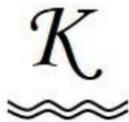


# SCOTCH AND WATER

(Incomers: Book 2)

Jim Forbes



A Kinord Book



# 1

## THE UNMISTAKABLE SIGNATURE OF GOLD

**T**HE J-WAY PURRED SOFTLY as Bob swept its coil in long arcs over the uneven ground. Occasionally it uttered a ‘beep’ as it encountered a large rock near the surface, but for the most part it remained placid, unexcited.

It was the third, and by far the best, metal detector he had owned since taking up the hobby five years ago. An Australian machine originally developed for gold prospecting, the J-Way could be tuned to pick up signals from a wide range of metals. For the moment, it was on a low sensitivity setting, hence the quiet purr. Later, Bob planned to sweep the same area with progressively higher sensitivity.

Up to now, he had stayed close to his Edinburgh home in pursuit of his hobby, and today was no exception. He had parked his Mercedes A-Class less than a mile away and followed a signposted right-of-way to the site, the J-Way slung from a shoulder harness. For a retired man in his sixties he was in good physical shape, and had enjoyed the walk on this fine spring day. Arriving at his chosen spot, he’d taken a moment to catch his breath and savour the fresh air before getting down to work. Now, though, his full attention had to be on the J-Way’s digital display and its soft murmur.

This was not, on the face of it, a promising site for buried treasure. Not necessarily a bad thing, Bob believed, for it meant the land was probably ‘virgin’ – it hadn’t already been scoured by weekend amateurs looking for loose change.

A steep gorse-covered slope separated his present hunting-ground from a golf course below. His search area extended from its crest up a gentler incline towards the vertical rock face of an abandoned quarry. Refusing him permission to search anywhere within the golf course, a groundskeeper had drawn his attention to this forlorn corner. A battered red twenty-foot shipping container, its white letters proclaiming 'Hamburg Süd', defiled the site; how *that* had been hauled here, and why, Bob couldn't guess. It was an eyesore in such a pretty place.

'Nothing to do with the golf club,' the groundskeeper had told him; 'in fact, that isn't part of our property. I think it's public land – you can check with the council if you like.'

Bob didn't check. He just came, surveyed the area briefly, and began sweeping with the J-Way. No one bothered him; not even the occasional duffer who came near, thrashing about among the gorse looking for a wayward golf ball.

He enjoyed the solitude. His was a pastime for men who liked their own company, and for Bob, the J-Way was company enough. It spoke to him, in a language he had come to understand very well. *There's something deep here, probably an old rusty pipe*, it would say. Or, *a few beer cans were opened here, back in the days of detachable ring-pulls*.

There had been several love affairs: with cars, with a top-of-the-range audio system, with a racing bike, though never with another human being, male or female. Now the love of his life was a metal detector. One that might make him rich.

He scanned along the brink of the steep slope, working towards the red Hamburg Süd box. As he approached its metal wall, the J-Way's purr gave way to an angry growl. Too much interference there.

Keeping a safe distance from the container, and still on the low-sensitivity setting, he had almost completed a first sweep when, at the entrance to a semicircular inturn in the rock face, the J-Way broke into a squeal. He passed the coil repeatedly

across the same spot, getting the same high-pitched note each time. An abandoned quarrying tool, perhaps?

With the setting adjusted for improved discrimination, the digital readout was unambiguous: this was a non-ferrous object. Not a quarrying tool, then. A high-conductivity metal, though not quite as conductive as silver. Bob's heart skipped a beat. The J-Way was displaying the unmistakable signature of gold.

And yet, was that possible? The signal was not consistent with a small item such as a wedding ring or locket close to the surface. It had to be something deeper and much bigger. His hand-trowel would be of little use; he stuck it in the ground to mark the spot, hid the J-Way among some gorse bushes and set off towards his car.

Within forty minutes he was back, armed with a heavy-duty spade. He began to dig, totally unaware of the arrival of a heavily-built young man who lurked, cigarette in hand, behind the shipping container.

About a foot down, Bob encountered a layer of flat rock, sandstone it looked like. From the sound the spade made when striking it, there seemed to be some kind of hollow cavity beneath. Turning on the J-Way again, he confirmed that the target was under the rock, probably in the cavity. Afraid to damage the object, whatever it might be, he dug cautiously, widening the hole and sometimes scraping with his trowel to expose the surface of the sandstone.

At first, he wondered if he had stumbled on the lid of a burial chamber, dating perhaps from iron-age times. Soon he saw he had struck a portion of pavement, formed of irregularly shaped slabs. It reminded him of some crazy paving he had laid in the tiny garden of his bachelor bungalow thirty years ago. Then he had another thought. Could it be ...?

He was startled by a voice at his back saying, 'Found something, pal?' Twisting round, he found himself looking up into a scowling bearded face framed by a black hood.

After a pause to regain his composure, Bob replied, 'I don't know. See these slabs? They look like pictures I've seen of Roman roads. But there's no record of a Roman road here.'

'You've no permission to dig on this land,' Hoodie announced aggressively.

Bob stepped out from under the big man's shadow to set a more comfortable distance between them. 'I spoke to an official at the golf club. He said there wouldn't be any problem here, above the gorse bushes.'

'None of the golf club's fucking business. The land is private. We'll be building a house here.'

*A house?* Bob thought. *Isn't this a protected area?*

He decided to humour this hooligan. 'Oh, my mistake,' he said apologetically. 'I'd no idea I was on private property. Anyway, the planning people will want to know there are possible Roman remains here.'

Hoodie's tone suddenly switched to one of false amiability. Taking a long drag from his cigarette, he said, 'Yeah, yeah, we'll tell them, of course. So did your metal detector locate something under those slabs?'

Not wishing to give anything away, Bob said, 'I got a signal that probably came from the paving stones themselves. They're iron-rich. See, they have a reddish colour.'

