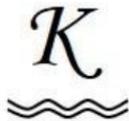


# RONA

(Incomers: Book 3)

Jim Forbes



A Kinord Book



## PROLOGUE

### COLD VENGEANCE

TEN WHITE JEQUIRITY SEEDS. *Check.* How innocuous they looked, lying on the kitchen worktop. Though not to the Avenger, who knew each one packed enough abrin to kill an adult man or woman.

Ten 600-gram packs of Fairfield's Premium Organic Muesli. *Check.* Scottish rolled oats enhanced with an eclectic mix of seeds, nuts and dried fruits, sold in health food stores and 'better' supermarkets at an eye-watering price. Each of the ten artist-designed, consultant-approved light cardboard boxes, emblazoned with quasi-scientific nutritional claims, enclosed a generic inner heat-sealed bag containing the product. The Avenger had bought these in ten different towns throughout Scotland and the north of England.

A pack of heat-sealable bags. *Check.* Indistinguishable from those used by Fairfield's.

A heat-sealing machine, purchased on EBay for £55. *Check.*  
Pound-store glue-stick. *Check.*

Nail file. *Check.*

The process the Avenger had worked out was simple.

The outer cardboard packaging was carefully slit open so that it could be re-glued as invisibly as possible. Not on the top, where minor signs of tampering might be noticed, but on the bottom of the box.

Then the contents of the inner bag were transferred to a new bag. One whole white jequirity seed was dropped in about half-way through, so that it ended up in the middle of the pack. The

new bag was sealed and slipped into the box; finally the task was completed with a dab of glue on the bottom flap.

Next step: a second visit to each of the ten supermarkets around the country. Meticulously and inconspicuously the Avenger had put a coded mark on each box to ensure it would be returned to its proper origin.

Ten times, the identical procedure would be followed. It would not be a case of taking the product to the customer service desk. Nor would it do simply to replace it on the shelf – too risky, with all those CCTV cameras. The packet to be returned had instead to be in the bottom of a trolley from the car-park, hidden under a pile of multi-use grocery bags. Security had no concern for what was coming *into* the store, only what was being taken *out*. Inside, a second pack of Fairfield's Premium Organic Muesli would be selected from the shelf, joining a number of additional purchases in the trolley.

At check-out, the entire contents of the trolley, including the poisoned muesli, would be placed on the belt. Then an apology to the cashier: 'I seem to have taken two of these by mistake. I only need one. Sorry about that.'

Invariably, the cashier would say, 'No problem.' The marked box of muesli would be back in stock within the hour, waiting for another discerning customer.

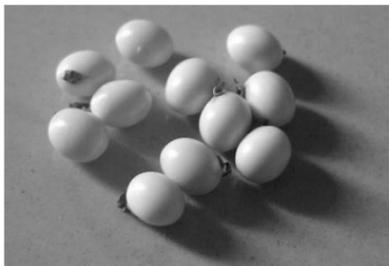


The plan had gestated in the Avenger's brain for a year or more. Its key elements, white jequirity and Premium Organic Muesli, had been selected after much research.

Abrin was well known. One of the most toxic substances in nature, it had been deployed before by criminals and terrorists and was the agent of death in a few fictional crime dramas, but the Avenger's plan took a novel tack.

First, the common jequirity with its bright scarlet seeds was too conspicuous to use as a contaminant. Hence the selection of the rarer white-seeded variety. It was the same species (*Abrus*

*precatorius*), with at least the same content of deadly abrin. Only the colour of the seed-coat was different. The Avenger had learned all about these seeds on the Internet, had known exactly what to look for and had flown to Indonesia just to collect some. No more than ten for the muesli ‘enrichment’ plan plus a few spares to plant at home. Not out of mere botanical curiosity but to generate larger numbers of seeds for possible future use.



Second, there was no need to extract the pure toxic principle. Nature had helpfully wrapped a lethal dose of it in a neat package: why mess with it? All that was necessary was to abrade a small area of the surface with a nail file. That ensured the seed could not pass undigested through the gut.

Third, muesli was a product designed to be poured from the packet directly into the bowl, with addition of chilled fresh milk or yoghurt. Abrin is destroyed by cooking; even moderate heat will lessen its potency. So forget porridge oats as a vehicle. *Revenge is a dish best served cold*: never was the adage more literally true.

Fourth, just one whole seed was to be added to each pack of the chosen food product. One person would swallow it and die; others eating from the same pack would be totally unaffected. And no trace of the poison would be detected if the remaining contents were ever analysed.

Premium Organic Muesli was an ideal carrier for white jequirity as it contained whole grains and nuts covering a broad spectrum of sizes. A single smooth little 100-milligram seed fitted right in with the flax, hemp, pine nuts, sunflower, cashew and macadamia. What a delicious, healthy last breakfast!

