



**By**

**NY Times best-selling author**

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# 18

***Aldourie Castle Estate  
Strath Dore. Loch Ness***

Having smashed through the storage room's dry-wall in a fit of Gaelic rage, Angus Wallace stood proudly amid a pile of dry wall rubble by the now-exposed two-hundred-year-old iron door he had been seeking. Calmly dusting himself off, he unlocked the ancient obstruction using Alban MacDonald's key and forced it open upon its rusted hinges. "Okay then ... Andrea?"

My mother looked at him, aghast. "You knew you'd have to break through their new construction to locate this Templar passage, that's why you brought a sledgehammer. Why didn't you tell me?"

"Because ye might have said no and I couldnae take a chance. As for this mess, my hotel's handyman is awaitin' Brandy's call tae come by tae repair the damage. By the time we return, the pantry should be as good as new."

"Jisttae be sure, Angus, yer nae referrin' tae Matthew Konecny are ye?"

"None better. The lad practically rebuilt the place after the fire."

"Aye, and ye didnae pay him, ye cheap bastard. *Insurance check should be here any day, lad* ... bollocks. Mattie waited three weeks before sendin' over his missus over tae collect. She's all up in my face, spoutin' off about how Matthew knows Angus set the fire—"

"What?"

"T'was an accident, Andie. Accident's is whit insurance is for."

Andrea turned to Brandy "How much is he owed?"

"Dinnae. I'd say he'd make due with a hundred and forty pounds."

She searched through her purse for her wallet. Pulling out a wad of bills, she handed the money to Brandy. "Make sure it looks as good as new. As for you—" she turned to her ex-husband, enjoying her new role. "Still keeping things from me Angus? I guess some things never change. Well, I'm not going down there with you until you tell me everything ... and you can start with that iron door. Why is it there? Why did the new owner drywall over it instead of refurbishing it like he did the rest of the castle?"

"Long before William Fraser-Tytler transformed the estate into a castle Aldourie was a mansion. It was built back in 1625 for a Templar who owned the land; the purpose—to construct a subterranean level with a foundation strong enough to accommodate the needs of the Black Knights."

"Their needs?"

"They wanted an elevator shaft rigged to a pulley system that would allow the lads easy access into the Guive's Lair."

"Then why is it sealed off from the rest of the castle?"

"Aldourie sits atop a deep crevasse favored by rats. The decision to seal off the subterranean floor was recommended to the new owner by his construction firm who felt building a new wine cellar was less expensive than dealing with the rodent problem."

"You never said anything about rats."

"No worries, darlin'. Our lights will keep them away. We really need to get started; I'll explain the rest on the way."

Angus handed her one of the two backpacks, each loaded with water and flashlights. He fastened one over his shoulders and then located a canvas bag which held a new car battery.

"Ready?" He held the iron door open for his ex-wife, allowing her to take the lead down a tight circular stairwell into Aldourie Castle's empty wine cellar which still harbored a trace of cedar

wood. She followed Angus to an arched solid wooden door that was jammed tightly into its frame. Bracing himself, he tugged until it popped open. Pausing an extra second to make sure there were no vermin present, he flipped on a light switch, revealing a long narrow hall lit by bare bulbs.

“Where’s does this lead?”

“To the elevator.” He started walking and she followed him in.

“You still haven’t told me anything about the Black Knights or their mission.”

“As I mentioned the Templar were the original title holders to Aldourie’s ninety-six acres dating back tae the year 1331 when my ancestor, Sir Adam Wallace returned tae the Highlands having rescued the Braveheart.”

“I saw the movie with you years ago; I can’t remember—”

“It wasnae in the movie. The Braveheart is the symbol of Scotland’s freedom—the heart of our king, Robert the Bruce.”

“You cut out his heart? Gross. So where did they hide this Braveheart?”

“Located in the Aldourie woodlands is the entrance to a cave. The cave leads tae a chasm, the chasm tae the place where the underground river connects the River Ness with the Loch. This juncture of waterway and cavern is known as the Guivre’s Lair, and it is here that the Highland Templar chose to hide the Braveheart.”

“What good is a symbol of freedom if you have to hide it?”