'Stay there a minute. I just need to check something in my office.'

*Office?* Oh, right, the Hamburg Süd box.

As the hooligan strode off, Bob read the words in large letters on his back: *THIS HOODIE'S NOT FOR HUGGING*, an allusion to the short-lived '*hug a hoodie*' catchphrase uttered by a prime minister some years before. With a shudder, he started filling in the hole he had dug. He needed to think about how to retrieve the gold, if gold it was, from below that pavement. It wouldn't happen today. He'd come back another time and make sure Hoodie wasn't around before he did any more digging.

If this *was* Roman gold, his luck was truly in. As treasure trove, it would be the property of the crown, but he'd be entitled to a reward based on its market value. Like every metal detector hobbyist in Scotland, he knew well that the finder of the Stirling hoard in 2009 had received a reward of nearly half a million pounds. Everything the J-Way was telling him led him to believe this could be another Stirling.

Hoodie shouted, 'Hey you! Come over here!'

Hesitantly, Bob stuck his spade in the ground and made his way over to the door of the container. It was gloomy inside but as his eyes became accustomed to the dimness he saw a portable generator, a variety of tools including a chainsaw and ropes as might be used for tree-pruning, a couple of plastic chairs and several packs of canned food and soft drinks.

'Okay, pal,' Hoodie said, 'first things first. Who are you?'

'My name's Robert Bowman. Look, if I've ...'

'I'm Victor Herring. This is actually my mother's building site, but I'm managing it for her.'

'Herring, eh? Is your mother Rachel Herring, by any chance?' Victor nodded.

'I read in the paper she's negotiating to buy the old bank headquarters near the airport. She has plans for a casino hotel. Las Vegas-style, the paper said. Is that right?'

'She's got her finger in a lot of pies, but you can't believe everything you read in the newspapers. Anyway, I just called to tell her somebody was digging around on her land. She went ballistic, said I should set my dog on you. As it happens, I don't have Gnasher with me this afternoon. So it's your lucky day.'

Just an hour earlier, when the J-Way had first signalled the possibility of gold, Bob had believed it was indeed his lucky day. Now, sitting in the semi-darkness of a dirty old shipping container with a bearded gorilla, he was not so sure.

'Doubly lucky, in fact,' Victor went on. 'You see, Mr Bowman, I've a deal for you.'

‘What kind of a deal?’

‘Thing is, if it turns out we’re sitting on some archaeological site – a Roman fort, whatever – we’ll not be allowed to build. And my Ma’s dead set on making her home here. So what’s it worth for you to do nothing more about those Roman slabs, eh? Forget you ever saw them? Never breathe a word to anybody?’

Bob reprised his vision of half a million pounds if there was gold out there like the Stirling hoard. Whatever Victor Herring had in mind, it wasn’t going to come close. ‘No, I couldn’t do a deal like that,’ he said. ‘If this is a Roman site, it should be preserved. Or at least documented before any foundations are dug. But, you know, chances are those slabs aren’t Roman, maybe not even very old. Let the council’s archaeologist do a survey. It might hold up the project for a few weeks, but that’s likely all.’

‘So, no deal?’

‘That’s what I said.’

They were sitting on white plastic chairs, facing each other. Bob started to get to his feet. ‘Don’t go,’ Victor said. ‘You can’t reject an offer without even hearing it. Like a Coke? An Irn Bru? It’s cold enough in this tin box at night to keep my supplies cool.’

Bob’s first instinct was to walk away, but his curiosity as to Victor’s price got the better of him. ‘Coke, thanks.’ He settled down again in his chair.

Victor stepped behind him – for a can of Coke, he supposed. The next thing Bob knew, there was a rope around his neck. He couldn’t breathe, couldn’t cry out. Lashing out with his arms and legs, he sent his chair flying. Soon he was face-down on the dusty floor, with Victor on his back, twisting the rope ever tighter. In less than a minute, he blacked out.

Victor kept the rope tight around the neck of the lifeless man for another full minute. Then he got up and rolled the body over with one foot to satisfy himself that his victim was dead. Rifling through Bowman’s pockets, he removed everything he found,

including a wallet with seventy pounds and some cards, a couple of pounds in loose change, a set of house keys and a car key. *No mobile phone. Good.*

Outside, he completed the task Bowman had begun of filling in the hole he had dug. Carefully he replaced the turf. It was hard to see the ground had ever been disturbed. All of Bowman's belongings, including the metal detector and its harness, he gathered up and took inside his 'office'.

He opened a can of Irn Bru and drained it in a single draught.

## 2

### AN ECONOMIC PROPOSITION

PEOPLE WOULD SOMETIMES ASK Delia Cobb how she came to be living in Edinburgh. A pretty red-haired girl in her twenties, she looked authentically Scottish, but her Chicago accent told a different story. One of a handful of U.S. graduates working at the water-infrastructure company NEPA, she had landed an international fellowship in environmental science.

It was not her first experience of Scotland. She had come the previous year to retrieve a rare and ancient artefact she had inherited. ‘Taran’s wheel’, it was called, an object of great cultural significance\*, now lodged in the National Museum of Scotland for safe-keeping.

It was there that Delia met the curator Jody Stair. In her mid-thirties, Jody had a partner, a divorcé by the name of Marcus Annandale. He owned a business on Edinburgh’s Royal Mile, selling customised malt whisky blends to tourists.

Though she found her NEPA work interesting, the fellowship was for Delia primarily a reason to continue her acquaintance with what she had come to regard as her adopted country, at least for a couple of years. After that, who knew? She might find some other reason to stay in Scotland, or she might decide it was time to return to the States.

