

The Way Home

Hamish ran, not daring to stop. His head was dizzy, and his body needed oxygen, but he continued to run. His limbs ached but he had to get away. This was his one chance. He could not be caught again. Here was his moment for freedom, and he had taken it. His breath caught the chill of the early morning air. Although it was still dark, the first signs of daylight were all around. Several birds were already in chorus to welcome the new day.

Barely believing his good fortune, Hamish had managed to escape his captors. One of the men had been so preoccupied in texting on his phone that he had made the only mistake since Hamish had been taken prisoner. The man had given his captive some water and just as he was about to search for the key to lock the barn door, his phone had pinged. Whatever he had seen on his screen made him rush off, slamming the door behind him. His footsteps disappeared. Hamish had heard the lack of key in the lock and knew this was his chance. As he pushed the door, Hamish was keen to make no noise. Unaware of how far away the guard had gone, he had to flee at this moment. The sound of the footsteps had disappeared within a few seconds. The guard could be close at hand and would return as soon as he realised his mistake. The barn door was heavy to open, especially as Hamish was weak from the lack of food in the last forty-eight hours. Adrenalin spurred him on. He must take this one chance. There might never be another. Somehow, the barn door had moved slightly. With another push he was outside. He wanted to collapse on the floor, but no time could be wasted.

It was not a good idea to look behind, in case someone had heard the noise and was following him. Passing near to some derelict stables and an old farm cottage, he ran. A small light could be seen within the darkness of one of the downstairs rooms in the building; the man was still on his phone. It had been raining since he had been taken prisoner. The farmyard was muddy and slippery, but Hamish ran, trying to keep in the shadows as much as he could. It was a dark cloudy night, with no moon or stars visible. He was grateful for the darkness.

As he came to the bottom of the farm track his eyes were slow to adjust to the lack of light. The road was approaching but Hamish decided to stay away from it, veering north through instinct. Some trees were ahead which could offer him cover and places to hide should he need any. His pace did not slow, the fear within drove him onwards away from his kidnappers. Suddenly voices came from every direction, shouting, calling him. Lights shone on the tree trunks to his left and right. They knew he had escaped. Hamish could not stop now. He had to push through any pain he felt. Breathless and panic-stricken, he ran deeper into the woods. Eyes now accustomed to the darkness, he saw a path appeared through the trees, but he diverted away from where these men might chase him. Old tree roots and fallen branches made his route more difficult but he knew this was a wiser choice than to follow the path. He could still hear voices echoing in the woods occasionally. He must not stop. An owl hooted somewhere ahead of him. If he ran this way, it might startle the bird, alerting the men to his movements. He changed direction, away from the creature into a deeper part of the woods. He must go quietly now in case his captors could hear him. As he ran, he could not stop the twigs underneath his feet from snapping or the leaves from the previous autumn scrunching. Deep into the woods the voices behind him dulled. The lights faded. Time seemed to stand still as he ran. Around upturned trees, over branches and through bracken he raced.

The wood became less dense. An outline of a hedgerow could be seen in the distance. Energy was sapping as he approached the bramble bushes that lay ahead. Could he possibly leap the hedge? He was unsure. All that he knew was that he must go forwards and not follow the fence line. In his younger days Hamish could have cleared this obstacle easily but now he was older and more unsure of himself. With an enormous leap he cleared most of the hedge, but his trailing leg caught the top of the brambles and as he landed heavily onto wet grass, he felt a sharp pain. Trying to move off, he felt liquid trickle down his leg and knew he was injured. He stopped briefly for the first time since taking his chance at the barn door. He must deal with this later. He went to move forward, and pain came again. He had to keep moving on. He assumed the gang would look for him. He was worth a fortune to them. He limped on. He must try to get home. Home ... he wanted this more than anything at this moment.

More than forty-eight hours earlier he had been sitting in the kitchen alone, everyone else in the family had left to go shopping. Hamish disliked shopping intensely and had always let everyone know this fact. He heard a vehicle pull up and thought it odd as they had not been away too long. Isla was always preoccupied and often forgot things. Perhaps she had mislaid her phone or purse. When he heard glass breaking, he knew that this was not one of the children or Isla. He jumped up immediately to investigate. The sound had come from the utility room, next to the kitchen. He had not even reached the door when he had been greeted by three people, all dressed in black. He was overwhelmed and for the first time ever, he froze. He could not run. One man had grabbed him, another had placed something over his head. He was led outside and lifted into a van. He had tried to protest but something had been placed in his mouth to stop him from making any noise. Two people sat in the back, guarding him as the vehicle was driven away. He could hear the kidnappers talking, in hushed whispers.

'I can't believe it was so easy! It was a piece of cake,' said one voice.

'The hardest part is still to come. Remember there is a lot of cash involved with this one,' warned a softer voice.

'When will he be moved on?' asked the first kidnapper.

'All in good time. We won't move him for forty-eight hours and even then, we'll have to be sure that the coast is clear.'

Hamish did not recognise these voices. Why had they taken him? How would Isla react when she knew he had gone? Would she think he had disappeared for a walk? Sometimes he liked to clear his head, stretch his legs and be on his own. When would the family realise someone had other plans for their happy life together? What could these people possibly want with him? He was unimportant; a quiet life with Isla and the children was all he had ever wanted. Why him? He had met Isla when he had been at his lowest ebb. She had saved him and made a life with him. It would break her heart and his if he never returned. Surely these people would let him go.

