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by

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CHAPTER ONE

NOBODY knew that Niall MacBain was coming home to Shielbaig until the stormy summer day he arrived.

Alison Mackay was sitting in the classroom, when her attention wandered from the laborious account of Robert the Bruce that Willy MacLeod was giving to his six fellow pupils. From the height of her desk, she saw a flash of blue through the trees and rain, and something made her go to the window.

'Carry on reading, Willy,' she told the boy, as he faltered. 'We're all listening.' She waited for the car to reappear. It was difficult to see anything, for the driving rain gave the village below the school a misty appearance. And what would anyone be wanting there midweek in late June? They were off the beaten tourist track, completely isolated save for the mobile shops twice a week, and even they would be parked somewhere safe in this. Thunder rumbled distantly, threatening, like a growling dog half asleep.

Then she saw the car again, as it came half-way up the village's only street, and stopped almost on the shingle of Loch Shiel, now grey and leaden in the strange half light of a storm. Alison shivered, some premonition of trouble making her cold, although the small classroom was warm with the peat fire that glowed in the corner. She watched the faint blurred figure of a man get out and run across the street, then vanish into one of the cottages. She wasn't sure, but it seemed as if it was the one belonging to old Fergus

MacBain.

A waiting silence made her turn. 'Fine, Willy, that was fine,' she looked at her watch. A quarter to four, and there would be no more work done today, for the storm was making the children restless, and one or two seemed frightened. Alison crossed to the desk. 'Get your coats, children. I'll take you all home.' She smiled at the ensuing hubbub, thankful that she'd come in the car that morning, for even though she lived barely a mile away, she would have been drenched after walking only a few yards.

Checking that the fireguard was secured, Alison switched out the light, plunging the place into premature gloom, and stood them all in the porch while she dashed round the back for her car.

One by one she deposited the giggling children at their doors, as they drove down the hilly street. One, Fiona Stewart, lived next door to old Fergus MacBain, and Alison said casually, as she leaned back to open the door for her: 'My, it looks as if Mr. MacBain has a visitor.' She felt rather than saw the odd look the girl gave her. Fiona was very mature for a ten-year-old, and everybody knew about the feud; it had passed into village folklore. But all she said was:

'Aye, miss.'

There was a light in the cottage. Alison pretended she was watching Fiona as she stood in the porch, but it was the glow of the oil lamp from the front window that really fascinated her. And even then, some presentiment of who it could be was hovering, tantalizingly, at the back of her brain.

Alison had so many other things on her mind that she

had forgotten the incident when she reached home. Jessie heard her putting the car outside the back door to garage later when the storm was over, and she opened it wide.

'Come away in, child,' she called, her white hair in a fuzzy halo round her from the light behind. Alison ran thankfully in and smiled.

'What a day, Jessie! Is there tea in the pot?'

'I have the kettle on now. Sit ye down. I want a word before you go in.'

'I'll make it,' Alison protested, as Jessie waved her away, and sniffed.

'No, you won't. There is only one person knows how to make tea in this house, and that's me.'

Alison grinned at her from the rocking chair as she coasted gently backwards and forwards. 'Yes, Jessie, sorry, Jessie. I don't know what we'd do without you.' And in her words was more than jest. She meant them, quite seriously. She watched the old woman, her bony hands confident and capable as she lifted the heavy kettle from where it bubbled on the range. She had been with the family since before Alison was born; even before her brother Alec who was five years older. And now, with their father dead, and Alec married in Canada, and their money vanished like a will o'-the-wisp, Jessie was still with them, firm and immovable.

A tower of strength, she had kept Alison's mother going in those difficult days three years before when Mr. Mackay's plane had crashed over the sea as he was on his way to Jugoslavia for a business conference. He had been on the verge of a breakthrough in his engineering firm in Inverness, one that would mean new wealth and security, sadly depleted owing to a trusted

partner's dishonesty.

What little they had had been swallowed up in death duties after the tragic blow. But Jessie had remained, and, Alison hoped, would for as long as she lived. She loved the old housekeeper dearly.