A complicating factor was her boyfriend Quin Johnson, still pursuing an academic career as a linguist in Chicago. Lately, things had cooled between them; he seemed keen to settle down

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

in the Midwest, while she had a vision of a more interesting life across the Atlantic. Not quite ready to break off their relationship – apart from anything else, he was living in her apartment and paying rent, and they talked by phone or Skype at least once a week – she was nonetheless reluctant to plan her future around him. Edinburgh, she found, was a place where she would be happy to put down roots, something she had never felt in Chicago, though she had grown up there.

North East Pipeline Aqueduct, her employer, was headquartered at South Gyle in the west of the city under chief operating officer Dennis Dickie. It was one of two similar, supposedly competitive, enterprises established three years earlier. The other, WestWater, had its offices in Glasgow.

Climate change had led to more erratic rainfall patterns in southern England, with catastrophic flooding in some years, yet severe and prolonged drought in others. Building infrastructure to transfer water on demand from northern and western Scotland to thirsty Londoners was the business that NEPA and WestWater were set up to pursue.

For decades it was believed that moving huge volumes of water from one end of Britain to the other could never be an economic proposition. The new companies were changing all that by using existing rights-of-way. NEPA, for example, was installing pipelines and open channels alongside the main railway line from Inverness through Perth, Edinburgh and Newcastle to a hub north of London, from which the water they brought would be distributed to a system of reservoirs. Even the necessary pumping stations along the way could mostly be accommodated on underutilised railway land. The rent NEPA paid to Network Rail promised to transform the economics of Britain's railways – a huge side-benefit.

All mainstream political parties in the Scottish parliament at Holyrood were supportive of the program, despite public unease about inevitable cost overruns and travel disruption.

NEPA cultivated a higher profile than WestWater, and as a result became a greater target of dissent. Yet only one political entity caught and exploited the anti-NEPA mood: a dissident faction of extreme nationalists calling themselves *Auld Stobby*, Scots for 'Old Prickly', in reference to the Scotch thistle. They campaigned vociferously against England's 'theft' of 'Scottish' water.

None of this was Delia's concern. She was glad to have a job that let her enjoy living in one of Europe's most vibrant and historic capital cities. She had found a charming flat at a rent she could just afford on Marchmont Road.

With a habit for composing anagrams, she converted the name of her street to a fictitious website: *northdrama.com*. She could not have foreseen the kind of drama Edinburgh had in store for her.

# 3

## WATER LAIRDS

**A**T 81, ARCHIE KILGOUR WAS the oldest and longest-serving member of the Ancient Edinburgh Society of Water Lairds. He had been inducted as a young man by his father; his grandfather and great-grandfather had been Water Lairds in their time too.

Since his wife's death a couple of years ago, Archie had withdrawn from most of the Society's activities, but maintained a friendship with some of his fellow members. Living alone in his large Georgian terrace house in Stockbridge, he was under constant pressure from his three daughters to sell up and move to a smaller place – a pressure he had until recently resisted.

'It's not just *my* home,' he had protested to them. 'Four generations of Kilgours have owned this house. Francis Kilgour – your great-great grandfather – bought it in 1877 for 250 guineas. And I'm not done with it yet.'

Of the many historic societies and guilds surviving in 21st-century Edinburgh, the Water Lairds had the longest pedigree, and were the most secretive. While others had charters from the Lord Provost or the city council, or were registered as charities, the Water Lairds owed their existence to no authority but their own. They did not hold flashy dinners or get mentioned in the *Scotsman* for good works. Meeting once a month in a rented room above a Rose Street pub, they talked mainly about current politics and the local economy, but also recounted stories handed down through the centuries of the Society's existence.

Most members were small businessmen; there were a few professionals including a couple of doctors, a university

professor, an art gallery curator and a concert violinist, but – unusually for an ancient Edinburgh institution – no lawyers. Sons followed fathers into the society, just as Archie Kilgour had, with new members quietly recruited from among friends and associates of existing Water Lairds. The roll had no more than thirty names, of whom perhaps two dozen attended regularly.

Membership records went back a little over 300 years, but unlike, say, the Merchants' Company, the Society of Writers to Her Majesty's Signet or the High Constables, the Water Lairds had no documented history or date of foundation. It was generally believed that in medieval times they had some quasi-official role as guardians of watercourses in and around the city of Edinburgh. The quality of those waters was not just of local but of national importance. After all, by act of the Scottish Parliament in 1617, wheat, peas, beans, rye and salt were to be measured in *firkins*, a volume equal to *21 pints and a mutchkin of the water of Leith*.

The Society kept a collection of old books in a locked cabinet in its meeting room. From time to time a proposal was made to donate them to the National Library of Scotland, but thus far no action had been taken. Occasionally recourse was had to one volume or another to settle a debate; this happened less and less as most of the titles, being long out of copyright, were easily accessible free on the web.

Lacking written articles of association, the Water Lairds had no explicit ban on female enrolment, but no woman had ever been admitted. It had not occurred to Archie to propose one of his daughters for membership. Instead, he had championed the recruitment five years ago of Marcus Annandale, who became his protégé and a close friend.

The day after celebrating his 81st birthday Archie fell on the stairs of his house. He would admit no connection between these events, and was lucky to have no broken bones. His

confidence shaken, he finally agreed to his daughters' entreaties to move to a flat in a building with a lift. Marcus agreed to help him sort through his belongings and dispose of things he would have no room for, nor need of, in his new, much smaller, home.

For five successive Mondays (the only day of the week when his shop was closed), Marcus combed through cupboards, chests and glory-holes. Archie supervised, giving thumbs up or down as Marcus suggested disposition of articles – sell, donate, keep, bin. On the sixth Monday, Archie pronounced himself satisfied that everything had been gone through.

'Isn't there an attic?' Marcus asked.

'Haven't been up there in forty years. My stepladder got to be unsafe and I threw it out. Never got around to buying a new one.'

'We should borrow one and take a look.'

