

# ONE



I made my way down the grand central staircase, preparing myself to meet a murderer and his—or her—potential victim. The borrowed jewels and a beautiful emerald-green evening gown, a gift from my sister, gave me a false, hollow confidence. I forced a smile in the direction of my friend John Davison, a smile which masked not only a raft of uncertainties and doubts but a deep sense of dissatisfaction, if not anger.

After all, I was supposed to be having a few relaxing weeks on the Isle of Skye before my wedding to my dear Max the following month. My plan was to travel to this romantic island in the Scottish Highlands with my daughter, Rosalind; my secretary, Carlo; and her sister, Mary. The holiday would give me the chance to rest after a rather hectic year. I would go on some lovely long rambles across the moors, perhaps even lose a few pounds. The fresh air would do me good and I would walk down the aisle of the chapel in Edinburgh with a clear head, a slightly better figure, and a peach-like complexion. The last thing I wanted to think about was murder.

But that wasn't how it had turned out. The week before I was due to travel to Scotland, Davison had sent me a note, asking me to meet him at his London flat in Albany. After the preliminaries and polite small talk, my friend, who worked for the Secret Intelligence Service, got down to business.

“I know the timing could be better,” he said, clearing his throat. “But there’s something that we would like you to do.”

“What is it?” I asked, taking a sip of soda water.

“I wouldn’t ask you, but as I know you’re going to Scotland—to Skye in particular—it seemed you were the ideal person for the job.”

I was so taken aback at his suggestion that I give up my precious holiday that I was lost for words.

“One of our former agents, Robin Kinmuir, who lives on Skye, believes that he is in danger. He’s received a series of threatening letters informing him that his life will be taken from him.”

The situation intrigued me and, despite myself, I wanted to know more. “I’m not saying I will agree to anything, but tell me a little more about Robin Kinmuir.”

“He’s a friend of Hartford’s, or was at one point,” said Davison. “The head of the Service regarded Kinmuir as one of the best agents we ever had. He had a great brain, a photographic memory, and was incredibly brave and fearless. Then he experienced a run of bad luck. His only son, Timothy, was killed in the war, a loss which hit him hard. He took to drink. His wife, Catherine, who was younger than him, left him—or, rather, it seems she simply walked out of their house and disappeared.”

That word always made my heart miss a beat because of those “missing” days in 1926 when the press reported that I had disappeared.

“And then... well, in 1916, Kinmuir made a terrible error of judgment out in Maastricht which resulted in the deaths of eleven of our men,” Davison continued. “Although he managed to make it back to Britain, he never forgave himself, and his drinking became worse. In fact, I’m sure he would have died had it not been for Hartford, who sent him off to a place in the country.”

“And the letters? What do they say?”

Davison reached for his inside jacket pocket. “I’ve got a copy of one of them here,” he said. “Typed on what looks like an old machine, it warns Kinmuir that his time is up. Here, listen to this.” He unfolded a square of paper. “‘I know what you did. Soon you will pay for your crimes with your life. Look over your shoulder—death will come when you least expect it.’”

“Sounds a bit melodramatic,” I said. “How do you know it’s not from some crackpot? What makes you think there’s any substance behind these threats?”

“One could easily dismiss it if we were dealing with an ordinary member of the public,” said Davison. “It’s Kinmuir’s work for the agency that sets him apart. Of course, there may be nothing to it, but I said to Hartford that we—or I, at least—would investigate. Although Kinmuir lives in this country, it’s not strictly within the remit of the Secret Intelligence Service; as you know, the SIS is primarily a foreign intelligence service. But what happened abroad may well have a bearing on the case.”

“I see. And are there any suspects?”

“One line of inquiry is that it’s something to do with the failed mission in Maastricht. Either that or... well, let’s just say that Kinmuir has hardly led a blameless life.”

“In what respect?”

Davison paused as he considered how best to express himself. “He had a certain reputation with the ladies. Several affairs and indiscretions, particularly during the time he was drinking heavily. There are also a number of suspect or failed business deals that we’re looking into.”

