

The Last Manuscript of Moira Dunlop

The train wound through the Highlands like a careful thought threading itself across a page. Snow sifted down in tiny, deliberate flakes, turning the hills into blank parchment.

Perfect, I thought. Exactly the setting Moira Dunlop would choose.

I was travelling to *Invercraig House*, a rambling Victorian retreat perched above Loch Caol. I'd been invited - to my surprise and near-terror - to catalogue the private journals of Moira Dunlop, the legendary and famously reclusive crime writer. Her publisher was hosting a winter literary retreat to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of Agatha Christie's death, and Moira was rumoured to be unveiling the first chapter of her "unfinishable final mystery."

I clutched my bag tighter. I'd studied Moira's work for years. Her early novels were sharp and gleeful; later ones darker, stranger, as if she'd begun mining some deep seam inside herself.

Archivists aren't usually invited to soirées, let alone the unveiling of a legend's last work. But here I was - mouse-quiet, habitually overlooked - about to step into her world.

Invercraig House smelled of peat smoke and lavender polish. The drawing room was warm, fire roaring, and already filled with the small knot of guests who'd braved the storm to attend.

Five of them. A perfect Christie-esque cast:

Eleanor Mackie, Moira's sharp-tongued literary agent, jewellery glittering like frost.

Dr Fergus Allan, a retired academic with glasses perched permanently low.

Rowan Bryce, an earnest young poet who had idolised Moira since adolescence.

Carolyn Boyd, a crime fiction podcaster with a laugh like breaking glass.

Tom Dunlop, Moira's estranged nephew, who wore resentment like a second coat.

All turned toward the staircase when she descended.

Moira Dunlop looked both ancient and ageless - tall, silver-haired, posture still ring-straight despite the walking stick she leaned upon. Her eyes, however, were alive. Sharp. Scrutinising.

"Ah," she said when she saw me. "Our archivist. Come."

I approached, flushing.

"You will be working with my diaries," she said quietly. "Treat them kindly. Some memories bruise easily."

I nodded. "Of course."

"And tonight," she announced to the room, "I will read a single page from my final book."

A murmur of thrill ran through the guests.

Moira lifted the manuscript - the neatly typed pages tied with a red ribbon - and tapped it once.

"This is not merely a story," she said. "It is my reckoning."

Her words chilled something in me.

But before I could dwell on them, dinner was served and the evening began.

Moira read her page just after dessert.

The lights dimmed. The fire quietened. Snow pressed its face against the old leaded windows.

She began to read.

The prose was unmistakably hers - spare, exacting - describing a remote Scottish estate, a gathering of guests, and a writer announcing she knows one of them committed a crime years ago.

But the final line made my breath catch:

"And the killer will return to finish what was begun."

A ripple of unease slid through the room.

Moira looked up, eyes glittering with challenge.

And then she collapsed.

One moment she stood fiercely upright; the next she crumpled like paper released. Her manuscript slid from her hands, scattering across the carpet.

Chaos. Shouts. Someone called for help. Rowan knelt beside her, shaking. Carolyn dialled emergency services. Tom whispered her name as though he'd swallowed broken glass.

But it was too late.

Moira Dunlop was dead.

They said it was her heart.

Perhaps it was. But something gnawed at my mind - not the collapse, but what followed. In the confusion, the red-ribboned manuscript vanished.

Every page.

No one admitted to taking it.

Inspector Fraser arrived by morning, storm-delayed but brisk and quietly firm. "No one leaves Invercraig House," he said. "Not until we've solved the matter of the missing manuscript."

He eyed me. "You're the archivist?"

"Yes."

"You know Moira's work?"

"Very well."

"Then you help me. You know how writers think."

I wasn't sure that was true. But I nodded anyway.

We searched Moira's study first.

Hundreds of notebooks. Box files labelled ruthlessly: DRAFT 1978, INTERVIEW NOTES 1995, FALSE CLUES, USE LATER.

A writer's mind laid bare.

Fraser frowned at the fireplace. "Someone's tried to burn something."

Charred edges of paper lay in the grate. I recognised the faint ghost of Moira's typeface.

"Someone wanted the final manuscript destroyed," he said.

My chest tightened. "Or someone wanted to destroy part of it."

We sifted through her desk where I found a single page - handwritten - with Moira's unmistakable looping signature.

Rewrite ending. Replace name. Pencil only - not ready for ink.

My throat went dry.

She changed the ending *that night*.

But I didn't know which name she meant.

And someone clearly did.

Inspector Fraser gathered the guests in the drawing room - a cosy scene made strange by suspicion.

"You all had access to the manuscript," he said. "Each of you reacted strongly to her reading and has a possible motive."

Eleanor bristled. "Moira was my client."

"Who you argued with last week," Fraser said mildly. "About her will."