'There's no light in the attic. And as I recall, there's only some old junk of my parents' or grandparents'. Whoever buys the house can get rid of it.'

'Ancestors' junk can turn out to be worth something. There could be stuff from your great-grandparents' time.'

'Okay, you win,' Archie said at length.

Marcus bought a powerful flashlight from a little hardware store around the corner and, with the aid of a neighbour's ladder, climbed through a trapdoor in the ceiling of the top-floor landing. Decades of dust and cobwebs lay on every surface. He found some hatboxes (one containing a top hat), a melodeon from which he could coax only a wheeze, a box of children's games, a wireless from the 1930s, and a set of wartime blackout blinds.

In a corner was a large wooden trunk, its lid secured with a brass hasp. Marcus tried to move the trunk towards the trapdoor but it wouldn't budge. At first he thought it was just heavy; soon he realised it was anchored, probably nailed from the inside, to the joists. He would have to force it open where it sat. A stout screwdriver proved an effective lever.

Inside were some womens' clothes, mostly Victorian underwear. Nestled among the garments was a doll with a porcelain head. And at the bottom lay a leather attaché case full of papers. Marcus brought the entire contents of the trunk down from the attic to let Archie have a look.

'Never saw this stuff before,' the old man said. 'The doll might have been my mother's when she was a little girl.' He opened the attaché case and pulled out a wad of yellowing papers. Leafing through them, he sat silent for a few minutes.

'Something interesting, Archie?'

'Looks like a manuscript. See the handwriting? Isn't it beautiful? Nobody writes like this any more.'

Marcus had to agree. The calligraphy was evenly sized and spaced without the aid of ruling; the letters sloped gently and uniformly forward and looped elegantly above and below. This was the writing of an artist, he was sure. A frugal artist – the writing ran to the very edge of the page with no margins, front and back. The slender ink-strokes suggested the pen had been held lightly, and there was evidence in places of a slight tremor, as if the writer was an old person. From perusal of a few passages in the manuscript, it appeared to be a family history of some kind.

'Where's the first page?' Marcus asked. 'That should give us a title and the name of the author.'

It eluded them until Marcus saw it stuck to the inside of the leather case. He tried gingerly to peel it off but the fragile paper threatened to tear with the slightest pull.

'Archie, I'd like Jody to take a look at this.'

The old man looked puzzled. 'Jody? Who's she?'

'I've told you about Jody a number of times. Jody Stair. She's my girlfriend. We've been seeing each other for almost a year.'

'Since your divorce from Heather?'

'Not quite. That was over two years ago. I met Jody at *Inglisleid* last spring.'

‘Ingle what?’

‘You know, the Scots language discussion group. Jody’s a founder member. Not me – I just started going after the divorce. Anyway, the reason I’d like her to see these papers is that she works at the National Museum. She’ll know somebody there with the right technique for separating the first page from the leather.’

‘Is she as bonnie as Heather?’

‘Yes, but in a different way.’ He took a photo out of his wallet and showed it to Archie: a woman slightly younger than Marcus, with regular features, dark hair and eyes, slim athletic build, and a radiant smile.

‘You can pick them. A bit on the thin side, isn’t she?’

‘No excess fat, for sure. She runs a lot. Finished the Edinburgh marathon this year.’

‘Mm. Divorced like you, I suppose?’

‘Too many questions, Archie. But as a matter of fact, no. She never married.’

Archie took a moment to digest this information. Then he said, ‘Marcus, you’ve been so kind and helpful these last few weeks. I want you to have the manuscript, if you’d like it. To keep, I mean. By all means share it with your girlfriend. Maybe you could ... what is it they do nowadays? ... scan it so that it’s preserved, and give me a copy.’

‘Thank you,’ Marcus said. ‘I’ll do that, and treasure it.’

Little did he realise what a treasure it would turn out to be.



A roll of builder’s heavy-gauge polythene and some duct tape in Victor Herring’s shipping container proved ideal for wrapping the corpse. Leaving the still-warm body well sealed in its plastic cocoon on the floor, he locked up and walked down a path through woods – skirting around the golf course – to where his green Land Rover was parked. Soon he was home at his spacious

flat in Merchiston, an upmarket area in the south-west of Edinburgh. That evening he checked the weather forecast and tide tables.

The following day was wet and unseasonably cold. Early in the morning he headed for his mother's building site. Putting the Land Rover in all-wheel drive, he followed the track through the deserted golf course. It was like negotiating a muddy river, but the LR was well up to the job.

It was no day for golf or dog-walking. But he kept an eye open for passers-by, just in case. Entering his 'office', he saw everything was exactly as he had left it the day before.

He hauled the polythene-shrouded body outside. Though it was much heavier than he expected, he was able by stages to lift and shove it into the back of the LR, accompanied by his chainsaw, a can of fuel, some bin-bags, a plastic bucket, and Bowman's metal detector and harness. Not fully trusting the privacy afforded by the LR's tinted rear windows, he threw a black cover over his cargo.

Back in the Hamburg Süd container, he thoroughly swept the floor to remove any visible traces of the previous day's struggle. It was thirsty work, and he gulped down a can of Irn Bru before setting off. Halfway to the public road, he met a hardy soul in a parka and waterproof trousers who was taking a walk in the rain. Victor slowed down so as not to splash him, then gave him a cheerful wave as he drove by.

At 11:20 am, just ten minutes before high tide, Victor stopped at a lonely spot he knew well near Carriden on the south shoreline of the Firth of Forth. He'd been along this almost deserted road on many a Sunday ride on his motorbike – a five-year-old Harley 1200cc Nightster that spent far too much time in the back of his garage – but never before in the Land Rover. Certainly never on business like today's.

