
Chapter 1

Charlie was alive. Her head felt like it had been split in two, but she was alive. Gagged and blindfolded, hands and feet bound, she lay in darkness. She knew she was in the back of a trunk, the movements of the car a silent lullaby, composing a heinous requiem of the senses with every twist and turn of the road. Her wrist throbbed but there was no way for her to adjust her body to relieve the constant ache. The smell of urine, sweat, and fear filled the small, dank space. She had wet herself. The dampness between her legs was cold. Its stench was thick and acrid and as oppressive as her restraints. *Never go to a second location.* She had learned that in a self-defense class she took in college. *The second you get into a car, you are dead, and the things the abductor will do to you before you die will be far worse.* Tears slid down her cheeks, soaking the cloth tied around her face. She had been so stupid, and she deserved this. It was, in a sense, divine retribution. The darkness sang out to her. It was easier there, simple in its aphotic beauty, devoid of light or hope. She went to it, letting it sing her to sleep.

She awoke sometime later, nauseous and disorientated.

The car had come to a stop and she could hear footsteps outside. This was her second location, her final resting place unless she could find a way to escape. The door of the trunk opened, and the rough hands of her kidnapper picked her up. He placed her over his shoulder, carrying her. Cool air brushed her skin, sending a shiver up her spine. She was no longer in Edinburgh, with its late summer heat wave. She heard a door open and close then the steady thud of his shoes on a wooden floor, the heavy cadence resounding the despairing rhythm of a death march. A dog barked in the distance. He placed her down on a soft mattress and the blindfold was removed. She looked up into eyes as cold as icy granite. He took off his suit jacket and set it on a chair, pulling a knife from a leather holster strapped across his chest. Tears streamed down her face and she found herself unable to move, helpless, as panic coursed through her. Dear God, this was it. The blade came toward her and she closed her eyes awaiting its piercing blow, but instead of stabbing her, he cut the duck-tape around her wrists and ankles. The pain in her injured left arm intensified as the blood slowly returned to it. She held it against her chest and bit back the whimper that threatened to escape as she pushed herself with her legs along the top of the bed, putting as much space between her and the man as she could. He opened a drawer on the nightstand and removed a pair of handcuffs, attaching one end to the headboard. A small voice inside her told her to fight or at least die trying. This might be her only chance. As he reached toward her, she struck out at him with her foot, landing a side kick squarely to his chest.

Unfazed by the blow, he grabbed her leg in one of his large hands. His fingers dug into her muscle. "Don't try that again," he said, his voice low and menacing, as his eyes continued to pierce hers. He clicked the other end of the cuffs around her right wrist and ripped the tape from her

mouth as he pressed his finger to her lips, arching a brow. "Don't scream," he warned, shaking his head to emphasize the seriousness of the situation.

Unable to hold his gaze, she looked down. "Don't kill me," she pleaded. Her voice, cracked from disuse, sounded hoarse and chafed. She wasn't sure why she bothered saying it, only she was desperate.

He continued to study her, not answering. She looked around the room trying to take in all the details in case she had a chance to escape. He hadn't killed her yet and her only goal was to survive. The room was dark, its only window covered in a thick black drape. Besides the large bed and chair, there was a dresser and an antique wardrobe. Her eyes kept coming back to her abductor. His looks were disconcerting. She placed him in his mid-thirties. The man had a handsome face comprised of a sharp straight nose, high cheek bones and a strong jaw. He was tall and muscular, his shoulders broad and waist narrow. His dark brown hair was neatly styled and the suit he wore expensive. He didn't fit her image of a murderer and it was hard to imagine the soul of a killer lived just beneath the skin of someone so beautifully made.

"I-I promise I won't say anything about what I saw. If you let me go, I promise I won't say anything." She was rambling; shock and fear were setting in. He would kill her, she had no doubt. She was a witness.

"Wheesht. Hold your tongue." He reached out and grabbed her chin, tilting her head to the side as he slowly ran the knife down the length of her neck.

Hot tears mixed with the mucus running from her nose. The tip of his blade, cold and sharp, silenced her instantly.

"Good girl," he said, slipping the knife back in its holster. He walked over to where his jacket lay and pulled a starched white handkerchief from the front pocket. Then, ever so gently, he began to clean her face as one would a small child.

"What's your name?" he asked. His deep voice cut through the darkness of the room.

"Ch-Charlie," she stuttered.

"Is that short for something."

"Charlotte."

"Last name?"

Lie. If he knew her name, he could find her family and harm them. "Adams." It was her ex-fiancé's name. The first one, besides her own, that she could think of on the spot.

"Charlotte Adams." He pronounced her name *Charlak*. "Where are you from, lass?"