Jessie put the teapot firmly on its stand, then looked over at Alison. 'It's your mother. She's acting strange again, wandering around and getting in my way, instead of on with her painting. And she's got that dreamy look on her face – the one she gets when she's got an idea fixed firmly in her mind. I don't know what it can be, but I've got an awful good idea.'

Alison nodded, her heart plunging down to her shoes.

'The house?'

'Aye.' She watched Alison shrewdly, her blue eyes bright and youthful in her wrinkled, beautiful old face. 'She's been going on for the past few months about it being too big, and too dear to run, and all sorts of things—'

'I know,' Alison interrupted miserably. 'But she always does in summer, when the sun shows up all the faults. I – oh, Jessie, what can we do?'

Jessie looked around the huge high-ceilinged kitchen. 'God knows, child. She's right. What can three women do in a house this size? There's your money, and the bit Alec sends, and what your mother makes from her paintings – such as *that* is, but we all know it's not enough—'

'She can't sell the house. It's been in the family for generations,' Alison said desperately. 'And anyway,' as a thought came to her, 'who'd buy it? We all know these big houses are a glut on the market. Oh, Jessie!'

She put her hands over her eyes for a moment. 'I hope we're wrong.'

'Aye, but we ought to find out. You had better ask her – and be kind, Alison. You know how she gets upset at any unpleasantness.'

Alison managed a smile. 'I should do by now. Thanks for telling me, Jessie. Perhaps we can work something out, who knows?' She said it lightly, but her heart was as heavy as lead. She loved her home with a fierce pride. It was a large beautiful granite building facing the loch, capturing all the sun, shielding them from the wildest storms and rains, and surrounded by trees and mountains in the loveliest part of Scotland, Wester Ross. And now, as she walked from the kitchen to the hall, a flash of lightning illuminated the gloom for a second, and she shivered.

It was much later that evening before she learned the truth that ended all her speculations.

Alison was curled up on the settee in the lounge, marking exercise books, and looked across at her mother, to surprise an odd, almost furtive look on her face as she looked back from the book that lay on her knee. She was normally so open, almost transparent, that Alison could bear it no longer. She put down the book beside her.

'Mother,' she said gently, 'tell me – please.'

Mrs. Mackay blinked, opened her eyes wide, and looked, if anything more guilty than ever. Alison felt a surge of love for her, a lump in her throat that she quickly swallowed. Her mother was so fragile and helpless-looking that she had to make a conscious effort to remember that this slender dark-haired woman had, in

her younger days, been a successful interior designer and decorator, had travelled the world under her own steam, with another girl, before being swept off her feet by Alison's father, on a holiday in Australia. She had come home, married him, and settled down to being a laird's wife. And no one had ever heard her utter a word of regret for the undoubted fame and fortune that could have been hers if she had gone on with her career. Now she confined herself to oil paintings of the Highlands, and occasionally sold some to Murdoch Imrie, an old friend of the family who owned a madly expensive antique shop in Inverness.

'Tell you what?' But her hand went to her cheek in a curiously fluttering gesture, a sure giveaway with her.

Alison went over and sat at her feet, resting her head on her mother's knee. 'Oh, Mother! Both Jessie and I are concerned for you. There's something on your mind. You're going to have to tell me sooner or later. Why not now?' The logic of this was inescapable. She sighed, and stroked Alison's hair gently.

'All right, I know. Oh, Alison, it's something – I should have told you before, because I don't like to be underhand – and you should know, above all—' her voice broke, then as if gathering her courage together, she went on: 'Things have reached the stage where it's impossible to go on much longer. We'll have to sell the house.'

Alison looked at her, blinking back tears at having the fears finally confirmed. 'That's what we thought. But I love it so.'

'So do I,' her mother answered softly. 'Oh, I've given it a lot of thought, and perhaps I should have

discussed it with you sooner, but – well, I kept hoping – you know how I do.’ Alison nodded, unhappy for her mother as much as for herself.

