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Amnesia

Written by Michael Ridpath

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AMNESIA

Michael Ridpath



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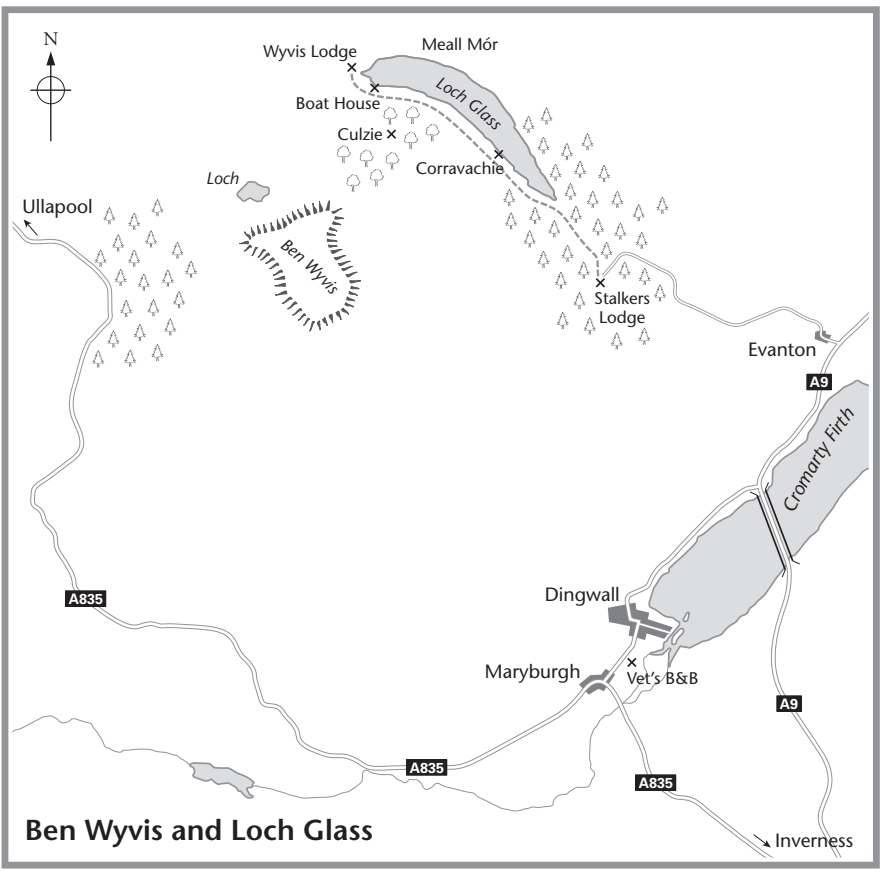
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In memory of my late uncle, Michael Ridpath, ornithologist,
of Mundaring, Western Australia


N
Wyvis Lodge
Meall Mór
Loch Glass
Boat House
Culzie
Corravachie
Loch
Ullapool
Ben Wyvis
Stalkers Lodge
Evanton
A9
Cromarty Firth
A835
Dingwall
Maryburgh
Vet's B&B
A9
A835
A835
Inverness
Ben Wyvis and Loch Glass

PART ONE

PROLOGUE

Friday 5 March 1999, Wyvis, Scotland

He heard a cry, almost a scream, cut short. Then the rapid tap of feet on floorboards.

'Jesus Christ! What happened to you? How long have you been there like that? Oh, you poor wee man!'

The voice was Scottish, female, concern verging on panic.

He was lying on something hard. He was cold. And his head hurt like hell. He tried to open his eyes but he couldn't.

He felt a gentle nudge on his arm. And then a hand on his cheek. Warmth.

'You're so cold! Are you alive, pet? Wake up! Open your eyes!'

His eyelids felt as if they were zipped shut, but he wanted to reassure the woman before panic overwhelmed her.

He forced them open. He saw a pair of tight blue jeans. And a concerned, lined face beneath short blond hair. A tattoo of a Chinese character in green ink on a collarbone.

'Thank Christ! You *are* alive!'

He tried to say 'yes', but all he could manage was a groan.

