

An antidote to gritty dramas, the first part of the diaries of Ewan Walker follows the Walker family and their close friends through several generations, including bereavement and revelations about their true relationships.

Our Brother Chris

From my Father's Diaries
Part 1

Peter Walker

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Author's Note

This story contains strong and emotive language in certain places, as it reflects the kinds of language used by young people of at the beginning of the Twenty-First Century.

I see no good reason to be prudish about this sort of thing, but if such language offends, I apologise.

One of the characters is openly gay, and there is reference to his boyfriend, but there is no sexual content. However, if this is likely to offend you, please DO NOT read this book.

Some wider-world events were part of the current affairs at the time the story is set. Some places are real. However, the main setting, all characters, and events related in the story are entirely fictitious. Any resemblance to persons living or dead is entirely co-incidental.

Chapter 1

Autumn 2013

Some men are scruffy. No matter how hard you try, they always look like a mannequin in a shop window that has been abandoned while the workers go off for their tea-break. The clothes hang off awkwardly. The colours do not seem to look right. However carefully you style their hair, they still look like a scarecrow. When they come out of the bath, they look just the same as when they went in. They do not improve with age; they just get fatter. Clothes have the sole and functional purpose of covering up their flabby and unattractive nakedness. They can spend a fortune on a beautifully tailored bespoke suit, and they will still look as if they had been pulled through a hedge (forwards or backwards). It is all in the genes; jeans would often make a substantial improvement.

Other men are elegant. Somehow their clothing fits neatly. Some of them look like the mannequins from which they bought the clothes. If they go to a cheap discount store, they will still look as if their clothes come from an expensive designer. When participating in sports, they make mud look a positively attractive fashion statement. They can come from a cross-country run with not a hair out of place.

It is, of course, possible to be neither scruffy nor elegant, as it really is a spectrum. Most men are in the middle, and it is possible to get them to look moderately acceptable in a fine suit.

Lest the ladies feel left out, they naturally tend towards elegance. And it is far more gallant to assure them of their elegance even if they have none.

Or it could be decidedly patronising, depending on your point of view.

And elegance was the purpose of Walker Brothers Department Store of Kirkstoun Place in the heart of the small Scottish town of Corscadden. Founded in 1935 by two young brothers, Richard and Raymond Walker, Walker Bros set itself the principal task of providing elegant or more mundane clothing to the good people of Corscadden, the surrounding area of Strathcadden and the wider county of Buchananshire. The store prospered until the outbreak of the Second World War, when it had to diversify in order for it to survive. The Walker brothers had a fine nose for what was needed in those troubled times. If it existed, they could get it. But you might have had to wait a while; there was a war on.

The fortunes of Walker Bros mirrored the fortunes of the time. After the war, the regime of austerity cramped most people's spending, but the brothers had a good feel for what their customers could afford. Prosperity returned in the late nineteen fifties. Many customers would alight at Corscadden Station for the ten-minute walk to Kirkstoun Place. When the sales were on, trains were chartered from Cardean in the south and Dallennan in the north.

The main-line railway running through Strathcadden and Glenlennan had opened as late as 1898. It formed part of the northern end of a spinal main line that ran right from the South Coast of England to the Northwest of Scotland. Known as the Great Central Main Line, it connected a wide range of industrial cities and university towns south of the border. North of the border, it opened up fast links to many previously isolated places. It was the first railway into the County of Buchananshire which at that time had become decidedly backward and missed out on much of the prosperity of the Nineteenth Century. Things changed rapidly over the next few years. Corscadden grew from a small town of less than 10000 inhabitants to nearly 20000. The Dunalastair Foundry became the major employer, along with several textile mills.

During the Great War, The Great Central Line was a vital link from the South to the Naval Dockyards at Bewnessan and Moranstounness on the northwest coast. And it proved yet again its strategic importance in the Second World War. Despite the Luftwaffe's many attempts at knocking it out, the trains got through. And that was its strategic strength.

It was a grievous blow to Corscadden and the whole of the County of Buchananshire and the neighbouring County of Kyle of Tonsil when Dr Beeching proposed the closure of the Great Central Line. Despite the local fury, the last train ran in 1968, and the line was demolished with a haste that was almost obscene. Nobody had recalled Beeching ever having visited the Buchananshire and Kyle of Tonsil region. Had he had an unfortunate experience that had led him to have a real downer on the counties?