The significantly cheaper non-organic version of Fairfield’s Premium Muesli would have done just as well. But the white

jequirity had grown in Indonesia without artificial pesticides or fertilisers; it was certifiably ‘organic’ and deserved to be delivered to a connoisseur of foods free of residual amounts of those nasty chemicals.



Up to ten people were going to die. It was collateral damage, an unfortunate side-effect of war, however just or unjust the cause. The real enemy was Fairfield’s Cereals, more particularly the individual who owned and ran that company. Donald Swainson was his name. A ‘toff’ he was – doubly so, for he had been born into the Earldom of Fairfield and had acquired the Barony of Bracklinn through foul play by his mother.

For six centuries, Swainsons had been Earls or Countesses of Fairfield. Fifty years ago, in financial difficulties, they had coveted the wealth of the Argills of Bracklinn. By 1970 the sinister 23rd Countess, Rona Swainson, had married and murdered her way to the Argills’ barony and wealth, making her three-year-old son Donald 6th Lord Bracklinn. Though Rona had not been charged with any wrongdoing, the Avenger was in no doubt she was guilty and had got away with it.

Problem was, Rona had vanished from the scene in 1990, shortly after abdicating the Fairfield title in favour of her son. Her live-in lover – some said he was her third husband – took off around the same time. Icelandic he was, by the name of Haraldsson. The Avenger’s inquiries through a detective agency in Reykjavik had failed to turn up a Haraldsson sharing an address with a British woman called Rona anywhere in Iceland.

Yet, if she was still alive, that was most likely where she had been hiding all these years. One day, the Avenger would track down the former Countess and make her suffer for her crimes. In the meantime, Donald Swainson, his Fairfield’s Cereals company and his family were still very much in Scotland and a suitable target for cold vengeance.

# 1

## A PIECE OF THE ACTION

**F**ROM THE PATIO OF HER PRETTY whitewashed house on the edge of Akureyri, Ragna Enjudóttir admired her colourful garden in the evening sunshine. The last house on Ketilsgata, a road that led nowhere except to the entrance of the municipal park just beyond, was little disturbed by passing traffic and Ragna felt blissfully alone. Solitude had been her friend since that day in 1990 she had embarked on her new life, leaving her old identity and so much trouble behind ...

Not that she ever wished to be parted from her beloved Ari. He was still out in the fjord on his boat and would be there for at least two more hours. She had eaten dinner alone; when he got home Ari would fix himself something he had caught. Unless, that is, he stopped off at Adda's Café as he often did.

In peaceful moments like these, Ragna liked to reflect on the life she had come to love, here on the north coast of Iceland not seventy kilometres from the Arctic Circle. Who could have foreseen it?

And yet, was it not strangely fitting that Rona Fay Swainson, as she once was, would find peace and happiness in this Nordic land? Here she would enjoy her good health for as long as it would last, together with the man she had loved for fifty years; here she would be content to die when the time came. If the narrative arc of her life were ever written down, its logic would be plain: the seeds of her present existence were sown across the sea in Scotland from the day she was born.

Except: in the early years she had found herself in some nasty situations. Had she not taken control, the arc could have

deposited her somewhere very different. Not the happy ending towards which she was now cruising.



*At Gordonhall, Kincardineshire, 30th September 1944, to Captain Philip Swainson, RN, 22nd Earl of Fairfield and Aenea, Lady Fairfield, a daughter, Rona Fay. Mother and baby well.*

Thus was her arrival announced in the *Daily Telegraph*. That Lady Rona Swainson would ultimately inherit the Fairfield earldom was not, of course, presumed at that time. A later-born son, if there were any, would scoop that prize.

One of the most ancient Scottish peerages still extant, it had been created for its first holder by Robert I (the Bruce) around 1308. A reward, it was believed, for crucial support to the king in defeating John Comyn, Earl of Buchan at Inverurie and in the subsequent 'harrying' of the north-east to extinguish all opposition from the Comyn family and their supporters.

The Earls of Fairfield down the centuries had a semi-mythical tale of their family origins: they believed their ancestors were Norse, among relatively few who settled inland south of the Moray Firth. The Swainson name, they maintained, was, like Swanson or Swinson, an Anglicisation of *Sweynsson*. Had their forebears made their home in the Western Isles, as many Norse incomers did, their name would have become MacSween.

Philip Swainson, the 22nd Earl, served with distinction in the Royal Navy throughout the Second World War, but in later years would have little to say of his active service. The only exploit he did recount from time to time occurred one night in December 1943 when, under his command, HMS *Metis* was patrolling the north Atlantic. On sighting distress flares, he directed his ship towards them through dark and mountainous waters.