His head hurt. A herd of elephants wearing stilettoes was performing a dance at the back of his brain.

'You're freezing. Stay there! I'll call an ambulance.'

The woman disappeared from view, and he heard her voice on a telephone.

He was lying on a wooden floor. He lifted his cheek. It was sticky. Blood – he could smell it, the tang of iron, of rust.

He tried to haul himself upright, but he couldn't. He tried harder. Somehow he pulled himself up onto his elbows, dragged himself a couple of feet across the floor, and twisted round so that his back was resting against the wall.

He was in a hallway. Above him, a steep, spiral wooden staircase, shiny with wear, curved into darkness. Next to him, a patch of dry brown spread across the floorboards. He raised his hand to his cheek, and then to the back of his skull. His head was caked in the stuff. The elephants were still dancing.

The woman returned, and squatted on the bottom step of the staircase staring at him. She was tall, long-limbed, about forty. Kind blue eyes. 'Don't worry. They're on their way.'

He tried to say something. He couldn't. He tried harder.

'Who are you?' he managed to croak.

The woman's eyebrows shot up in surprise. 'Och, you know who I am! I'm Sheila. Sheila MacInnes? From the Stalker's Lodge?'

'I don't know who you are,' he said.

Then another, more worrying question occurred to him.

'Who am I?'

1

Saturday 13 March 1999, St Andrews

Clémence huddled deep into her coat against the wind threading its way through the university buildings from the North Sea, only a quarter of a mile away. One day into the spring vacation, the town was already almost empty of students. Clémence was staying on: she lived in Hong Kong, and for one reason or another, she couldn't go back there for the holiday. She had just dropped her friend Livvie off at Edinburgh Airport to join a university ski trip somewhere in Austria. Livvie had said Clémence could borrow her car while she was away, provided Clémence picked her up the following week.

It was very nice of her – the car was a cute yellow Clio, brand new – but where would you drive to in Scotland alone in the middle of March?

She had also dropped off her boyfriend Callum, who was taking the bus back to Glasgow, where he was going to be working in a pub to earn much-needed spending money. They had only been going out three weeks, but Clémence would miss him. The university discouraged students from staying on in the vacation, and she would be virtually alone in St Andrews. She had considered asking Callum whether she could stay with him, but it was too early in their relationship for that. Maybe she would visit him for a couple of days over the weekend.

She had moped in her room in halls for an hour, and then set off for the university library. If she was going to be stuck in St Andrews, she may as well use the time productively. She had fallen behind with her

work: a bit too much socializing, a bit too much drinking, way too much faffing about. Callum. Nothing drastic, nothing that a couple of weeks in the library wouldn't sort out.

St Andrews was an ancient university of beautiful buildings, but its library looked like a car park built in the 1960s. Yet it was familiar, it was welcoming, and it was out of the wind.

She was walking through the entrance to the entry gates, when her phone buzzed. She checked the number and grinned. An American international dialling code. New York.

'Tante Madeleine!' she said. 'How are you?'

Tante Madeleine was actually a great-aunt, the sister of Clémence's long-dead French grandmother. It was Aunt Madeleine who had paid for Clémence to go to boarding school in England, and who was now paying for St Andrews. Clémence's own parents were teachers, divorced from each other, and earning little money. More importantly, it was Aunt Madeleine who cared about her.

They spoke in French. 'Oh, Clémence, darling, I am so worried. I need to ask you a favour, a very great favour. I hope you can help me?'

'Of course,' said Clémence, more worried herself by how long the favour would take to explain than what it actually was. International calls from Aunt Madeleine ate up her phone credit.

'There is an old friend of mine, of your grandparents, called Alastair Cunningham. Have you heard of him?'

'Maybe,' said Clémence. 'I think he visited us in Morocco when I was little.'

'That's right. Well, he knew your grandfather at university, then became a doctor and emigrated to Australia. Anyway, he came back to Britain last year and now he lives in the highlands of Scotland in a little cottage somewhere.'

'Do you want me to visit him?' said Clémence. 'I can. It's the spring vacation and I can borrow a car.'

