

# **A Highland mystery**

*preview: chapters 1 and 2*

**Anthony Mudge**

Thank you for downloading this preview of *A Highland mystery*. The complete novella will be available on Kindle from 5th July 2014.

*A Highland mystery* is intended as the first of a trilogy. I expect to start work on the second part – to be titled *Exit, pursued by a bear* – this autumn, with a view to publishing it next year.

Your feedback is always welcome; please feel free to email or tweet me (awmudge@gmail.com and @awmudge respectively).

A.M.

Edinburgh, 21/vi/2014

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## Chapter 1

The academic year was finally over. It was with some relief that I put my grammar books back in the bookcase by my desk, knowing they would not see the light of day for the best part of the next two months. No having to explain the subjunctive or pretend to enjoy interminable Balzac ... Sheer bliss.

In a few weeks, my parents would descend upon me and appropriate the use of my flat for the duration of the International Festival but, before that, I had a walking holiday in the Highlands to look forward to. In term-time, I was sometimes known to wish myself into a rowing boat on the Forth or on a walk in the Trossachs instead of trying to teach 14-year-old boys the nuances of the French language. When I had a weekend free from school duties, I often stayed up late on the Friday evening to complete all my marking so I could leave town early the following morning. A ramble up the Fife coast, camping somewhere in the wild: reconnecting with nature lifted my spirits. A whole fortnight in the Highlands was a treat I had been looking forward to for months, all the more so given my schoolfriend Alec was joining me for the first week.

I left my Stockbridge flat in bright sunshine. Already walking briskly uphill, I got an extra spring in my step when I spotted Grace Kelly cycling down towards me. (My father had yet to set eyes on this double of his favourite actress, and was impossibly envious.) Come late August, Princes Street would be impossible to navigate for Callas fans, but for now I was able to get to Waverley with plenty of time to spare. Even the Teddy boy who knocked me out of his way to board the train in front of me failed to dampen my spirits.

I found an empty compartment, hoisted my luggage into the rack and sat down. The train set off with a jolt and I reached into my jacket pocket for Alec's postcard, happy that I was finally on my way.

*1st July 57*

*We leave tomorrow morning (he had written). Picking you up from Auld Reekie is definitely out, we're spending a couple of nights in Glasgow on the way north, so it's plan B. The idea is to get to Inverness by mid-afternoon on Friday (5th). There's a direct train that gets in shortly before 4pm, so I'll meet you in the lobby of the Station Hotel. Just don't get too drunk at staff drinks on Thurs!*

*Best,  
Alec*

We had only seen each other sporadically since leaving school, and not at all in the last two years. Neither of us were prolific letter-writers, nor did we have much occasion to speak on the telephone, but what communication there had been between us recently seemed to suggest he had regained some of his old insouciance since working for the Naysmiths. After the way his life had fallen apart just as we were to start university, it was time some good fortune came his way again.

His future had seemed so bright at school. A scholarship boy, he had taken advantage of every opportunity to come his way, and had every reason to be proud of himself when he was offered a place to read mechanical engineering in Glasgow (I was to stay in Edinburgh). Then, a week or so before term was to commence, disaster struck: some substantial investments of his father's had failed and the family could no longer afford to send him to university. Crestfallen, Alec took on any number of jobs to support his family including (very ill-advisedly, in my opinion) returning to our old school as little more than a general dogsbody. He took the shattering of his dreams very hard, and it showed in his dwindling ambitions.

Then, out of the blue, an old friend of his father's got in touch to say a retired colonel of his acquaintance in Northumberland was looking for a secretary. Alec had proved a reasonable bookkeeper since taking on the family finances, but I failed to make any sense of his enthusiasm for such a position until he mentioned an unexpected perk of the job. In addition to secretarial duties, he would also be expected to chauffeur his employers in cars he could only dream about. Fascinated by all things mechanical for as long as I had known him, it was little wonder Alec leapt at the chance. The raising of his spirits when he got the job was a sight to behold: I met him in town that night and we got riotously drunk by way of celebration.

Colonel Naysmith and his wife, Dame Harriet Getty – an actress for whom my mother had the deepest admiration – spent ten days every summer visiting friends in the Highlands and now, in Alec's third year in their employ, he had asked if I might be allowed to join them. He knew from past experience that he would not be needed much during their stay and, with both of us avid hill-walkers, we would be in our element. I took it as a mark of the Naysmiths' esteem for Alec when he told me his request had been granted.