The whole of Buchananshire and Kyle of Tonsil and its many isolated communities were severely impoverished by the loss of the railway. The holiday trade collapsed overnight; the railway was closed at the very start of the holiday season. A number of holiday makers were stranded. The main A825 road through Strathcadden was totally inadequate for the task. The smaller roads were even worse. The replacement buses were supplied by a company in Falkirk, who made little effort to ensure that the buses ran to any reliable timetable but made every effort to fleece the passengers. Since it was nearly three hours to the nearest station, travel to and from Corscadden became a major trial of will and strength. Most people did not bother.

There was talk of a large motorway being built on the track-bed, so everyone could hop into their little motor car and go anywhere they liked. Most people said it was just blether. Just as it turned out.

South of the Border, the first section of the new motorway was built. It was a typical British job, over-budget, late, and very badly done. It was so badly done that the road started to fall apart almost immediately after the opening. And the motorway into Scotland was never built. The open section of the road was so troublesome that eventually it was closed for rebuilding, which never happened.

It was into this environment that Charles Edward Walker returned from Edinburgh University to learn the business. His father, Richard Walker, made him learn the ropes from the bottom up. After all, if the young man was to be running the company in a few years, he did have to know where the tea was kept, and to ensure that somebody cleaned behind the fridge.

Charles Walker was a dynamic and energetic businessman who had a nose for opportunity that was even more finely tuned than those of his father and uncle, who retired in 1971. Charles ensured that people got the goods they wanted at the price they could pay, and the quality that they deserved. Despite the depression of the area, Walker Bros prospered. He showed great promise as an apprentice costumier and subsequently a master tailor. Charles found time every day to practise his craft with consummate skill. His gentlemen's suits and Highland regalia were much in demand.

Charles was a devoted family man to his wife, Muriel and their two daughters, Jennifer Claire (born in 1962) and Sarah Susan Clayton (born in 1965). Finally, as an afterthought, Joseph Oliver Baxter Walker arrived in 1974. Joseph (Joby) was recognised by his father almost immediately after he was born as being too much of a geek to be of any use in the commercial world. Instead, Charles recognised his son's talent as an engineer who had a keen interest in all things mechanical and electrical. At the age of ten,

Joby had taken over a large room on the top floor of the Walker family home, a spacious Victorian semi-detached villa, to build a large model railway, at which he spent many a happy hour. When it was completed some five years later, it featured in *Railway Modeller* as *Railway of the Month*.

In the Nineteen Eighties, after they had left university, Charles' daughters, Jennifer, and Sarah, joined the business. In the early Nineteen Nineties, Corscadden got its rail link back in the massive European Union programme to make a network of high-speed all-purpose electric railways. Under the *Eurorail* brand the Great Central Line was re-instated north of the Border. Not only was a disastrous decision reversed, but also the Great Central line came into its own, for it had been built to the more generous loading gauge of the continent. Other links from Corscadden were re-instated too. Such was its importance as a railway junction that a key signal box was built there. Two days of local holiday were taken to celebrate the resumption of train services. Fast electric trains took passengers north and south, and for the first time directly to Edinburgh and Glasgow. Long freight trains, hauled by "twin tri-Bo" electric locomotives would rumble through the night, taking goods in a fraction of the time required for the equivalent road transport. A new high-speed section was built on the failed motorway south of the Border.

As Corscadden re-acquired its prosperity, so did Walker Bros. They expanded to build new stores in Buchanan and Dallennan.

Not long after the new age of prosperity had returned to Corscadden, the Walker family were bought out by a consortium of companies based in London, who were trying to increase their business portfolio. The Walker family made a fortune. Charles Walker was a humble man. Although he could have bought a large

country estate, and still lived on the proceeds, the thought never crossed his mind. “Why should I bother moving? Muriel and I have lived in this house for thirty-five years. We brought up our family here. It’s our family home.” Instead, he bought himself a new lawn mower, as the old one had been on its last legs for years. They did up the kitchen and set up the Walker Family Trust to be able to do good work for the benefit of the citizens of Corscadden.