'It's more than that,' said Madeleine. 'Last week he fell down the stairs and hit his head. It is serious: so serious he has lost almost all

of his memory. He's in Inverness Hospital, and he has no relatives still alive in this country, nor friends for that matter.'

'Poor man!'

'Exactly. Somehow the hospital got hold of my number, and I am planning to fly over to Scotland to organize things for him. But could you fetch him from the hospital in Inverness and take him back to his cottage and look after him? It will only be for a few days. I remember you saying that you volunteered at the old people's home?'

'All I do is read to them,' said Clémence. 'I don't know how to look after them.'

'The hospital say he is ready to go home,' said Madeleine. 'I don't think it will be too difficult.' She paused. 'I know it is a lot to ask, Clémence, and I would understand if you said no. I can probably employ a nurse to stay with him, but I feel so bad for the poor man.'

Clémence did too. She had a reputation for being a bit of a ditz, partially justified, and she wasn't confident of her ability to take care of a sick old person. But her Aunt Madeleine rarely asked her for anything – *never* asked her for anything – and Clémence owed the old lady so much.

Besides which, St Andrews, a town she normally loved, was already beginning to depress her.

'All right, Aunt Madeleine. I will go and pick him up tomorrow.'

They discussed details and then Clémence hung up, a little worried about what the next few days would bring, but pleased she still had some phone credit left.

Sunday 14 March 1999, Raigmore Hospital, Inverness

'Who the hell are you?'

The old man's brown eyes stared up at her, shrewd, angry but also unsure. Vulnerable.

'Clémence,' she answered, in as encouraging a tone as she could muster.

'Do I know you?'

'No. I mean yes. Sort of. We met when I was little. In Morocco. But not since then.'

The old man took in the information from his position propped up in the hospital bed. He looked a tough old bird: firm wrinkles, a square jaw with a cleft chiselled at its centre, a thinning grey buzz-cut mocked by dense shaggy eyebrows. His eyes were sharp. Demanding. But unsure.

'Are we related?'

'No,' said Clémence. 'I'm Madeleine's niece, or rather great-niece. Madeleine Giannelli? A French lady? An old friend of yours?'

'I know who Madeleine Giannelli is,' said the old man, with a flash of irritation.

The nurse, an Irish woman who had been hovering behind Clémence's shoulder, leaned forward. 'Be nice to the girl, Alastair. She doesn't know what you can remember and what you can't.'

The irritation switched from Clémence to the nurse. Then the old man grunted. 'They tell me Madeleine is an old friend,' he said. 'I have to believe them. So far she is the only friend of mine they have discovered. I have no family, apparently.'

Clémence glanced at one end of a neat scar, the stitch marks still visible, that sneaked up the side of the old man's skull from his pillow.

'She'll be here as soon as she can,' said Clémence. 'She lives in America. I'll bring you home and take care of you until she arrives.'

The old man looked Clémence up and down doubtfully and grunted. The nurse clucked her disapproval.

Clémence thought the old man had a point.

'Ah, here's Dr Stenhouse,' the nurse said.

Clémence turned to see a small dark-haired woman in a white coat moving towards her briskly.

'Are you here to take Dr Cunningham home?'

It took a moment for Clémence to realize that the doctor was talking about the old man, not one of her colleagues. 'Er, yes,' she said.

'Can I have a word before you go?'

'Of course,' said Clémence.

'I'll get Alastair ready,' said the nurse.

Clémence followed the doctor away from the beds to a quiet corner beyond the nurses' station.

'I'm very glad you can do this,' said the doctor. 'It's not just that we need the bed. Dr Cunningham may be eighty-three, but he was a very fit man when he came in here, and if we keep him in too long, his muscles will atrophy and we'll never get him out of bed.'

'Has he recovered fully?' Clémence asked.

'Physically, yes,' said the doctor. 'He fell on the stairs and the trauma was quite severe. He was unconscious for several hours and, as you can see, he has suffered severe memory loss. He had a subdural haematoma which we had to drain surgically. An MRI showed that he had sustained at least two previous head injuries in the past; your aunt says he used to play rugby, which might have been responsible. He was admitted nine days ago, but he hasn't complained of a headache for three days.'

'What about the wound?'