From what he had told me in his previous letter, the Naysmiths' friends, Mr and Mrs Jarvis, had a houseful of guests staying over the weekend, so our company would be expected until their departure. As of Monday, Alec would only be required in the mornings (and not always then), so we would have a good deal of the day to ourselves – and given how late the sun set at this time of year, this far north, there was nothing to stop our expeditions stretching into the late evening. My father knew from experience Alec and I were likely to cover some distance in a single day and had lent me his trusty Highland maps.

Suspecting it could be quite late by the time we reached the Jarvises', I deliberately had a late lunch – my picnic drew the usual envious glances from my

fellow passengers – after which I turned to the *Times*. The journey north lasted a few minutes shy of six hours, so I had also brought the latest Marcel Pagnol, a birthday present from my friends Olivier and Delphine, to pass the time. It proved quite unnecessary: I should have known that the Cairngorms would catch my attention. Pagnol's recollections of his Provençal childhood would keep.

A couple of hours later, I had all but given up on the *Times* crossword when the train whistle sounded; we were arriving in Inverness. I collected my things together and made my way to the end of the carriage, where a lad of five or six had to be stopped from opening the carriage door before the train had halted. I suspect he was every bit as impatient as I to stretch his legs. He was already tearing down the platform, his father in hot pursuit, when I stepped down from the train and followed in their wake. The main station entrance was straight ahead and, according to the clock, I was a few minutes early.

I spotted the Station Hotel, a rather dour Victorian affair, the moment I stepped into the sunshine. There was no sign of Alec outside, so I decided to go in: had he arrived early, he would probably have gone in for a quick half while waiting for me. I followed the sound of chatter into what turned out to be a surprisingly gloomy bar. It took a while for my eyes to adjust.

"Goosey Goosey Gander!" a familiar voice cried behind me.

Only one person would still dare call me that and get away with it, I thought as I turned around – and sure enough, Alec was bearing down upon me, looking very smart in a light grey suit.

"Alec!" I exclaimed, shaking his hand. "You're looking well."

"So are you," he said, then looked at my knapsack with some surprise. "Ye Gods, you can't expect me to lug that thing around the Highlands for you!"

"Don't be daft," I said, "I've got the smaller one in my case, for our walks. This one'll come into its own once you've headed back south."

"I might have known you'd bring this monstrosity," he answered with a smile, and pointed at my suitcase. "Is that what I'm to put on the Edinburgh train next weekend?"

"That's it," I said. "I won't need my suits come Monday."

"Pass it here then," he said, "we're off round the corner."

"We're not staying here?" I asked, handing him my suitcase.

"Better ale."

"Say no more!" I said eagerly, following him outside.

"You didn't see me waving from the other side of the concourse?" he asked once we were out on the street.

"No, sorry."

"I must have looked a right idiot."

"Not for the first time ..."

"That was different," he said. "It was worth it, she was gorgeous."

“And well out of your league,” I teased him.

“Rubbish,” Alec answered. “If I hadn’t tripped ... This is the place,” he said, indicating a pub on the left. He held the door open and grinned. “Age before beauty.”

“Watch it,” I said, but I could not help smiling.

“You grab a table,” he said. “I’ll get the drinks.”

I found a table, put my luggage on the floor and sat down. The room had definitely seen better days, but it was not too smoky and had a pleasant atmosphere – just the sort of pub, I suspected, in which Alec and I could easily while away whole evenings.

“Here we go,” Alec said, joining me with a couple of pints.

“Nice suit,” I complimented him as he sat down. “Your uniform?”

“More or less,” he answered, and took a drink. “Ah, I needed that!”

“Where are the Naysmiths, having tea somewhere?”

“At the Caledonian, around the corner. Far too fancy for the likes of us.”

“How long have we got?” I asked.

“A good half hour,” he said.

“I take it we’re going to them?”

“They’re hardly going to come here,” Alec replied. He took another drink, then put his glass down. “Come on then, what’s new? It’s been ages!”

“I hardly know where to start,” I said.

“There’s a Mrs Goose and a whole flock of goslings,” he said, and winked.

“Ha,” I scoffed, “if only! My parents send their best wishes.”

“They’re both well?”

“Father’s longing to retire so he isn’t stuck indoors all day, and Mother’s itching for the Festival to begin.”

“Same as ever then,” Alec said, smiling.

