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A Cornish Ransom

Chapter Four

They heard the music and the excited buzz of the crowd ringing out along the deserted streets of old Inverness even before they had reached the park. It was less than an hour to midnight and the revellers, especially the younger ones up by the stage, were whipping themselves into a frenzy.

Loveday and Sam joined the families at the back of the site and clapped and cheered as each new band came on stage. The music pulsed louder and louder as the sounds of the bagpipes, guitars and drums filled the air. The crowd swayed in unison, raising their arms and waving them from side to side in time to the music. The cheering was deafening. Loveday tucked her arm into Sam's. They were ten minutes away from midnight and she had a sudden overwhelming urge not to share the arrival of this new year with anyone else but him.

'Come with me,' she called, laughing, as she tugged him away from the crowd.

'Where are we going?' he shouted, trying to make himself heard above the clamour of the excited crowd.

'You'll see,' Loveday said, pulling him further away from the melee. They had extricated themselves from the bodies around them and made their way out of the park and into the street, where it was quieter.

'You know, of course we're going to miss the fireworks,' Sam said.

'No, we won't. We'll see them fine from over here. But the difference is, we'll be on our own. Just the two of us.' She looked up at him. 'Isn't it a better way to welcome the new year, just you and me?'

Sam wasn't about to argue. He stopped and pulled her close to him, looking down at her. 'Loveday Ross, you are such an old romantic,' he said, tipping her chin up and smiling into her eyes. 'Have you any idea how much I love that?'

'I think we're the same, you and me,' she said, gazing back at him.

They walked on, arm in arm, until they reached the river, where they stood for a moment listening to the sounds of the rushing water. Two minutes away was all the hilarity and excitement of the party in the park, but here there was only peace. Loveday took a deep breath, savouring the velvety stillness.

Across the water the hotels that lined the banks opposite were lit up like Christmas trees. No doubt their guests would be enjoying their own Hogmanay parties. All around them the soft sounds of the night made her tingle with the excitement of the occasion. Birds, stirred from their slumber, moved silently amongst the branches of the trees, and Loveday wondered if they sensed a new year was about to begin.

The river slapped against the banks as it sped through the city on its way to the open waters of the Beaully Firth. It all added to the atmosphere, and the sweet sounds of the night. Ahead, Loveday could see the footbridge that spanned the River Ness. She breathed deeply, taking it all in, enjoying the thought there was not another single person in sight. The moment was magical, and it belonged to her and Sam.

They paused when they reached the bridge and listened as the cathedral bells rang out across the city, and the sky was suddenly filled with an explosion of colours from the fireworks.

'Happy New Year, Loveday,' Sam whispered, his lips brushing her ear.

'Happy New Year, Sam,' she said.

They kissed and held each other close.

‘Now you know why I wanted to bring you here,’ she murmured into the shoulder of his tweed coat, moving her arm to indicate the peaceful scene around them. But already doors were beginning to open, and the sounds of celebrations began to drift across the river as first-footers emerged, whisky bottles in hand. Loveday saw a figure crossing the footbridge and frowned as it stopped and looked back at them. For a second she wondered if it was someone they knew, but the person turned away again, and carried on to the other side of the river.

Loveday turned her attention back to Sam. ‘It’s a crazy tradition,’ she explained. ‘but we do it every year. A tall dark man has to be the first person over the threshold at the start of the new year to bring the people who live in the house good luck. The whisky will ensure good health,’ she explained. ‘The black bun and the lump of coal first-footers are also meant to carry, means the family won’t go hungry or cold.’

Sam pursed his lips. ‘OK,’ he said. ‘I get that bit, but why a tall dark man?’

She laughed. ‘It harks back to the days of the Vikings, who were blond. It was never a good thing if one of them turned up at your door at any time.’

‘What happens if a short, fat, fair man turns up to first-foot you?’

Loveday screwed up her face. ‘They wouldn’t dare,’ she said.

She was looking down at the water. Something had caught her eye. She’d assumed at first it was debris from the banks that had become entangled with the supports of the bridge. But it wasn’t. She pointed.

‘Is that what I think it is, Sam?’

Sam peered down at the large dark shape being tugged about by the fast-flowing river. His phone was already in his hand and he was hitting 999.

Loveday's eyes were fixed in horror on the water. She could hear the urgency in Sam's voice beside her.

'Police please,' he said. 'There's a body in the river.'

Loveday was on the phone to her mother as the first police car arrived.

'Happy New Year, darling,' Heather called down the phone. 'Where's your Sam? I was hoping he'd be our first-foot, but Brodie had to do it. We didn't want Ian Ferguson, fine though he is, to be first over the door.'