'It's healing nicely. Bring him back next week and we'll take the stitches out.'

'Can he remember anything at all?' Clémence asked.

'He has retrograde amnesia, which means he has lost the ability to recall events in his past dating back to his childhood. He can remember his parents, but not his late wife, for example. But he can remember everything required for day-to-day life. He could probably drive a car, although I don't recommend you try that one out. He doesn't remember going to medical school or being a GP, but he has a detailed knowledge of medicine.'

'Could it be Alzheimer's?' Clémence asked.

'No, it's definitely trauma. Alzheimer's doesn't show up in scans, but Mrs Giannelli said he was alert mentally the last time she spoke to him, and showed no sign of memory loss. Although, if he did have incipient Alzheimer's, then a head injury could easily make things worse.'

'Will he get any of these memories back?'

'Probably. That's where you come in. Jogging his memory is the best way to encourage recall, but that's difficult when there seems to be no one in this country who knows him. But do the best you can. That's why it's important to take him back to his home. He moved into a cottage on the Wyvis Estate up by Loch Glass last year and shut himself away. The stalker's wife up there, Sheila MacInnes, is responsible for renting out the cottage and cleaned it for him once a week. Fortunately, she pops in almost every day to check on him, and she discovered him at the bottom of the stairs.'

'That is lucky.'

'She says there are plenty of papers there and photos; she found your aunt's address on a letter on his desk. Try to talk through those with him. Do you know much about him?'

'Almost nothing,' Clémence said. 'Only the little bit my great-aunt has told me.'

'Well, phone her and find out what you can. When your aunt gets over here in a few days, I'm sure she will be able to help a lot. Now, make an appointment with me back here for early next week, and we will see what progress he has made and take care of those stitches. The district nurse will check in on you to make sure he's all right, but I don't anticipate any problems.'

She might not, but Clémence did. Stuck in a cottage with a grumpy old man who could barely remember his own name suddenly seemed like a big responsibility for a twenty-year-old. It scared her. Maybe this wasn't such a good idea after all.

The doctor seemed to sense her doubts. 'Mrs Giannelli said you had experience working with old people?'

'Oh, yes,' said Clémence, smiling. 'Yes, I do.' Reading to them. Not feeding them or wiping their bums or washing them.

No. This wasn't going to work. 'Look. Can't he just stay here for a few days until Madeleine arrives?' Clémence said. 'It might be better for him in the long run.'

Dr Stenhouse's lips pursed. 'When fit and healthy old people have severe injuries one of two things can happen. Either we and they give up and they spend the rest of their life in a bed in a home somewhere, or we pull our fingers out and help them and they recover. I've seen people take the easy option too often, not just doctors, but relatives and the patients themselves. You can never be sure in these cases, but in my judgement, there is a chance that if you take Dr Cunningham back to his home and talk to him and jog his memory, he might recover. That's not certain by any means, but it's a possibility. He's a brave man, not the kind of person to take the easy way out. But if you leave him here to rot, he will do just that. That is for sure.'

Pull yourself together, girl, the doctor was saying. Fair enough, thought Clémence. She didn't know the old man, but he needed her help and she should give it.

'OK,' she said. 'I'll do it. Let's go back and get him.'

2

Clémence drove north out of Inverness, the old man silent beside her. They were soon on the high modern bridge crossing the Moray Firth, with the jumble of the port of Inverness beneath them on one side, and an oil rig lurking in the firth on the other. In the distance, to the north-west, stood a broad-shouldered, white-caped, mountain.

'Is that Ben Wyvis?' Clémence asked.

'How should I know?' said the old man. 'I didn't even know I was in Scotland till they told me.'

'Take a look at the map,' said Clémence. 'It's on the back seat.'

The old man hesitated, and for a moment Clémence thought he would refuse, then he twisted around, retrieved the map and examined it. She suddenly had an awful thought that his reluctance might be because he had forgotten how to map read.

He hadn't. 'We're on the A9, aren't we?' he said.

'I hope so,' said Clémence.

'Yes, that's Ben Wyvis.'

'Your cottage is on the other side of that, by Loch Glass.'