“Johnny says hello – ”

“Johnny Latham! Where is he these days?”

“Would you believe it, Italy.”

“Italy? What’s he doing there?”

“Building an orphanage in some backwater or other.”

“That’s our Johnny ...”

“To a T,” I agreed. “Come the winter, he’s a ski instructor.”

“A ski instructor,” Alec repeated, evidently impressed.

“In Austria,” I continued, with a degree of envy.

Alec whistled. “All right for some! You know,” he said, “apart from you, the Lathams are the only ones who didn’t drop me like a stone when ...”

“To their credit and everyone else’s shame,” I said.

“Sometimes I still wonder if I should have accepted that scholarship.”

“Nonsense,” I protested. “No-one could have predicted what happened, and you know Johnny and I will fight your corner.”

“I must write to him.”

“Remind me to pass you his address, it’s changed. Again.”

“Thanks,” he said, then made an effort to cheer up. “Never mind Johnny and his disgustingly exotic lifestyle, what about you? Any girlfriend on the scene?”

“Not at the moment,” I answered. “I’m telling you, I don’t know how schoolmasters with wives and children have time for them as well as all that marking. There’s no end to it ...”

“Some of them don’t have much time for their wives and children anyway,” he said. “You remember how old Harry Thomson was always making eyes at the school nurse – what was her name?”

“Miss Bruce? You couldn’t blame him, we all had a soft spot for her. With good reason.”

“When I went back,” Alec said confidentially, “word around the staff room was that the two of them ...”

“No!” I exclaimed, shocked – and, it has to be said, rather disappointed. “I’ll never look at her in the same way again.”

“She’s still there?”

“She’s Matron now, but yes, still setting schoolboy pulses racing – the things you get to see as a schoolmaster! I’m sure we weren’t anywhere near as bad.”

“More depraved than McBride?”

“Much, much worse,” I assured him, and winced at the memory. “Anyway, let’s not talk about that lecher. Everything well with you?”

“Not too bad, thanks,” he answered. His tone was light, but I could have sworn his cheerfulness had dimmed.

“Not too bad’?” I asked, trying to make light of it. “Is that the best you can do?”

“Oh, life’s a lot better now, I won’t deny it. There’s just one thing that ...” He hesitated.

“What’s wrong?” This was troubling: his years of misery were meant to be over.

“Don’t look at me like that, James,” he pleaded. “I’d rather not discuss it here, that’s all.”

“Too public, you mean?”

“Exactly. Let’s leave it till we’re at Walberswick.”

“Walberswick?” I asked, puzzled. “But that’s in Suffolk.”

“I thought I was meant to be the geographer,” Alec said, smiling. “How do you know about Walberswick?”

“Old girlfriend,” I explained. “She was an art teacher, never stopped going on about it.”

"It's also where Mrs Jarvis is from originally," Alec said. "She and her husband are both painters."

"I thought I'd heard the last of the place ..."

"Bad break-up?"

"Not particularly," I said. "I just got the impression she preferred Suffolk to Edinburgh, so it was never going to last."

"Some day, young Goose," he said extravagantly, "a woman worthy of you will cast her eyes your way and forever be ensnared. Poor soul," he reflected.

"That's enough of your cheek," I said, laughing. "What about you, any lasses turning your head?"

"Would you believe it, no," he said. "It's all cars these days ..."

"You've given up women for *cars*?" I asked in disbelief.

"Don't get me wrong," he answered, "there are some stunners about - "

"Cars or women?" I asked, looking at him with a cocked eyebrow.

"Women, you numpty!" he laughed, then his eyes all but glazed over. "Oh, you should see the Colonel's cars ..."

I had no compunctions about switching off at this point. Instead, I sat back to enjoy the spectacle of Alec waxing lyrical about his favourite subject: the line of a Daimler, the workmanship in a Lotus engine, even a Land Rover's tyres, everything about cars captivated him. It meant very little to me, but Alec giving free rein to his enthusiasm was something I had missed.

"... and last month, the Colonel got himself a TR3 that's just – " he searched breathlessly for the right word, then gave up. "I wish he'd let me drive it," he sighed.

"Stop drooling!" I laughed.

"Sorry, did I get carried away?"

"Just slightly," I said with a grin. "I hardly dare ask what you've driven up here."

"Not the Bentley, sadly," he said. "The Colonel's quite right, it's not up to a long journey like this – and heaven help us if we were to break down. Still, I'd love to bring it out on the open road, just once ..."

