He stood, and she placed a red ribbon around his neck with the Civil Knight Grand Cross Star. Lennox tried to make out what the queen said to him but only caught the words 'thank you.' They shook hands and MacKay stepped backward several times before turning to his left and taking a seat.

Normally, when the service was over, the guests would have been invited to the gardens for a small reception and to take pictures, but with the rain, they were allowed to stay in the Great Gallery as staff quickly stacked the chairs and brought in refreshments. Lennox stayed to the side of the room looking at the portraits on the wall as the other guests mingled in small groups, drinking steaming cups of tea and chatting in low voices.

She looked at the painting of a large, dark-haired man wearing armor. He had a bristly beard and long mustache. She felt the gentleman approaching before he even said anything, her senses alert.

"The red king," the voice said in her ear. "It was painted before he turned into the cruel tyrant Shakespeare depicted him to be."

She turned, looking into deep blue eyes. The scowl had softened and only a faint line marred his forehead. It was the man who was watching her earlier. One of MacKay's lads. She gave him an easy smile, looking at the placard underneath the portrait. "Macbeth."

"Aye, Macbeth. Ninety-five kings line these walls along with one queen." He arched a black brow.

She knew he was trying to be charming, but it came out sharp. She bit back a retort. Handsome, narcissistic, arrogant and at the end of the day, they were all the same, pricks. She knew the type, cocky lads like him, born with a silver spoon in their mouths. But whatever dislike she had for him, she pushed it aside. She had a job to do. "I wouldn't know," she said, aloof.

"You're not from around here," he said. "An Irish lassie by the sound of it."

"Not by birthright, but I grew up there."

"So where is home for you then?" he asked.

She didn't answer and instead walked on, careful to swing her hips with just the right amount of grace and elegance.

He followed, and she stopped at a full-length portrait of a woman in a green dress, gold stomacher, and purple cloak. She wasn't particularly beautiful, but she had a strength about her that set her apart as proud and self-assured. "The queen?" she asked.

"Aye. Our Mary, Queen of Scots. Quite the enigma." He stepped closer, his shoulder brushing hers. His cologne hung in the air around them, spicy with a hint of sandalwood and musk. "You never told me your name."

She turned and looked up at him. "You're right, I didn't. Now if you'll excuse me." She pushed past him, walking out of the room and feeling his dark eyes on her the whole time.