“And who would benefit from his death?”

“Ah, the perennial question! Kinmuir has a substantial estate. Although it goes by the name of Dallach Lodge, it’s actually a huge old pile and sits on hundreds of acres of land. On his death that would all pass to his next of kin: his nephew, James, his late brother’s son.”

“Well, he’s the obvious suspect,” I said, standing up. “There, you’ve heard what I’ve got to say on the matter. Now, I really must go and finish packing for my trip.”

“You mean that’s it?” said Davison, barely able to disguise the disappointment in his voice. “You’re not prepared to help?”

“Davison, I don’t know if you heard, but I’m getting married,” I said, rather more impatiently than I meant to. “I really haven’t got time for this at the moment.”

“So, you’re prepared to let a man die?”

“Oh, stop,” I said, reaching for my coat. “Don’t try to blackmail me into this.”

“Listen, if it’s any comfort, I would come with you. Kinmuir now runs his country house, Dallach Lodge, as a hotel. Of course, he would never call it that: his guests are supposed to feel like old friends who have just come to stay for a few days. Although the estate is a quite valuable one, recently Kinmuir has suffered from a lack of funds. It seems he can’t afford the upkeep of the house without taking in paying guests. A number of people are about to arrive at the lodge, and we suspect that one of them may want to kill Kinmuir.”

“Why doesn’t he simply cancel their stay? That would be the easiest thing, surely?”

“That’s what he wanted to do, but we pointed out to him that the best way to catch his murderer—if he or she does exist—would be to act normally and open his hotel as usual.”

“Yes, I can see that,” I said. “But why can’t you just go on your own—or get someone else to accompany you?”

“We’ve been through all the different possibilities. You’re the best person suited for the job. What with your sharp mind and your ability to get to the—”

I cut him off. “I don’t need to hear your flattery, Davison. The truth of the matter is you’ve got no one else. I’m right, aren’t I? Inform Hartford from me that he really needs to sort out his recruitment, especially of those of the fairer sex.” I paused. “Tell me this—and I

want you to answer honestly, or with as much honesty as you can muster: What would happen if I didn't choose to help you?"

A grave expression crossed Davison's face. "I'll be frank," he said. "Yes, you are the only woman we have free at the moment. If I were to go by myself, or take another man with me, the murderer might suspect that we were from the police, if not the agency." He hesitated for a moment. "But if we were to register *together*, you and me... well, it would give us quite a good cover, don't you think?"

"Are you really suggesting that we turn up there as..." I could hardly get the words out. "... as a *couple*... when I'm preparing to get married next month?"

Davison must have seen the horrified expression on my face, because the lines of seriousness around his mouth melted away and he burst out laughing.

"Sorry, but your face was a picture!"

"How could you be so—"

"I know, it was beastly of me. I couldn't help myself."

"Look, if you want me to assist you, then the least you can do is show me a little respect." The words made me sound like a prig, and even though I was beginning to see the funny side of Davison's teasing, I wasn't going to let him off the hook that easily. "Really, it's quite uncalled-for."

"I apologize," he said, trying to compose himself. "No, of course I realize that would be quite an unsuitable arrangement. What I propose is for the two of us to turn up at Dallach Lodge as cousins. You register as yourself—and tell the truth about your forthcoming marriage to Mr. Max Mallowan. You'll have to do this anyway because you want to register the banns in Scotland. And it will be easy for me to be plain old John Davison, a middle-ranking civil servant. I am here to be your chaperone in the weeks leading up to your nuptials. So, what do you say?"

He looked at me with a mischievous glint in his eyes. “You never know, you might help save an innocent man’s life,” he said. “Surely that’s worth sacrificing a little of your holiday?”

“Oh, very well,” I sighed. “But on condition that it’s for a short amount of time only. I won’t do anything that puts the date of my wedding at risk. That wouldn’t be fair on Max.”

Of course, the man I was due to marry could never know. Max—who himself was seeing various friends in the south of England—thought that I was simply taking a holiday in Skye with my daughter, my secretary, and her sister. But what could I tell my travel companions? It was too late to cancel the trip and they were so looking forward to journeying north with me.