“Agreed. And the council has plans to put it on display in the museum in Inverness as soon as they can afford a new security system. Back then things were different. The Templar knew Longshanks, the English King would send his entire army after the Braveheart if they found out where it was. So the Templar devised a plan that would use Loch Ness’s water dragons—whit they called Guivre—tae safeguard the Bruce’s heart.

“Each spring hundreds of pregnant female eels pass through the underground river in order tae enter Loch Ness and spawn in one of her forty rivers and streams. Once they lay their eggs the female eels will inhabit the depths of Loch Ness for ten years ... maybe decades—I dinnae. According tae Zachary, it’s only when their biological clocks say it’s time tae return tae the Sargasso Sea tae die that they will lee the Loch through the underground river.

“Knowing this, the Templar constructed a gate at the mouth of the passage, the iron struts of which were spaced large enough for a normal-size eel to pass through but tight enough tae prevent the older bigger females from leaving. It was in the Guivre’s cavern that the Templar hid the Braveheart.”

“How many of these big females could the lair hold at once?”

“Turns out just one. Over time the Black Knights learned that by blocking the passage, they had inadvertently created a competition tae be the one and only Queen of the Loch. From whit my father read tae me from Sir Adam’s diary, tha’ first season of the gate was an especially bloody one as the biggest dragons fought tae hold the lair. Things tend tae settle down once a solitary Queen is established as she’ll eliminate any younger females before they can grow too large. The last Queen—Nessie—ruled the roost for damn near eighty years.”

They came to a wooden barrier similar to the ones used by Highlanders to fence in their sheep—in this case, to prevent members of the Black Knights from accidentally plunging down the throat of a dark, deep chasm.

Andrea aimed her flashlight down the shaft before looking around topside. To her right, poised above the jagged slice in the geology was a six-foot-wide by twelve-foot-long wooden dock. Situated on this man-made perch was a three-sided roofed elevator car that was rigged to a series of pulleys anchored to the underside of Aldourie Castle’s original foundation—the ceiling located a good twenty feet above their heads.

“Seriously? That’s the elevator?”

“Were ye expectin’ somethin’ made by OTIS then?”

“No. Just something less out of the Flintstones. What are you looking for?”

“The log book. At the bottom of the chasm is a second car identical to this one, only right now it weighs far more. The last Knights tae ascend are required to record the amount of dead weight needed tae descend—ah, there it is.”

Using his flashlight, Angus checked the last page of the leather-bound text. “What’s yer current weight, darlin’.”

“Last time checked ... about a hundred and-twenty-seven pounds.”

My father raised an eyebrow. “Our ability to descend and hopefully ascend depends on accurate weight differentials. Best tae be honest.”

“One-hundred-and-thirty-six pounds, asshole. Happy?”

“Ye wear it well. With clothes we’ll call it an even ten stone. Add my fourteen, plus one more for each of the two backpacks and that equals sixteen stone ... figure a hundred and one kilos. The cart resting at the bottom of the shaft carries twenty stone; therefore in order to descend, we’ll need tae add a good thirty-one kilos.”

“What’s that in pounds?” She took out her phone and calculated. “Seventy pounds, give or take. How do we add weight?”

Angus aimed his flashlight at a rack of weight plates and kettle bells. He handed my mother two ten-pound weights, and then attempted to carry two larger plates—each weighing in excess of thirty pounds. Gripping the raised edge—one in each hand, he lifted and carried, grunting with the effort.

“Angus, put that down, they’re too heavy.”

“I can handle it.”

“Our ability to descend and hopefully ascend better *not* depend upon your back holding out. Now put them down and carry one at a time.”

He lowered the two twelve-kilogram plates and wiped sweat from his thick silver brows. “Ye always did wear the pants in oor family.”

“That’s because you couldn’t keep yours on. What should I do with these kettle bells?”

“Hang on tae them.” With a grunt he picked up the two weight plates and carried them onto the dock. Stepping carefully inside the wobbling elevator, he set the weights down on an industrial scale bracketed in place along the back left corner of the floor.

“Okay, hand me the kettlebells and backpacks, and then the canvas bag, but didnae climb aboard until I say.”

She did as he instructed, then watched as he removed the new car battery from the canvas bag.

“I thought you said the elevator is operated manually?”

“Aye. The battery is used tae power the lights.” Feeling along the plywood floor behind the scale, he located the old car battery and began loosening the two wing nuts securing the cables. He then connected the red cable to the new battery’s positive post and the black cord to the negative.

