NEIL
LANCASTER

THE BLOOD TIDE



ONE PLACE. MANY STORIES

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THE RIB CHUGGED steadily, its engine low, as it nosed into Loch Torridon. The slack tide and absence of tricky currents allowed the boat to cut soundlessly through the water towards the small beach by the road. Jimmy McLeish had left his Toyota pick-up parked there, trailer still attached, as he often did when he went out fishing or picking up his creels. It wouldn't cause any comment or curiosity, so he should have been relaxed. He was anything but relaxed, though, because this cargo wasn't the usual fish or lobster. This was a whole different ballgame.

The night was dark and moonless, with the inky darkness that you get only in the Highlands, far away from light pollution. If it hadn't been for Jimmy's night vision goggles, he would never have been able to navigate his way in past the rocks. Lights tonight would be a mistake, however, because of what lay in a black bag between his feet. The night was his ally.

Jimmy scanned the scene before him, the ghostly green tinge from the goggles bathing the landscape in an unnatural glow. A few specks of light were visible to the west, where a handful of dwellings dotted the tiny clachans of Fasag and Torridon, but beyond that there was just deep, impenetrable

blackness. This was his neighbourhood. This wild, beautiful coastline was his home.

He took a deep breath and edged the small craft towards the shore of the sea loch, aiming for the tiny single-track road that ran parallel with the edge of the frigid water. He scanned the shore and let out a sigh of relief when he saw the shape of his pick-up truck, a silhouette against the craggy rock that bordered the road. Another vehicle was parked right behind it, as expected. Three brief flashes of a torch indicated he was good to go. That was the agreed signal, so Macca, Scally's right-hand man, was there waiting for him. Jimmy gently increased the engine power, and the small rib picked up speed towards the truck.

His task was childishly simple, so he really shouldn't have been this nervous. He reached into his jacket and pulled out his battered hip-flask. His hands shook as he unscrewed the cap and took a hefty nip of the peaty whisky, enjoying the warmth as it slid down his throat.

The torch flashed again, three times, as he killed the engine and nosed the boat to the shore, close enough to his launch trailer. There was a soft bump as the rib came to a halt on the stony sand and he flipped up the goggles on their harness. The sudden silence was absolute. He looked at the shore but saw nothing in the blackness. There was no one there.

He waited, nestling his goggles down to scan the area, the scenery once again bathed in the soft green light. The beads of sweat on his forehead made the rubber eyepiece feel greasy and slick. He had seen the flashes from the shore, he was certain of it, so where the hell was Macca? He jumped off the small boat into the shallows and pulled the rib ashore, feeling the

gravelly surface grip the keel. He quickly jammed a stake into the ground and lashed a line to it.

He looked again at the new vehicle, which was as dark and foreboding as the landscape surrounding them. As he adjusted the intensifying properties of the goggles, hoping to see something, the landscape gradually lightened. His eyes followed the loch's shore towards Torridon, where his wife would be sitting at home in front of the fire. More than ever, he regretted the blazing row that they'd had before he left. As always it was about money, or the lack of it. He'd stormed out, giving her no indication of where he was going or what he was doing. He hoped that enough cash to pay the outstanding bills and maybe get a nice meal would soften her up. Part of him wished that he could be with her, right now, rather than here in the inky blackness, waiting for the distinctly intimidating Macca. Not for the first time, he wondered if he had made a terrible mistake.

Suddenly a blinding burst of torchlight shone directly on him, immediately overwhelming the image-intensifying properties of the goggles. He gasped and pulled them away from his face. Stars danced in front of his eyes from the sudden assault on his senses. He blinked rapidly, rubbed his eyes, but the flare remained.

When he opened them, he was once again flooded with bright light from a head torch worn by a huge man. This wasn't the short, stocky Macca.

'Jesus, you almost bloody blinded me,' Jimmy said. 'Who the hell are you? I was expecting Macca.'

'I'm Davie, and this is Callum. Scally sent us. You got the bag?' The man was tall and muscular, with a pale face and dark

hair. His accent was pure Glasgow and there was something about it that Jimmy didn't like. The torchlight only partially lit the man's face giving it a ghostly, unpleasant quality. Jimmy's thoughts flashed briefly to the times his brother would scare him by holding a torch underneath his face. He felt a prickle of fear begin to grip at his gut. This didn't feel right.

'Aye, it's here. You got my money?'

'Of course we have, but we need to see the package first,' said Davie, with a smirk.

'But Scally said cash on delivery,' Jimmy said, his voice faltering, unsure where this was going.

'Cash on delivery? You hear this? Mannie here wants paying before we've even seen in the bag.'

The man called Callum stepped forward. He was a full head shorter than Davie and much slimmer, although it was hard to see him properly, the only light sources being Davie's head torch and what looked like a penlight in Callum's hand. 'Oh dear, my friend, is this your first time?' Callum said. 'Nobody gets paid before we check the bag, right? Do be a sport and pass it over then we need to get your rib out of the water, pronto. I know this is a little bit of a backwater, but the local constabulary may venture here. Come on, chop-chop.'

Callum had a surprisingly light, cultured accent that sounded like it came from southern England. Despite the man's light timbre, his voice was laced with sarcasm, and even by the flickering light, Jimmy could see the half-smile, his teeth shining white. The hairs on the back of Jimmy's neck began to prickle. They seemed to be seasoned professionals, but unlike any criminals Jimmy had encountered before. He suddenly felt very exposed.

'Aye well,' Jimmy said, 'give us a hand getting the rib hooked up, but we'll leave the bag where it is until we're out of the water.'

'Fair enough. Give Davie your keys and he'll reverse your truck.'

Jimmy tossed his keys at the big man who caught them and walked away up the beach.

Jimmy eased the wheeled launch ramp into the water and within a few minutes had the rib secured. Davie was soon reversing the pick-up, with trailer attached, onto the beach. Jimmy used the winch to pull the boat and launch trailer onto the back of the vehicle. He then spent a few moments securing the rib with straps, until it was tightly fastened and ready to go.

'Now, old bean. I believe you have something for us?' said Callum. 'Much as we trust you, we'd like to see it before we hand over your fee.'

Jimmy reached into the rib and dragged over the heavy waterproof canoe bag. He heaved it with a grunt onto the stony sand at the side of the truck. Davie quickly unbuckled the bag and reached inside. His head torch lit up the interior with a bright blaze of white light.

'Tiger stamped,' said Davie, a trace of pleasure in his voice.

'Capital. Sling it in the back of the truck then, Jimmy,' said Callum.

With a growing sense of unease, Jimmy did as he was asked, carefully securing the canoe bag, then hefted it onto his shoulder. Callum's torch illuminated the back of the truck. It was bathed in bright white light. Jimmy heaved the bag into the load-bed and it landed with a thump, but didn't lie flat.

'Shift it, man. It needs to be out of sight,' said Callum in an

oddly simpering voice, which managed to combine insincerity and sarcasm in equal measure.

Jimmy suddenly felt cold. He swallowed, reached in and dragged the bag away from a long object that was stopping it from lying flat. The bright torch beam fell on a pale face. Jimmy let out a yelp. A dead body stared up at him with sightless eyes. There was a red-rimmed hole, deep and black, in the centre of its forehead. Even in Jimmy's blind panic, he recognised Macca, Scally's right-hand man. His heart raced and bile rose in his throat. He was about to be ripped off, or worse.

He turned to stare at Davie and Callum as terror thundered towards him like an express truck. They both gazed back, with unpleasant, yet amused looks on their faces. Davie stepped forward. The head torch beam flooded into Jimmy's eyes, blinding him.