

CHAPTER ONE

My closest friends know me as DJ Smith, investigator for Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs (Drugs Division). My enemies, I hope, don't know me at all. In my line of work I try to keep the lowest of profiles. Cloaked in secrecy. Under wraps. Undercover. That's me. For the kind of enemies I make would be glad to see me dead. It's always at the back of my mind.

That was why I should have paid more attention to the bell-boy with a couple of suitcases on his trolley. I'd summoned the lift to take me down from one of the penthouse suites. A sudden violent blow on the back slammed me against the stainless-steel shaft doors. They shouldn't have opened. But someone had made sure they did. I pitched forward and down...

Whoever made the attempt on my life hadn't taken into account the position of the lift, which was at the floor below. So my fall was not the intended twelve storeys, but a mere six feet; my injuries were a few cuts, bruises and more than a little shock to the system. I survived, but I can't say the same for my undercover career as leisure hostess cum personal shopper.

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The Department were quite good about the fact that I'd screwed up that carefully set up operation. My next assignment was, thankfully, not to Siberia but to Scotland.

'Just a routine nose around, Deborah. Treat it as a holiday for you and the cat. It'll be a rest for you after that last little bit of bother.' Jim Orr, my Head of Section, selected a slim file from the neat stack on his desk.

A bit of bother! I'd almost been *killed*. But a six-foot fall instead of twelve storeys – if you look at it that way, I suppose you *could* call it 'a bit of bother'...

He held the file out to me. 'We've had a tip-off about a country house hotel not far from Edinburgh. It's all in there, such as it is. The East of Scotland Drug Squad have been reporting a big increase in heroin traffic over the past year. They suspect the stuff's coming in somewhere along the coastline between Edinburgh and the English border.'

I opened the file. The first plastic pocket held a photograph of a big grey-stone house in the Scottish Baronial style of architecture.

'The White Heather Hotel, your base while you're up there.' He hummed a snatch of 'The Bonnie Banks of Loch Lomand'. 'Proprietors Murdo and Morag Mackenzie. They've no previous convictions.'

I studied the mug shot. A harmless-looking couple, but that didn't mean a thing. Murdo Mackenzie's heavy features frowned back at me. That deep line between the eyes showed him to be one of life's worriers. One of those anxieties seemed to involve premature hair loss as he'd combed dark strands of hair across his scalp in a vain attempt to disguise a receding hairline. Morag was four years older. Her black hair was

flecked with iron grey, and tied back in the severe hairstyle of an old-fashioned bun at the nape of the neck. Her hard face and thin lips gave the impression that she was the more dominant of the two.

Jim flicked a hand at a fly about to make a six-point landing on a stack of files on his desk. 'The woman's in the clear, but her husband's distinctly shady. The local police have been interested in him for the last couple of years. Nothing ever proved, though.' He gazed pensively at the fly, undeterred and now nosing through a pile of confidential papers. 'Our source reckons there's a *possibility* that Mackenzie might be involved in the distribution of the heroin. It shouldn't take you long to check the place out. The Operation code name is Scotch Mist.' He whipped a canister of fly-spray from a drawer. *Psssssb*. The fly flopped on its back, one leg waving a final farewell, lips sealed forever. 'But I don't think this will come to anything.' I was treated to another snatch of 'The Bonnie Banks of Loch Lomand'. 'Yes, just treat it as a holiday for yourself and the cat.'

It was the middle of June, but all the way from the border with England that notorious Scottish east coast mist made driving difficult. Cold and dismal, it hung low over the fields and hills, bleaching out the summer colours of the countryside and reducing the famed beauty of the landscape to grey, indistinct shapes that loomed, then vanished quickly behind. I peered through the windscreen. If I'd taken the main dual carriageway instead of the scenic route, I'd have checked into the White Heather Hotel an hour ago. I'd now be putting my

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feet up and having a coffee, or sampling one of Scotland's pure malts. I rolled the names over my tongue. Glenmorangie, Laphroaig, Cragganmore, Dalwhinnie, Macallan, Royal Lochnagar, Tallisker...

That mist was thicker than ever. The insides of the car windows were steaming up too. I grabbed for the cloth lying on the back seat. In the driving mirror my eyes met Customs Officer Gorgonzola's copper ones. She gave me her Cheshire Cat grin, designed to show off each sharp tooth to perfect advantage.