Loveday grinned at the phone. She could tell her mother, who didn't normally touch alcohol, had already made a start on her annual bottle of Baileys. Ian Ferguson was probably one of the best customers they had. He seemed to spend more of his time propping up the bar than in his cottage next door.

The light-hearted exchange with her mum was in sharp contrast to what was going on around her.

Two uniformed officers had got out of their car and were leaning over the rail, trying to work out if they should catch the body and bring it ashore before CID arrived.

'Is everything all right, Loveday? Nothing's happened, has it?'

Heather Ross's second sight always seemed to emerge in times of stress. If there were anything wrong with her family she would sense it. Her mother had always known when Loveday got into tricky situations in Cornwall.

Sam always insisted Loveday shouldn't get herself tangled up in his cases, but somehow, she always did. People came to her. She was easy to talk to. It wasn't like she had ever tried to poke her nose into Sam's business. But things just happened to her, and they invariably caused problems between them.

Sam could hardly blame her for getting involved in his last case though, considering it was she who had reported the murder.

She'd only been there in the caravan park by St Ives to help convince a friend the place was not haunted. How was she to know an elderly woman and her husband would be murdered? Loveday herself had only just escaped being the killer's next victim.

Heather Ross had sensed her daughter had been in danger then, the same way she sensed something was wrong now.

'Sam and I will be delayed a little, but we should be with you all in about an hour.'

'What's happened?'

'I told you, everything's fine, Mum. It's just that—' She hesitated. 'Well, Sam and I found a body in the river, and now we have to wait to give statements to the police.'

There was a split second of silence, and then Heather said, 'A body? You've found a body?'

'It has nothing to do with us, Mum.' Loveday tried to sound reassuring. 'It's just a body in the river. Absolutely no connection with us. It was bad luck we were the ones who happened to spot it.'

'I wish you hadn't. It sounds absolutely horrible.'

Loveday was also wishing she hadn't noticed the thing in the river.

While she'd been on the phone, another unmarked police car had arrived and two plain-clothes officers were emerging. She walked back to Sam who was with the two uniformed officers by the railings. The plain-clothed officers were introducing themselves as she arrived.

'I'm DI Morris,' the middle-aged, slightly paunchy detective said. 'And this is DS Anderson.' He indicated his younger ginger-haired companion and then turned to Loveday. 'I understand it was you who first spotted the body?'

She nodded. Her eyes were on the river where one of the two uniformed officers was wading into the water with a long branch he'd picked up from the bank and was trying to fish the body out.

They had all turned to watch.

DI Morris shook his head. 'Grim business.' He addressed Sam. 'What were you two doing down here? I thought all the activity was going on across at the park?'

'It got a bit noisy. We strolled along here for some quiet,' Sam said. 'The church bells had struck up at midnight and we were by the bridge wishing each other Happy New Year when Loveday spotted the body.'

Loveday nodded her confirmation.

Sam was still watching the activity around the body. 'Do these young officers know what they're doing down there? They could be causing more damage than doing good.' He frowned and continued, 'Any way of knowing where the body could have gone into the river?'

DI Morris gave him a suspicious look. 'You ask a lot of questions for someone who just happened to be passing.'

'Sorry, I should have introduced myself properly.' He produced his warrant card. 'My partner and I are on holiday, staying with her family on the Black Isle. If I can be of any help, please let me know.'

Loveday frowned, annoyed with him. Sam was offering his services when this was supposed to be *their* time. Her eyes went to the body as it was pulled up onto the bank. She was staring at it.

'We know him,' she said flatly, looking at Sam. 'It's the dolphin man.'

The inspector eyed them. 'And who might the dolphin man be when he's at home?'

'That's just what we called him. We met him this morning at Chanonry Point taking pictures of the dolphins,' Loveday said.

The inspector raised an eyebrow. 'You saw him this morning? So, he was alive this morning?'

'He certainly looked to be,' Sam said, frowning at the man.

'We don't need the jokes, sir. This could be important. I was trying to gauge how long he could have been in the river.' He turned to the uniformed officers at the water's edge. 'Try to drag him up onto the road here. And you, Andy...' He turned to his sergeant. 'You give them a hand.'

The young sergeant, who hadn't been listening to the others' conversation, screwed up his nose in distaste. 'Do I have to, sir? We don't know how long it's been in there. What if it falls apart when we yank it up?'

'Do as you're told, son, and less of the lip,' the portly inspector said.

He turned to Sam. 'Do your subordinates behave like this, Inspector Kitto?'

Sam shrugged. 'They have their moments. Although on the whole they're all pretty good.'

The three officers managed to pull the body up and over the railings. It landed on its back with a sickening thud. Loveday shuddered. She hadn't liked the man, but he hadn't deserved this.