By daybreak, *Metis* was in the vicinity of a remote island. An eerie calm had descended; the ocean offered some respite from its normal winter fury, allowing a search party to go ashore. They were drawn to the ruins of an ancient chapel, the only remaining indication that this dot of land had ever seen human habitation. Huddled within its walls was the entire 49-man crew of a German U-boat. Surrendering without a fight, they told their captors that their craft had struck offshore rocks and, as she was irreparably damaged, they had been ordered to scuttle her and await rescue. They had waited eight days in vain for a vessel of their own navy to pick them up; now they were relieved to be in enemy hands rather than spend one more winter's night on this godforsaken rock.

The submariners would give no hint as to their mission, but Captain Swainson suspected covert activity of some kind, using the island as a base or radio relay station. Once the German prisoners were securely on board his ship, he set out alone on a reconnaissance of the bleak half-square-mile surface. He found nothing to confirm his suspicions.

However, his brief foray on that wind-blasted, sea-spray-soaked speck of land affected him deeply. In later life, he would sometimes talk of the ghosts of islanders lingering in the caves and geos of the shoreline. They spoke to him, he said, in words he recognised as Old Norse, the language of his own ancestors, on which his father the 21st Earl had been something of an authority.

On Christmas Eve, *Metis* put in to Wick to disembark the prisoners and Swainson took a few hours' shore leave. His young wife Aenea had arrived the previous evening by train and was staying in the Temperance Hotel. It was in those lodgings that their only child was conceived.

The island where Philip Swainson had just encountered his 'ghosts' was Rona. On the birth of his daughter on the last day of September 1944, he was adamant that Rona would be her

name. Aenea was given little say in the matter, but was allowed to select a middle name for the infant.

Some while after VE-day and the repatriation of German prisoners of war, Philip received a letter from Klaus Strohmann of Dortmund, manager of a print works and formerly the captain of the U-boat crew uplifted from the island of Rona in December 1943. In grammatically faultless if slightly stilted English, he wished formally to express his gratitude and that of his men for their rescue and for the humane way they had been treated aboard the *Metis*. He hoped that the enmity of a war not of the making of either one of them could be replaced by a bond of mutual respect, as one sailor to another. That letter began a lifelong friendship, renewed each year by exchange of Christmas gifts.



Rona Fay Swainson enjoyed as comfortable an early childhood as the daughter of a landed earl could expect – which is to say, not very. Cared for by a succession of nannies then packed off to boarding school at the age of seven, she developed an independent streak which often got her into trouble with her teachers and housemistresses.

Queen Alexandra's School for Girls in rural Stirlingshire did not in those days put great emphasis on academic achievement. Focused as it was on turning out marriage-fodder for the aristocracy, it aimed to develop the arts of social interaction as well as proficiency in country pursuits, particularly those involving horses. By the time she reached her early teens, Rona found the whole programme stultifying and despised her airhead schoolmates.

Salvation was to come from an unexpected quarter: her father. Though not out of any concern he may have had for the quality of the girl's education.



In April 1958, Philip Swainson received an unexpected visitor at Gordonhall: an ex-navy colleague who, like himself, had returned to civilian life after the war. He knew him as Commander Harry Fitzwarren, but was interested to learn that in 1956 he had inherited the title of Lord Wythorpe from a distant cousin.

‘My dear fellow,’ Swainson said, sitting down with him in the library, ‘what brings you to this neck of the woods?’

‘I’ve been travelling up and down the country renewing old acquaintances ... you know, friendships forged during the war. What has surprised me is the number of men I thought of as comrades in arms who have no desire to stay in touch. I’ve a feeling – perhaps you can relate to this, Philip – it’s my recent elevation to the peerage that has alienated them.’

‘I wouldn’t have thought so, Harry.’

‘Nor would I, old chap. But there it is. All that post-war socialism under Attlee changed people’s attitudes to the aristocracy. Even seven blessed years of Tory government haven’t undone the damage, although if Eden hadn’t got himself unstuck by that damn Suez mess, I think we’d be in a better place. Macmillan’s not a bad prime minister but he’s not one of *us*, if you catch my drift. Doesn’t have the *blood*. Comes from the *business* world – publishing, if I’m not mistaken.’

Swainson was about to disagree politely with the visitor’s political analysis but was distracted by the arrival of Mrs Gibbon, the housekeeper, with tea and crumpets.

‘Anyway,’ Fitzwarren continued, sensing his host did not share the view he had just expressed, ‘it doesn’t matter *why* some people are giving me the cold shoulder. It’s good news for those who don’t – and I earnestly hope, Philip, that I can number you among them. You see, I’ve come into possession of some information that stands to make me a lot of money, and I want as many as possible of my friends to get “a piece of the action” as they say in the City.’

‘What kind of information?’

‘Let me answer with a question. What’s the biggest money’s-no-object commercial opportunity at this moment? Don’t just think Britain, think the planet.’

‘When you say “money’s-no-object” I have to think you’re talking about the Space Race.’

‘Exactly.’