The job completed, he tightened the connections and turned to Andrea. “Climb aboard—here, give me yer hand. Now mind yer eyes, this will be bright.”

She squeezed her eyes shut against the brilliant tsunami wave of lights attached to the outside of the cart—and suddenly they were descending rapidly, one of Angus’s calloused palms engulfing her hand as he pulled her into his embrace—

—pushing him back as the sound of ten thousand squeals mixed with the sickening clatter of claws along the sheer rock face—now a swarming hyperkinetic mass of oily black clumps, the rats’ beady nocturnal eyes set aglow in the passing lights.

Sensing something rising at them from below, she leaned out—

—Angus yanking her back as the other car passed them and raced up the fissure. “Are ye all right?”

She nodded and then pointed to an altimeter anchored to the opposite wall, the glowing blue numbers spinning backward toward zero.

430 ... 400 ... 370 ... 340 ...

Reaching for the two ten-pound kettle bells, Angus dropped them over the side, reducing the weight differential with the other car and slowing their rate of descent.

280 ... 260...240...220 ...

She held onto him, steadying him as he gripped the raised edge of one of the large weight plates and rolled it out of the car.

75 ... 67 ... 68 ... 60 ...

“Angus, if you toss out all of our ballast, how will you keep the car from lifting away the moment one of us steps off?”

“No worries.” Situated in the back corner of the cart close to the car battery’s electrical junction was a first aid kit and a folded wool blanket. He moved the later, exposing a length of heavy chain, one end anchored to the cart floor by an eyebolt, its free end attached to a snap-hook.

Andrea looked down as the ground suddenly appeared below, becoming a patch of mattresses which rushed up at them—absorbing most of the impact of a still somewhat bone-jarring landing.

Dropping to his knees, Angus reached out, feeling between two of the mattresses with his right hand which held the end of the chain. “Come on then, where are ye ... ah-ha.” Locating the end of another chain anchored long ago beneath the earth, Angus snapped the hook in place over

the nearest eyebolt, securing the elevator car to the bottom of the shaft. "That should do it. But jisttae be safe..."

Locating the steel plate he had dropped over the side, he dragged it onboard. He and Andrea proceeded to add a dozen more kettle bells of varying weight and sizes until the car settled deeper into the mattresses.

He held out his hand to Andrea. "Ready?"

"What about the rats?"

"No worries, darlin', their eyes are too sensitive, they won't venture intae the light. Reach inside yer backpack and remove one of these large lanterns along with a smaller flashlight. Tuck that one in yer outer jacket pocket as a back-up. "Ready?"

"What are we looking for?"

"Anythin' that looks like it was once alive." Angus led her past the bottom of the fissure. Hearing a howling of wind, they followed it, their surroundings quickly narrowing to a tunnel of rock.

"It's jist through there, maybe six meters."

Andrea aimed her lantern at the opening. "I don't know how long six meters is, but I'm feeling claustrophobic just looking at it. It's barely high enough to crawl through one at a time on our hands and knees."

"Aye, it's tight but it's the only way in. I brung gloves and kneepads; check yerbackpack."

"What if the rats come?"

"We always leave a kerosene lantern burning in front of the opening; the scent combines with the light taekeep the vermin away. Here, let me have a look in yer pack." He unzipped the waterproof carry-on strapped to her shoulders and removed a pair of hard plastic knee pads used for rollerblading and matching gloves, handing them to her.

She secured the protective apparel over her hands and knees while Angus removed a brass oil lantern from his backpack. She watched him top off the kerosene from a plastic container before striking a match to light the wick. He adjusted the flame to its highest setting and then positioned the eighteen-inch-tall device in front of the tunnel's entrance. She waited while he quickly strapped on his knee pads and gloves.

“Ready?”

“Let's just do this and get the hell out of here.”

“My sentiments exactly. I'll take the lead, mind yer head.” Angus secured his backpack, pulling the straps as tight as they would go, and then dropped to his hands and knees and started crawling.

Andrea gave him a five second head start and followed him in.

The plastic knee pads slid easily on the rock surface, making the going much quicker than she had anticipated. She could hear the echo of a powerful stream, and then she was through—

—the two of them standing in a cavern, their flashlights punching holes through a dense darkness. Above their heads was a curved rock ceiling harboring clusters of stalactites; before them—a narrow expanse of rock a dozen paces from a swiftly moving current of black water that swept from left (south) to right (north).