It was no surprise to learn that Davison had already thought of this. The four of us would check into the hotel in Broadford, on Skye, as arranged, and after a day or so I would receive a telegram from my literary agent, Edmund Cork, requesting my presence back in London. I would say that there were serious problems with the script of my forthcoming play, *Black Coffee*, which was due to open in December. The director was on the point of quitting the production. My return to London was a matter of urgency: there was too much work to do from such a distance. Although I was sure that Carlo and Mary would offer to accompany me, I would persuade them to stay on in Skye so that they could give Rosalind the holiday she deserved. I would travel back to Scotland as soon as I could.

What Davison had not counted on in his plan was the sense of guilt I felt at abandoning Rosalind. No doubt this was made worse by the fact it was not the first time. I had left her in 1922 during my ten-month-long trip around the world with Archie, who was then my husband. There was the unfortunate episode of my disappearance in 1926 and then the separation when I traveled to Ur, in southern Iraq, in 1928. During that time in the desert there were times when I doubted I would ever see my daughter again.

The few days we spent in Broadford with Carlo and her sister, Mary, were a delight. We enjoyed a picnic in a field overlooking the bay and played endless games of cards and cat’s cradle. As I watched my

daughter explore the beach, I had to keep telling myself that she was a resilient child. After all, she was now eleven years old, away at boarding school, and her headmistress told me she was a happy and self-sufficient girl. Yet I knew that my separation from her would leave me feeling wretched. I could not allow Rosalind to see my distress, and so, when the day of our parting arrived, I had to steel myself as best I could. As the taxi pulled away from the hotel in Broadford, I pretended to myself that I was just popping to the shops and I would see her in a couple of hours. However, instead of taking me to the ferry and then to the railway station, the car drove me across the island to a deserted spot to pick up Davison.

Once we had collected Davison, we traveled towards the southeastern side of Skye, past a number of abandoned cottages, moors covered in purple heather, and long stretches of bogland. The drama of the island was on an epic scale: here was a true example of the sublime that I had only previously seen in paintings or photographs.

Since arriving on the island I had been transfixed by the sky. The atmosphere was constantly changing: one moment the clouds were black and ominous, the next the sun would cast its light down and transform the harsh landscape into a sight of savage beauty. Before I journeyed to Scotland, friends had told me to expect four seasons in one day, and they had not been wrong. During the course of twenty-four hours, one could experience rain, wind, and mist but also the most beautiful pure sunlight I think I had ever seen.

Eventually we turned off the road and down a lane until we reached a set of gates leading to a drive lined with rowan and birch trees to Dallach Lodge. It was a handsome, gabled, three-story baronial house built from red sandstone, standing on the banks of a sea loch, set within a lush garden with monkey puzzle and red cedar trees. Above it, on a higher ridge that dominated the bleak landscape, was a ruined castle. In the distance, across the Sound of Sleat, one could see the rocky peaks of the Knoydart Peninsula on the mainland stretching up into the clouds.

“It’s all very *Castle of Otranto*,” whispered Davison as we stepped out of the car. “In fact, it looks the perfect place for a murder.”

All that had happened in the whirlwind of the preceding few days. And now here I was on my first night at Dallach Lodge. The drawing room was ablaze with candles and the sparkle of diamonds. The ladies wore elegant evening gowns and the men sported dinner jackets.

A deep voice—upper-class English but with a light Scottish lilt—boomed across the room, followed by the appearance of a huge bear of a man with a ruddy face and enormous whiskers. I knew from Davison that Kinmuir was sixty-seven years old.

“Here are our two new arrivals. Hello, I’m Robin Kinmuir. Welcome. You must be Mrs. Christie and Mr. Davison?”

“Yes, that’s right,” said Davison, shaking Kinmuir’s large hand.

The owner of Dallach Lodge knew of our purpose at the hotel, but he had been instructed to treat us as ordinary guests. At the earliest opportunity we would question Kinmuir about the letters he had received and try to learn more about the other guests who were staying there.