"So what's the practical option?"

"The Jag," Alec said. "A Mark VIII."

"Oh, the hardship!" I cried. "It's a wonder you can cope ..."

My laughter was all the more justified when I saw the car in question a few minutes later, a beautiful burgundy and cream model whose sheer class made much more of an impression on me than all the technical specifications Alec quoted. We put my bags in the boot and went to meet the Colonel and Dame Harriet.

We found them having tea in the lobby. I recognised Dame Harriet from her elegant profile; she was chatting to a plump woman whose demeanour betrayed her as a fervent admirer. In a chair opposite, a man looked on from behind the *Telegraph*

with the sort of bearing that could only come from an army officer: clearly this was Colonel Naysmith. He nodded in acknowledgement as Alec and I approached.

"There you are, Alexander," he said curtly, extinguishing his cigarette.

"You'll have to excuse me now, my dear," Dame Harriet said to her companion, "our driver is about to whisk me away. So lovely reminiscing with you."

The woman gurgled her thanks and went to join a group sitting a few tables away, clearly all as awed as each other.

"One does so dislike disappointing one's public," Dame Harriet said to herself. "Now then," she continued, turning to face me, "you must be James of the delicious surname."

"A pleasure to meet you, Dame Harriet," I said with a smile, and shook her hand. "My mother will be terribly envious."

"Colonel, allow me to introduce my friend James Wildgoose," Alec said. "James, this is Colonel Naysmith."

The Colonel stood and we shook hands briefly, exchanging 'how do you do?'s.

"The car's just outside, Colonel," Alec said.

"Shall we, Harriet?" he said, turning to his wife, but she had already got up. She took his arm and we made our way outside. I went on ahead and stood ready to open the rear car door for Dame Harriet.

"A thoughtful gesture, Mr Wildgoose," the Colonel said, "but my wife always sits in the front."

"Travel sickness," Dame Harriet explained. "Ever since I was a little girl."

Alec opened the front passenger door for her and she got in, thanking him.

"You sit behind Dame Harriet, James," he said as the Colonel went round to the other side of the car and got in behind the driver's seat. I followed his instructions and finally Alec himself sat at the wheel. He turned the key in the ignition.

"Shall I map-read?" I asked.

"Thanks," Alec answered, looking into the rear view mirror, "but there's no need. The car practically knows the way." We pulled out into the road.

"You're a skilled navigator?" the Colonel asked as we set off.

"I get by," I said.

"That's putting it mildly," Alec scoffed. "Our Second Master prided himself on getting every lower sixth hopelessly lost on the first orienteering weekend of the school year. He met his match in James."

"A much underrated skill, in my opinion."

"Thank you, Colonel," I said. "It's certainly had its uses."

"Alexander tells us you're a schoolmaster yourself?" Dame Harriet asked.

"I am indeed," I answered. "At our old school, in fact."

"He mentioned that," she said. "What do you make of life from the other side of your own childhood classrooms?"

“It took some getting used to at first,” I said. “It’s quite an eye-opener, before even considering the teaching. All those areas that were out of bounds to us as schoolboys quickly lost their mystique.”

“It was the same when I went back,” Alec commented. “Even as an odd-job man, I saw the whole place in a different light.”

“You’re both very lucky,” Dame Harriet told us. “In my profession, going to the theatre can be quite unbearable.”

“How so?” I asked, curious. “Do you spend the evening thinking you’d play the lead differently?”

“Sometimes,” she admitted, “but it’s more a question of familiarity breeding contempt. I’ve been treading the boards so long that it takes a truly exceptional production to engage my every sense. Sadly, most fall short. I cannot tell you how many times I’ve started picturing a play as though from backstage.”

“From the stagehands’ perspective, you mean?”

“Good heavens no!” Dame Harriet laughed, “as an actress. I once saw a production of *Othello* in which Desdemona had three costume changes in as many scenes, and all I could think about was how far the poor woman had to walk to and from her dressing room between them.”

What Mother would do to hear this sort of insight, I thought.

“In one scene, she gets all of one line,” Dame Harriet continued, “and she’s off again a few lines later – but it’s a night-time scene, so most directors, this one included, put her in her night-dress. It’s not even a very good line: ‘What is the matter, dear?’, or something equally fatuous. By Shakespeare’s usual standards, it’s positively mundane ...”

“It was as bad when I retired,” the Colonel said suddenly.