The rain continued unabated, and a cold fog lay over the firth. Though the north shore was less than two miles away

across the water, it was invisible, as were the towers of the Forth Road Bridge and the new Queensferry Crossing about five miles downstream. The ghostly shape of a container ship could just be discerned making its way upriver to Grangemouth. Victor lit a cigarette and planned his next move.

## 4

### BOX-CUTTER BALLET

JODY LEAFED THROUGH THE PAPERS. ‘Yep, you’re right,’ she said to Marcus. ‘It’s a family history.’ Turning to the last page, she noted the initials *C.N.* and a date, 1883. ‘I wonder who *C.N.* was. It’s a shame we can’t see page one. That might give us her full name.’

He gave her a sceptical look. ‘*Her* full name? What makes you so sure this was written by a woman?’

‘There’s a feminine quality about the handwriting, don’t you think? I’ll take the attaché case to work tomorrow, get the first page separated from the leather.’

Next morning, she called Shilpa Chandrasekharan in the conservation department of the National Library of Scotland. Putting the case in a plastic pouch to protect it from the rain, she hurried over to the NLS.

Entering the library at street level, most visitors are unaware that most of the building lies below them, and that they are actually on the eleventh floor. Far below, she found the conservator at her desk in a tiny room.

‘It’s a common problem,’ Shilpa said in her Indian-inflected Edinburgh accent. ‘A little mildew on leather acts as a kind of adhesive for any paper that gets pressed against it for a prolonged period. But I have a way of freeing it. Just in case the paper gets damaged – which it shouldn’t – I’ll scan the visible side before I begin. You don’t care about the case, do you?’

‘No, it’s the document that matters.’

Almost before Jody had finished saying those words, Shilpa brought a box-cutter out of a drawer in her desk and began

attacking the inside of the case. She worked rapidly and rhythmically – a box-cutter ballet, Jody thought admiringly. Soon Shilpa had a rectangle of leather, just slightly bigger than the paper adhering to it, that could be laid flat on the platen of a scanner.

‘I’ll have the first sheet in good condition for you by five o’clock tomorrow.’

‘Thanks, Shilpa, you’re a gem. I’ll take the rest of the manuscript out of your way.’

‘Actually, a manuscript of this age is going to be quite fragile and prone to fading. Why don’t you leave it with me? I can have the original archived here and send you a scan of the whole thing tomorrow afternoon. Just email me details of the provenance of the document, for proper cataloguing.’

Jody was initially reluctant – she wanted to start reading the document that evening. But Shilpa had made a good point. And if *C.N.*’s writing had lain undisturbed since 1883, it could wait one more day.

‘Okay, that makes sense,’ she said. ‘But I’ll take what’s left of the case.’ Replacing the bits of ancient leather in the plastic pouch, she stepped back out into the rain.

Marcus’s shop was close by. She headed up there to tell him they’d have a scan of the manuscript by the following evening. Since he was busy with a customer, she put the plastic pouch on his desk at the back of the shop, then signalled to him, putting her thumb and little finger to her right ear and mouthing ‘call me.’ On the way back to her office, she stopped in a sheltered doorway and rang Delia’s mobile.



A box-cutter ballet of a different kind was about to take place on the dismal, deserted shore of the Firth of Forth. From inside the Land Rover, Victor Herring shoved with his feet against the large polythene-and-duct-tape package until it fell out the back

door, landing with a heavy thump on the ground. Taking a box-cutter from his pocket, he slit the bands of duct-tape holding the package together. Soon he was able to unroll the heavy-duty polythene to reveal Robert Bowman's corpse, lying face down on the plastic sheet.

Working quickly and methodically, he removed every stitch of clothing from the body and stuffed it all in a bin-bag. He then inspected the naked corpse for tattoos or other distinguishing marks, and saw nothing of significance. It was at this stage that he almost missed Bowman's gold wristwatch, but caught it in time. Severing the leather strap with his cutter, he noted the initials *R.J.B.* engraved on the back of the watch. *Probably a retirement gift*, he thought as he pocketed it.

Next, with his chainsaw he made short work of decapitating the body. He sealed the head in a bin-bag, then double-bagged it just to be sure there would be no fluid escape. *Better take the hands off as well.* He tried to restart the chainsaw. No joy: the rain had got to it. *Ah well, if the police have Bowman's fingerprints on file, they'll also have his DNA. And there's nothing I can do about that.*

So on to the main event, dumping the headless corpse in the firth. Grabbing it by the feet, he hauled it down over the shingle beach, leaving a trail of blood and tissue fragments. Soon the water was lapping around his ankles, but he kept going. By the time the water was up to his knees, the corpse was floating. It was time to let the outgoing tide do its work. The body would be carried away from this spot, to wash up anywhere on the downstream shoreline. It might even find its way out into the open sea, then who knew where it would end up? Denmark possibly. An interesting subject for one of those Scandinavian crime dramas.

Having gathered up and bagged the polythene sheet and duct tape, he filled the bucket several times from the firth and splashed the water over the shingle to wash away the bloody trail

the body had left above high-water mark. The rain helped with the clean-up.

He removed his shoes, socks and outer clothes and put them all in a bin-bag. Returning to the lapping shore, he shivered in the drenching rain but took time to thoroughly wash his hands and face in the brackish water. Back inside the LR he towelled himself and slipped on dry jeans, hoodie, trainers and gloves. He turned up the heat as he drove back into Edinburgh.

What remained of his task was more fun. First he disposed of the J-Way metal detector and its harness in the doorway of a charity shop on St Johns Road. Then, driving randomly around the city, he dropped off the bin-bags, one at a time, in communal rubbish bins belonging to different blocks of flats. Nobody paid the slightest attention. He took time to move the existing rubbish around in each bin, so that his deposit wouldn't be sitting on top. The last bag, the one with the severed head, was left at an address in the Grange. Mission accomplished.

