

Chapter 1

Hollywood had come to the Highlands. Not the widescreen, surround-sound, 3D Highlands. Or the misty moors of Scotland: the wee deoch an doruis, granny's hielan kailyard, heuchter-stick-it-up-your-teuchter Highlands.

No, the actual Highlands.

Filming of the blockbuster *Freedom Come All of You* had already begun around the village. It wasn't glamorous like I'd thought it might be, just inconvenient. Traffic tailed back behind convoys of location vehicles: long trucks full of lighting and camera equipment and endless snaking coils of greasy black cables. The steep-sided trucks parked on the grass verge and hung there at such an alarming angle I worried they might keel over in a strong wind.

To recreate the Highlands of yesteryear, informative road signs were taken down, and not replaced, and roads were often closed without notice or explanation, incurring four-mile detours. I wondered when, or indeed if, they had permission to close roads like that, but it was Global Imperial, they had bought the town; they could do anything they wanted.

As I drove down to the village, Faughie FM was playing *Freedom Come Aw Ye*, the song by Hamish Henderson from which the film had taken its title. As DJ Andy Robertson played this song in heavy rotation, I was unable to stop tapping my toe and humming

along. Despite this constant reminder of the film title, I'd overheard people in the village giving it the nickname *Brigadoom*.

Driving past, I noticed that the new helipad was nearly finished. The tarmac had set and two men were rolling a paint cart to form a huge white H inside the circle. That had not taken long. It was strangely exciting to think that anything urgent enough to warrant a helicopter could happen in Inverfaughie. In the three months I'd lived here the most urgent thing I'd ever seen was a tourist jump out of a moving coach and sprint to the public toilets.

The village was bustling with activity now, and everyone was making money, lots of residential homes had suddenly become B&Bs and people were out tidying their gardens or polishing their windows. Taxis were dropping off and finding new fares within minutes. The influx wasn't just the usual Berghaus-clad climbers: intelligent dafties who spent their days humfing expensive kit up the north face and their evenings boasting about it in the Caley Hotel. No, these visitors were snappy dressers with sports cars. Audis, Subarus and Mazdas were everywhere. It actually took me a few minutes to find a parking space.

Global Imperial's production office was a Portakabin, but inside it was remarkably plush: thick carpets and thick curtains, behind which thick wads of cash were being exchanged for accommodation contracts. Jenny had already told me to insist on a block booking, and advised me on the going rates.

'I can't ask for that kind of money, they'll chase me,' I'd told her.

'You'd be a fool not to. That's what everybody's charging. You don't want to undercut everyone else, Trixie. Giving Global Imperial a reason to drive the price down won't make you popular.'

She was right; I didn't want to be even less popular than I already was.

'Highlanders don't get many opportunities,' she'd lectured me, 'we have to grab them when they come along.'

Pleased to meet me, the Accommodation Manager ushered me straight in. Her assistant had apparently been delighted with my B&B facility. She didn't quibble about the price, didn't bat an eye. She wanted to reserve all six double rooms for the duration.

‘If you let me have your bank details, Mrs McNicholl,’ she said in a lovely American accent, ‘I’ll ping the deposit over to you now. Oh, and may I take a copy of your Accommodation Licence?’

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This was the first time I’d actually met a Member of the Scottish Parliament. I’d expected a sharp-suited, thrusting, handsome charmer, but Malcolm was more of a baggy-arsed, corduroy pantywaist. As I’d come to appreciate since moving here, life in the Highlands was replete with disappointments. I smiled politely and folded my arms. This was going to be a long night. Jenny Robertson, the local postmistress and shop owner, had invited me round to her house for what she’d billed a ‘soiree’. We weren’t exactly contemporaries: Jenny had at least twenty years on me. I would have put her in her early sixties but she had all the energy of a spider monkey and the nous of a city fox. She was skinny and a bit wrinkly, though you could see she’d been a good-looking woman in her day. And nose? Jenny’s nosiness knew no bounds, but I, a recent incomer, had no other friends. Never having been invited to a soiree before, I’d accepted immediately, but if I’d known that ‘soiree’ was Jenny’s word for a night of envelope stuffing and political chat, I’d have politely declined. I had more important things to think about.

‘It doesn’t matter how small you are,’ Walter tried to inculcate us, ‘if you have faith and a plan of action.’

Worried that I’d giggle, I tried not to look directly at him. Walter had his passionate face on: his head tilted heroically, his eyes bright with visionary gleam. This would have been moving if it wasn’t for the cake crumbs that were trapped in the creases round his mouth.