“Oh, Everard!” his wife cried, “I hardly think –”

“No, listen,” he insisted, “it’s not as different as you’d think.” He turned to me. “I spent all my working life in the army, and believe me, young man, I’ve seen things in the heat of battle I’d sooner forget. It’s positively galling,” he said, with feeling, “to discover years later how misrepresented war is in the press.”

“That’s not the same –” Dame Harriet began.

“Stuff and nonsense,” the Colonel said firmly. “If anything, it’s worse. There are many things going on in Korea, for instance, which remain completely unknown to the general public. The news is sanitised beyond belief and only those of us who’ve been there are aware of it. The way things are going, it’s only going to get worse,” he continued. “National service is to be abolished so, before the century is out, our governments will send us into war without the least knowledge of what it means to be a soldier. In my day, every man in the country had experience of army life, including politicians.”

I had been on the point of comparing teaching to a war zone but decided against it: there was no earthly point in antagonising the Colonel.

## Chapter 2

Colonel Naysmith's outburst had left an unaccountably chilly atmosphere between him and Dame Harriet, and I felt too uncomfortable to attempt any more conversation. Only Alec appeared unperturbed, but he was concentrating on the road. At some point after we had left Inverness behind, he and I exchanged a look in the rear view mirror. I raised my eyebrows and he smiled.

"May I ask," I said, taking this as a sign that it was safe to talk again, "whom we are joining at the Jarvises'?"

"Oh, let me think," Dame Harriet said. "There are to be – how many of us, Everard, was it eight?"

"Ten, including the four of us," the Colonel replied.

"Ten?" she queried. "Are you sure?"

"Of course I am. The Jarvises themselves –"

"They are old friends of yours, I presume?"

"They introduced me to Harriet, as it happens," he answered. "Many years ago."

"Theresa's an old friend of mine," Dame Harriet said. "We were at finishing school together in Lausanne. Horrible place – I wouldn't have coped without her."

"Bertie and I were in the same regiment when I joined up," the Colonel said, "but he was kicked out within the year for insubordination."

"If I may say so, Colonel," I said, with some surprise, "I wouldn't have expected you to count among your close friends someone who was drummed out of the army."

"His father forced him into it," the Colonel declared, "when he had no business to. Bertie detested it and got out the only way he knew."

"It's as well he did," Dame Harriet chipped in, "otherwise he'd never have met Theresa. That infamous Constable exhibition."

"It was Turner."

"No, Constable."

"Who else?" I said hastily.

"Dr and Mrs McNeill," the Colonel answered.

"Their closest neighbours, though even they live two or three miles away."

"So Walberswick is every bit as isolated as the map suggests," I said.

"Yes, but they've been close friends ever since Dr McNeill treated Bertie after his operation –"

“And the Campbells,” the Colonel interrupted.

“They had to cancel,” Dame Harriet corrected him. “You must have forgotten.”

“What?” the Colonel responded. “When did this happen?”

“Theresa mentioned it in her last letter.”

“Dame Harriet is quite right, Colonel,” Alec said. “She wrote a fortnight ago.”

“It’s the first I’ve heard of it.”

“I did tell you, Everard,” Dame Harriet assured him. “I remember distinctly.”

“No matter,” he said dismissively. “I expect I’ll see Archie at the V&A do next month.”

“And Arabella’s coming to stay in the autumn,” Dame Harriet said. “At any rate, that explains why you thought there’d be ten of us.”

“But we *are* to be ten,” Alec said. “Mrs Jarvis said in her next letter she had invited two others.”

“Really?” Dame Harriet asked. “Whom?”

“It seems your memory’s no better than mine,” the Colonel observed with wry amusement. “Who is coming in their stead?”

“There was Margaret someone,” Alec said, “a local botanist.”

“Not Margaret Sutherland?” Dame Harriet asked with a sharp intake of breath.

“That was it.”

“Harmless old bird,” the Colonel said.

“Ha!”

This came from Dame Harriet, a short, sardonic laugh. I looked from her to the Colonel, then to Alec, but there was no word of explanation from anyone, only an inaudible muttering from Colonel Naysmith.

“And the new minister,” Alec said after a pause, trying to clear the air. “Well, I say new, but – ”

“That dreadful man?” the Colonel asked, incredulous.

“That’s not fair,” Dame Harriet said defensively. “Just because he’s not the most confident of people ...”

“He wasn’t lacking in confidence last time,” the Colonel said dryly.