'I see it. On the map, it looks like it's in the middle of nowhere.'

'It does, doesn't it? Is that coming our way?'

Behind the mountain, large dark clouds were gathering.

'I think it is.'

Great, thought Clémence. She wasn't a confident driver, and navigating narrow mountain roads in a storm with a grouchy old man beside her didn't sound like much fun.

They were on the north side of the Moray Firth now, on the Black Isle, the peninsula of rich farmland between the Moray and the

Cromarty firths: low rolling hills, fields of green and brown, scattered whitewashed buildings with grey roofs.

'So what do you know about yourself?' Clémence asked.

'Nothing,' said the old man. 'Absolutely nothing.'

'Oh come on,' said Clémence. 'You must know something. We have to start somewhere. Did you speak to Aunt Madeleine?'

'No,' said the old man. Clémence waited.

The old man sighed. 'She told the nurses I was born in 1916, grew up in Yorkshire, went to Oxford University, became a GP back in Yorkshire, and then I emigrated to Western Australia in the nineteen sixties. I got married and then divorced. No children. And then for some reason I came back here last year and rented a cottage at this place called Wyvis. Why I suddenly did that I have no idea.'

'Sometimes people want to go back to their roots, don't they?'

'Yes, but I never lived in Scotland! Or at least I assume I didn't. I don't know, do I? I don't know anything!'

The frustration burned in his voice.

'But you remember Yorkshire?'

'Yes,' said the old man. 'Or at least the Yorkshire of my childhood.'

'Well?'

'Well what?'

'How was that? The Yorkshire of your childhood? Where did you live?'

The old man looked at Clémence sharply. 'You don't know what it's like, do you? You're just a child. You can't possibly know what it's like – to have forgotten everything.' The bitterness oozed from his voice. 'I don't see how they think you can help me. This is just a waste of time.'

Clémence realized that unless she did something about the old man's attitude soon, the next week was going to be a nightmare. They were passing a turn-off to a small village. She swerved off the main road and followed a narrow lane for fifty yards, until she came to a gate, where she pulled over. Two shaggy red cows with long sharp horns looked up to study the car from beneath unkempt fringes.

'Hey! What are you doing?'

Clémence switched the engine off and turned towards the old man.

She kept her voice calm but firm. 'Dr Cunningham. You're quite right, I can have no idea what it's like to be you. But remember what the doctor at the hospital said? It would be easy for all of us to give up on you. You spend the rest of your life in a hospital bed, watching *Countdown* on TV, without knowing who you really are. You forget how to walk, how to look after yourself, and everyone loses interest in your life. You lose interest in your life. So at some point it stops and everyone just gets on without you. Do you want that?'

The old man had raised his bushy eyebrows. Now he lowered them. But he didn't answer her question.

'Because if you do, I can take you back to the hospital right now. But if you don't . . .' She smiled, and softened her voice. 'I'll help you. I'll help you get better. I'll help you remember.'

The old man glared at her.

'Now. Shall I take you back to hospital?'

For a moment Clémence thought the old man was going to say yes. Then he closed his eyes. He sighed. 'No,' he whispered.

'Say that again. Louder.'

'No,' the old man repeated, looking at Clémence. There was anger in his eyes, but there was also need. He did need her help.

'So when I get back on the main road and ask you questions about your life, you will have a go at answering them?'

The old man nodded slowly. 'All right. I will.'

Clémence examined his face to check whether he meant what he said. He seemed sincere.

'OK. Let's go.' She executed a five-point turn in the lane, and within a minute they were back on the main road heading north.

'All right. So tell me about Yorkshire.'

The old man said nothing. Frustrated, Clémence took her eyes off the road to shoot him a quick glance. But he seemed preoccupied, thinking. She decided to let him.

Eventually, he spoke. 'We lived in a little town called Pateley Bridge on the River Nidd. My father was a doctor there. We had a grey stone house with ivy growing up the outside to my bedroom window. I can remember that clearly. I can remember my little sister Joyce.' He paused, but this time Clémence sensed not reluctance, but pleasure at the memory. 'I can remember her giggle; she used to giggle constantly. I loved to make her laugh. I used to do impressions of her friends, or the teachers at the school. Even politicians on the wireless. I could do a good Ramsay MacDonald, I remember.'