“Now, what would you like to drink?” A sickly looking butler approached with glasses of champagne. I noticed that his hands were shaking as he held the tray. I didn’t want to appear to be rude, and so after Davison took one I did the same, even though I had no intention of drinking it. “Let me introduce you to everybody,” said Kinmuir.

Kinmuir had lost most of the hair from the top and back of his head. The little that was left had been combed across his bare scalp to give the impression that he had more hair than he possessed. It also looked as though he had taken refuge in the bottle, dyeing his few remaining strands a garish reddish-brown. “First of all, the ladies. Mrs. Buchanan, please, you must meet the new guests.”

He placed a friendly if not proprietorial hand on the lower back of a slim, birdlike woman who could have been aged anywhere between forty-five and sixty. She had not lost her beauty, and there was something strangely familiar about her. She wore a long black silk dress,



and around her throat a diamond necklace cast a vibrant light onto her face. She had blond hair of a shade a little too bright, which made me suspect that she too had sought the help of a chemical agent. She held herself with a poise and an elegance that made me guess that she had been a dancer, or had trained as one when she was younger.

“Mrs. Agatha Christie, Mr. John Davison—this is Mrs. Eliza Buchanan,” said Kinmuir. “To me she is an old friend, but you may know her from the world of the theater.”

“Of course,” I said, realizing where I had seen her before. I knew that, even though her stage name was Mrs. Eliza Buchanan, she had never married. “I thought your Lady Macbeth one of the very best I have ever seen.”

She beamed at the compliment. “?‘*Out, damned spot! out, I say!—One; Two: Why, then ’tis time to do’t,*’?” she intoned in a breathy, theatrical manner. “But I mustn’t steal the show,” she added, bowing her head and stepping back to allow Kinmuir to introduce the other guests.

“This is Miss Vivienne Passerini,” said Kinmuir. “I’m told she is a very brilliant botanist and has just returned from her travels.”

“Oh, I wouldn’t quite put it like that,” she said, laughing.

Miss Passerini was a beautiful young woman with emerald-green eyes, jet-black hair cut into a neat bob, and an olive complexion.

“Where did you visit?” asked Davison, taking a sip of his champagne.

“I’ve just come back from Berlin,” she said. “I’ve been following the trail of the naturalist and explorer Alexander von Humboldt—or at least part of his travels—for a book I’m working on. He was born there, you see.”

“How intriguing,” Davison replied. “Am I right in thinking that he stopped on the island of Tenerife on his way to Venezuela?”

“Yes, he did,” Miss Passerini said. The two of them started to talk about the history of exploration, plant classification, and the fauna and flora of various far-flung parts of the world.

My memories of Tenerife were not pleasant, and as I turned away, Kinmuir introduced me to two handsome men in their twenties.

“Mrs. Christie, may I present my nephew, Mr. James Kinmuir, and his friend from Oxford, Mr. Rufus Phillips.”

If Robin Kinmuir were to be murdered, here was—by my own reckoning, at least—the prime suspect for the crime. I would see what I could find out about James Kinmuir.

“Do you live here on Skye, Mr. Kinmuir?”

“Please, call me James,” the young man said, flashing a smile. He was tall and broad-shouldered, with a strong nose and a fringe of blond hair that gave him the look of an overgrown schoolboy. “At the moment, only during the summer months. The rest of the time I teach—at Flytes, a school just outside Edinburgh. I try to interest the boys in the Greats. Not that I get much thanks from the little brutes.”

This interested me. The implication was that he had to work—that he didn’t have an independent income. Perhaps his intention was to get his hands on his uncle’s estate. But if so, why would he alert Robin Kinmuir by sending him threatening letters?

I turned to his friend. “And you, Mr. Phillips? Are you on holiday here?”

“Yes and no,” he said. Rufus Phillips was a little shorter than his friend, with dark brown curly hair and exceptionally long eyelashes that gave his face a rather girlish look. “I’ve just left the Slade art school in London. I’m doing a spot of traveling and supporting myself by doing the odd painting, such as they are.”