She'd been assuming he'd been murdered, but of course he could simply have fallen in further upstream. However, somehow, she didn't think that was the case. People like him courted trouble. Perhaps he had ogled one woman too many and her husband had taken exception to it? A lot of alcohol was consumed at this time of year. Anything was possible.

She could hear DI Morris ordering his officers to use their police vehicles to block the road either side of where the body now lay.

'It's not often we get this kind of thing in Inverness.' He was shaking his head.

Sam had narrowed his eyes and was peering out into the darkness of the river. 'Any thoughts yet about where he might have gone into the river?'

The older man sighed. 'I'd say the most likely place is somewhere on The Islands.' He nodded upstream. 'It's a collection of little islands linked with footbridges in the middle of the river. Very popular with the tourists and birdwatchers.'

'Birdwatchers?' Sam repeated.

'Yes, it's full of trees.' DI Morris wrinkled his brow. 'We'd better get that checked out.'

He looked up at the approach of a small white van. 'It's the scene of crime boys. The medic should be here directly to give him the once over before we get him over to the mortuary. The only one we could get was a local GP. Lucky to have him on Hogmanay.'

He turned to Sam. 'I don't suppose you noticed anything unusual out at Chanonry Point this morning? I mean anybody behaving strangely? Anybody who seemed to be watching our man?'

'No, not really. Everyone had a camera right enough. Somebody could have been watching him. There's no way of knowing.'

'I don't suppose he gave you any clue as to where he was staying in Inverness?'

Sam's brow furrowed as he tried to remember. 'He told us he had a place somewhere down in Merkinch. Is it the right name? Down by the harbour he said.'

The inspector nodded. 'I suppose we'll have to do a door knock down there. That's going to be fun at this time of year.'

'I have his business card, if it's any use,' Loveday said, fishing the card she had been given earlier at the Tourist Information Centre out of her pocket. 'It's just a phone number I'm afraid, although his name is there.' She handed the card across to the officer.

The inspector squinted at it in the darkness and then reached for his mobile phone and turned on the torch. He shone it at the card. 'Thomas Nankivel.' He frowned. 'Nankivel? No, that's a new one on me.'

'It's a Cornish name, Inspector. The man told us he was from Redruth in Cornwall.'

DI Morris nodded. 'Well, I suppose any information helps, although in this case I would doubt it.'

Loveday was thinking of her mother back at home with the rest of the family. They must be wondering what was going on here. She should ring her again. She turned to the inspector. 'Have you any idea how much longer you'll need to keep us here? It's just that my family—' She didn't finish the sentence.

The man scratched his head and frowned. 'No, you can probably go, so long as you leave your names and address with the sergeant there. We will of course need to speak to you again, but I appreciate you'll want to get back to your family.'

'Thank you, Inspector,' Sam said. 'We appreciate that. We can both come down to the station in the morning.' He checked his watch. 'Or should I say, later in the morning.'

'That would be fine, sir. We might actually know more about this man by then, but perhaps you can fill in some more details for us once you've had time to think about it. Anything you remember overnight I'd be grateful if you could make a note of it and bring the note with you in the morning.'

DI Morris had posted the two uniformed officers at each of the vehicles to stop anyone approaching the site. But the people who gathered to see what was happening weren't really interested in hanging about, not tonight. Everyone had more important fish to fry. It was New Year and there was partying to be done.

Loveday and Sam were quiet as they made their way back to their hired car. It wasn't the way they had planned to celebrate New Year.

'Do you think it could have been a contract killing?' she asked, as they drove over the deserted Kessock Bridge on the way home. Her brow was creased into a frown. 'I mean, being killed and tossed in the river. What's that all about?'

Sam shot her a look. 'We don't even know if this is a suspicious death, let alone a murder, so let's stop talking about contract killings.' He shook his head and she could tell he was frowning. 'Anyway, it's none of our business. It's DI Morris's problem now. Let him get on with it.'

'I was trying to picture how it could have happened,' Loveday said meekly. 'The woman at the Tourist Information Centre said she thought he was a bit funny, a bit of a lecher, I mean. And I certainly got that feeling. Maybe he's upset someone, maybe he's tried to get too friendly with somebody's wife or girlfriend. Maybe her husband or her boyfriend, or her brother, or her father?'

Sam sighed. 'Can you hear yourself, Loveday? Why are you even thinking along those lines? It has absolutely nothing to do with us. Please don't go getting involved here.'

She gave an indignant tut. 'I'm hardly likely to get involved when we're leaving in a few days, now am I?'

She saw him stifle another sigh. 'No, you're right,' he said. 'We'll be back in Cornwall two days from now and leaving all this behind. The only memories I want us to take away from Scotland are happy ones. Right?' He turned again to look at her.

'Yes of course,' Loveday said.