Malcolm snorted, looking to Jenny and me for support.

‘Not my words: but Fidel Castro’s,’ Walter continued, holding his hands up to demonstrate his lack of influence with the Cuban revolutionary. ‘Fidel Castro’s, who – just to remind you – took on the United States of America.’

Walter pushed the pile of *Vote for Malcolm Robertson* leaflets to one side, leaned right into Malcolm's face and whispered, 'And won.'

'We couldn't do it even if we wanted to,' scoffed Malcolm. 'We don't have the resources.'

'That's the problem with you LibDems,' Walter retorted, his nostrils flaring, 'no ambition, no imagination. You're a shower of lily-livered Jessies.'

Jenny hooted and so, taking her lead, I laughed too.

When I'd helped her get the tea things earlier she'd assured me that this was just good-natured banter between the lads. From their spirited debate, Walter appeared to despise everything the other guy stood for, and yet here he was, Malcolm Robertson's official campaign manager. And here I was, stuffing envelopes to help Malcolm retain his seat. This wasn't what I'd come for. I needed to ask Jenny's advice on something but now that we were bogged down in this tedious debate there was no opportunity.

'We're easily self-sufficient,' Walter argued relentlessly, 'we'll not be eating many mangos but we have all the crops and livestock and dairy we need.'

'So we won't starve, but what about creating wealth?' countered Malcolm.

'What do you want, Malky? *Opum furiata cupido*.'

Right, that's it, I thought, Walter's started with the Latin, I'm out of here.

'What is this frenzied lust for wealth? I'm talking about transformational politics,' Walter boffed on, 'égalité, fraternité, liberté: education, health care, housing. We create the wealth the same way we always have, from our exports: salmon, fish, whisky, green energy, fresh clean water. The only difference is that we get to keep the revenue. Open your eyes, man, we're rich beyond the dreams of avarice!'

We looked to Malcolm for a comeback.

'Maybe,' he said meekly, 'but apart from the, eh, wealth, and equality, fraternity and um, oh yeah, the liberty, what else have we got?'

Walter sighed heavily and slammed his head down on the table. After all his rhetoric, he was finally defeated by Malcolm's complete lack of an argument. But I had bigger problems.

I didn't want to be here any more. Not here, in Jenny's living room. Not here living in this small suffocating Highland town. I needed to get back to civilisation. How could two old geezers having an abstract argument about independence fix that for me? It was patently such airy-fairy nonsense. That's what annoyed me about politics: it never went anywhere, never solved anything. I'd been offered no alcoholic refreshment whatsoever, not so much as a small sweet sherry. Having had no advice from Jenny, I still had the same problems I came in with, only now I was bored, frustrated and still sober.

I didn't have the head space for politics, I had my own troubles: my only neighbours had vanished and an ugly fence had gone up around their property. The Accommodation Inspectorate was due any day and the fence might mean I'd never get my Bed and Breakfast licence. No licence, no accommodation contract; no money, no exit route. I'd never get out of Inverfaughie. I'd die alone here in the damp mist, encased in cobwebs and wispy white mould.

Action was what was required, not pointless political sparring. As I made my apologies and got my coat, I decided that in future I should steer well clear of politician types, so much balloon juice only wound me up. I'd concentrate on solving my own problems and leave the politics to those with nothing better to do.

Chapter 2

'Hooch Aye the Noo!' the sign said, 'The Management would like to extend a warm Highland welcome to Harrosie: Bed and Breakfast, all mod cons, groovy atmos.'

I'd found the wooden sign at the back of the garden shed, dusted it off, painted it and, in a fit of optimism, hung it back on the rusting bracket outside the front door. But that was before the house next door was fenced off like a condemned building, a place of plague.

The place that I'd lived in for the last three months, and that I'd grudgingly had to accept was my home – for the moment at least – was one of two houses that sat on a hill overlooking the dreich village of Inverfaughie.

If you enjoyed dreichicity, Harrosie was an ideal B&B: there were eight bedrooms, three with their own bathrooms, another bathroom and toilet, a big kitchen, dining room, a wee back room and a long lounge facing the front. The view to the right was of purple and grey mountains that skulked around Loch Faughie. To the left it looked out to sea at the islands, swathed in mist, like tropical islands, except with a sub-tropical, sub-zero climate. All the bedrooms even had brass plaques on the doors and were all named after whiskies.