Rachel Herring took his call in the study of her five-bedroom house in the Isle of Man countryside. 'I don't need details, son. Just pleased you've averted what could have been a sticky situation. As it is, Planning's asking for too many changes, and I don't want the question of an archaeological survey coming up again. It cost me ten thousand to get it waived last time.'

'You know, Ma, I could get a digger up to the site and work the whole place over before any archaeologist comes near.'

'Yes, I thought of that, but it would attract too much attention. Plus, it would be obvious we've been excavating before the planning approval comes through. I've another idea. I'll discuss it with you tomorrow when I'm in Edinburgh.'

'You're coming over? I'd better clean the house.'

'I'll stay at the Balmoral. But you should clean your house anyway. Or get a wife to do that for you.'

'Love you, Ma.'



The customer Marcus had been preoccupied with when Jody dropped in was an elderly well-to-do lady named Kirsty Morton. Unlike most of his clientele, Kirsty was no tourist. Home for her was a large house in Murrayfield surrounded by an acre of gardens, all enclosed behind high walls, on the lower slopes of Corstorphine Hill. With no children of her own, she had a favourite grandnephew, Hugh Leggat, whom she indulged on special occasions. A flyer for *A Malt O' My Ain* among her junk mail one day gave her the idea of having a unique Scotch whisky created for Hugh's 28th birthday.

*A Malt O' My Ain* was Marcus Annandale's brainchild. Five years ago, he had been an up-and-coming marketing executive with one of Scotland's biggest distillers, headquartered in Edinburgh. Following a hostile takeover by a French-Irish conglomerate he and over a hundred other employees suddenly found themselves surplus to requirements. The severance payment was generous beyond his wildest expectations. With it he purchased a retail whisky shop on the High Street, part of the Royal Mile in the Old Town, that had been in decline for years.

A business concept he had tried unsuccessfully to push through the bureaucracy of his former employer could now be given the breath of life. The notion was a custom blending operation, in which high-quality single malts could be mixed to an individual's precise specification to provide a unique 'signature' blend with its own label.

In principle it was no different from the colour mixing found in any paint store, except that the sensory properties of malt whiskies – smoothness, peatiness, smokiness, fullness, aromaticity and so on – were highly subjective. Punters would taste a variety of 'standards' and rank them on a number of criteria, providing data for the design of a specific blend of up to six single malts tailored to their preferences.

Depending on the rarity of each single malt used in the blend, a customised bottle of whisky from *A Malt O' My Ain* could retail

for anything from £50 to £500. Buying a case of a dozen bottles brought the unit price down significantly: £29.99 upwards a bottle, with free shipping. It was at the low end that Marcus did most of his business, which still left a healthy profit margin.

Kirsty was not a low-end customer. Nothing younger than twelve years was to go in the blend. Marcus suggested her grandnephew come into the shop to take the 'taste test'; meanwhile Kirsty could select a label design.

'Have you a name in mind for this malt?' Marcus asked.

'*Poacher's Poison*. Private joke – Hugh will understand.'

'No problem. I just have to run a wee check to make sure it's not somebody else's trademark – but I doubt it.'



'Hi, Delia.' Jody's voice on the phone sounded excited. 'I've come across a manuscript – well, it's Marcus's, really – that might be quite interesting. It's from 1883, by the looks of it a family history left to posterity. You're good at reading between the lines. Would you go through it with me?'

'Sure, Jody. I'd love to.'

'How about tomorrow, after work? We can meet at La Toscana – say at 6:30.'

No sooner had Jody ended her phone conversation with Delia than she received a call from Marcus.

'What's up, sweetheart?' His usual phone conversation starter. 'Sorry I was busy when you came in.'

'Shilpa at the National Library did quite a number on the attaché case, as you've probably noticed.'

'I saw you left a plastic pouch on my desk, but haven't had a chance to see what was in it.'

'Don't bother. It's not salvageable. The important thing is, Shilpa will send me a scan of the whole manuscript tomorrow. Including the sheet that was stuck to the leather. Soon as I get it, I'll shoot you a copy. You coming over after you close up?'

‘Can’t tonight. Promised Archie I’d meet him for a beer at the Stockbridge Tap. He wants to celebrate getting his place cleared out. Tomorrow?’

‘If you’re finished by 6:30, come to La Toscana. Delia will be there.’

# 5

## PERSUASIVE

**T**HREE ITEMS OF BUSINESS brought Rachel Herring to Edinburgh. First, a mid-afternoon meeting with Councillor James Swift. Second, an unlikely rendezvous with a couple of members of the ultra-nationalist group *Auld Stobby*. And third, dinner with her son Victor, to discuss what to do about those damnable Roman remains – if that’s what they really were.

Rachel was a slim, good-looking woman of 55 with neat dyed-blond hair, who favoured expensive clothes and jewellery. Her son had inherited none of her fine features, spare physique or cultured tastes; for these deficiencies she blamed his father, her first husband. Dead these last 26 years, it was Cyril Herring who had built up the business interests she now owned and managed.

Not that she complained about her marriage to a man thirty years her senior. It had made her a wealthy woman, and had been mercifully short – just over three years from wedding to cremation, during which she had borne her only child, Victor, now 27. Although recently wed to the fourth of her husbands (a pretty boy about the same age as her son), she had kept her first married name. To none of them had she been the kind of wife she wanted for Victor: someone who would clean him up a bit, do his laundry and provide a bunch of grandchildren.

Swift hated his meetings with Rachel. Invariably she made demands requiring all his political skill and deviousness to satisfy. Already he had used his powers of persuasion to swing the council’s acting director of planning behind giving consent

in principle to plans for a luxury home on possibly the best undeveloped site in Lothian – maybe all of Scotland. A local conservation group had protested vehemently, but Rachel's promise to make a huge business investment in the area had been his trump card.

