

*Saturday June 10 1944*

*Inverness*

He pulled the jeep into the kerb and killed the engine, suddenly aware he had not the faintest idea what came next.

If this was what escape felt like, the sentiment was over-rated - *exhilaration*, wasn't that meant to be the word? And maybe it had been a bit like that, at least at the start, driving too fast, checking the mirror like some demented getaway man.

All gone now: drained away. Nothing left. Just the damp silence of Inverness and a curious furtive feeling, wondering what they'd say when he got back.

If he went back. After all, hadn't somebody once said he was expendable? You never know, perhaps the delinquent boy who'd run away was never meant to go home.

Not that anyone sane would describe *Station 402 Signals Torridon*, as home.

Somebody had left a packet of Players under the dashboard. He shook one out, lighting it, letting a plume of smoke hang thick between his lips, staring into the darkness.

*What the hell came next?*

Deserted blackout Inverness stared back at him, the one visible road a dreary line of cramped stone houses, dissolving at the farther end into a grey pall of coal smoke, everywhere the smell of tar.

Weren't the buggers supposed to be celebrating D-Day? Didn't they know what it cost to bring cheer to their shrivelled Scottish hearts? If the news had reached this godforsaken dump, the residents were keeping it to themselves.

It was hard to believe this street was ever anything but deserted. The faint orange glow from the panelled door of the pub flickered like a candle in a church.

The whole place silent. Silent as the grave.

Alex had yet to learn in Inverness you drink in silence – talk is an impediment.

The place was crowded, massive soldiers smelling of wet cloth stuffed shoulder to shoulder at the bar, green tooried bonnets adding an air of threatening gaiety to khaki uniforms.

As he came in, a dozen wary eyes fixed him in a huge mirror, gilt letters emblazoned *Dewar's Whisky*, a ripple of soft voices, oddly menacing, breaking the silence.

He ordered brandy, embarrassed at the sound of his own voice, the man behind the bar throwing a sly sidelong smirk at the others, measuring it out.

That had been four drinks ago.

Or was it five? He had forgotten.

Also forgotten exactly when she had come in. He had seen the door open, bringing its whiff of tar, seen someone take the other chair at his table, slowly become aware of a soft highland accent washing over him, a tiny face, sharp features, black hair combed to a severe white line across her scalp.

She seemed a restless soul, forever leaning down to the floor feeling for her bag, hauling it up, fumbling inside for cigarettes.

He caught her eyes as she inched the packet towards him with a fingertip, frowning as he reached mechanically for his case, shaking her head too vehemently as he opened it for her.

Somewhere beyond the sweet taste of brandy some part of him had begun to keep watch, conscious of an inner commentary that at first he did not quite believe.

In all his life, Alex Vere had never picked a woman up, even wondered about the mechanics, how you went about it. It was something that happened in books.

Justine would have known.

Now and then this tiny woman would turn aside, head tilted in profile, her tongue flicking fretfully across tiny white teeth, as if she was trying to lick something off. Watching it come and go he heard the inner lucid voice arguing the toss, weighing the odds.

"Another?"

Smiling, scraping her chair legs back, one hand flapping for her bag.

"You're going it a bit. What is that stuff, anyway?"

"Brandy." Adding, because she seemed offended he had not returned her smile, "Brandy. You know. Artists drink it."

"Those that can afford it, I dare say."

She fished her handbag up, laying it on the table, snapping it closed.

"That what you are? I've never met an artist. That why you're eyeing me? What brings you here. Torridon now, that's miles away."

"*Torridon*. What the hell d'you mean? What ..."

"No need to chop my head off. The jeep. It's often here. Are you from there? You a spy then?"

"I'd be careful if I were you. You know where gossip lands you."

"If you say so Mr Artist," trying to stare him down, defiant patches of red high on each cheek. "I could if you like ... you know ... *pose*. Posing you call it. Not for nothing, mind you."

"No I'm not an artist. You're mistaken on that score – nothing further from the truth."

Alex closed his eyes, remembering at last why he had ordered brandy, remembering the desperate fag end of a failed mission, the last safe time with Justine. They had been drinking brandy then, lost in the fog of war somewhere in France – some other godforsaken place. Remembered dawn in the safe house, rain coming on, Justine barely alive.

He looked across to the tiny upturned face, its baffled expression a little pained, knowing he was too weary to explain. Watched her stand, her skirt too tight, pushing an awkward way through the blue haze to the bar, sharing a joke with someone he could not quite make out.

As the man behind the bar filled a tiny metal jug, she leaned across the counter, smiling into his face, hitching one leg up, the seam of her stocking crooked in the hollow of her knee.

