**PROLOGUE**

*January 18*

*02.14am*

*56°44'07.0"N 6°32'17.0"W*

A sea of smashed glass.

Snow and ice, ocean and darkness: a barbed frieze of ash and teeth and steel.

Five miles from the West Coast of Scotland, the elements becomes a maelstrom of power and violence. The Atlantic has saved its fury for this final stretch of water: a final, lethal punch thrown by a fading adversary. Here, nearing the wild, saw-toothed peninsula of Ardnamurchan, the sea and sky seem to conspire. The snow becomes a blizzard; the stormy waters now almost Biblical in their fury. Where the water meets land it attacks as if trying to claw great of chunks of earth within its embrace.

A metal tube, crow-black, moves like a sluggish torpedo towards a serrated curve of land. Ahead, the glow of the lighthouse: yellow light transforming the tumbling snow into lace handkerchiefs and shredded bridal gowns.

Soft light bleeds in through dirty glass, illuminating a space that reeks of petrol and unwashed flesh: an assemblage of metallic squares, each black with shadow and grime. This is neither a ship nor a submarine: it is partly submerged, its single turret and tail visible above the foaming tide. The belly of the vessel droops below the waterline. It is 15 feet from bow to stern.

A wave hits hard. Slaps at this tiny machine as if it were a tick burrowing into flesh. The craft rocks. Sways. Ploughs onward, rivets and plates shuddering as if beaten with hammers.

To the men within the belly of the black, Orca-like vessel, it is as if God has plunged His fists into the frigid waters and begun to stir.

Inside: four men. Sweaters, cotton undershorts and bare feet, shivering and grumbling, their lips moving around the butts of glowing cigarettes. They move with the gait of those more accustomed to the movement of the ocean than of the land. They are sure-footed, despite the ice and snow and the up-down-up-down surging of the sea. They have seen far worse weather than this. Have known nights so cold that each breath is an agony; nights when they have felt as though their skeletons had transformed into an assemblage of icicles and their skulls no more than packed snow beneath a layer of meat. Their limbs ache. Their bellies growl. They stink of fish-guts and oil, of smoke and brine. They do not complain.

At the tiller is Aroldo. He’s thin, but there is a strength to his wiry, featherweight physique. Beneath his scratchy, ill-fitting clothes, is a frame that is all ridges and hollows: muscles sliding over one another like the protective plates of a suit of armour. Here, in the darkness of the cabin, he is little more than two eyes and a glowing ember. He is smoking, pushing out lungful after lungful of grey smoke: pressing his lips to the crack in the glass so that the nicotine does not taint his cargo. It billows up to join the snow-filled clouds above. He sucks in a final drag then forces the butt through the hole. He cannot permit an untended flame within the craft.

The vessel lurches as it hits a gathering wave. Aroldo has time to steady himself. The three other men do not. They swear and grumble as they clatter, painfully, against the metal hull of the ship. He glances back at them and they fall silent. Despite their days and nights at sea, they are still strangers to one another. They have not formed a bond of shared misery. Though they have defecated in the same bucket and breathed in one another’s foulness, there remains a hierarchy. Aroldo finds it better this way.

He carries a crew of three men. He does not know their names and they have been instructed not to tell. One is responsible for the shipment in the hold. Another is tasked with maintaining the engine and generator. The third is here to report back to their paymasters and to ensure that if they are spotted by the authorities, they do as instructed and pull the scuttle-lever: sending the vessel and its cargo of Class A narcotics to the bottom of the sea.

Aroldo has never seen Scotland before. He has captained three Narco-subs on trans-Atlantic runs. Each time he has put in at Spain and made his way home via cargo ship. This is the first test of the route that they will be taking from now on. There are few eyes on this stretch of abandoned, rugged coastline. Nobody watches for South American drug-runners at Britain’s most westerly point.

Aroldo glances at the flimsy console desk in front of him. He is an experienced sailor and has coaxed this ramshackle vessel across the ocean in a way that makes him proud. He knows himself to be worth far more than the $50,000 US dollars he will receive upon his return to Guyana, but he also knows that the men he works for do not appreciate their workforce haggling over payment. He has lost a brother to the cartel. Saw what they did to him. He’s heard that the video is available online but he has no wish to see for himself if the descriptions of what occurred are actually true. He does know that they took his brother to pieces. They kept cutting him up long after he was dead, and at the end, in a vindictive codetta, one of the balaclava’d Narcos held up his head and stared into the sightless eyes, then dropped it like it had already begun to smell.

“We nearly there, boss-man?”

Aroldo ignores the question from the engineer. He has been asking it hourly for the past 12 days. Of the three men he is bringing to their deaths in this remote land, it is the engineer he will grieve for least.

None of the passengers know that they are so very much more than crew. They are as much a cargo as the heroin and cocaine in the hold.

“Take your medicine,” growls Aroldo, over his shoulder. He hears a rustling, as the trio of passengers do as they are bid. Aroldo doesn’t know what they are taking. He told them it was seasickness medication. It’s not. It’s some form of pre-operative blood-oxidiser, guaranteed to ensure they are in as presentable a condition as their long passage across the sea will allow.

They hit another swell, and suddenly he can see the triangular outline of the vessel that they are here to meet. He has been told not to talk. Not to offer handshakes or to press for information. He is to deposit the cargo. He is to tell the three men that they have done their jobs well. And then he is to turn the sub around and head for the pre-arranged rendezvous, where it will be scuttled, and he will be picked up. He knows he is opening himself to risks by taking on such a dangerous job, but as long as he keeps his mouth shut he will be useful to the cartel. If he were to talk, word would soon get around that the drug-runners are diversifying. They have found a market for meat.

“That it, boss-man?”

He glares through the glass at the approaching vessel. He fancies he knows the name of the man at the tiller, but he will not offer it in greeting. It is an overheard name: a snatched utterance spoken as they loaded the cargo: two Narcos at the helm of a pleasure craft near the mouth of the Essequibo River. They had said the name ‘Bishop’. And Aroldo, a God-fearing Christian, had taken note.

He glances over his shoulder. Six white eyes in the darkness, staring back. He does not let himself think about what awaits these eyes. What they will see before the world turns black. Their corneas alone are worth $25,000 each. But their hearts – they are what makes this journey so important, and so very lucrative.

Aroldo says a prayer as the craft comes near. He feels certain that God will understand. These three men are worth more dead than alive. He is just the ferryman – just the navigator. He is simply the captain of this ship of souls.

Outside, the sound of surf, the swirl of snow, and the distant outline of an unknown land.