The take-over was a disaster. The Synergy Consortium removed the two Walker sisters, who had worked with their father for some time, and were ready to take over when Charles retired. With the sisters’ unceremonious departure went all the local knowledge and acumen that would have been vital for success in the region. A frightfully dynamic young man came up from London. Out went all the dull but practical stuff that the good folk of Buchananshire really wanted. In came the expensive and minimalist fashion from central London. Within weeks, the stores were making losses hand over fist. Within three months, Walker Bros had closed, leaving two hundred staff redundant.

Charles Walker was horrified and disgusted at what he saw, and the Walker Family Trust bought back the stores at a tiny fraction of the price that had been paid. Reopening the Corscadden store under the slogan, “Back under old management”, Walker Brothers went back to the dull old stuff, ranging from the clothes that would keep the farmers warm to every conceivable item required in the kitchen and workshop. There was, of course, teen and twenties fashion for both men and women. And, if it existed, Walkers could get it.

Customers drifted back, and Walker Bros became profitable once again. It was Charles Walker’s intention to re-hire all his staff who had showed great loyalty to him. It took him and his daughters a year, but they achieved it in the end, re-opening the Dallennan branch for Christmas 1995.

Meanwhile Corscadden was getting a reputation as being a place for those who enjoyed an alternative lifestyle. Many tartan hippies took up residence in and around the town, growing organic vegetables (and one or two other kinds of plants). A thriving arts scene also grew up, with music and theatre. The tartan hippies lived up to their moniker; they took to wearing kilts which were popular garments in Buchananshire and Kyle of Tonsil. Walker Bros were, of course, happy to supply them in a range of styles, sizes, and prices. Organic producers supplied the Walker Bros café with a range of tasty fare that was enjoyed by all the customers.

With this influx of new people, the town got a reputation of being a good place to visit, to eat, and to stay. Its faded gentility was spruced up and tourists had a good range of venues to enjoy every evening of the week. Independent stores flourished, and the big multiples rarely got a look in, which made the town a good place to shop. A strong sense of community made it a friendly place, and there was little crime. In short, Corscadden was a good place to live and came high in the rankings for quality of life.

Charles Walker was elegant and dapper, as befitted a man who was not only a master tailor, but also had spent almost his entire working life building (and rebuilding) his department store empire. A humble Christian man, he always felt profoundly grateful that he had a talent for recognising good business opportunities and a good deal of good luck to go with it. He had a fine nose for a company that was, in his words, “rocky”. Some of his stock was bought for a song at liquidation sales, but he was always careful not to get too high and mighty about this. “There, but for the grace of God, go I” was his maxim.

Charles Walker used some of the Walker Family Trust to reward his daughters for their efforts by buying large, detached houses in Corscadden for them. Charles did not forget his son

Joseph, either, for at the end of 1995, Joseph Oliver Baxter Walker had become engaged to Mary Claire Bethan Fairbairn, a doctor who was doing locum work at the local GP surgery and was a very close friend of Sarah. One or two eyebrows were raised because of a nine-year age gap, as Joby was twenty-one, while his fiancée was thirty.

Charles and Muriel were thrilled and dismissed the mutterings with the contempt that they deserved. The wedding was on Saturday, 29th April 1996, and one or two older folk tut-tutted about “the bun in her oven”. On Friday, 30th August 1996, the bun arrived cooked to perfection, Aidan Iain Alexander Walker.

In September 1997, Charles bought Brewster House, a large, detached house in Priestfield Avenue, set in mature gardens, so that when, for a second time, this Joseph and Mary came to give birth, she would not have to lay her baby in a manger, but in the nursery of a large and comfortable family home. Not long after that, on Friday, 27th February 1998, there arrived a second Master Walker, Ewan James Samuel.

Aidan was immediately recognised as being a little version of his father. Ewan took after his mother. His granddad said he was a Fairbairn. Throughout his childhood Aidan would model children’s clothes for Walker Brothers, in the same way as his father and aunts had twenty years before. And Ewan did the same, for both boys were stunningly good-looking. Even now, both were regularly modelling fashionable clothing for teenage boys. Nevertheless, Charles felt that both boys lacked the business acumen that would assure the continued existence of Walker Bros. From their modelling experience, both boys gained an appreciation of fine clothing, but that was where it ended. Both were highly intelligent, elegant, and were gaining a gentle joy in culture, which was lovely. But their perceptive grandfather could not detect a gram of business acumen in either of them.