Andrea took a deep breath. The air was frigid and moist, entwined with a scent of decay which turned her stomach. “What is that smell?”

Angus aimed his light across the underground river, illuminating the other shoreline. It was riddled with rocks and something that resembled a human head and upper torso.

“Angus, what is that?”

“True's dive suit, at least whit's left of it. Zachary was inside the thing when the Guivre—”

“Angus!” Her beam was aimed at the northernmost end of the cavern, its circle of light revealing swells of movement along either shoreline, the source of the stench providing a blood-drenched feast to thousands of black rats.

“Whit the hell are they eating?”

“I don’t know and I don’t care—Angus, we have to leave.”

“Not yet.” Reaching into his jacket pocket, he removed the most powerful flashlight he had brought with them, aiming the dense beam of the Imalent MS-18’s 100,000 Lumens at the swarm—

—causing them to disperse into the shadows, revealing the pile of bleeding, mucous-drenched eel remains.

Andrea gagged. “Is that—”

“A Guivre? No. Those are Anguilla, their ten-foot cousins.”

“Rats eat Anguilla?”

“No, Anguilla eat rats, that’s why they inhabit the cavern. Rats eat dead Anguilla; the question is whit killed them?”

She screamed—her light revealing dozens of rats racing across the rocks in their direction.

“Get back tae the tunnel; use yer light tae keep them away.”

“What about you?”

“I’ll be right behind ye, go!”

She hurried back to the cavern’s exit, the passage glowing orange, the lantern Angus had left at the entrance keeping the rats out the tunnel. But they were everywhere else, their dark bodies darting along the walls and ceiling and across her path. She stepped on one and screamed, her ankle twisting painfully in the process. Refusing to stop, she hobbled to the dimly backlit tunnel, her head on a swivel, her flashlight’s blessed beacon clearing the way as she dropped to her hands and knees

before the exit. Terrified of the rats following her in, she gripped the flashlight backwards in her right hand and began crawling toward the lantern, its glow flickering at the other end of the tunnel.

\* \* \*

Angus approached the closest pile of refuse, his powerful light revealing details of the assault. The Anguilla had been entangled in an orgy of twenty-to-thirty writhing bodies when something had risen out of the river to attack—its jaws excising a three-foot-wide bite from the entwined torsos of its unsuspecting cousins.

Reaching to his belt, Angus retrieved his hunting knife from its leather sheath before removing the last remaining item from his backpack—a plastic specimen jar. Aiming his light, he located what he surmised was the edge of a gushing wound and used the serrated side of the blade to saw off a chunk of the mucous-laden meat. Stabbing it with the point of the knife, he shoved it inside the plastic container and tightened the lid—

—his heart pounding in his chest as returned to face the river, his skin crawling as he heard the telltale change in tempo of the rushing tide, the course of the ominous swiftly moving waters diverted by the sheer mass of the surfacing creature.

Returning the knife to its sheath, he clutched the container to his chest and ran, his light blazing a blinding path through the frenzy of squealing rats.

\* \* \*

Andrea emerged from the tunnel and froze, her flashlight illuminating a veritable gauntlet of agitated vermin, the lantern's flame dancing in their beady nocturnal eyes, their moist pink nostrils sniffing the dank air, the scent of burning kerosene keeping them at bay.

She grabbed the lantern by its brass handle and took several strides in the direction of the elevator shaft, the swarm of rodents refusing to back away.

And then something else caught their attention, causing them to stand on their hind legs and snort the chilly breeze whistling out of the tunnel, the walls of which were now gyrating from the approaching beacon of light.

Andrea saw Angus smash the top of his head as he stood too soon in his hurried attempt to escape his rocky confines. The concussive blow felled him to his knees and she ran to his side, dragging him up by the crook of his arm—

—the howling air abruptly muted as she heard something immense enter the tunnel.

“Angus?”

“Give me the lantern—take my light ... clear the way.” He grabbed onto the brass handle and shoved the heavy flashlight into her abdomen. “Go!”