“How dare you bring that up, of all people?” she shot back, suddenly angry.

“How dare I?” he repeated mockingly. “Can you blame me? The two of you skulk off to Bertie’s studio – ”

“I’m warning you, Everard – ”

“Oh, be quiet,” he said scornfully. “The way he was looking at you across the table at dinner that evening – ”

“You’ve got some gall, accusing me,” Dame Harriet told him, “when I think how often – ”

“For pity’s sake, woman,” he cried, “how many more times must I – ”

“Alexander,” Dame Harriet cut in quietly, her voice ringing with authority, “would you stop the car, please.”

“No,” the Colonel ordered. “Drive on.”

“I need some fresh air,” Dame Harriet stated, as though daring him to defy her.

The Colonel sat back, furious at being overruled, and Alec drew the Jaguar to a halt by the side of the road. He got out, walked around the car and opened the door for Dame Harriet.

“Thank you, Alexander,” she said, taking his arm. She walked a few yards beyond the car to a rock by the roadside, sat down and took several deep breaths.

“James, would you like to see our route on the map?” Alec asked, still holding the door open. It was an obvious pretext, but I would be glad to get out of the car.

“Go ahead, Mr Wildgoose,” the Colonel said. “I’m sorry you had to see that.”

“Little matter, Colonel,” I answered, thinking he did not sound terribly apologetic. “Thank you.”

“Would you open your window a little first?” he asked, winding down his own. “I could do with some air too.”

I did as he asked and got out.

“Remind me to check the brakes when we get to Walberswick, would you?” Alec said as I joined him. “They’re a bit, well ... spongy.”

“What was all that about?” I whispered while he busied himself unfolding the map over the bonnet.

“I’m sorry, I should have warned you,” he answered, equally quietly.

“You don’t need to show me where we are,” I said, loud enough for the Colonel to hear, and pointed at a fold on the map. “Here.”

“Trust you to find it straight off,” Alec said, laughing despite himself. He lowered his voice again. “You might have drawn it out a little.”

I glanced over to the Colonel. He had lit a cigarette and appeared to be lost in his own thoughts.

“You could always show me where we’re going from here,” I suggested to Alec, hushed again.

“True,” he said, and I followed his finger as he drew it across the map.

“Do they often get into arguments like this?” I asked.

“Not generally,” Alec answered. “The confined space makes it worse.”

“You mean it’s been like this all the way from Northumberland?”

“I’d’ve kept quiet had I realised what effect mentioning that clergyman would have. Before my time,” he explained.

“You weren’t to know,” I told him, then glanced at the map. “Good heavens,” I cried, “does that road really wind that much? We’re hardly heading into the mountains.”

“Just you wait,” Alec smiled, “if the roads were in better condition, I’d love to bring the Triumph up here. Thankfully,” he continued in an undertone, “this is the only long car journey they ever take together. The rest of the time, it’s short trips, and only rarely both of them at once.”

“Makes it rather hard on you,” I noted.

“You don’t know the half of it ...” he answered.

“Now then, boys – ”

We turned abruptly: Dame Harriet’s voice had made us both jump.

“You don’t mind my calling you that, do you?” she continued, noticeably calmer than before.

“You’re hardly the first,” I said with a smile.

“James’ parents probably still do,” Alec added.

“I should imagine so,” she answered airily. “Shall we get going?”

“Certainly.” Alec was already folding the map.

“Allow me,” I said, opening the car door for her.

She smiled and got in. Alec thanked me and we returned to our seats. The Colonel asked us to excuse his behaviour – Dame Harriet pointedly did not respond – and we set off again.

“Have you got that map to hand, Alexander?” the Colonel asked a little further on. “I would be very interested to see where the two of you plan to go over the next week. Thank you,” he said as Alec passed it to him.

I spread the map out and started discussing possible itineraries with the Colonel. Alec was enjoying the road and before long, Dame Harriet had started dozing.

“Well,” the Colonel exclaimed when we finally closed the map, “considering your knowledge of the area before we’ve even got there, I’m curious to know why you didn’t join the army. Surely it must have crossed your mind?”

“I come from a Quaker family,” I answered, “so it was never a serious consideration. Teaching was always my vocation.”

“A pity,” he answered. “You’d have made a very fine officer.”