Mary was the matriarch of Brewster House. She was, no doubt, a forceful personality, highly intelligent and strongly driven. She was a tomboy, determined to demonstrate that women could be every bit as effective as men. As a girl, she was feisty and decidedly boyish; it was model planes for her, not dolls. As a student, she rode a powerful motorbike (far too fast) and did all the mechanicals herself.

She was a dab hand at tuning the carburettors. The 1975 BMW Flat-Twin was still in the garage at Brewster House, although it had not been out on the road for ten years. The last time Mary had taken it out for a spin, she had been clocked and had gained three points on her licence. Uncharacteristically, Joby was furious and reminded her that she was the mother of two small children and had responsibilities towards them.

In her medical training, Mary Fairbairn got the moniker Scary Mary. Even her university tutors were circumspect with her. And she would stand up to the professor and give as good as she got. In medical school, there was a lot of gallows humour, at which she was an expert, with a certain scatological twist to it. By contrast to the patients, she immediately showed she was a first-class doctor, through her care and gentleness.

Mary had first met Joby through his sister, Sarah, who was a close friend of hers. A shy twenty-year-old student whose social skills were more like those of a teenager was no match for this feisty near thirty-year-old doctor who was, at heart, a feminist. Although Joby was twenty, nine years younger than she, when they first met, he looked so much younger, no more than about seventeen or eighteen. Although very intelligent, he was never streetwise, and his innocence was truly as beautiful as his face. There was no risk that he would challenge Mary's status as an alpha female. In other words, he was gorgeous. And she did love to see him in the short

running shorts that were the fashion at the time. Now Joby was her tomboy's toy-boy who was so very sweet and gentle. Like Joby, Mary was fit. And both had a keen sense of fun together. When they first met, they loved going out into the country, whether it was running or mountain biking, hill-walking, or camping.

Mary was a tall and slim woman. When dressed for work, she wore stylish and fashionable clothes, but after work, she would dress down, favouring jeans and t-shirts, or sports clothing. She suited both. Having married into the family of a department store owner, there was plenty of high-quality apparel available.

And these characteristics had passed to her lovely and gentle sons who were decidedly Mummy's boys. They too liked to wear sports clothing at home. They also loved dressing up for special occasions, especially their fine kilts: not quite full highland regalia, but very elegant all the same. Her two boys seemed to have acquired the feminine streak that was characteristic of their father. That had been obvious from an early age. Now in their teens, both were slightly effeminate, not that she minded one little bit.

It was no surprise when Ewan came out as gay; she was waiting for Aidan to do the same, but Aidan was much more discrete. She could tell that both her sons were same sex attracted. It would be a matter of time that her eldest son came out.

Joseph Walker had worked away at Edinburgh University for several years. He would leave on the first Edinburgh train on a Monday morning. His father had bought a flat in the Marchmont area where he stayed from Monday to Wednesday. He would return from Edinburgh on the early evening train on a Thursday, and the boys would stay with Aunt Sarah. Aunt Sarah would also stay overnight regularly while Joby was away.

Once the boys were doing their Highers, they would spend Thursday evening at their school, where there was substantial boarding provision for Highers students from remote areas and a few spare rooms for occasional use. It was ideal for Joby and Mary to have a quiet evening together. Some lifestyle magazines would call this 'quality time'.

Joby was a devoted father and had passed his enjoyment of outside country pursuits to his two sons. They would run, cycle, and, in the summer, play tennis. Mary had been a county tennis player as a girl. The presence of a lawn the size of a tennis court in front of Brewster House was a positive blessing. There she coached her young husband; he was pretty useless to start with but soon got the hang. Within a few months he could give her a good game. Her sons could give her as good a game as they got.

When Mary could spare time from her very busy job not just as a partner in the town's doctors' surgery but also a haematologist at the Strathcadden General Infirmary, she would join them as well for running and badminton. Mary was an athletic woman, a very fit forty-eight-year-old. Joby, nine years younger, was equally as fit as and could outplay many of his students, who were half his age, on the badminton and squash courts. There were few who could beat the Professor.