In case you're wondering, Customs Officer Gorgonzola, extraordinarily gifted sniffer-out of drugs, is a cat, a large Red Persian of tatty and disreputable appearance. She has the typical sweet nature of the breed, the copper eyes, but not the long luxuriant coat. Some Don Juan of an alley cat must have seduced her mother, hence the moth-eaten appearance. At times, for no apparent reason, her eyes narrow into slits, she sheathes and unsheathes her claws and hisses quietly to herself, perhaps dwelling upon the harrowing circumstance of her near-drowning at birth.

The White Heather Hotel couldn't be far away now, but visibility was very poor, only a couple of hundred yards or so. I lowered the window and stuck out my head. A low dry-stone wall loomed to the right, and beyond it I could hear the faint crash of waves on the shore. A little way ahead, insubstantial in the mist, a huge monkey-puzzle tree spread a dark tangle of arms. As I crept level, a puff of wind swirled and eddied the mist to reveal a white signboard suspended from a branch overhanging the road. On it in fancy lettering:

WHITE HEATHER COUNTRY HOUSE HOTEL.

I'd reached my goal. I brought the car to an abrupt halt, depositing Gorgonzola in an astonished heap on the floor.

'It's your own fault,' I growled unsympathetically. 'You should have let me clip you into your harness instead of poncing about on the back seat.'

Ignoring such coarseness, she leapt back onto the seat and curled up. One open eye watched me sulkily as I stepped out of the car.

WHITE HEATHER COUNTRY HOUSE HOTEL

SELF-CATERING COTTAGES

JACUZZI, SOLARIUM, SAUNA

NO PETS.

Proprietors Mr & Mrs M Mackenzie

Beneath hung a smaller notice: *Vacancies*.

The *No Pets* edict was not a problem. I'd often faced this sort of tricky situation. 'Nothing that our well-rehearsed routine can't cope with, eh, G?'

Never one to hold a grudge for long, she stepped daintily out of the car and wound herself round my legs in affectionate agreement.

The hotel was miles from anywhere – a breakdown would provide an excellent excuse for not having booked ahead. I turned off the ignition, propped up the bonnet, and sawed vigorously at the drive belt with the scissors kept in my bag for 'emergencies'. A minute or two of effort, and I surveyed the ragged cut with satisfaction. I pulled the severed belt off

its pulley and threw it into the nearest clump of bushes.

Now for the luggage. I leant into the boot and whipped out a large blue holdall inscribed *MINE*, and an equally large red one, surprisingly heavy for its size, inscribed *YOURS*, containing a fluffy towel, a soft sheepskin rug (G's bed, she liked her comforts), and fifteen large cans of an obscure but expensive brand of cat food, her favourite. I locked the car, gathered up the two holdalls, and set off. Gorgonzola, moth-eaten tail held high, stalked ahead.

Despite the hampering mist I could see that the grounds of the hotel were extensive and well-kept – lawns of billiard table smoothness, silvery with moisture, lapped two huge beds of heather (white, of course). Half a dozen cars were parked on the gravelled forecourt from which wide stone steps led up to the front door of the house, its rather grim grey stone softened by the finely sculptured leaves of a rampant Virginia creeper. Of Gorgonzola, there was no sign. She always knew when to make herself scarce.

I scrunched over the wet gravel and up the steps. An elegant potted plant in a classy white jardinière graced the large vestibule. Beside it on a small spindly legged walnut table reposed a tastefully designed card bearing in copperplate script a glowing description of the hotel. A well-polished brass plaque introduced a somewhat curter note.

*THE MANAGEMENT REGRETS NO PETS
CAN BE ENTERTAINED.*

Entertained? An audience of cats and dogs in the drawing room solemnly listening to a string quartet? Mustn't laugh, I

could be on CCTV.

Through the glass door, I could see carpeted stairs and, standing guard at their foot, an imposing grandfather clock with yellowed dial. I pulled open the door, and deposited the holdalls in front of the polished reception desk. Spread open before me lay an open ledger and, beside it, a porcelain hand bell with the notice *Please ring for attention*. I rang as requested. No response. I seized the opportunity and swivelled the ledger to scan the entries.

'Can I be of assistance...madam?' The cold, steely voice paused perceptibly before the *madam*. The speaker had noted my action and did not approve.