"America." There was no use lying, he would know by her accent. He gave her a long, hard look, then shook his head and left, locking the bedroom door behind himself. She listened as another door slammed and the engine of a car started up. Her tears came in sobs as she curled into herself. She tried not to let her mind drift to Michael. This was her punishment for leaving him at the altar. She would never see him or her family again. The darkness was close, calling her name, she would find refuge there. Slowly, she let herself submit to it, drifting into a restless sleep.

Sinclair Stuart pulled his black BMW M8 coupe into the empty car lot in Wick and parked. Dawn was just breaking on the horizon and he had yet to sleep. Last night had been a fucking disaster. What was supposed to be a well-planned out hit had turned into a nightmare in the blink of an eye. The girl came out of nowhere. Mistake number one—if his partner had swept the building like he should have, he wouldn't be in this position. Phin messed up. He hated mistakes and he hated cleaning up someone else's mess.

Mistake number two and possibly more serious—Viktor Sokolov had been tipped off.

He should be in his bed right now having drowned out the experience with an expensive bottle of whiskey and a good pump with Maurina. Instead, he'd driven all night and was in the northeast of Scotland with a girl who happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. Sokolov would be searching for them both. The girl was a problem. He never should have looked into her violet eyes. They reminded him of a piece of artwork, arousing powerful emotions from his past. His hand twitched in response, closing around a makeshift, outlawed pencil. He made a fist, pushing his past and anger down. Damn Alex McKay and his ultimatum.

His mind wandered back to the girl. She had strength, he would give her that. Even with her dark eye makeup halfway down her face and those dammed haunted eyes filled with panic and tears, he could glimpse her resolve. And although she was terrified, and she should be, she would fight him. If he was going to keep her alive, he needed her to fear him.

He opened the car door and got out. A gust of cold wind whipped through the gray morning sky. It would be raining soon. The smell of salt and fish sat heavy in the damp air. He made his way to Bridge Street where the shops were located and entered the local market, picking up food for the next few days. They would have to hide out until he was sure Sokolov's men hadn't followed them. Then he would have to figure out what to do with the girl, before heading to the Tower. He shouldn't have run after her and he definitely shouldn't have taken her. Instead, he should have left her to fend for herself. Why the hell did he bring her up here? It was those eyes; he'd only seen eyes that color once before, pale lavender, and a window to her fucking soul. The Watch would be unhappy. Shite, Alex would be furious. He cast a quick glance around

to make sure he wasn't being tailed, before he went into a small shop. A perky blonde girl looked up from behind the counter. "Hi, hun. You're out early for your messages. We've only just opened. I haven't even had a coffee yet."

"I won't be long, I just need to pick up a few things for my partner. Her luggage was lost at the airport."

"Och, poor thing. She'll be needing everything then."

"Just enough for a few days. Nothing fancy, just warm." He didn't care what she wore except she had wet herself and her dress was ruined and until he decided what he was going to do with her, she needed clothes.

"There's a storm coming, ye ken," she warned, scooping a spoonful of instant coffee into a mug and adding hot water from an electric kettle. "It will be blowing something fierce by tonight."

"Aye." He wasn't here for small talk. He just needed the damn clothes.

She smiled and set her mug down. Opening the top button of her blouse, she let her fingers linger on her ample chest. "What size is she?"

Sin hesitated. The girl was flirting with him. Great. He was hoping to get in and out unnoticed, in case Sokolov's men had followed them and started asking around. "She's thin, maybe seven and a half stones. About this tall," he said, holding his hand up below his chin.

The blonde helped pick out a pair of jeans and a jumper. "She'll need bras and panties and a parka," she said with a smile, winking as she added some lacy bits to the pile along with a black down jacket.

"Add a pair of Wellies and that should do." He pulled his wallet out, paying in cash.

"She's a lucky girl to have such a caring boyfriend. You must love her very much."

"You have no idea."

Finished, he headed back to his cottage by the sea, turning down the single lane dirt road that took him to the small stone house. Girnigoe Cottage, named after the famous castle, sat isolated on the cliffs off the North Sea. He bought it years ago out of some sentiment from his childhood. His mother used to bring him here every year to spend their summers. He planned to use it one day for his retirement. That was before The Watch. There would be no retirement for him now and the place held only false and deceitful memories. This was his first time back in over six years. It had sat empty and the renovations he started back when he purchased it had been put on hold. He only came now because he could think of no other place to go. He looked around the stark grounds, breathtaking in the sheer harshness of the scenery. Ten-meter cliffs formed a small cove which led down to the churning sea. During low tide, a small beach appeared, offering the opportunity for walking or picnics, or at one time sketching. To hell with that now. The area around the house was barren, the elements too rough for most plant life except the beach grass which blanketed the ground. In his mind it was stunning and better yet, private. He only hoped it would keep them safe for a while until he decided what to do with Charlotte.

He opened the bedroom door, checking on her. She was asleep. He needed to clean her up and examine her wrist, but it could wait until he slept. First things first, he needed to set up the security cameras and he could use that whiskey.