Most male professors look like professors – advanced middle age; bald on top, but a shock of hair to the sides; rather tubby; a bit pompous; and quite hopeless at practical things. Not so with Professor Walker. He looked quite a bit younger than his near forty years, and some visiting professors thought that he was a junior research fellow. Nobody could doubt his formidable intellect in his field of electrical and electronic engineering.

He liked to please others, and his lecturing style was enjoyed by his students. He had the knack of making something very complicated sound as if it were pure common sense.

Although shy initially with others, he had a deep sense of care towards them and took pains to ensure students were comfortable with him. Aidan was a younger version of his father. Anyone ringing up the Walker family could never tell whether it was Joby or Aidy. He was also very practical with his hands; one of his hobbies was making furniture. Brewster House was a showcase for his considerable talent at the plane and the lathe.

For a businessman of considerable ability, the phrase “Come on Poppy! Walkies!” would seem banal, if not downright trivial. For Poppy, a five-year-old golden retriever, it was the essence of excitement - lots of new smells for her to investigate. Which were the boys out on the block? She could leave her calling card, except that “daddy” would immediately clear it up. Poppy rushed to the front door in eager anticipation as Charles slipped the lead onto her collar.

As he trudged up through Priestfield it was dark. He was tired after a long day. He was a man who felt he should lead by example, a discipline that had been instilled in him by his late father. After all, if he expected his staff to work all God’s hours, he should be seen to be doing exactly the same, if not more. But not on a Sunday. Walker Bros had never opened on a Sunday, nor would it on his watch. Sunday was a special day for the family, which he and Muriel would spend, after church, with one or other of his daughters, or with his son in rotation. And once every four weeks the family would descend on Laurieston Villa. As a devoted father, he enjoyed family life, and he was built up for the pressures of the following week. He and his daughters never talked shop. His view was that nothing was so desperate that it could not wait for Monday morning.

As Poppy inspected this or that interesting smell, snuffling, and snorting, Charles began to consider his retirement. He was

now seventy-one and had spent fifteen years unpicking the damage those idiots from London had caused. London was, in his opinion, a city state that seemed to regard the UK as its empire. The vote in September 2014 would change that, and he looked forward to Thursday, 24th March 2016, which was the date that had been set for Scotland to make its own way in the world. Walker Bros was now in good enough shape for Jenny and Sarah to take over completely. He had complete faith in his daughters. The revival in the fortunes of Walker Bros owed as much to their hard work every bit as much as his.

Neither Jenny nor Sarah was a spring-chicken. Jenny had turned fifty-one in April, and Sarah was forty-eight in June. Although Jenny was married, she had no children. Sarah, too, was married but there were times that Charles wondered if his daughter's close friendship with Mary went further. It was none of his damned business.

And there was Joby, now nearly forty and the Dunalastair Professor of Electrical Engineering at Edinburgh University. Multiple contacts with Scottish and European universities were not the same as the business acumen that would ensure success for a department store.

Joby certainly was landing on his feet in academia. Mary had quickly become a partner in the Medical Centre. Charles knew next to nothing about physics and engineering. It was not his business. What was his business was what Poppy had produced on the grass verge on the corner of Priestfield Crescent and Priestfield Avenue. As he picked up the material and put it in the little bag, he thought, "I'm getting no younger. I'm not as flexible as I once was."

As for Poppy, she contentedly made scratch marks with all four feet to advertise, “Look! I’ve been here,” and snorted loudly as she did so, holding her tail aloft with pride in a job well done.

As he trudged back to Laurieston Villa, Charles started to brood on what he had thought a few minutes before. He was seventy-one now and Muriel was sixty-eight. Neither of them was getting any younger, and he wanted to have a bit of fun before either of them became too old and knackered to do so. Jenny and Sarah were working on the new store at Inverlucker, and once that project was seen through, they could take over. And his pension pot was more than adequate.

While he adored his grandsons, Charles was convinced that neither Aidan nor Ewan would have that spark to take Walker Bros on for the fourth generation. Neither boy was really suited to the rough and tumble of the real world of commerce. They would make it in academia, like their father. It brought back that day when Joby had told him that he did not want to go into the company, for which Charles was mightily relieved.