In 1958, the whole world was galvanised by the US-Soviet competition for dominance in space. Following the shock of *Sputnik 1* the previous October, the US response had initially been beset by failure, most humiliatingly the televised launch-pad explosion of *Vanguard TV3* that was to have carried the first American satellite into space. On 17th March 1958, *Vanguard TV4* had gone successfully into orbit; the 6-inch sphere derisively called ‘the grapefruit’ by Nikita Khrushchev marked a new beginning for the US programme. (Nearly sixty years later it continues to circle the Earth once every two hours and thirteen minutes, having logged its 100,000th orbit on 14th April 2015.)

‘But I don’t understand, Harry. It’s an American government project, top secret, no opportunity for the likes of us to get involved, isn’t that so?’

‘Not so, as it happens.’

Looking his visitor in the eye, Swainson saw the sincerity of a fellow naval officer who, like himself, had faced the enemy with distinction. ‘This tea’s a little weak, don’t you think? Why don’t I pour us something a little stronger while you share this “information” of yours?’

Fitzwarren laid out his stall. Contacts he maintained in the upper echelons of the British Navy had dropped some friendly hints, which he had gone on to confirm through other networks. ARPA, an agency recently set up by US President Eisenhower in response to the ‘Sputnik crisis’ to promote space technology for military purposes, was working with UK defence procurement to access certain products of scientific research. The problem

was, the companies engaged in such research lacked the capital to meet ARPA's needs.

Harold Macmillan's government could not countenance an American takeover of these companies, nor would it fund them directly, either of which solution would invite parliamentary and press scrutiny. A public share offering was likewise out of the question. Instead, a highly selective call was going out to private investors who had been vetted for their wealth and discretion. Fitzwarren's visit was, he explained, part of that process.

'What rate of return do you expect?' Swainson asked, suddenly all ears.

'Are you ready for this? Fifteen percent, guaranteed; could go even higher. Paid as a dividend once a quarter.'

'Macmillan says we "never had it so good", but bank rate is four percent and the best I can get on my stocks and shares is about six. I'd certainly be interested in a small punt. Can you put me down for £5,000?'

'No can do, old chap. The minimum investment is £50,000. To keep out the spivs and riff-raff, you know. How quickly could you raise that?'

Swainson was nonplussed for a few moments by the amount needed, but quickly recovered. 'Er ... a few days, that's all.'

'Okay, I'll send you details of where to remit the money. If you're happy with your investment, you'll have a chance to increase your stake at any time. Now, enough of business. Have you heard anything of Toothy Turnbull since he left the Navy? Somebody told me he was on to his third wife, just since the war.'

The two men enjoyed a couple of hours of gossip and reminiscences over fine whisky and cigars. Coming into the library, Aenea Swainson, delighted to witness her husband talk uncharacteristically – and animatedly – about his wartime experiences, invited Fitzwarren to stay for dinner.

A few days later, an official prospectus headed 'M31 HOLDINGS' arrived in the mail. Careful perusal confirmed

everything Fitzwarren had said. Having liquidated almost his entire brokerage account, Philip Swainson wrote a cheque for £50,000 and sat back waiting for the dividends to roll in.

In June he received the first £1,875, and in September the second dividend, in the same amount but with an additional £500 'bonus'. A signal, he thought, that he should increase his investment. Without telling Aenea – she would worry unnecessarily – he took out a bank loan, three-fourths of the assessed value of the entire Gordonhall estate, and put it all into his M31 account. After paying interest to the bank, his net return would be 8 percent, more if bonuses kept coming.

Or so he thought.

When no dividend cheque was delivered by the middle of December, he tried to contact M31 Holdings. The phone number printed on the prospectus was unobtainable; letters were returned as undeliverable.

It took a few days to sink in fully: his erstwhile friend Harry Fitzwarren, the self-styled Lord Wythorpe, had pulled a huge scam on him. Not only had he lost all his savings, he was now colossally in debt. Confessing to Aenea how he had been duped was almost as painful as the financial ruin now staring them in the face.

The police could offer little hope of tracking the fraudster down. Fitzwarren had almost certainly disappeared abroad with his ill-gotten wealth.

What kept the Swainsons' heads above water in the months that followed was a small nest-egg Aenea had brought to the marriage back in 1938 but had kept in her own name for tax reasons. That money, together with the meagre rental income from the Gordonhall estate and the occasional sale of heirloom silver and paintings, covered the interest they owed the bank and supported a frugal lifestyle in their draughty mansion.

Among the luxuries that could no longer be afforded was Lady Rona's private schooling. In January 1959, at the age of

fourteen, she was taken out of Queen Alex's to complete her secondary education at the local state school, Banchory Academy, less than three miles from home. What for her parents was an embarrassing come-down was for Rona a blessed release.