Dr. Allan folded his arms. "Preposterous."

"You were the inspiration for her early detectives, were you not? And her later villains?"

The professor flushed.

Rowan Bryce stared at his shoes. "She was my mentor."

"Whom she once accused of plagiarising her work."

Carolyn raised her voice. "I adored Moira! I came here to interview her!"

"And she banned you from using her recordings after you released your 'True Crime of Moira Dunlop' episode," Fraser replied.

Tom Dunlop snorted. "Everyone here benefited from her except me."

Fraser turned. "Ah yes. The nephew she cut entirely from her will."

Tom's jaw worked furiously.

Six suspects, then.

Someone knew they were in that manuscript.

Someone thought it implicated them.

While Fraser questioned each guest, I returned to Moira's study.

If she'd revised the ending, she would have used a pencil. She'd written that clearly.

I pulled her diaries from the shelves. Opened one labelled WINTER RETREAT - PRIVATE.

Inside were notes in her spiky hand:

Truth must be told. But gently.

He will recognise himself.

She will deny it.

One is guilty. One is not. Must choose carefully.

My pulse quickened. Two suspects. One guilty. One innocent. And she had struggled to choose.

The diary continued:

End rewritten. Pencil added. That should prevent misunderstanding.

I read the next line three times.

If anything happens to me, the pencil will show the way.

A shiver ran through me.

The pencil mark was the key.

But to what?

Fraser found me with the diary in my lap.

“What’s that?”

“Her writing process,” I said. “She struggled with two possible suspects.”

“Which two?”

“She never names them.”

Fraser exhaled sharply. “Of course not.”

“But she says the pencil marks the real ending. She changed the culprit last minute.”

“And the killer stole the manuscript to hide which name she chose.”

I nodded.

“But Moira didn’t use pencil often. It would stand out.” I rose. “We need her earlier drafts.”

Together we dug through her folders until we found the thick file labelled FINAL - PRE-EDIT.

Inside were multiple endings. Some typed. Some roughly handwritten.

But only one had a pencil addition.

A faint correction in the margin beside a character’s name:

Not him. Her.

My breath caught.

“Her,” I whispered. “Moira changed the killer’s gender.”

Fraser stared at the note. “Which means -”

I turned as the truth settled cold and certain in my chest.

There was only one woman in the group who had reacted oddly after Moira collapsed. Not grief - but calculation. And she had a very specific motive for wanting an incriminating manuscript destroyed.

Carolyn Boyd.

The podcaster.

Her “True Crime of Moira Dunlop” episode had accused Moira of covering up a decades-old unsolved death. She’d insisted Moira knew the killer - and was protecting them.

What if she was right?

What if she herself was the killer she’d been hunting?

Moira, reading over her own fictionalisation of the real crime, had changed the culprit from a man she’d once suspected... to the woman she finally realised was truly guilty.

A correction made in pencil.

A correction Carolyn had to erase.

We found her in the snow-swirled garden, the stolen manuscript stuffed in her bag.

She froze on spying the pencil-annotated ending in my hand.

“How much do you know?” she whispered.

“Enough,” I said.

Carolyn’s face tightened into something almost... relieved.

“She was going to expose me,” she said. “After thirty years. After I’d built everything. She knew I killed Colin Murray. She finally saw through her own old blind spot. And she wrote it down.”

“You killed him accidentally,” I said quietly. “Moira wrote that. She never intended to ruin you.”

“But she would have.” Carolyn swallowed. “And when she collapsed, I... I took my chance.”

Fraser stepped forward. “And burned half her manuscript.”

She nodded.

“But I couldn’t destroy all of it. Not fast enough. And she’d already changed the ending. One line. One cursed line.”

Not him. Her.

The line that ruined her.

Fraser cuffed her gently. "It's over, Carolyn."

Her voice cracked. "I loved her work. I never thought she'd see through me."

"She writes people too well," I said softly. "That was always her danger."

Carolyn bowed her head. Snow collected in her hair.

Afterwards, Fraser walked me back through the quiet house.

"You solved it," he said.

"No," I murmured. "Moira did. With a pencil."

He smiled. "You're an archivist. You notice small things the rest of us overlook."

I glanced at the recovered manuscript pages - soot-stained, fragile, but intact enough.

Moira's final mystery.

Not fiction at all.

But truth, sharpened to a point.

Invercraig House emptied slowly over the following days. Snow melted, leaving soft rivulets down the windowpanes. The manuscript went to her publisher, diaries to her estate.

On my last morning, I stood by the loch, watching the grey water ripple.

Moira had written dozens of mysteries.

Yet the last unfinished one had become a confession - not hers, but someone else's.

A writer's final gift: truth disguised as story, waiting for the right pair of eyes to read between the lines.

And I had.

Just as she knew I would.