Later, as Charles sat with Muriel, he thought fondly of their son, now the Dunalastair Professor of Electrical Engineering at Edinburgh University. There was a lovely picture that Sarah had taken of Joby when he was thirteen. He was kneeling on the carpet in the drawing room at Laurieston Villa, wearing shorts, a tee-shirt, and white socks. He had a toy that launched a propeller into the air. It had just left the launch device and was now in front of him. His eyes were agog with fascination. It was so typical of Joby who even now had a wide-eyed fascination with new things.

Aidan was a younger version of his father. He was a rather shy and skinny boy, who looked a lot younger than his seventeen years. Although quite tall, he was slight and smooth-faced (or baby-faced as some would more cruelly put it). Like his father, he

approached everything with a wide-eyed curiosity that was touching. He was a good sportsman and was in the school running team. His slight body build, and long legs gave him an excellent power-to-weight ratio that was ideal for cross-country, road running, and endurance cycling.

Ben Lufen was the mountain that gave Strathcadden a dramatic backdrop and was ideal for both Aidan and Ewan to train on. In the summer Aidan had won the Junior Championships. Joby and Mary were so thrilled. And Aidan had bubbled all about it to his grandparents.

Aidan was well-liked at school because of his gentle nature that made it natural for him to befriend other quiet and shy students. With his serious and conscientious approach to his studies, he was an excellent role model and a natural choice for a school prefect.

Aidan loved music and was a talented keyboard player. He could master much of the common piano repertoire. Not only could he sight-read easily, but he could also play many pieces from memory, having heard the piece once. He could also improvise, before writing down the score afterwards. He would make an outstanding amateur performer, but his music teacher felt that he did not have quite the lightness and delicacy of touch that would make him a pro.

In some ways he was pleased, as he did not want the hours of practice that a professional needed, which might risk destroying his love for his instrument. Instead, he added the church organ as another keyboard instrument. Aidan had achieved this by standing in for the regular organist at church when she was on holiday or had been off sick. This year, he had also started to play the organ that graced the assembly hall at Strathcadden Academy.

The only thing Aidan was not was a natural successor to his aunts at Walker Bros.

Like Aidan, Ewan was a good cross-country runner and a tennis player. He was a tall and lanky youth. Although Ewan was eighteen months younger than Aidan, he had been, for the last two years, a few centimetres taller than his brother. Ewan had been the same height as his brother since the age of six, so much so that people thought they were twins. This lasted until he was thirteen when he went through his puberty growth spurt and became one of the taller students in Secondary Three. Now at the age of fifteen, the youngest in Secondary Five, Ewan had long, slim, and colt-like legs that were ideal for running. Gawky at thirteen, he was rather less so now.

Ewan was a Fairbairn. His features were inherited off his mother, so much so that he was a male version of her. The tomboy Mary had often wondered what she would have looked like if she had been a boy. She only had to look at Ewan to see the answer. Ewan would never be an alpha male. There was a lot that was quite feminine about him. His face was slightly girlish, and he had neatly styled wavy sandy hair that covered his ears. Since his manner was slightly effeminate, it came as no surprise that Ewan was openly gay and had a boyfriend.

Although he could out-eat a horse, Ewan was very skinny and still maintained a good power to weight ratio that let him bound over Ben Lufen like a mountain goat. He was a good climber, using the climbing wall at Strathcadden Sports Centre. He had acquired the nickname "Squirrel" as a result of this and his sandy hair which was like that of a red squirrel. As a male version of his mother, he was more outgoing and at ease in social situations.

As he got older, he became more protective of his older brother. Like Aidan, Ewan was gentle and kind which made him popular with others. He had scored very highly in his Standard Grade examinations, the second best in his year. Now he was

doing his Highers and most reckoned he would outscore his brother, a challenging target indeed, as Aidan Walker was one of the brightest students of his year.