## 2

### BOOKPLATE

**D**ELIA COBB'S INTERNSHIP in Edinburgh\* was up and she had so far been unable to secure a new position. Her work experience and academic qualifications, including a Master's degree in environmental science, were not the issue. She was a citizen of the United States, not of the United Kingdom, and arbitrary limits on employment of immigrants had been imposed by the Home Secretary in response to a perceived 'threat to the British way of life'. Delia had to convince a prospective employer not just to hire her but to make the case to the Home Office that her skills were special enough to warrant employing a foreigner.

'Aren't there jobs back here in the States that you could be applying for?' her parents repeatedly asked her. 'You're in your mid-twenties. Soon you'll be too old to get a foothold in the American market.'

The truth was, she wanted more than anything to make her career in Britain. Quin, the long-distance boyfriend who had remained steadfast during almost all of her time here, had fallen for a colleague in the University of Chicago and was no longer a factor in her life. Plus, there was a personal matter binding her to her adoptive country.

From DNA evidence, Delia knew she had Scottish ancestry, at least on her mother's side, but an online genealogical search had drawn a blank. Her quest for ancestors was not driven by

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\* The dramatic events that unfolded during Delia's stay in Edinburgh are the subject of *Scotch and Water (Incomers: Book 2)*.

mere curiosity; a commitment she had made to identify the Keeper of Taran's Wheel depended on it, for the most likely candidate was herself. (Taran's Wheel was a pre-Christian religious talisman whose custody was entrusted to a bloodline of female 'Keepers' stretching back into antiquity.\*)

Her challenge was to establish a link from Jane Wilson, her five-times-great-grandmother, to one Agnes Cromar, through the female line. That would confirm Delia's rightful status as Keeper, with all the ancient privileges and obligations that entailed. Jane had emigrated from the UK to America in 1800; Agnes died in 1874 at the age of 69, so was born after Jane emigrated. To complicate matters, no reliable trace of Jane could be found in old British records accessible online.

Delia planned to search through all the old graveyards, about thirty in all, within an arbitrary 15-mile radius of Agnes's final resting place in Tarland, Aberdeenshire. What she hoped to find was a headstone bearing both the Cromar and Wilson names. A week should be sufficient, she reckoned.

She had no reason to expect a week in May to turn into a whole summer, nor a brief stay in Aberdeenshire to result in travel to more remote parts of Scotland – and beyond – in a totally different pursuit. Nor had she the slightest inkling that she might once again be putting herself in harm's way.



In the study of the comfortable north London home he shared with his wife Emily, Frank Jamieson cast an eye over the volumes on the bookshelves. He was not looking for anything in particular. Many of them were titles he had kept to read, or re-read, in his retirement; five years into that happy phase he had not yet found the time to dip into any of them.

*Today might just be the day*, he thought. From a shelf of antiquarian books inherited from an aunt in Scotland over thirty

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\* See *Taran's Wheel (Incomers: Book 1)*.

years ago he took out first one then another, leafing through them in a search for something he might want to sink his teeth into.

The third one he opened caught his interest. There was something puzzling about it.

It was a weighty tome – 847 oversize pages of closely-packed text with 2,236 engravings and 25 colour plates – bound in red cloth bearing the legend *Illustrated Natural History*. Frank was impressed by the sheer scale of the work, and surprised that it bore no author's or illustrator's name, and no date of publication. It appeared to be a 'new' edition of an earlier book with the expansive title

THE ROYAL NATURAL HISTORY,  
BEING A SYSTEMATIC ARRANGEMENT OF DESCRIPTIVE ZOOLOGY  
FROM MAN TO THE LOWEST FORMS

and credited only its editor: James Wyld.

Wyld was a mid-to-late nineteenth-century science writer whose interests ran more to experimental and industrial chemistry than to zoology. Almost certainly, he was not the primary author of this colossal opus.

A listing of the book on the Internet gave 1881 as its publication date; this seemed a reasonable estimate given the mention Frank found at page 115 of David Livingstone's remains having been 'lately' returned to Great Britain – an event which occurred in 1873. Yet the author rejected out of hand all the teachings of Charles Darwin, whose transformative *On the Origin of Species* had appeared in 1859 and *The Descent of Man* in 1871.

Torn between his disgust at the colonial-era racism of the chapter on man and a grudging admiration for the far more objective, and amazingly comprehensive, scientific treatment of non-human animals, Frank made to close the book and return it to its shelf, where it would probably rest unopened for another

five years or more. As he did so, he caught a glimpse of the inside front cover, noticing for the first time that it bore an intricate bookplate.

*EX LIBRIS GORDONHALL*, it read.