“Rufus is being terribly modest,” said James. “He’s a wonderful portraitist; in fact, he’s working on an oil of my uncle. Of course, Rufus

insists he doesn't want to be paid for it. My uncle hasn't seen it yet, but when he does, I think he'll find that it really captures his—"

"My what?" said Kinmuir, slapping his nephew and his friend on the shoulders. "No doubt you'll show me as the decrepit old fool I am. *Sans* teeth, *sans* eyes, *sans* taste—*sans everything*—like Auntie upstairs." He turned to me to explain. "I'm talking about Mrs. Veronica Kinmuir: I forget how old she is. She's the wife of my father's late brother. She is nearly blind from cataracts, hasn't left the house in years, and talks mostly gibberish, childish nonsense. For a long time she didn't want anything to do with me—treated me something rotten—but when she started to lose her marbles, I thought it only right to bring her here." He addressed Rufus Phillips again. "I hope you don't paint me as nothing more than a mess of jagged lines and crooked angles. The truth is I'm not sure I have an eye for art at all: the house is full of paintings, but I've barely given any of them a second glance. Yes, I'm a terrible philistine."

Kinmuir scratched what looked like an insect bite on his throat.

"As for the avant garde, don't get me started on that! Once I stood in front of a Picasso for a good ten minutes, shifting my position, walking around to take it in from different perspectives, but I couldn't make head or tail of it—and I'm talking quite literally. If ladies weren't present," he said, nodding in my direction, "I think I would express myself rather more forcefully, if you get my drift." He took a sip from his glass of soda water. "But you're not here to listen to my gripes about the state of art today. Let's leave these two scoundrels and I'll introduce you to the group over there."

He pointed to a trio of people standing in the far corner of the room, which comprised the local doctor, Jeremy Fitzpatrick—a man in his sixties who was completely bald—and two middle-aged sisters, May and Isabella Frith-Stratton. The pair of rather odd-looking women were complaining about the midges—they were simply terrible, such a pest, they said—and were pleading with the doctor to tell them how to prevent being attacked by the beastly creatures.

"Sorry to interrupt," said Kinmuir, addressing the Frith-Strattons. "I thought you'd like to meet a fellow author." Their faces lit up for a

moment before Kinmuir added, “And Mrs. Christie is about to get married. I’m right in saying that the wedding is going to be in Edinburgh next month?”

“Yes, it is,” I said. “I’m here with my cousin, Mr. John Davison, to have a few days’ holiday before the ceremony.”

The sisters looked at me with an indifference that bordered on the hostile.

Robin Kinmuir cleared his throat and changed the subject. “As I was saying, Mrs. Christie here is a writer of detective stories. May and Isabella, who are twin sisters, write romance novels under... What name was it again?”

“Maybella Acton,” said May, pronouncing the name as if she were reading it from a catalogue. “*A Heart United? Force of Destiny?*”

I was none the wiser. And although I smiled with enthusiasm, no doubt my ignorance was quite obvious to the sisters.

“Perhaps the best-known is *Bonds of Blood* and its sequel, *Bonds of Love*,” added Isabella in a more natural manner. “But they’ve all proved very popular, particularly in the lending libraries. We find that people want to read something that takes them out of themselves, books that offer escape and romance. They don’t want to be reminded of the general awfulness of life, of brutality—of death.”

The Frith-Stratton sisters had obviously taken a dislike to me. An awkward silence descended on our little group, one that was broken by the doctor.

“Living out here and covering such a wide area, I don’t get much time to read at all,” said Dr. Fitzpatrick in his thick Scottish accent. “I’m afraid my reading material is confined to my patients’ notes and the occasional page of the *Lancet*.” I noticed that he had kind eyes and a warm smile. He had, it seemed, the perfect bedside manner of the country doctor, not like some of the more sinister medical men I had come across in the past.

“How did you and Mr. Kinmuir become friends?” I asked him, after the two sisters broke away from the group and accompanied Kinmuir across the room.

