

## **The Doll Makers**

### ***Chapter 1***

The words changed on the long drive north. Annie's determination did not.

From Leicester Forest East, where she'd stopped to top up – coffee for her, water for the car – she added layers to the words she was going to say, fine-tuning the script. No more fantasy about coming home a world-renowned success, listening to her father say, 'I always knew you had it in you, Annie'. That one was gone forever. Buried.

The journey became hotter and stuffier, the early morning sun making a mobile oven of the car, whose blower gave her tepid air and hot engine smells, before beginning a terrible clatter like a death rattle. She clicked it off.

By the time she reached the M6, the traffic had eased, but it wasn't until the sign for Lockerbie flashed by that a nagging doubt crystallised. The words wouldn't work. It wasn't her script to write. Like in the old, dead fantasy, where he glowed with pride over his daughter, her father was the one with the speaking part.

From Lockerbie to the outskirts of Glasgow she oscillated between arguing for delay and facing it out. What's the great hurry, whispered the serpent. Take advantage of the glorious day promised by the early sunshine, have a whole Saturday free of worry. Evening's soon enough, or tomorrow.

She smiled as she lived it through in her head. A stroll down through the village, a beer in the pub. A whole Saturday just like it used to be. A wonderful fantasy to counter motorway boredom, but never an option. She had to say what she'd come to say and it must be done at once. All she had to find was a form of words that wouldn't choke her.

Though she made good time, the city was well awake and bustling, the traffic demanding her concentration as she drove through and out towards the ferry docks.

After bumping up the ramp, she parked selfishly on the deck, crowding the vehicle the other side of her, making sure she had room to open her door and climb out to spend the few minutes of the crossing up on the foot passengers' walkway. She leant on the rail. The sea air rushed over her as the ferry pushed its way across the Clyde. The light was changing, the clarity of early morning giving way to the haze and hotness of the day ahead. For a minute, she surrendered to the sensations of coming home, the smell of the salt air, the empty mountains rising up ahead.

Then she imagined her father's face in front of her, and snapped back to why she was here. The salty air hit her face like a thousand pinpricks. The water was murky.

But it was easy, she realised suddenly. Of course it was easy. All she had to do was look him in the eye and say "Dad, I've got bad news." Once he realised it was serious, he'd take the lead and wouldn't rest till he'd wrung every last detail out of her.

As she squeezed back into the car, she felt a cocoon wrap itself round her. It'd be a rough ride, but he'd come through for her. Facing him would be part of the penance.

If she still had the car Aunt Marion had bought her, she'd almost be home. But the old Nissan coughed as she jiggled it down the ramp, and she daren't take the direct route over the mountain passes.

As soon as she could, she'd swap this overheated vehicle for track suit and trainers, and get into the mountains. Nothing cleared the mind better than forcing muscles beyond their capabilities, up steep gradients. She'd taken to pounding up the

Victorian stairways of the older stations once she'd moved to London. They were every bit as good at getting thighs and calves to screaming pitch and lungs to white heat, but lacked the challenge of the hills, the dangers of ankle-breaking cracks beneath the ground, hidden ravines waiting to trap anyone straying from the tracks.

But there was something else she must do first.

*Dad, I've got bad news.*

Annie parked outside her father's house and clicked the key. The banging of the engine as it overran set her teeth on edge, but she felt the best she'd felt in weeks. Decision made. She knew what she had to do. Bag over her shoulder, she marched up the path.

With a smile totally inappropriate to the circumstances, she rang the bell and waited on the step. The door swung open and her smile froze.

Mrs Latimer stood there. For a moment they stared their mutual dislike and then Annie's father hurried up from the darkness of the hallway and said, "Annie, you're early. How are you?"

This was it. The moment for action. She sensed more than saw the tiny twitch of a knowing smirk. Mrs Latimer might be the stupidest woman alive, but she'd never lost the animal instinct that told her Annie was in trouble.

*Dad, I've got bad news...*

She swallowed the words. "Fine." She greeted her father with their customary arms-length hug and brief touching of cheeks.

*Dad...*

The moment slipped away.

“I’ve to do a couple of hours this morning,” her father said, an apologetic nod to the jacket of his uniform that hung on the stair rail. “I wasn’t expecting you as early as this. You have a rest after your journey, or have a walk round the village. We’ll go down to the pub at lunchtime.”

“Yes, you must have set off in the middle of the night.” This from Mrs Latimer. “There’s nothing wrong, is there?”

“No, everything’s fine.” She waved a hand at the bag where her running shoes hung by their laces. “I’ll go out for a run. Get the journey off me.” Her father’s words re-ignited the fantasy. *We’ll go down to the pub at lunchtime.* Just like old times.

Turning and looking Mrs Latimer in the eye, she caught a shaft of disappointment. Mrs Latimer thought she’d scented a false trail. Annie didn’t allow herself to feel smug. It was a temporary respite. Mrs Latimer would know soon enough. Hell, everyone would know.