Like Aidan, Ewan was a good musician. It was hardly a surprise; both their parents were good musicians in their own right and Brewster House always seemed to echo to music of a number of different genres. Although not quite as accomplished a keyboard player as Aidan, Ewan was still pretty handy on the ivories and could play the church organ. He also played the classical guitar, as well as bass guitar in a teen boyband formed from friends at school. He was a more versatile instrumentalist than Aidan, who stuck to keyboards.

Also, Ewan had a great sense of the aesthetic. He loved poetry and the English Language. Like his family, he had a quiet faith that had its roots in Celtic Christianity. The island of Iona was not so far away.

Ewan had as little business acumen as Aidan.

Both the brothers were very close both emotionally and physically. They did much together. It made Charles think about his dad and uncle, who were more than just brothers. When Uncle Ray died in 1972, Dad was inconsolable, and said “Ray was not just my brother, he was my best pal.”

It certainly seemed to run in the family.

Chapter 2

Monday, 11th November 2013

While the oldest of the Walker Dynasty was thinking very much about the long-term future, the two youngest were more concerned about what they had coming up at school the next day.

Strathcadden Academy was unique in Scotland, a state school which had a large boarding provision. The boarding was for students studying Higher and Advanced Higher courses. Such students, previously having attended small high schools, travelled long distances from remote areas, from as far as Kyle of Tonsil. Commuting from school to home would take hours. Therefore, it made more sense for them to stay at school from Monday to Friday.

Strathcadden Academy was a comparatively recent foundation, having started in the late Nineteen Eighties. It was formed by the merger of a large independent school, Saint Oswald College, and the Corscadden Grammar School.

The former had hit on hard times. It had been declining since the Great Central Line had closed. For many of its clientele who came from south of the Border, it had become almost inaccessible, with long and tedious journeys stuck behind tractors or lorries. The twisty and busy nature of the A825 main road made safe overtaking almost impossible. That did not prevent people from trying with some horrific and tragic results. The alternative was to get one's offspring to the nearest railway station, Stirling, followed by a four-hour journey on buses that were chartered at the start of and end of each term.

Weekend visits by parents to their sons (it was a boys' school) were all but impossible unless they lived relatively locally or stayed in hotels in the town or outlying villages. Over the years the students dwindled in numbers, parents opting for schools south of the border, such as Kelferford, or over towards Perth.

Saint Oswald's staggered on into the late Nineteen Eighties, but the plan and project to re-open the Great Central Line came too late to save it. One Wednesday morning in April 1988, it closed suddenly without warning.

Corscadden Grammar School had once occupied a central site in the town, as would befit a school that was at the heart of the community that it served. Its ancient and much-loved building was cramped and could not accommodate the increasing numbers of pupils it was taking in. So, in the early nineteen sixties it was moved to a new site at Langhouse. The new building was state of the art at the time and won a number of prestigious architectural awards. In other words, it was brutal to look at, difficult to heat, shoddily built, and not really fit for purpose. As the building proved more and more troublesome, the reputation of the school went down.

The nemesis for Corscadden Grammar School arrived in May 1988. As the gymnasium was being set up for a Highers examination, a large crack was noticed in the end wall. Staff and students were rapidly evacuated before, with a loud roar, the building collapsed in a cloud of asbestos-riddled dust.

As loud as the crash was the uproar that followed. The rest of the building was rapidly declared as unsafe and it soon became apparent that the starting material for the school was asbestos in its various shades of white, blue, and brown. Serious questions were asked of the council as to why they were continuing to teach children in such a dangerous place, especially as the rest of the building, erected on totally inadequate foundations, was ready to follow the gym. A major investigation revealed much bad design work at the architects.

The collapse of the Langhouse building and the collapse of the Saint Oswald College Trust were entirely coincidental, but the fact that the Buchanan and Kyle of Tonsil Regional Council was

owed a considerable amount of money enabled the Council to re-site the Grammar School at the Saint Oswald's site for minimal cost. As there were boarding facilities, a decision was made to offer boarding for students studying Highers and Advanced Highers. These students were coming from as far as Kyle of Tonsil. The boarding was appreciated by many parents who were having to get up at 5 o'clock in the morning to put their children on the school buses. Some of the smaller outlying secondary schools were amalgamated into the new Strathcadden Academy.