The kidnapers had not released him. They had kept him in the barn for two days, with no food and only occasional water. They had not spoken again in front of him after dragging him into his prison. He had been asleep, drugged several times to keep him quiet. When he had been awake, he had tried to alert anyone around to his presence, but these people had silenced him, beaten him and so he had remained silent to keep himself safe for his chance to escape.

Hamish limped on. His goal was to get home. He was fearful that these people could still find him. He could not afford to stop and needed more distance between him and the gang. His leg hurt but there was nothing to be done. He could have lain low for a few hours, but he had come this far now. He just needed to find Isla. He had always had a brilliant sense of direction. She had always found it one of his endearing features that she loved about him. When they had become lost on some of their many walks, Hamish always knew how to find a path to the car.

He crossed many fields, up and down the braes, finding gates and track ways to avoid jumping over any more hedgerows. The clouds had moved away, and the fields ahead were lit by the full moon. He kept in the darkness, not wanting his shadow to be seen. Ahead of him, Hamish could see something glistening. He slowed as he reached the edge of the loch. For the first time in hours, he could take the opportunity to drink. Cold water trickled down the back of his throat, making him cough at first. It tasted like nectar.

Refreshed, he had to decide which way to travel next. Should he turn right or left? As he was making his decision, he heard a sudden noise ahead in the water. He tried to make out what was in front of him. Hamish realised as soon as he heard the splashes of water and the unmistakable sound of the movement of wings rising into the air. A flock of wild geese were taking off, bound for the northern lands far away. They circled around the water several times, landing again, not quite ready to depart. Rising into the air for the second time, forming into their flight shape, the group prepared to leave. In that instant, Hamish decided that the wild geese overhead would lead the way. He would follow them as far as he could, until they would merge into one solitary speck in the sky. They circled several times more, as if they were waiting for him to be ready to follow. For a few brief minutes he would be part of their squadron.

Finally, they moved off away from the water, the sound of beating wings, all in unison was mesmerising. Hamish stood for a moment watching them, listening to them, in wonder at the sight as they began their journey north. A duck, woken from its sleep, quacked. The noise broken the spell that the geese had cast on Hamish. He moved off, following as quickly as he could.

Off he ran in the direction they were showing him. His legs were sore, his feet ached, and his heart was heavy. He would be unable to relax until he managed to get back to Isla. He passed through two forests, through several burns and crossed more fields. His eyes glanced at the sky when he could, certain that the wild geese were leading him home. Dawn was breaking. He had been running almost all night. He knew that he should rest soon, or he would collapse but he wanted to continue until he could go no longer. In the distance, there was a slender speck of light moving across the horizon. If he could run to that light, he might be saved ...

As Hamish ran nearer the light faded. A motorbike's headlights had cut through the darkness, its engine disturbing the silence of twilight but now it was gone. Sensing a road was ahead, he moved back into shadowland. He was still fearful of anyone catching sight of him. The geese honked as if to say goodbye, moving off as they continued their long journey to the summer lands. They had taken him to the safety of the road. He recognised instantly where he was. He glanced up to the sky, light now starting to flood the fields, bushes and trees as the sun began to rise. Within seconds the flock had merged into one small dot, then were gone forever.

Alone now, Hamish set off staying behind bushes and hedges as he followed the road. He came to the crossroads he was expecting to find, now knowing he was a short distance from Isla and his family. He noticed a familiar sign. Usually, the board advertised jumble sales in the local village hall but there was a different poster covering the normal words with Hamish's photograph. "POLICE" and "MISSING" dominated the sign.

He followed the lane to home. He had not got far to go now. Isla would be delighted to see him. He could not wait to show her how much she meant to him; how much the children meant to him. There it was, his own garden gate, left slightly ajar. He pushed it open. The house was still in darkness. The people inside had, undoubtedly, mourned his loss, thinking they might never see him again, but he was safe now. He had been stolen from them. He knew that when he alerted his family to his presence, the house would no longer be in darkness, lights signalling a celebration of his return. Hamish lifted his head and barked.

A few days later, Isla heard the news on the radio that a gang of three had been caught in the act of stealing a dog twenty miles away. The telephone rang. A police officer informed her that the abduction of Hamish was being included in any charges made against the thieves. Relieved that the whole incident was behind the family, Isla knew she could relax. Hamish had always been a massive part of their life since she had looked into his gorgeous brown eyes at the rescue centre. Having fallen in love with him instantly, she had taken him to his forever home that afternoon and had never regretted her snap decision once. She had been heartbroken when he had been stolen. As she opened the newly repaired utility door, she smiled to herself that he had managed to get home to her. No one knew how he made his escape from the kidnappers' clutches. She didn't care. He was home and safe and that was all that mattered. In a good mood, she was planning to go into the garden to tidy a flowerbed ready for planting some summer annuals. Hamish followed her outside. As she worked, she heard a flock of wild geese honking overhead as they began their travels north. Hamish lifted his head and this time he howled ...

'Haste ye back!'