Gordonhall was a name Frank recalled from the late 1960s, almost fifty years ago. It was a seventeenth-century mansion on the south slope of the Hill of Fare near Banchory in what was once Kincardineshire. He had gone there one day with his Aunt Barbara and Uncle Al – it must have been in 1969, by which time the great house was uninhabited. Some kind of scandal had befallen the family who had owned it – several suspicious deaths were involved, best he could remember. Peering through the

windows of what had been a library or study, the sight of hundreds of books scattered on the floor had left an impression on the young Frank.

Now he found to his astonishment he had a book from that very library, as testified by its bookplate. How had Aunt Barbara acquired it? Uncle Al, a motor mechanic, had probably accepted a selection of volumes from the abandoned Gordonhall library in part-payment from a customer – someone charged with looking after the house and grounds, perhaps – for repairs to a vehicle. Barbara had come by several of her rarer books in just such a way.

Frank well remembered his aunt's sorrow at what befell the handsome building shortly afterwards: a devastating fire that spared no combustible material. What remained standing was deemed unsafe and pulled down for the site to be levelled. Only a walled garden, still being tended, remained as evidence that a house once stood there.

Looking again at the bookplate, Frank read the motto inscribed on a belt or ribbon near the top: *FAER FJALL*. Words that meant nothing to him; he had no idea even what language they were in.

An Internet search quickly provided the answer: the lairds of Gordonhall had been Earls of Fairfield, a title derived from Old Norse *Faer Fjall* meaning 'sheep hill'. The Hill of Fare that rose behind Gordonhall might, he thought, have been that hill.

More of a mystery was the object near the centre of the bookplate: what appeared to be a pyramid bearing a strange symbol. An inverted copy of the pyramid lay immediately below, like a reflection. The symbol, Frank found, was similar to a Scandinavian rune from around the tenth century: a letter corresponding to the modern *F*. Together with its reflection it could be read 'FF' – perhaps another reference to the *FAER FJALL* motto. But the symbolism of the reflecting pyramid remained a puzzle.

So, a few surprises. An unsuspected connection to a long-lost stately home had been in his possession since his aunt's death 35 years ago. A book, at once mysterious in its authorship and embarrassingly awful in at least part of its content. But a much bigger surprise awaited Frank as he hoisted the heavy tome on to a high shelf. The back cover, which threatened to break free of the binding, fell open to reveal a large envelope taped to the endpaper.

### 3

## TEMPORARY

**R**ONA ENROLLED AT BANCHORY in January 1959, midway through third year of secondary school. That forced her to choose between modern languages and sciences, mid-session. Having had pathetically little exposure to science at Queen Alex's, she felt languages would be her better option. Though she struggled to catch up in maths and Latin, she soon shone in English, French and especially German. Her curriculum was completed by choosing geography over history, more because of the recently-graduated young man who would be her teacher than for any particular love of the subject.

She was surprised and, at first, hurt by the unwelcoming reception from her female classmates, who over the years had formed themselves into cliques that resisted penetration by incomers. Her only ally was an outsider like herself, a Polish girl called Lidia Jaracz.

Physically, Lidia was everything Rona was not. The bodily changes accompanying puberty were more evident in Lidia. Her bobbed dark hair contrasted with the blonde waves that cascaded down to Rona's shoulders. Though not conventionally pretty, she had the kind of face that drew the eye. And, at the early age of 14, she possessed a sense of style that made Rona feel frumpy, even when both were dressed in the uniform of blue blazer, grey pleated skirt, white blouse and school tie.

Where Rona showed no great interest or prowess in sports, Lidia was the fastest in her year on the athletics track. She regularly left the other girls so far behind that, on the annual school sports day in the King George V Park, she raced with the

boys instead – and gave them a good run for their money. None of this made Lidia any more popular with her female classmates.

‘I pay no attention to those bitches,’ she told Rona in her first week at Banchory. ‘The boys are much nicer, and more fun. I’ll introduce you to my friends: Keith, Alan, Dougie and Stewart. You’ll like them.’

‘I’ve never been pally with a boy. Aren’t they just interested in football, trains and stamp-collecting?’

‘Some of them, yes. But the ones I hang around with are also into films and music, especially rock’n’roll.’

‘Are they in our year?’

‘No, third-year boys are still babies. I like the fourth-years better.’

Less than a month after Rona’s arrival at Banchory, news broke of the death of Buddy Holly. Popular music having been more or less banned at Queen Alex’s and never played at home in Gordonhall, the fatal crash of a small plane in an Iowa snowstorm on 3rd February 1959 meant little to her – though it moved Lidia almost to tears. Clearly Rona had been missing something. She resolved to become more knowledgeable.

‘Where do you hear this music?’ she asked her new Polish friend.

‘Radio Luxembourg. You can only pick it up after dark, since we’re so far away. Beats me why the darkness helps. Right now, any time after six is good, but in the summer you can hardly get it at all.’

‘So what then? Can you get rock’n’roll on the BBC?’

‘The BBC’s rubbish. No decent music at all. The only thing worth listening to is *Pick of the Pops* with David Jacobs on the Light Programme, Saturday evenings.’