Nice legs. Long as well. Long, for someone so small.

She turned to look at him, taking him unawares, her sudden brazen stare scalding him.

Sliding his glass across the table she let a drop jerk out across the back of her hand, licking it away, pulling a face.

"That's fierce stuff, that is," reaching out to touch, "what d'you do, then, if you're not an artist? D'you stay in Inverness? What's your name?"

The smell of brandy fresh on her breath overwhelmed him, squeezing his eyes closed.

*What the hell came next?*

What was he supposed to do?

Take her home to fuck? Was it that she had in mind?

Smuggle her past the sniggering Guard House. *Got your leg over, Sir?*

No, no, impossible. He forgot, Torridon was miles away, no home there. Where then? The two of them tottering through dreary streets to some other home. Naked, would this tiny body conjure Justine back? What do you do with someone you did not know?

Someone who was not Justine?

He could feel her searching his face, puzzled at his eyes shut-tight, shoving hard against his arm,

"Have you got a name, then?"

Another memory spiralling from nowhere. Justine drawing him close, her hair across his eyes, the sun breaking through pine trees, suddenly hot. Everywhere the bitter scent of wood smoke. Justine resting her lips on his, barely a kiss, two hands behind his head.

He flinched as she prodded him again, hearing his voice as if it was someone else.

"No names, no pack drill. What happened to your pack, anyway? You never said. No ... sorry ... thinking of someone else. Bit addled. Got you muddled there."

"With your girl? I hear that a lot, you know. Or wife is it? What's she called?"

"No girl. No wife."

"Go on ... you say that."

"And it's bloody true."

The man behind the bar stopped polishing a glass, looking across.

"No need to shout. You'll have us chucked out. Donny doesn't like shouting."

"No, you're right. Sorry ... sorry. Look, best leave me to myself. Things to think about."

She scraped her chair back, pressing one hand on the table to steady herself.

"Suit yourself, I'm sure." Half standing, changing her mind, slumping back down, bag tight against her knees. "Looks like you'll have to put up with me. There's only here to sit."

She leaned forward, her head touching his, suddenly conspiratorial.

"Sheila, if you're interested. That's my name. I never liked it, but my mother must have. So there you are, Mr Mysterious."

He felt her hand feebly pecking at the cloth of his sleeve.

"D'you want another? That's six of those you've had, mind. He'll be at the bell in a minute."

Eyes closed, Alex reached out, taking her wrist in his hand, feeling bone through the fabric of her coat. Too frail. Everything seemed wrong.

"Yes, get me another Justine. Here ... wait ... take this ..."

"Sheila. The name's Sheila. You've had too much. He won't take a fiver ..."

"Yes he will, Sheila. Get me another, Sheila ... if you would."

She dissolved to a blur of creased khaki, staring into small bloodshot eyes, the raw smell of hot beer belching over him.

A beefy man in uniform perched on the edge of her seat, too close, the pom-pom on his bonnet absurdly alien.

Why the hell would anyone wear such a thing?

"Go on Shirl, you heard what the wee man said." Clenching an arm round the woman's legs, pulling tight, squeezing skinny thighs. Glasgow accent, hoarse with the smoke, ominously soft. Alex had known voices like that before. Known too many. These were voices to end your life.

He felt his heart jerk, the throb of something urgent in his neck, a sickening weariness, knowing what came next.

"You heard what he said - he wants another." Pushing the woman away, hands riding up with her skirt. "*If you would.*"

Alex leaned across the table, close enough to feel the heat off the man, knowing already where all this must end.

"Push off, will you, there's a good chap. Three's a crowd. She's with me."

"*Good chap* is it? Well I'm no' all that good. An' she's no' your Justine, see?"

"Leave him, Jimmy, you can see how he is. The boy's drunk."

"Oh, aye, he's that. What's he to you?"

"Nothing ... nobody. I dinna know him. And you know Donny won't have it. Not fighting."

"Who's fighting? Away and look for his bevvy." Pulling the five-pound note from her hand, stuffing it in her blouse. "An' you're no' his bloody Justine, mind. Just take a wee minute getting back."

A sudden stink of sweat jerked Alex up, a blotchy face close to his own.

"*Justine*, what sort of name's that, then?"

No one was altogether clear as to what happened next. Except that arms tight round Alex's shoulders fell curiously limp, a kind of animal yelp piercing the room, scarlet pom-pom joggling back with the soldier's head. An arc of bright blood was spinning in the air.

It seemed to Alex that something huge thumped down between them. But for the spreading stain of red across his face you would have said the soldier slept.

That was when Sheila screamed.