I spun round guiltily, as if I'd sneaked a quick glance at a doctor's notes and been caught in the act. Confronting me was a tall angular woman, her black hair flecked with iron grey. Mrs Morag Mackenzie.

'You have a vacancy?' I asked.

She inclined her head in aristocratic assent. 'Hotel, or self-catering cottage?'

'Oh, hotel!' I said. 'I do like my little luxuries!'

Her gaze rested on the two holdalls. 'A single or a double room, madam?'

'A double,' I replied blandly. 'Though I'm by myself, I prefer the extra space.'

Her eyes scrutinised me for a long moment, as if to x-ray my morals. 'Sign here, please.' She pushed the register towards me and selected a key from the board behind her.

I signed my name with a flourish. My real name, that is. Using an alias, I've found, only leads to unnecessary complications.

'Ms Deborah Smith. Smith...' She pursed her thin lips,

savouring the word as if it was something rather nasty she had found in the salad. Again her eyes homed in on the *YOURS* holdall like an Exocet missile on its way to its target.

‘Yes, it’s plain Smith, not spelt with y or e, I’m afraid, Mrs...er...’ I smiled disarmingly.

‘Mackenzie.’ There was no reciprocating smile from the Gorgon. ‘I’ll show you to your room. It’s number 4 on the first floor.’

I picked up the holdalls. Now to dispel any lurking suspicion that my arrival was anything other than chance. ‘Is there a phone in the room? I’m afraid my car’s broken down just outside your driveway, and I’ll have to contact a garage.’

‘Room telephone, madam? *Of course.* This way.’ She stalked ahead of me up the ornately balustraded staircase.

The weather should be a safe enough topic. ‘Do you often get mist as thick as this?’

‘Haar,’ replied Mrs Mackenzie, ‘haar.’

West Country accent, Devon or Cornwall. Orr’s briefing on the hotel and its owners had not included any such connections. Perhaps this was going to be a lead worth following up.

‘Haar?’ I echoed encouragingly, hoping she would reveal more.

She paused beside a magnificent Victorian stained-glass window on the half-landing. Her thin lips compressed into what might have been a condescending smile. ‘Haar,’ she spoke slowly and clearly as if explaining to a person of limited understanding, ‘is the local word for the sea mist that tends to linger for several days after a spell of hot weather.’

‘How interesting,’ I said truthfully.

Room 4 faced to the rear, just above a small tree whose branches overhung the sloping roof of a conservatory running the length of the building. I wouldn't have to smuggle Gorgonzola in under my jacket as I sometimes had to do if access proved beyond her mountaineering skills.

When I was alone, I threw up the lower half of the sash window with as much noise as I could decently make. In anyone's books, this dreadful weather counted as winter. I was confident I wouldn't have to wait long.

G couldn't bear being wet or cold – not surprising in view of her near-death experience as a kitten. After a misalliance, pedigree breeders can be unforgiving. I'd found her late one autumn afternoon, a wet and shivering ball clinging desperately to an old log jammed against the river bank. Beside her floated the drowned bodies of her brothers and sisters. I'd scooped her up and taken her home wrapped in my woolly hat. No alternative, was there? I couldn't leave her there to die.

I dried her, made up an intensive care unit from a hot water bottle and an old jersey, and started a regime of two-hourly feeds from a pipette. There wasn't much sign of life. She was so weak that I had to put the tip in her mouth and stroke her throat so that she would swallow the slow trickle of warm liquid. Then it was retire to bed, set the alarm, stagger up, eyes glued with sleep. Each time, to my surprise, the little ball of ginger fur was still alive.

The next morning a pink tongue licked my finger. 'Welcome to the world, Kitten,' I'd said. 'You can stay here till I find you a good home.'

I didn't give her a name, just called her Kitten. Keeping a cat

was really out of the question for me, so it was better not to become too attached to this tiny creature. At the time I trained dogs for HM Revenue and Customs, taking three or four home and testing them by hiding an object in the house. That way I found out which of them had potential as a Sniffer.

I kept her out of the way of the dogs at first, but she soon showed she could take care of herself. Any dog that overstepped the mark received a sharp reminder to behave. Puppies came and went. Kitten stayed. She played with the dogs, ate with the dogs, slept with the dogs. I suppose she grew up thinking she *was* a dog. I shortened her name to Kit and didn't try too hard to find her that good home.