The councillor stood to be well rewarded. A 'fee' of £25,000, plus £10,000 for securing a waiver of the normally mandatory archaeological survey. All payable in a few weeks, assuming the committee signed off on detailed planning approval.

Still, it was with some trepidation that he came to the one-on-one meeting in the Balmoral Hotel. Rachel Herring had leverage. Having once accepted her money, he couldn't back out of his business relationship with her; better to keep it going than risk her outing him for corruption. Anyway, he told himself, it was for the public good. Her commercial development plan would create hundreds of local jobs. She had made it clear that her proposed casino resort near Edinburgh airport was contingent on a building permit for her new home. Swift was doing the right thing for the Lothian economy.

He arrived at the Balmoral early, giving himself time for two stiff drinks before Rachel appeared. Alcohol and apprehension turned his ordinarily florid complexion a deeper puce. But the meeting in an otherwise deserted lounge turned out to be relatively benign. Rachel was all sweetness and light; she ordered coffee, a large cognac for him and a Tio Pepe for herself. All she apparently wanted was an update on the progress of the full planning application. And it was going fairly well: a few changes would be demanded, but it appeared there were no serious snags.

Privately, Swift found the proposed seven-bedroom, eight-bathroom house hideously vulgar in appearance; a tasteless excrescence on such a prominent site. But none of that mattered. So long as the house was built, Swift's secret, and his augmented bank account, would be safe.

The meeting over, Rachel ordered another large cognac for him, then made her apologies. She was running late for another appointment. He stood to bid her good day, then sat down to nurse the soothing, warming brandy.

Ten minutes later, Rachel was shown into a small cheerless room below street level in a narrow close off the High Street. It reeked of mould, rancid chip fat and stale beer. A tiny window high on one wall admitted a cold draught but little in the way of light; illumination came from an ancient fitment containing two buzzing, flickering fluorescent tubes. In the centre of the floor stood a cheap laminate-topped table surrounded by four chairs.

Left alone for a few minutes, she began to wonder if she'd been wise in coming here. After all, *Auld Stobby* wasn't exactly a mainstream political organization. It had failed to distance itself from the vague threats of violence against English-owned businesses in Scotland uttered by some of its adherents.

Though born in Lancashire, Rachel didn't consider herself English; when asked her nationality she always replied 'Manx', the Isle of Man having been her home since her first marriage 29 years ago. Now she was contemplating giving up her 'non-dom' tax status and taking up permanent residence in Scotland, though this would hardly make her Scottish.

A couple entered. The woman was small with a boyish figure, her black hair in an asymmetric post-punk crop, a naturally pale complexion emphasised by deep purple lipstick, set off by a single large black earring in the shape of a raven's feather. A Goth, presumably. Heavy black eyeliner and mascara contrasted with her hazel eyes, which looked unusually green in the fluorescent light. She wore knee-high boots, tights and a tiny flared skirt, all black, and a white Primark top cut to show cleavage, though she didn't have much.

Her slightly older companion was tall, muscular but pasty-faced, with cold eyes. Lank fair hair fell over the collar of his Italian leather jacket, which was teamed with designer jeans.

The pair introduced themselves as Isla Younie and Hendrik Vandenbrouck.

‘You’re not Scottish, I take it?’ Rachel said by way of greeting to the tall man, on hearing his name. Evidently a man of few words, he let Isla do the explaining.

‘He’s Belgian, from Ghent. Was active for many years in – what was it, Hendrik, the Free Flanders Army? – but left when they started getting too soft. Now he’s joined our movement for a free Scotland.’

‘I suppose your movement has links to the Scottish National Party?’

‘The SNP?’ Isla sneered. ‘They’re politicians like all the rest. They’ll sell Scotland down the river. We, on the other hand, won’t rest until Scottish assets are safely in the hands of the Scottish people.’

‘And by “we” you mean *Auld Stobby*?’

‘That’s right.’ Isla smiled to reveal even white teeth. ‘We’re well named, *stobby* – prickly, just like the Scotch thistle. *Wha daur meddle wi me.*’

Isla’s recitation of the Latin motto ‘*Nemo me impune lacessit*’ from Scotland’s royal coat of arms, in its usual Scots translation, was lost on Rachel. ‘So I’m surprised you wanted to meet with *me*,’ she said. ‘I’m an incomer, not one of the “Scottish people” you want owning Scottish assets.’

‘We’ve heard you’re negotiating to open a big gambling resort out west, by the airport,’ Isla said, coming to the point of the meeting.

‘And you’re against it?’

‘Not at all. It’ll bring in foreign money. Aye, *English* money. And that’s okay by *Auld Stobby*. Your English punters – Americans, too, and Chinese – will fly in, lose their shirts and fly out again. We won’t be too troubled by them on the streets of Edinburgh. Perfect. But see your Scottish Parliament? And your Edinburgh Council? They’ll be holier than the Pope.’

“Gambling?” they’ll say. “Las Vegas on our doorstep? No, we don’t want *that*.” For this last remark, Isla adopted a mock ‘Edinburgh genteel’ accent.

Rachel saw the pitch coming. ‘So I suppose you’re after some funding from me, as the price of your support?’

Hendrik Vandenbrouck, who hadn’t said a word up to this point, pushed his chin forward and said, in his Flemish accent, ‘We can be *very* persuasive.’

Rachel was taken aback by his sudden aggression. Isla immediately clarified. ‘When Hendrik says “persuasive”, he means we can persuade people to favour your scheme. He wasn’t talking about putting pressure on you, in case that’s what you thought.’

Vandenbrouck nodded, saying nothing more.

‘But you *are* after money, aren’t you? Isn’t that what this meeting is about?’

‘We always need money to continue our work.’

‘And what exactly can you do for me? *Who* can you persuade? You’re not exactly a legitimate lobbying organisation, are you?’