She aimed the powerful beam at the rats—shocked to discover they had already fled. Turning back to Angus, she saw him toss the lantern into the dark mouth of the cave—

—the glass smashing, the lit wick igniting a swath of flame as the kerosene splattered inside the tunnel—inciting a high-pitched screech that caused Andrea’s heart to skip a beat, her racing pulse suddenly tripling.

Sliding her left arm around Angus’s waist, she aimed her light, splitting the darkness ahead and half-dragged, half-carried him back to the chasm.

The three-sided lift car’s exterior-mounted lights had dimmed noticeably. She watched in horror as the rats leaped from a thousand unseen perches onto the length of steel cable rising from out of the elevator’s roof, the black-haired vermin snapping at one another as they scurried straight up the ninety-degree incline.

Aiming the brilliant incandescent torch inside the elevator sent more dark bodies scattering. Ducking inside, she dropped her ex-husband on the floor. “Angus, how do I—”

“Release the anchor first ... then the weights.”

“Anchor first ... right.” Locating the thick chain, she traced it back outside the car to the pile of mildewed mattresses. Reaching her hand between two of them, she felt for the steel clasp and slipped the hook free.

“Ow!” Andrea yanked her hand free—along with the fourteen-pound rat, its body wriggling beneath the bite wound as it dangled from her right forearm by its teeth.

“Oh my God, get off!” Afraid to touch it, she clubbed at it with Angus’s flashlight, missing with the first two strikes. The third did the trick, the rat scampering away as the car – free of its tether began rising away from the mattresses.

Wasting no time, she leaped back on board, hoisted a ten-pound dumbbell off the floor and tossed it over the side. Then, like a woman possessed, she grabbed the fifty-pound steel plate in two hands and heaved it into the darkness, the sudden weight differential with the other car sending them rocketing topside. A moment later the now-heavier second elevator car shot past them, marking the shaft’s halfway point.

This time there was no warning—the heart-stopping jolt causing her to bite her tongue, the sudden impact of the elevator’s reinforced padded roof striking the docking bay actually propelling them three feet off the floor—the feeling of weightlessness short-lived as they landed in a heap.

“Christ, my bloody head feels like someone took old Betsy to it.”

Andrea was about to respond when she saw the lights.

They had been waiting for them for most of the last hour—eighteen members of the Black Knights—eighteen former brethren.

Angus sat up in pain, his right hand shielding his eyes from the Templars’ powerful lights—his left slipping the specimen jar and its mangled eel contents under the back of Andrea’s jacket.

“Whit were ye doing down below, Angus?”

“My sacred duty as a Black Knight, Brother O’Hearn. Perhaps ye could do the same.”

“You were excommunicated from the order, Mr. Wallace. You were forbidden from being here,” Mason Oliver bellowed using his familiar Sunday fire and brimstone delivery. “And tae allow a woman—”

“Shut yer piehole, priest. I’m a Templar, not a bloody Catholic. As tae the woman, this is Dr. Lucy Darr, a scientist from the States. I dragged her doon intae the Guivre’s Den tae have her render an opinion as tae whether she thought the beasties could ever return tae Loch Ness. Well, guess whit, lads—not only can they return, they have returned! Ain’t that right, Dr. Darr?”

“Huh? Oh yes, indeed. We discovered another Queen occupying the cavern.”

“She’s a nasty one. Nowhere near the size of the last one, but she slaughtered quite a few of her Anguilla cousins and then chased us back up through the tunnel, somethin’ Nessie never did.”

Several conversations broke out at once. “Is it possible?”

“How do we contain her without the gate?”

“Is that even necessary? We came here tae collect the Braveheart. Let’s do that. Display it in the museum as we intended and be done with this Black Knight nonsense all ready.”

“Did ye not hear him? If there is a new Queen present then I’ll not be confronting her with a bloody sword. Get me a goddam Howitzer!”

“Wallace is lyin’, Brother Murphy. And don’t be blaspheming.”

“A liar, am I now? Tell ye wit, priest; why don’t-cha go on down and have a look fer yerselves. Unless of course, the Pope excommunicated yer choir boy butt hammer from yer balls.”

Father Oliver’s face turned beet-red; several others biting their lower lips to keep from laughing.

Angus stood. “Come on, Dr. Darr. We’ll leave these geniuses tae deal with figurin’ oot how tae collect the Braveheart from the new Queen. Jist didnae be askin’ my clan tae save yer sorry asses

from the beastie this time around.”