Training sessions may look like games, but they're a serious business. The dogs mustn't be distracted, so I shut Kit in her basket, when I could catch her, but more often than not the process became a game of hide and seek. She hid. I'd seek. Sometimes I shut her out in the garden, and then she would peer in at us, gingery face pressed disconsolately against the glass.

Kit's career with Revenue and Customs began the day I chose a ripe cheese as my test for the dogs. To make it a tough one, I liberally squirted a can of lavender-scented polish on every wooden surface in the lounge, paying particular attention to the bookcase. In the six-inch gap between carpet and base I laid my pongy morsel of cheese, pushing it as far back as I could. Only a dog with the very best 'nose' would pass a grade A test like this.

Before going to fetch the dogs, I went in search of Kit. She was lying on my bed curled up, face buried in tail in her *Do Not Disturb* posture. I gave her a quick stroke and left her

to it. No need to put her in her basket today. I let the puppies, Jenny and Roger, out of their kennels, attached a leash to each collar and led them into the house.

I tied Jenny securely to the stair rail and knelt down beside Roger. In my hand I held another piece of the smelly cheese.

When he'd had a good sniff, I slipped the leash, and pointed at the open lounge door. 'Search!'

The puppy bounded forward, barking with excitement, tail wagging, while I stood in the doorway, stopwatch and notebook in hand. Chair, settee, cupboard, chair again, pawing and sniffing. Bookcase. A cursory sniff underneath, then back to the settee again and another scamper round the various pieces of furniture. He trotted back past the bookcase again, but showed no interest in it. In the end I had to write, *Roger – Fail*.

Then it was Jenny's turn for the cheese test. I slipped the leash. 'Search!'

Tail wagging, she made straight for the bookcase. Nose down, rear in air, snuffle, sniff, frantic wagging. I had my pencil poised to rate Jenny as a pass, when she lost interest in the bookcase. Off she rushed to investigate the easy chair by the fire, then a cushion on the settee. She completed a second tour round the room, but made no return to the bookcase. Regretfully, I wrote, *Jenny – Fail*.

'Just goes to show,' I thought. 'You never can tell.' I'd been pretty sure that Jenny would find the cheese. It was really disappointing. I'd give them both a second chance tomorrow.

I took the dogs to their kennels, and went back to the lounge to retrieve the cheese. To save too much scrabbling and peering, I'd placed it directly in line with the *Complete Guide to Dog Care*, but when I reached in, my fingers touched only carpet. I

made a sweeping motion to right and left. Nothing. I stretched out full length and squinted into the gap. Two eyes peered back. Two copper eyes and a self-satisfied ginger smile. Hanging from a whisker were two crumbs, all that was left of the cheese.

It didn't take me long to figure out the chain of events. Kit had known it was training time and had wanted a part of the action, so while I was away collecting the dogs, she'd sneaked into the lounge. Beneath the strong scent of lavender polish was the cheesy smell that had been on my hand when I'd stroked her. She'd recognised it – and tracked it down. The dogs hadn't failed their test. There had been no cheese left to detect.

Intrigued by her exploit, I reran the cheese test. Only this time there were three participants. Roger failed, Jenny locked on in 60 seconds, Kit in 30. After that, I allowed her to join the dogs in their sniffing games. Time after time, she proved that her sense of smell and intelligence were outstanding. What else could I do but recommend her for training?

On the day she passed her final test, I decided that her new role deserved a new name and called her after the cheese that had triggered her change of status.

'Welcome to HM Customs, Gorgonzola,' I said, and gave her a hug. The unwanted ugly duckling, left to drown, had matured into a swan. We'd been a team ever since.

I didn't have to wait long at the open window of the White Heather Hotel. Two minutes later, there was a scrabbling in the tree over the conservatory and Gorgonzola, looking rather like a bedraggled dish mop, stepped daintily over the sill, leaving a trail of wet paw prints across Mrs Mackenzie's pristine carpet. 'Haar,' she spat petulantly.

I was impressed. She had already set herself to learn the local lingo. Slamming the window shut, I delved in the red *YOURS* holdall and pulled out her fluffy towel – like all prima donnas, she expected to be cosseted.

I enveloped her in the towel and rubbed gently. ‘There, that’s better, isn’t it?’ I crooned.