The afternoon found her lazing outside the pub, a pint of heavy in her hand, legs stretched out. The vast expanse of the loch spread in front of her, the sun glinting off small waves, the incoming tide hustling pebbles along the shore. Children raced about, their laughter and shrieks overlying the rhythmic slap-slap-slap of water against the wooden landing. It had been quite a ritual at one time, strolling down to the pub with her father, sitting in companionable silence as they downed their beers, or on a day like today at the height of the season, leaving him inside to share the bonhomie of the bar, while she lazed outside in the sun.

Usually, she could close her eyes and imagine herself alone. The shrieking could be sea-birds, the rumble of conversation no more than the rustle of water over the shore. It wasn’t working today. She was cocooned in a shell that isolated her from

the crowds, but the laughter and gossip refused to mimic the loch-side on a peaceful day.

She'd put Mrs Latimer off the scent, but not for long. Memories bubbled up from childhood. "I'm sorry to have to say this about Annie, Mr Raymond... Tell your father what you've done, Annie..." She'd faced her old enemy down. False confidence, of course. And it would soon be evening. Just her and her father alone in the house.

She breathed deeply, trying to relax, and lay back and listened, wanting to eavesdrop on other people's conversations if she couldn't pretend to be alone. The voices wouldn't come together. They were a blurred backdrop to the rhythmic slapping of the water, the low growl of the pebbles. The loch stretched across to the far shore, a dark, cold expanse untouched by the heat of the day.

A shout from the crowd of children down by the jetty pierced her protective shell. "Dad! See what I've got!"

*Dad, I've got bad news...*

She cut her eyes towards the group, half-focussed on young Freddie Pearson, pulling at something he'd snagged below the quay. He was a local, not a tourist. She'd seen his father in the shop earlier. The shopkeeper, Mr Caine, a long time family friend, had given her a smile over Pearson's shoulder.

"Hello Annie," he'd said, "You up from London then?"

She'd shown him her teeth, because you have to smile at your father's old friends however dumb their questions, then turned away. She wasn't in the mood for conversation. Not that there was much to turn to. The rack of postcards would have been impressive if the real thing hadn't been right there outside the door. A row of straw dolls hung sadly from a rail. One of them, succumbing to gravity and some

internal imperfection, had slipped head-first onto the shelf, leaving a pseudo-gruesome severed leg swinging. Christ, thought Annie, is old what's-her-name still making dolls?

*I've got bad news, Dad.*

She practised the words in her mind. Just get his attention where it needed to be, and that would be the hard bit over with. But it wasn't evening yet. There were hours of afternoon sun still to enjoy.

“DAD!” Freddie Pearson’s voice ripped through the summer breeze at a volume that couldn’t be ignored. She saw Freddie’s father glance over his shoulder, rolling his eyes in good-natured exasperation to his mates round the table. “Good lad, Fred,” he shouted. “Reel it in like I’ve showed you.”

Annie lifted her feet off the ground, flexing muscles that weren’t used to these hills. If she’d been in London today, she might have done Russell Square. Two hundred stairs almost. It wasn’t the same. Even here where the clamour of the busy pub overflowed to the shore, the crowds were an insignificant pocket of bustle in an empty landscape. London crowds were different, they dominated the environment. Annie had yet to work out where she felt more vulnerable, in the loneliness of the city or the emptiness of the hills. Not that anything would stop her. Physical fitness was a matter of pride. It was one thing she did well. The only thing left perhaps...

“DA...AD!” Freddie was seriously frustrated now, his yell so sharp that everyone turned. He’d reeled in his catch, struggled to lift the rod high enough for his father to see what swung on the end of the line. High enough for everyone to see.

Annie’s mind gave a horrified lurch – a fleeting vision of a doll hanging, smile incongruous as straw spilt from its torn limb.

She saw the pint-pot slip from her grasp in slow-motion, tipping as it fell, brown liquid and foam spraying in the splintering of glass. As it shattered at her feet, her eyes focussed again on the children by the landing.

That was no doll on the end of Freddie's line.

There was a moment of absolute quiet, then pandemonium erupted. The smashing of glass, the scraping of chairs as people scrambled to rise, shrieks losing all sense of play... and underlying the mayhem, the steady slap-slap-slap of waves on the jetty.

The loch was no longer a benign backdrop to the summer's day.

Annie couldn't drag her eyes from the water's surface, knowing that under the silver glint of the waves were fathoms of cold, heavy, darkness. And somewhere out there was the rest it... the rest of Freddie's catch.

People shouted. Someone ran inside for her father. She jumped up and tried to shake her mind back on track. She should have thought to go for him. Where were the lightning reflexes she took such pride in? She looked at the crowd round the quay, then out again over the water. The rest of it wouldn't be out there, it would be caught under the wooden structure the children had been fishing from.

She took a deep breath, remembering that she could cope with this sort of thing, that she was good in nasty situations, and turned towards the pub doorway. Her father was there, blinking in the glare of the sun. Briefly she met his eye, saw realisation dawn. *I've got bad news, Dad.* That had to wait now. She had to help him deal with this. Matching his step, she strode with him towards the landing, bracing herself for the worst.

Whatever... whoever... was down there was in an advanced stage of decay for Freddie to have reeled in just part of a leg.