'Go on.'

'What?'

'Go on. Do your Ramsay MacDonald.'

The old man hesitated and then cleared his throat. He spoke in prim, clipped Scottish tones: '"My friends, we are beginning a contest which will be one of the most historical in the story of our country."'

'Very good!'

'How do you know? Do you even know who Ramsay MacDonald was?'

'I certainly do,' said Clémence. 'Prime minister before the war. Labour? No, Liberal.'

'Labour and then the National Government. Bit of a twit, quite frankly. Born working class, did his best to die a toff.'

'Do you know who the current prime minister is?' Clémence asked.

'I do, as a matter of fact, but only because the doctors told me. Some chap called Tony Blair. But I do remember the one before him, or maybe it was two before him. Margaret Thatcher. And James Callaghan before her, and Harold Wilson and Edward Heath.'

'Not bad,' said Clémence.

'And I know who won the 1966 election in Australia. Harold Holt for the Liberals beat Arthur Calwell for Labor. Now isn't it strange that I can remember that, but I can't remember the name of my own wife?'

'Yeah. That's seriously weird.'

'The wiring in my brain is a complete mess. I need a good electrician. Do you think you're a good electrician, Clémence?'

'An expert,' she said, knowing she wasn't.

They drove on. Then he smiled. 'There is so much I remember of my childhood. I have been going over it all in my mind in bed in the hospital. I went away to boarding school. I played rugger, I was good at it, I played centre three-quarter for the first XV. Then . . .'

He sighed. 'Then it just disappears. The doctors think I might have had a concussion at school, which is when the wiring in my brain first became damaged. Who knows? I certainly don't.'

'We'll get it back,' said Clémence.

The old man frowned. 'I hope so,' he said. 'I really hope so.'

They drove on, the light grey of the sky darkening. Soon rain was splattering the windscreen.

'This last week has been very odd,' said the old man, staring straight ahead at the rain. 'Without memories, you don't know who you are. I have to accept who other people say I am. They say I'm a doctor. I know medical things, I know that the metacarpals are fixed to the distal carpal bones, so I must be a doctor. They say I have spent much of my life in Australia. I know that the Mundaring librarian is called Jeanette, so I must have lived in Australia.'

'It must be weird,' said Clémence. 'But maybe we can figure out where Mundaring is, why you know the library. Then we can piece together that part of your life. And then another part, and another, until it all makes sense.'

The old man smiled. 'Thank you for your help, Clémence. I'm sorry I was so ungrateful back there. It is actually good to have someone from my old life – my real life – with me. But sometimes it just seems too difficult. And it's frightening. I mean, why don't I have any friends in this country? And if that's the case, why am I here? What sort of person am I? Am I kind? Am I generous? Am I mean? I know I'm bad-tempered, but maybe that's just the frustration of my situation. And why did my wife leave me? Was I unbearable to live

with? Or was she? Did I have an affair? Did she? Am I trustworthy? Can I trust myself?'

'God, I see what you mean,' said Clémence.

'And what happened to Joyce? She was younger than me; is she dead? I hope not.'

She must be, thought Clémence, or someone would have found her. As must be his parents, obviously.

'If I were a young man, perhaps I could start a new life, a new personality. But I'm eighty-three! Or so they say. Far too old to start a new life. And barely enough time to recover the old.'

Clémence looked across at the old man. He met her glance. His eyes were uncertain. How would she feel if she were him? Lost. Afraid. Alone.

They drove on in silence, the rain turning to sleet. They came to the long, low bridge over the Cromarty Firth, with the town of Dingwall only just visible through the murk. She had an idea.

'Who was your best friend at school?' she said.

'Why do you want to know?'

'We've got to start somewhere. Let's begin with what you do know.'

The old man nodded. 'All right,' he said, smiling. 'I know the answer to that. Porky Bakewell. His real name was Dennis, but we called him Porky because he was so thin.'