Tap tap on the bedroom door. I hadn’t locked it. To have done so would have aroused suspicion, and I had to assume the Mackenzies were guilty till I found otherwise.

The handle turned at the same moment as Mrs Mackenzie’s sharp, ‘Can I trouble you a minute, Miss Smith?’

With one swift movement, I rolled up G in the towel and hurled the swaddled bundle under the bed. She gave a surprised squeak, then silence. She’d recognised an emergency. And that’s what there’d be if Mrs Mackenzie threw me out of the hotel for entertaining an expressly forbidden pet. A quick glance at the open holdall reassured me that she’d see nothing more incriminating than the sheepskin rug.

Mrs M’s angular body appeared in the open doorway. ‘I just came up to ask if everything was all right.’ Her eyes swivelled round the room, raking it for evidence of anything untoward.

‘Everything’s fine, thank you, Mrs Mackenzie.’

Her glance flicked to the open holdall, but she seemed satisfied. She gave the room a final once-over, and turned to go. ‘Guests are expected to keep reasonable hours. The hotel is locked at midnight.’ With a curt nod she went out. The door clicked shut behind her.

So...she’d checked up on me. Interesting. I stepped softly to the door and stood there with my ear pressed to the panelling. Three seconds, four, five... Then I heard her moving away and

the *creak creak* as she descended the stairs. Quietly, I turned the key in the lock.

I stooped to look under the bed, ‘OK, you can—’

I heard the *crunch* of tyres on gravel and crossed to the window just in time to see a van disappearing into the depths of the enormous double garage set back at a little distance from the rear of the house. The door swung down silently behind the van. Concealed by the curtain, I waited. Murdo Mackenzie, co-owner of the White Heather Hotel, emerged from a small access port carrying a plastic-wrapped package. Was it my imagination, or was there something shifty about the way he was glancing around? He moved towards the house and I lost sight of him.

From the holdall I drew out a rather old-fashioned mobile phone, in reality a state-of-the-art encrypted camera-phone. Holding it close to my mouth, I began my report.

‘June 19th, 20.00 hours. Operation Scotch Mist. In position at target. Double garage at rear looks interesting. Blue transit van just arrived. Driver M, in possession of plastic-covered package.’

I switched off and moved back to the window. The mist seemed to be thinning a little, for I could now see, on the far side of the damp lawn, a large pond and the outline of two small buildings that might be the self-catering cottages. I opened the window and listened. Silence, except for muffled dripping from the saturated tree that had served as G’s entrance route.

She was still under the bed. I lifted the valance sheet and peered beneath. A pair of furious copper eyes glared back at me. It took much wheedling and coaxing, and a dish piled

high with her favourite salmon flakes, before, mollified, she condescended to emerge.

I waited till her tongue had rasped up the last morsel. Then, 'Sorry, G, it's time for work. You're on duty.' I reached into the holdall for the broad black collar she wore when on drug-detecting duty. Incorporated in it was a miniaturised transmitter.

The awful realisation struck that she was about to be sent out into the damp grey world. One moment she was grooming her coat, the next she'd flopped into a relaxed heap, eyes closed, heavy breathing, denoting a deep and exhausted slumber that not even the most cold-hearted taskmaster would dream of interrupting.

'Nice try, Gorgonzola.' Unfeelingly, I snapped the collar round her neck. 'Remind me to nominate you for an Oscar, Actress of the Year award.'

Training won. With only a token protest, she allowed herself to be bundled up in my arms and carried to the window. I pointed at the garage. 'Search!'

Moth-eaten tail twitching to indicate deep and continuing displeasure, she leapt lightly into the branches of that conveniently placed tree. Rustling leaves and the patter of displaced mist droplets marked her progress to the ground. With a final expressive twitch of her tail, she disappeared round the side of the garage.

I turned from the window and tuned an innocent-looking iPod to receiving frequency, then lay back on my bed, hands behind my head, waiting. Five minutes...ten minutes... The collar-transmitter was sound-activated, so there would be nothing from the receiver unless her search was successful.

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My eyelids grew heavy... It had been a long drive from London and that mist had made the stretch from the Scottish border particularly tiring. My thoughts began to drift...

Rrrrrrr rrrrrrr. The low crooning call from the 'iPod' brought me fully awake. It looked as if the Mackenzie establishment would indeed merit further investigation.