‘I’ve already had a word with Mr. Stewart—’ Alison looked up sharply. John Stewart had been the family solicitor for years; he was almost like an uncle. It was the sensible thing to do, she knew, yet it made it so definite.

‘What did he say?’

Her mother gave a faint smile. ‘You won’t believe this, but there’s someone interested in Courthill. He wouldn’t tell me who it was, but apparently a person – I don’t even know if it’s a man or woman – contacted him a year or so ago, and asked to be informed if ever Courthill came on to the market. It must be someone who’s seen it. He phoned me yesterday. This person will be contacting us soon.’ She looked to the fireplace, where the peat fire glowed dully, nearly out. ‘That’s why I’ve been on edge these past few days,’ she squeezed Alison’s shoulder. ‘Forgive me. I have no choice.’

‘No.’ Alison shook her head. ‘Surely there’s something?’

‘What? I wish there were. You know what it’s like here in winter, when we virtually hibernate because the house is like an ice-box. We should have had central heating installed years ago. It was all right when we were filled with visitors, fires in every room, and people, and warmth, but not any more. There are only the three of us, and Jessie is old. How long do you think she can go on working in that huge draughty kitchen? She never grumbles, she’s an angel, but it will tell on her soon.’

The storm had died away. It reflected Alison's mood now, quieter, and suddenly resigned. She sighed, and turned her head to where Rusty, their golden labrador, lay stretched out fast asleep on the hearthrug. She was old, a little grey now, and Alison reached out a hand to stroke her. The dog stirred slightly in her sleep. 'Mother, where will we go?'

'I've been looking at the cottage in the grounds. It's so long since we had a gardener that it needs a lot doing up, but it could be done. And it's big enough for the three of us, and Rusty.'

'And Rusty,' Alison echoed. 'But can you do that? Sell the house and not the cottage?'

'Of course.' Her mother looked surprised. 'It's virtually separate anyway. We'll keep the small garden round it, and we have the same view of the loch as we have from here.'

All she said was true. But would she be able to bear it, living so close, with someone else in her house? Alison wondered silently. That was the question, and there was no way to answer it, except one.

They went to bed, and Alison still hadn't told her mother about the other thing that was bothering her. It was just as well. Mrs. Mackay had enough on her plate, but Alison's burden was doubled. It was almost certain that the school would have to close after the autumn term. Of the seven children she taught, five would be leaving at Christmas because they were almost eleven, and would be going as weekly boarders to Dingwall. The other two would then be transferred to the school in Strathcorran, which was fifteen miles away. And as there were no children above the age of one in Shielbaig, the school would remain closed for four years – if

not for ever. Alison knew only too well how the official mind worked, and while she would get a transfer, it might be to a school far away. She still hoped for a miracle – much, she thought wryly, as her mother had done. All it needed was a couple of families, each with three or four children of school age, to move into Shielbaig, for her job to be safe! That was all!

Alison sighed, turned out her bedroom light, and tried vainly to sleep.

The next day, Friday, was so bright and sunny that the storm might never have been. In the playground early that afternoon, as the children did P.E., Alison heard the roar of a car, and saw the blue one that had arrived so precipitously in the previous day's storm slow down and stop again outside Fergus MacBain's. In the light of all that had happened, she had completely forgotten about the old man's visitor. She went over to the low stone wall that protected the children, and the playground, from a sheer drop to the village below, and looked curiously at the silent car. She could see it perfectly now; an old Ford Cortina. A man got out, and before he crossed the road it seemed that he looked up towards the school. Just for a moment, a fleeting glance, but it made Alison feel foolish, as if she'd been caught peeping at a window. She turned away, chiding herself for a too vivid imagination. Yet she was curious to know who the visitor was. If one of old Fergus's sons had been coming home, surely it would have been all over the village, but she'd not heard a word. Nor had she had a chance to see the stranger's face, but there was something disturbingly familiar about the way he walked. She looked again towards the