When I repainted the sign I picked out the letters in heather colours, purple and yellow. The bit about groovy atmos I'd added

myself, anything for a laugh. Underneath I'd reinstated the three thistles. Until I'd lived in the Highlands, using thistles as a mark of excellence had struck me as weird; thistles were jaggy and inhospitable, but now I totally got it. For an accommodation rating system, they could just as well have used midgies.

Elton John was dead right: life was a circle. My old mum Elsie, god rest her soul, had come here to Harrosie all those years ago to work as a housemaid. After my fortieth birthday, forty years after mum had left Inverfaughie, I'd returned. Just because I was a bit fed up with my job and wasn't getting on with my ex, just because some distant relative had left me something in his will, just because I was bored and lonely and horny and, seeking excitement, I'd thrown the dummy out of the pram. It might have been my mid-life crisis, or something to do with my ex-husband being shackled up with an au pair half his age, but I'd given up my home, my teenage son, my pals, my well-paid job and all my worldly pleasures. What a donkey.

And now I was about to carry on the work that Elsie had begun – changing sweaty sheets and cleaning stain-streaked toilets for paying guests. Not because I was going to enjoy performing intimate ablutions for strangers, but because it was the only way I'd ever earn enough money to go home. The mid-life crisis had been a huge mistake, I knew that now. I could hear how Elsie would have laughed: Miss High and Mighty Medical Sales Rep of the Month (April Thru Oct), scrubbing kitchen pots and toilet pans. But I'd have the last laugh. My mother had been a mere housemaid; I might not own the building but I was the proprietress of the B&B business, the Mistress of Harrosie.

I'd been reluctant to move out of 'Glenmorangie', the best-appointed room in the house. The wee room at the back, 'Tullibardine', would have to do as my bedroom – that was, if I ever managed to get rid of the smell of boiled sheep. In the olden days when Harrosie had been a farm building, this wee back room must have been where they did those quaint agrarian things like sheep boiling, although why they would haul sheep up two flights and a landing was a mystery to me. With persistent rumours of sheepshaggery

it was better not to think about it. No, the wee room would do me fine. The slightly bigger room, 'Old Pulteney', next door to mine, would do for Steven. That would leave me six bedrooms; six lucrative revenue streams. And this was set to be Inverfaughie's best ever summer. Not because of the mintcake-munching climbers, but because of the movie.

When I'd first arrived in this wee village I'd tried to integrate: I volunteered with the guitar group, worked at the annual gala day. Ok, I'd got a bit drunk at the ceilidh, aye, fair enough, I'd said some things, been a bit inappropriate, but it was hardly a hanging offence. Highland villages were hard unforgiving places, loyal to their own. I'd never be accepted here, I was a white settler, and a gobby Glaswegian into the bargain. I was as welcome as an outbreak of Legionnaires' Disease in high season.

Inverfaughie was no place for incomers; my English neighbours had worked that out before me. They'd left suddenly, packed up their kids and their suitcases. They didn't even stop to take their furniture. The first I knew of it was early last Sunday morning when I saw them standing in the rain like bedraggled refugees. The kids were wailing, their thin shoulders heaving in the Highland drizzle. Rebecca, their eight year old, and my only friend in this friendless place, clung to Bouncer and wiped her tears on his fur. She sobbed so hard she induced a bout of hiccups.

'I'll miss you Trixie,' she gulped, 'and you too Bouncer.'

When she hugged me it wasn't easy to let her go.

Once the taxi had pulled away and the noise of the distressed young family faded, their house was like a bricked-up tomb.

'Bring out your dead!' I cried into the wilderness.

They had left me their keys, mumbling something about letting the estate agent in, but it was builders who came.

The builders didn't want the keys, they didn't need access to the house, they said. They rolled up with two huge trucks and within three days had built an eight-foot-high perimeter fence. No matter how much I plied them with tea and my home baking, the foreman couldn't, or wouldn't, tell me who had instructed the work and, more importantly, why.

Harrosie now stood, isolated on top of the hill next to a sealed fortress within an ugly fence of untreated wood. It was like living next door to Guantanamo.

‘Bring out your dead,’ I shouted as the builders drove away.

I phoned Steven but he was more curious than outraged.

‘But what’s the purpose of this mysterious erection?’ he said.

‘That’ll do, Steven.’

‘Is the fence keeping something out?’ He took a loud theatrical in-breath. ‘Or keeping something sinister in?’