“Now, that’s a funny story,” he said, his eyes glinting with delight. “I’m not sure Kinmuir would thank me for telling you this, but he’s out of earshot...”

As I listened to the anecdote—which involved a drunken Kinmuir, a bolting horse, and a nasty bog—I noticed that there was a solitary figure standing by the window with his back to the room. From him there emanated an air of mystery.

The doctor continued to talk of his friend. “Of course, Kinmuir drank a good deal back then. But he managed to cut back—not like me, I’m afraid, drinking whisky as if there’s no tomorrow—and now he’s as fit as a fiddle, as they say. I examined him only a few weeks back and he’s as strong as an ox. I told him he’ll outlive the lot of us.”

But my attention had wandered to the enigmatic man whose face I could not see.

“That is amusing,” I said. “Now, tell me, Dr. Fitzpatrick, who is that man over by the window?”

The doctor followed my gaze. “The dark-haired one? I believe he is called—let me see if I remember—Mr. Simon Peterson. Seems a decent enough chap. Keeps himself very much to himself, though, as you can see. Not one for small talk.”

“Do you know anything more about him?”

“Only that he’s been here for a few days. Works in shipping, I believe. Very popular with the ladies. Sorry, that’s all I know. Why?” Dr. Fitzpatrick took another swig from his tumbler of whisky and said in a conspiratorial manner, “You don’t think he’s about to commit a... a *murder*, do you?”

“My imagination does run away with me at times,” I said, humoring him.

He lowered his voice. “And, by the way, don’t worry about the Miss Frith-Strattons. I think they took against you a little because of the news of your forthcoming nuptials. My impression is that they write about romance precisely because they don’t... well, because they don’t have very much of it in their own lives.”

“That is very sad,” I said.

“Rather like you and murder,” he said, laughing. “You write about it because you’ve never experienced it yourself. Or, rather, I hope that’s the case.”

“Indeed,” I said, trying to smile.

I recalled the words Davison had spoken to me when we first arrived at Dallach Lodge. Did someone really intend to commit a murder here? And if so, what could we do to prevent it?

Due to the death threats against Kinmuir, Davison had arranged to sleep in his dressing room on a camp bed. The next morning my friend reported that, despite the older man’s awful snores, the night had passed peacefully. He said that he would continue to watch Kinmuir throughout the day, and it was my job to try to make a few gentle inquiries into the guests.

First I intended to explore the kitchens. I knew that one of the easiest ways to kill someone was by poisoning. I had tried to talk to the cook, Mrs. Baillie, the previous night—I said I was interested in seeing how she prepared certain Scottish recipes—but she was too busy to see me. Then she sent word that she had a few minutes to spare after breakfast.

Breakfast was a lavish affair with a sideboard full of silver dishes of kedgerie, bacon, sausage, black pudding, and eggs: poached, scrambled, and fried. Everyone was there apart from Mr. Peterson, who apparently preferred to take his breakfast in his room, and Dr.

Fitzpatrick, who had stayed at the house overnight but left early to attend to a sick child in a nearby village.

I took a minute or so to study those gathered around the long table. Mrs. Buchanan, the actress, seemed to radiate light, but how much of her character was real, how much a self-conscious performance? Vivienne Passerini, the striking botanist, was like none of the stuffy English girls I had met: there was a spirit of adventure about her that I liked and admired. Then there was the boyish pair James Kinmuir and Rufus Phillips, the young painter; they seemed as close as friends could be. And what was I to make of the Frith-Stratton sisters, Isabella and May? I noticed that May followed Isabella around like her shadow, walking to the sideboard behind her, picking up the same dishes, eating at the same time. The effect was like watching a strange and unsettling mime act.

My eyes came to settle on Robin Kinmuir, dressed in his tweeds, looking the part of laird of the land. As he tucked into a hearty breakfast, no one would ever guess that he had received a threat to his life. Perhaps the presence of Davison was doing something to soothe his nerves.