The sky seemed to clear as we drove further into the mountains. The grass on the roadside was lush, or as lush as it ever got in the north, the green tempered with a dry, earthy brown which at once drained it of brightness and made it appear richer. Occasional dabs of colour further off broke up the uniformity of the landscape: the odd gorse bush, and every so often one or two sheep, surely lost. (Contrary to my parents’ predictions, not once did a flock impede the Jaguar’s progress.) There were no more houses than before, only occasional stone cottages dotted here and there. Even then, for every one that was occupied, a great many more lay in ruins, abandoned blackhouses whose crumbling walls bore sole witness to a fast-disappearing way of life.

The Colonel remained alert the whole time. Dame Harriet had dropped off but as the road surface worsened, any attempt at sleep became useless. Finally, as we turned a corner that seemed to me little different from the others, she breathed a sigh of relief.

“Thank Heavens, we’re here.”

The road climbed a little in the distance and the Colonel told me the Jarvises' house lay just beyond the crest of the hill. I could well imagine that painters looking for an isolated spot to call their home could do much worse: the land on our left was much the same as ever, but to the right, it plunged sharply downwards. According to Alec's map, there was a loch in the glen beyond, but the stone wall on either side of the road cut off the view. In the distance, I could just about make out mountain peaks, some with a trace of snow left on them. In that one moment of imagining long walks in the wild, the journey's tension between Colonel Naysmith and Dame Harriet ceased to matter.

We reached the top of the hill where, tucked away on the right, a steep path headed down into the glen, flanked by a handsome pair of gateposts, the name 'Walberswick' carved into one of them. Ahead, a long stretch of road dipped before disappearing to the left, following the contour of the land.

"Now, Alexander," the Colonel said, leaning forwards, "stop on the roadside. I'll take her from here."

Alec turned the wheel gently to the right into a slight slope by the gateposts. After a moment's pause, he pulled at the handbrake and released it again, stopping the car.

"Sheer vanity," Dame Harriet said disdainfully as her husband got out. "He likes them to think he drove all the way."

The Colonel opened the driver's door.

"Come on," he said, "out you get."

"The brake cable's gone, Colonel," Alec said, pushing at the pedal. "They won't stick."

"Don't be ridiculous," came the impatient response. "The handbrake's still working, isn't it?"

"Yes, but you may not be able to stop safely once we get to the house. It's too dangerous. I –"

Whether it was the weight of Colonel Naysmith resting against the car or Alec who momentarily loosened his grip on the steering wheel, I could not say, but at that moment, the car moved back onto the road – and downhill.

"Turn into the slope, you fool!" the Colonel called after us.

"Stop the car, Alexander," cried Dame Harriet.

"Blasted thing won't budge," Alec muttered. He turned the wheel from one side to the other, but this only served to give the car more momentum and it lurched faster down the road.

"Put the handbrake on!" I said urgently, my foot pressing frantically at a brake pedal that was not there.

"I daren't," he gasped. "We'd end up back-to-front, and then –"

"Change down to first, then!"

"It's all right," Alec insisted, suddenly calm. "I've got a plan."

I cast my eyes on the road ahead: we were heading straight down it, still gathering speed, and there seemed to be nothing to stop us, only the bend in the road – and the wall beyond which lay Heaven knew what.

“Dame Harriet,” I cried urgently, my fingers tearing at the door handle, “get out! Get out while you can!”

“Wait, James,” Alec cried, “you’ll be –”

But I had already tumbled out onto the road, Dame Harriet’s scream in my ears. The Jaguar was speeding ever faster down the hill as I picked myself painfully up and half ran, half stumbled after it. Colonel Naysmith caught up with me and we both called for Dame Harriet and Alec to get out. What the hell was Alec playing at?

There was a loud rasp from the horn and, moments before the bend, a dreadful grinding from the gearbox just as the Jaguar suddenly pulled sharply to the left. Its tyres screeched horribly but, instead of following the road, the back of the car plunged on ahead and smashed straight into the wall. The front end was immediately jerked backwards, then flung up in the air with such force that the back rose up after it, sending the entire car spinning over the edge. For a heart-stopping moment it seemed to hang in mid-air ... and the next instant it dropped and disappeared from sight.

“Harriet!” Colonel Naysmith cried, stopping in his tracks.

I ran on to the edge of the road, the abrupt silence terrible in my ears, and reached it just in time to see the car hit the ground with a crash far below – but still it careered down the slope, rolling wildly until finally, finally, it hit a tree and lay there, looking like little more than a twisted mess of metal.