

# FREE AUTHORISED EXTRACT

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From *The Ballad of Callum James Roan*

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## Chapter One

### The Stone Cottage, Moray Firth — 1998

The sea never stopped breathing.

Even when the tide was slack and the boats lay still in Findhorn Bay, the sound came in slow — a deep inhalation against the rock, a long exhale through the marram grass. The stone cottage had learned to breathe with it. So had Callum James Roan.

He stood at the small window with a mug cooling in his hand, watching a grey morning stretch itself thin across the Moray Firth. He had been awake since four. He rarely slept past it now.

There were things that came in the early hours.

Not dreams.

More like unfinished sentences.

He rubbed the back of his neck without thinking — left side, just below the hairline. The skin there held a faint crescent ridge. Not obvious. Not dramatic. But present.

He had never told anyone about it.

Not Morag.

Not the lads.

Not even the men he'd served beside.

It was too strange.

He had a memory — no, not a memory — a fragment.

A briefing room.

Low light.

Someone saying his name.

A flight — long, featureless, seven hours at least.

He couldn't remember where.

He remembered the watch.

Standard issue digital.

Square face.

Rubber strap.

Four buttons.

He remembered the injection.

Left side of the neck.

Sharp.

Precise.

Gone in seconds.

And instructions, spoken like scripture:

“Top right button three times.

A. B.

Then A and B together.

It will excavate.”

He had laughed at the word.

Excavate.

As though something had been planted in him like a seed.

He remembered pain once — distant, blistering — as though something had tunnelled outward from under the skin. He remembered pressing buttons again.

A.

B.

Top right three times.

And ash.

He never found ash.

He found nothing.

Just a scar.

Sometimes he wondered if it was nothing more than PTSD dressed in machinery.

Men built fictions to survive.

The mind did strange things under pressure.

He set the mug down.

He was a large man. Broad across the shoulders. Built like the stone he lived inside. He had done well in the Guards — better than expected. Discipline suited him. Structure suited him. He had no time for politics then.

He had no time for politics now.

He called the SNP the NATS, though not loudly. He was Scottish to the marrow — pipes, glen, stubborn wind — but he had grown up British. That identity had dissolved quietly over the years, like ink in rainwater.

It was the loss that unsettled him.

Loss of Britain as he had known it.

Loss of Scotland as he had known it.

Loss of cultural memory.

Loss disguised as progress.

Colour didn't matter to him.

Culture did.

An accent and a kilt didn't make a Scot.

He had once told Morag, half joking, half not:

“If I could rebuild Hadrian's Wall and man it, I would.”

She had laughed.

He had not.

It wasn't hatred.

It was protection.

He feared something softer than invasion.

Erosion.

He feared that in one generation, the old songs would be footnotes, the history rewritten by men who did not understand the stone beneath their feet.

He turned from the window and the room darkened slightly as the cloud thickened outside.

The stone cottage held heat badly and memory too well.

He had been a boy here when the thunder split the sky.

He remembered that clearly.

The crack of it.

The flash.

The ball of white light — too slow to be lightning, too deliberate — passing through the stone wall as though it were mist.

In through one side.

Out through the other.

No scorch.

No fracture.

He had sat upright in bed, heart pounding.

Later that same year — or perhaps another — he had found himself standing at the foot of his own bed. He remembered staring at the wall behind where his head had lain.

There had been something projected there.

Blurred.

Out of focus.

Like a film not meant for him.

He did not remember what it showed.

Only that he had been watching.

And then—

Hands.

Cold.

Strong.

Around both ankles.

And he was pulled down, violently, under the bed into blackness.

He did not remember climbing back out.

He remembered morning.

He remembered telling no one.

He had long ago decided the mind can fracture under pressure.

Children imagine.

Soldiers misremember.

Trauma reshapes memory into myth.

But the scar on his neck remained.

He rubbed it again.

Outside, the wind shifted.

The sea inhaled.

Something in him stirred — not fear, not quite.

Recognition.

He had returned to the stone because the stone did not lie.

But lately the stone had begun to hum.

And Callum James Roan — veteran, apolitical Scot, reluctant nationalist, large man with a small scar — was beginning to suspect that whatever had followed him from boyhood had not finished its sentence.

He did not yet know where it was leading.

Only that it had begun long before he wore a uniform.

And it had not asked his permission.

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