Davison watched Robin Kinmuir carefully—as he had at dinner the night before—making sure that no one leant over him to put something into his food or swapped his water glass or coffee cup for another. If a killer was present in the house, and if they chose to use poisoning as their preferred method of murder, it seemed unlikely that they would risk corrupting a whole dish. And there was only so much Davison could do. For instance, he could hardly examine everything placed in front of Kinmuir; neither did it seem fair—or prudent—to test what he was about to eat on the two black Labradors that had the run of the house. Everything Davison and I did had to be done with the greatest subtlety; we could not risk our cover being exposed.

After finishing his breakfast, Robin Kinmuir started to tell the table about the history of the ruined castle that sat on the ridge above Dal-lach Lodge. Although it looked medieval, in fact the family seat of the Kinmuirs dated only to the nineteenth century. The original mansion house, built in the seventeenth century, was extended by the

famous Scottish architect James Gillespie Graham in the early nineteenth century. Thirty years later a fire destroyed a good deal of that building and a new mock-Gothic wing was added. By the end of the nineteenth century, when yet another fire consumed the building, the Kinmuirs decided to abandon the castle for the baronial lodge, which had also been designed and extended by Gillespie Graham.

“What with all the fires, it seems somewhat ironic that the family motto is ‘*Resurgere ex cineribus*,’?” Robin Kinmuir observed. “‘To rise again out of the ashes.’?”

As the polite laughter died down, Mrs. Buchanan looked along the table. “It looks rather murky outside,” she said. “What are our plans for the day? Oh, there’s no point asking you, Robin: no doubt you’ll begin your day by taking the dogs for a walk. But what about the rest of you?”

James Kinmuir was the first to answer. “Rufus was keen to go riding, but tragically we don’t have any horses: they all succumbed to some terrible infection and they haven’t been replaced yet,” he told us. “So instead it’s going to be a spot of shooting. We thought we might try for grouse, since it’s the first day of the season.”

“Well, don’t think you’re going to take the dogs,” said Robin Kinmuir.

“Don’t worry, Uncle, I won’t spoil your morning routine,” said James in a good-natured manner.

“I’ve always thought the grouse such a curious-looking bird,” said Rufus Phillips. “What with that bright red comb over its eye which looks almost like a wound. Of course, I’ve only seen them in paintings and in books, never in real life.” He looked at Robin Kinmuir, who was buttering a piece of toast. “Do you think we’ll be in luck?”

“I would think so,” Robin Kinmuir replied. “There will be plenty hiding in heather on the moor. James will show you. You should bag a few for supper, that’s for sure.”



“I disapprove of shooting, as Mr. Kinmuir well knows,” said Mrs. Buchanan. “It’s barbaric. I can’t stand the sight or the taste of meat. Like my dear friend George Bernard Shaw, I’m a vegetarian. If any of you are interested, I’d be more than happy to explain the reasoning, and I believe I have a few pamphlets upstairs. We can all lead perfectly healthy lives without eating animals.” As James bit into a piece of sausage, Mrs. Buchanan cast him a hostile look before turning to me and asking, “And, Mrs. Christie, what does the day have in store for you?”

“I thought I might take a walk down to the loch or up to the ruined castle,” I said. “I’m intrigued to see it for myself after hearing its history from Mr. Kinmuir.”

“I might join you,” she said. “I once took part in a performance of *Hamlet* in a ruined castle in Denmark. Absolutely thrilling... quite uncanny. One could almost feel Prince Hamlet’s ghost reach out and touch the back of one’s neck.”

“It must have been a wonderful experience,” said Miss Passerini. “Gertrude is such a fascinating part.”

Mrs. Buchanan expressed her displeasure with a quick flash of the eyes. “I played Ophelia, my dear,” she said with a thin, withering smile.

“Oh, I didn’t mean to imply that...,” said Miss Passerini. “It was just...”

I excused myself from the table and made my way through the hall towards the servants’ steps to the kitchens below. Mrs. Baillie was sitting at a well-scrubbed table, enjoying a welcome cup of tea, while a couple of girls busied themselves clearing up the breakfast pots and pans. I introduced myself and told the cook that the dinner and breakfast were quite superb. I informed her of my forthcoming wedding and the fact that I wanted to extend my repertoire in the kitchen.