And he told her all about Porky, and what they used to do together. Damming a beck on Greenhow Hill, exploring the forbidden disused lead mines, drawing endless maps of an invented tropical island, getting in trouble for trying to lasso Mr Heptonstall's bullocks. As the old man relaxed, his voice became a warm rumble. And actually, the adventures of Porky Bakewell and the young Alastair Cunningham were entertaining, at least to Clémence. One of her skills was that she was easily amused. Lucky that.

They turned off the main road at the village of Evanton, and climbed a steep wooded glen, the sleet turning to snow. After five miles or so, they reached a wooden bridge over what the map told

them was the River Glass. The bridge was guarded by the Stalker's Lodge and a high white metal gate bearing the sign *Wyvis Estate. Private Road.*

The words 'Wyvis Estate' were familiar to Clémence. She wondered if this was the mythical Scottish estate that had once been in her grandfather's family. Maybe she was making false connections, but on the other hand that might explain why the old man had decided to ensconce himself there.

It was a beautiful spot. The snow had stopped. Soft white flakes clung to the needles of the pine trees that surrounded the lodge, and the road was slick with a damp film of it, cut with neatly spaced wheel tracks. The low late-afternoon sun slunk beneath the clouds retreating to the east, and glistened on the drops of water already being squeezed from the thawing snowfall.

Clémence left the old man in the car and, as she approached the lodge, she spotted an envelope on the doorstep bearing an approximation of her name, *CLEMENTS,* printed in large letters. Inside was a note from Sheila MacInnes, enclosing a key and giving directions to the old man's cottage. Mrs MacInnes had stocked the place up with essentials and she promised she would drop by that evening if she could, or else the following morning. She had parked the old man's car in a shed at the lodge to keep it safe.

They followed the track from the Stalker's Lodge and drove through woods beside the stream. According to Mrs MacInnes's directions, they would reach Loch Glass in a mile. Clémence drove carefully; Livvie's Clio was new, and the last thing she wanted to do was to slide off the snow-covered road into a ditch or a tree.

The old man was silent, preoccupied.

'Does any of this seem familiar?' Clémence asked.

'No,' said the old man. 'It's just . . .'

'Just what?'

The old man looked away. 'I'm not sure now I do want to remember my old life.'

'Why not?'

'I don't know,' said the old man. The smile had gone and the wrinkles were firmly set in a frown.

They emerged from the woods and a long curved loch appeared in front of them, a deep royal blue. Loch Glass. On the far side of the loch was a wall of almost vertical rock. Above them, on their side of the water, rose the massive dome of Ben Wyvis, a pure white hump against the pale-blue sky. The sun was low in the sky now, and the great mountain cast a shadow over the top end of the loch, which took on a darker grey colour.

'It's beautiful,' said Clémence. 'No wonder you chose to come up here.'

They drove along the shore of the loch, which seemed to be uninhabited, except for a white cottage on a little spit of land. Smoke was rising from its chimney.

The track was in good condition, luckily for the Clio, which had no trouble gripping through the thin layer of snow. After a couple of miles, the water curved around to the left, and a handsome house came into view at the head of the loch a mile or so ahead. It was large but fell short of meriting the term 'castle'; in fact the gables and stockbroker Tudor timbering gave it a home counties feel. Beside it rose a stand of tall Scots pines, and in front squatted two small square buildings, also of stockbroker Tudor.

'That's not it, is it?' Clémence said, slowing to consult her directions.

'No,' said the old man.

Clémence glanced at him. 'You remember?'

'It's hardly the kind of cottage that an eighty-three-year-old man would live in alone, is it?' he said, with a grin.

'I suppose not,' said Clémence, feeling a little stupid. Indeed, the directions called upon her to turn left up the slope from the loch through a wood.

The wood was a tangle of deciduous trees, clambering up the rock-strewn hill from the loch shore. Their trunks were silver grey, and

they were twisted and heavily laden with thick green moss and white scoops of snow. Their branches ended in a mass of tangled fingers. The track rose steeply for a couple of hundred yards, until it emerged into a clearing, in the centre of which stood a square, trim stone cottage in a simple garden protected by a wooden picket fence. A weather-beaten sign board announced *Culzie* in faded black lettering.