little cottage where Fergus MacBain lived alone. He had had four sons, Alistair, Ian, Duncan, and Niall. The two older ones lived in New Zealand; they were sheep farmers, if rumour was to be believed. Duncan and Niall had both left home years ago to join the Merchant Navy. Duncan and Niall . . . Black Niall, the wildest one in a rough, tough quartet of boys, belonging to a family that had a bitter, silent feud with the Mackay family for over a hundred years. Alison only remembered Niall, because he was the youngest, and practically the same age as Alec, her brother, and they had been at school at the same time. At the same time, but not together – unless they were fighting. It must have been in their blood, thought Alison, this urge to be constantly at each other's throats, born in them from the terrible time in 1869, when the two families had been the chief ones in the village and surrounding crofts, and the names Mackay and MacBain were said in the same breath, for they were inseparable. Until one day, when Hector MacBain and Domnuil Mackay had had the misfortune to fall for a fiery-eyed village beauty who'd led them both on, enjoying the situation immensely. The tale had become embroidered over the years, until it seemed that the two youths were both tragic victims of a cruel Jezebel. Whatever the truth of that, the fact remained that one day the two young men had gone off into the hills to 'settle their differences'. They were never seen again.

A few days later a shepherd had come down from his bothie, wild-eyed, and telling a terrible tale of what he had seen; something that had so upset him that he had taken to his bed in shock. He had been searching for stray lambs on a rough part of the mountain, near to

where it fell steeply away into the sea, and he had seen the two men locked in fierce combat. The ground was treacherous and covered in loose stones and pebbles, and even as he had watched, they had slipped and gone hurtling over the edge, still fighting.

By the time he had managed to reach the spot, it was too late. Far below, the white foamy sea crashed against the rocks, and the noise of the breakers, and the harsh cry of the gulls, were the only sounds left in the world. Sick with shock, he had turned away.

When his tale was told, bitter, unforgivable words had been spoken. And from that day on, the two families had become as far apart as the two poles, hatred sparking like a live current if any should meet. There was more too, but the tales were only vaguely hinted at; tales of smuggling, and gambling, and illicit whisky stills.

But no one had ever told Alison exactly what. Perhaps there was shame of a different kind on both sides, she thought. Certainly she knew that she had never dared ask when she was a child, and now it was too late. Sometimes she wondered if Alec had ever found out.

Alison lived at Courthill, the family home since long before the feud, and Fergus MacBain, the last remaining member of his family in the area, lived in a small cottage that had been his father's and grandfather's before him. The big house that had once been theirs, so near to Courthill, had been destroyed by a terrible fire in 1872, and all their money, so the story ran, had gone with it. In its place grew trees, and all that remained to tell that there had once been a house were a few heaps of stone.

Alison shivered, suddenly cold at the memories revived, and joined in with the children's exercises with such enthusiasm, as if to shake away the ghosts of the past, that they were startled, and couldn't keep up with her pace. Her mind refused to join in with the later lessons. She was weighed down with an intense feeling of depression. It was probably the knowledge that the school might have to close, or it could have been caused by the thought of leaving her home – or a combination of the two. It brought on a headache that persisted even after she had taken two aspirins, and by four o'clock she was so wretched that it was a relief to see the children go. She sat very still at her desk and watched them run shrieking and shouting down the hill, as if released from prison.

Distantly, on the other side of the loch, she could see home. Just the roof, and part of a bedroom window over the thick trees, but it was enough to bring a lump to her throat. How can I leave it? she thought. Tears of pain and fatigue sprang to her eyes. She was being childish, she knew. Her mother was right. They could not go on living there, managing as they did, and expect the house to maintain itself. She wasn't so blinded by love for it that she couldn't see the window frames that needed attention, or the slates missing from the roof. Even the grounds had deteriorated rapidly since they had let the gardener go. Alison and her mother did their best, but it was fighting a losing battle with the acres of rich vegetation that ran riot, sheltered as they were in the curve of the bay of the loch.

She sighed, picked up her mirror, and dabbed carefully at her eyes. There must be no trace of tears when she reached home. She looked at herself coldly and