As her parents’ wireless, a walnut-trimmed item of furniture about the size of a cabin trunk, had to remain permanently tuned to the Home Service, Rona was not allowed to select the Light Programme, let alone turn the dial to the 208 metres

wavelength beamed from Luxembourg, with its heady diet of pop music and ads. She got into a habit of walking over to the gardener's cottage after dinner, school homework permitting, where Bert and Ada were happy to tune in 208 for her enjoyment.



A violent storm that October caused serious damage to the roof of Gordonhall. Having cancelled their building insurance to save money, the Earl and Countess faced a repair bill that was far beyond their straitened means. Nor, as winter approached, could they afford to heat even the few rooms they occupied to a tolerable level.

It was Aenea who took charge of the situation – after all, it was her money that now supported the family. At dinner one evening, she laid out a plan. ‘Let’s face it, we can’t continue to live in this old barn. We have to lock it up, leave it to the mercy of the weather, and move into a much smaller house. And Mrs Gibbon will have to go – she’ll easily get a chambermaid job at the Raemoir Hotel, probably for more money than we’re paying her.’

‘And where will we find this smaller house?’ her husband asked.

‘Right under our noses, dear. The gatehouse at the bottom of the drive has two bedrooms and a decent-sized living room.’

‘The *lodge*?’ Philip questioned. ‘I don’t fancy that, not one bit. It’s noisy down there, with all that traffic going past the windows. And where would our furniture go? Our oriental rugs? Our library of two thousand books?’

‘The furniture that won’t fit in the gatehouse we’ll sell. The rugs too. We’ve already sold off most of our art collection. And as for your books – well, they can stay where they are meantime. The library’s about the only room in the house that’s dry.’

Philip had no answer, at least none that he could voice without his wife bringing up the subject of who had got them

into this mess in the first place. He turned to his 15-year-old daughter. 'Rona, what do you think of this idea of your mother's?'

'It's okay. In fact, it would be better for me as the school bus could pick me up right at the door. I wouldn't have that long trek down the drive in all weathers. But don't the Latimers live in the gatehouse?'

'They're our tenants,' Aenea explained, 'but they gave notice a few weeks ago that they intend to give up the lease at Martinmas. They're moving into a council house in Banchory.'

Philip Swainson, 22nd Earl of Fairfield found the whole idea of living in the tiny lodge profoundly distasteful, but he realised his wife was right. For outside consumption, he thought, the story would be that this was a temporary move while Gordonhall was repaired and upgraded. In his heart he knew there would be nothing temporary about it.

# 4

## BEYOND REPROACH

OLIVIA LAPOTAIRE SAT HUNCHED over her laptop compiling her grocery order for Saturday morning delivery. Waitrose was out of her usual brand of cereal, but was instead offering Fairfield's Premium Organic Muesli, which she had not previously bought.

Always a checker of online reviews, some would say obsessively so, Olivia did her homework. The Fairfield's product scored high marks for its composition, taste and organic credentials, and she decided to give it a try.

Had she searched a little further, she would have come across a tweet from a disgruntled former Fairfield's employee. The 'big secret' was that the company's non-organic products, which sold at about half the price, were in fact identical in all respects to those it labelled 'organic'. Not that there was anything dishonest about the label: all ingredients were indeed certifiably organic. It was just that the very same ingredients went into the lower-priced product line. Fairfield's scored a healthy profit at that lower price, and made out like a bandit at the premium price.

It would probably have made no difference to Olivia's purchasing decision. Seeing the word 'organic' on the box was a comfort. It made her a good wife and mother.



A week later, the Lapotaire family were having breakfast together at the kitchen table in their detached villa in an upmarket Manchester suburb.

‘Jules, darling,’ Olivia said, attempting to draw her husband’s attention away from an item on TV about funding for the arts. ‘Did you notice anything different about the muesli this morning?’

He harrumphed at the interruption, then noticed his wife’s annoyance. ‘Er, yes I did, as a matter of fact. Nuttier than usual, I thought. New packet, isn’t it? Nuts tend to rise to the top, I suppose.’

‘Like in theatre management,’ she commented, in a sideswipe at his profession.

‘If you say so.’

Ambrose, twelve going on twenty-four, piped up, ‘Actually, Daddy, it’s not the nuts that rise, it’s the smaller stuff that sinks to the bottom. It falls through the gaps between the bigger pieces.’

‘Yeah, yeah,’ his ten-year-old sister Electra said with exaggerated world-weariness. ‘That packaging project you did last year. Hope I don’t have to do anything as stupid.’

Always keen to head off an impending argument between the kids, Olivia said, ‘It’s not just a new packet. A different brand. Fairfield’s, it’s called. I like it.’

‘Me too,’ Ambrose said, pouring some more of the muesli into his bowl.