‘It’s a few years ago now, but when Donald Trump wanted to destroy a prime Aberdeenshire coastal habitat to open a golf resort for tourists with bags of money and zero taste, the local council turned him down. That seemed to be the end of the matter, until their decision was overturned by the SNP-led government at Holyrood, and the bulldozers were soon at work. Who do you think made that happen?’

‘*Auld Stobby* did that? If it’s true, I’m impressed.’

‘You better believe it,’ Vandenbrouck said.

Isla studied Rachel’s inscrutable expression. ‘We’re not expecting anything right now, Mrs Herring. All we ask is you give it some thought. We can meet again in a few weeks.’

‘Leave it with me. I’ll get in touch if and when I think there’s something to discuss.’

With that, the meeting broke up. Rachel returned to the Balmoral to freshen up before having dinner with Victor. Her clothes and hair stank of the basement room where she'd just had her first encounter with *Auld Stobby*.



When Kirsty Morton arrived home from her gift-shopping, she was pleasantly surprised to find her grandnephew waiting for her on the driveway.

‘Hugh!’ she cried. ‘Why are you waiting out here? You could have let yourself in.’

‘I just arrived. There’s something I want to talk to you about.’

‘Me too!’

Over freshly brewed coffee and a scone at the kitchen table, Hugh Leggat said, ‘Okay, Aunt Kirsty, you go first.’

‘Your birthday’s coming up in less than a month, and I’ve just been arranging your present. Unfortunately it can’t be a surprise this year, because you need to go for a fitting, as it were.’

‘A fitting? What for? Not a kilt, for sure. You gave me one just two years ago.’

The gift would be a case of custom-blended Scotch whisky from *A Malt O’ My Ain*. One that would be blended to his precise preference. Hugh made his usual protestations that the gift was too much, but promised to go for a tasting session within the next few days. Then it was his turn to share some news.

‘You know I’ve been speaking out against NEPA,’ he began.

‘Speaking out? No, I didn’t know.’

‘I had a letter printed in the *Scotsman* last week, saying what a boondoggle it is for all those executives. They’re drawing huge salaries, and are in line for massive bonuses that aren’t tied properly to project timelines. And in the end, what’s it for? Just to keep London in cheap water.’

‘I don’t take the *Scotsman*, dear.’

‘I know. You get some English paper. The *Independent*, isn’t it? You don’t learn about what’s really important to Scotland.’

‘Hugh, darling, I’ve never heard you take such a parochial attitude! You used to rail against the nationalists for exactly that kind of thinking. Now it sounds like you’ve joined the SNP. Is that what you’re going to tell me?’

‘Not the SNP. They’re in bed with the NEPA board. I’m a member of *Auld Stobby*.’

Kirsty was stunned. Her grandnephew was a forensic accountant. He hobnobbed with prosecutors, solicitors, judges even. It could only hurt him professionally to be associated with those tattooed, multi-pierced skinheads. She begged him to reconsider.

‘It’s too late, I’m in. And I expect to be very active. But I wanted to tell you myself before you hear it from another source.’

‘Well, I can’t pretend I’m not shocked and disappointed. But you know your own mind. I just hope you’re not putting your career in jeopardy over this.’

‘If something’s worth fighting for, a career sometimes has to take second place. It’s not as if I’m married with kids. I’m not putting anyone else’s wellbeing on the line. Only my own. I can understand how you’re having a hard time taking this in, but it’ll all seem perfectly normal to you in a few weeks.’

Kirsty thought otherwise but decided to leave it at that for now.



Rachel’s preference would have been a hushed, expensive restaurant with starched tablecloths and an à-la-carte menu in French. But she couldn’t take Victor to a place like that. So she settled for a slightly seedy bistro on Rose Street with ‘today’s specials’ scrawled in chalk on a blackboard. Victor liked that ‘today’s specials’ never changed – he came here often and knew exactly what would be on offer.

‘Okay, Victor,’ Rachel said after they’d ordered their food and had a bottle of wine on the table, ‘we need to do something about those damned remains.’

‘I know. I still think a few hours with a digger is the answer.’

‘No. Here’s what we’re going to do. What was the name of that little man we got to fix the fire doors at Learmonth?’

‘Cameron Lewis. Calls himself Cammy.’

One of Rachel’s existing business interests in Edinburgh was the Learmonth Club, a small casino operation. A year or two earlier, the premises were found to be in violation of fire code; to avoid losing its licence, the club was required to install new doors meeting very stringent – and expensive – specifications. The manager, Ciaran Mortimer, had mentioned this to one of his regular punters who happened to be a building contractor.

Actually, ‘building contractor’ was a slightly grandiose term for Cammy Lewis’s operation. He did odd jobs for the cash he needed to fund his gambling habit. At that time, however, his habit was costing more than he earned, and he’d maxed out his credit card with no obvious means of paying off the debt. He proposed installing the fire doors for a combination of cash and gambling chips; he just *knew* that those chips would get him on a winning streak and he’d be back in the black.

Victor, who kept close tabs on the Learmonth Club, instructed Mortimer to accept Lewis’s offer. Furthermore, at his mother’s suggestion, he made it clear that the chips Lewis received had to be ‘lucky’ ones. Not *too* lucky, mind. Just enough to keep their contractor in credit, at least until the job was finished and approved by the licensing authority.

‘Does Lewis still play at Learmonth?’ Rachel asked.

‘He does. And still loses. From time to time he goes off in despair to the Genting, but I assume he does no better there – he always comes back.’

‘Give him a bigger line of credit as he’s such a faithful customer. I want him in our debt. Then we’ll have him dig up

whatever it is we have at the building site. By hand, under cover of darkness. Does he have a wife? Kids?’

‘I think so.’

‘Good. If he shows any sign of backsliding, or threatens to tell anyone what he’s doing, remind him how unfortunate it would be if anything happened to them. Now pour me another glass of that merlot.’