“You know what they say: ‘The way to a man’s heart...’ and all that.” Mrs. Baillie spoke with such a heavy Scottish accent that at

first I didn't understand her. She must have been used to seeing the rather blank, stupid look that crossed my face, because she repeated the sentence, enunciating her words as she did so.

My real purpose was to ask about the arrangements of the kitchen, who handled the ingredients and prepared the food, and how it was transported to the dining room. Then I hoped to find out a little more about the guests staying at Dallach Lodge. But first I needed to gain her trust. I suspected that the way to Mrs. Baillie's heart was through her cooking, and I was right. As soon as she started to talk about the cuisine of Scotland and the Highlands, she could not stop. She described recipes passed down from her mother and grandmother and how she made her own sausages, of which Mr. James seemed particularly fond.

“So much so that he's recently taken to nabbing them at breakfast,” she said, laughing. “I've told him the next time I find him stealing, he'll feel the back of my hand on his behind. I don't care how old he is.”

She went on to describe a range of dishes that I had never heard of, including Cullen skink, clapshot, cabbie claw, potted hough, and stovies.

“?‘Stovies’?” I asked.

“Tatties: potatoes that are slow-cooked in a kind of stew with meat — anything you've got left over from the night before,” she explained. “It's a good use of the leftovers when it's only the master and—”

Just then we heard a loud scream from upstairs. At the sound of the noise, one of the servant girls standing by the sink dropped the ceramic bowl that she had been cleaning and it smashed into pieces on the flagstone floor. Mrs. Baillie's monologue came to an abrupt end and her mouth gaped like one of the dead fish I had spotted on the cold slab, gutted and ready to be cooked for lunch. I stood up, quickly thanked her, and ran up the back stairs and into the hall. In front of the door stood Mrs. Buchanan, who was in a state of shock.

Her face was pale and her lips had almost turned blue. Her eyes seemed empty and hollow. I took her arm.

“What on earth has happened?” I wanted to ask about Robin Kinmuir but knew that I couldn’t mention his name in case the killer was watching; I had to pretend I had no advance knowledge that a crime might be committed. Where was Davison? Wasn’t he supposed to have been looking after Kinmuir. “Mrs. Buchanan?”

She tried to speak, but no words came out of her mouth.

By this point the others had started to gather.

“What’s wrong?” asked Isabella Frith-Stratton.

“We heard a scream,” added her frightened sister, just behind her on the stairs.

Through the front door came Vivienne Passerini, an unusual flush to her sallow complexion. “I heard a gunshot,” she said. “But I didn’t think anything of it because of the grouse shoot.”

At this, Mrs. Buchanan started to wail again. She put her hands on her ears so as to drown out the noise of her own screams.

“Mrs. Buchanan, you must tell me what you’ve seen,” I said, grabbing one of her hands.

Simon Peterson appeared at the top of the stairs, still in his dressing gown. He had an athletic, muscular body and his face and mustache bore traces of shaving cream, which only seemed to accentuate his handsome features. “What the hell is going on?” he demanded.

As I started to explain that we weren’t quite sure, another figure entered the house. Rufus Phillips looked like he had aged a good ten years. Dirt and something else—something that looked like blood—were smeared across his smart tweeds. As he opened his mouth to speak, James Kinmuir appeared in the doorway. Tears ran down his face and his blond hair was ruffled and full of mud. His white shirt and tweed jacket were soaked through with blood.

“I didn’t mean to... I was out shooting with Rufus... I saw a grouse —or thought I did,” he stammered, trying to catch his breath. It was difficult for him to get his words out. “I fired and...” He placed a hand against the door to support himself, then slumped to his knees. “He wasn’t supposed to be there. He wasn’t supposed to...”

“What the hell have you done?” asked Mr. Peterson. “Who was there? Who was it?”

“It was Robin—Uncle Robin—and I’ve killed him,” said James.