His father was immersed again in BBC Breakfast and paid no attention.



Later, in his office at the theatre, Jules Lapotaire was putting the finishing touches to a PowerPoint presentation he planned to use at a 3 pm meeting with a group of councillors at the Town Hall Extension, when he became aware of an abdominal pain. He had eaten a sandwich at his desk half an hour earlier and was on his third, maybe fourth cup of coffee of the day. Putting the uncomfortable sensation down to indigestion, he chewed a couple of antacid tablets.

They had no effect. Gradually the pain became more acute. If he lay down for a few minutes, he thought, it would pass. He walked along the hall from his office towards the deserted theatre. In one of the boxes was a sofa on which he could recline, with the additional advantage of being close to a toilet should an urgent need arise. It was a ladies' room, but that didn't matter as there was no one but Jules in the whole building.

Half an hour later the pain had become almost unbearable and his whole body was shaking uncontrollably. He fished out his phone to call Olivia. No signal.

*Have to get out of here*, he thought, struggling to get to his feet. That was when the delirium started. Totally disorientated, he made a lunge towards the rail at the front of the box and fell twenty feet to the floor of the auditorium. He vomited copiously on the shabby maroon carpet before losing consciousness.



The councillors who assembled for the three o'clock meeting with theatre director Jules Lapotaire hung around for fifteen minutes before returning to their more important business. Nobody considered calling him – not that he was in a position to answer in any case.



As a freelance writer on 'lifestyle' topics for newspapers and women's magazines, Olivia worked at home, irregular hours. When, as today, she had a tight deadline, the kids would go from school to their Grandma's for tea.

It was after seven in the evening when she realised Jules had not come home yet, nor had he called to say he would be late. She rang his mobile and his office landline several times, getting no reply.

Before heading to Grandma's to collect her offspring, she drove to the theatre, which she knew was dark, between productions. Letting herself in through the stage door, for

which Jules had given her a key, she made first for his office. He was nowhere to be seen, but his desk looked busy, his computer was turned on, and his jacket hung on the back of his chair. He had to be in the building somewhere.

In the theatre auditorium, the only light shone from one of the boxes. She called Jules's name. A little nervously, she made for the illuminated box, but found no one there. Looking over the rail into the darkness of the stalls below, she could see nothing. A strange unpleasant odour, like vomit, wafted up from the depths. An empty-theatre smell, Olivia assumed.

*Ah well, she thought, he'll show up at home when he gets hungry.* It was time to pick up the kids.



'Missing, you say, Ms Lapotaire?' the voice on the phone said at one in the morning.

Olivia told the police dispatcher what she knew of her husband's movements the previous day, and reported her own unsuccessful visit to the theatre premises. It was arranged that a constable would come to her house for the stage-door key, so that the building could be thoroughly searched.

Only at 4 am did the call come.

'Ms Lapotaire, I'm sorry to tell you your husband has been found, injured and unconscious but alive, in the stalls area of the theatre. He's in an ambulance, on his way to Manchester Royal. As soon as we've more information, we'll let you know.'



Jules's physical injuries from his fall were the primary focus of attention for the busy accident and emergency unit. It was not until after nine in the morning that one of the junior doctors on duty began to pay more attention to the fact that Jules had thrown up.

A sample of the vomitus revealed that his most recent meal had consisted of a roast-beef sandwich with mustard on whole-

wheat bread. Most probably from the convenience store next-door to the theatre.

At the hospital, Olivia reported what her husband had eaten for breakfast. She was careful to mention that the muesli he had consumed was organic – therefore beyond reproach as she saw it.

‘Nonetheless,’ the doctor told her, ‘if there’s any left in the packet we should have it analysed. It looks as if Mr Lapotaire is suffering from acute poisoning of some kind.’

‘I ate the same muesli, yesterday *and* today,’ Olivia said, ‘and I’m okay. My son even had two helpings, and is perfectly fine.’

‘Sounds like it’s not the muesli, then, but we’ll check it out just to be sure. What else did your husband eat?’



By 6 pm, an endoscopic study had led the team of doctors, who now included a consultant clinical toxicologist, to suspect poisoning by ricin, unlikely though that seemed, or – an off-the-wall possibility – abrin. Blood tests, however, were negative for both.

The toxicologist pointed out that L-abrine, the blood marker for abrin poisoning, was quickly metabolised and could give a positive result only within about 24 hours of ingestion. Abrin could not be ruled out, but was so improbable that the patient’s condition would have to be put down to ‘poisoning by an unknown agent’, pending analysis of the foods he was known to have consumed.

Jules Lapotaire was kept comfortable and hydrated. He regained consciousness fleetingly at midnight and again at 3:30 am. At 5:47 am, forty-six hours after his breakfast of Fairfield’s Premium Organic Muesli, he was pronounced dead.