In the reorganisation, Secondary Five and Six for all the High Schools in the Buchanan and Kyle of Tonsil Region was provided by Strathcadden Academy to improve the Higher and Advanced Higher opportunities.

As the roads in Kyle of Tonsil were so poor, it would be difficult to transport so many students by bus. The roads were so narrow and twisty that a modern coach could hardly get through. Therefore, the unique community-owned railway, the narrow gauge North Scottish Electric Railway was called on to help. On a Monday at 6 o'clock a special service ran along the length of the North Scottish Electric Railway from Kyle of Tonsil to Inverluer. The "Caddie Stopper" called at all stations, picking up two hundred Distant Caddies. A similar, but less heavily used service, ran from Trochanter to Inverluer. Both trains connected with the first electric train to Glasgow, which called at Corscadden. The reverse working ran on a Friday evening. The Distant Caddies boarded through the week in the six boarding houses. There were some students who came from the islands, and they tended to stay over the weekend. A small number of Distant Caddies came from as far away as Edinburgh, and a handful of students came from Northern England as private students, and they could stay over the weekend. The so-called "Weekend Caddies" tended to stay in Baxter House.

The first headmaster, Mr Paul Duffy, was exactly the right man for the job. He was strict, but very fair, gaining the respect of

staff, pupils, and parents alike. He would not tolerate bad behaviour but would do everything to bring back the errant to the straight and narrow. Exclusions were very rare indeed. While most Caddies, as the pupils continued to be known, were very biddable, there was always the odd one...

In short, Strathcadden Academy offered everything that a top independent school could offer, but at a tiny fraction of the price. The boarding fees that parents of some of the older students paid covered the costs, and any small surplus was ploughed back for the benefit of pupils. Sometimes the parents of local Secondary Five and Six students were able to book their sons or daughters to board if they had to work away from home. Additionally, there was a small number of students whose parents had arranged for boarding on an independent basis.

The uniform that was adopted arose from a bizarre incident during the hot summer of 1995. Boys demanded to wear shorts as the girls could wear skirts. This was refused, so the next day, about two hundred boys from Corscadden turned up to school in their sisters' skirts. Facing a possible damaging blow to the school's reputation, Mr Duffy sent out a questionnaire to parents. Responses suggested that the uniform for both boys and girls should be based on the kilt. Since kilts were a popular dress among young people in the area, it seemed entirely natural that this garment should feature at the heart of the new school uniform. As a textiles design project, a group of girls from Secondary Three designed the new uniform. A vote of parents and pupils passed this almost unanimously and the distinctive "Caddie Style" came in.

Caddies, both girls and boys, looked smart in their uniforms: a lightweight 5-yard grey and black tartan casual kilt (called *Douglas Grey Modern*), sweatshirt in their house colour, white

polo shirt, blue knee-socks with a dark blue upper carrying two bands of house colours, and black leather shoes. Students in Secondary Years Five and Six had a different more adult look. They had a navy-blue jacket, a Douglas Blue Modern kilt and a green V-necked jumper and green socks. Caddies were a colourful lot, even if colour clashes were inevitable. The vast majority wore their uniform with pride. Problems were few.

The success of the new uniform led to its adoption in all the secondary schools in the area as gender-neutral clothing. The Regional Council was well aware of potential issues with kilts, as they were popular menswear in the region as a whole. It took its responsibilities towards safeguarding very seriously.

In the year 2008, Mr Duffy retired, being replaced by Mr Keith Mitchell, who, unusually for a Scottish headmaster, came from Yorkshire. Mr Duffy was a hard act to follow, but Mr Mitchell set to it with an energy that enabled him to live up to everyone's expectations. Like Mr Duffy, he was strict and scrupulously fair. Strathcadden Academy had the reputation of being a rather gruff place, but very fair and deeply caring. In contrast to its gruff traditional surface, it was a leading school as far as use of Information and Communication Technology was concerned. Additionally, there were chill-out areas in many parts of the school where students could nestle down in beanbags and use their laptops. Although it took some pupils in Secondary 1 time to get used to being called by their surnames in class and wearing kilts, the student body developed a great loyalty to the place and were proud to be Caddie Laddies or Caddie Lassies. So much so that after Highers, taken at the ages of 16 or 17, most students stayed on at Strathcadden to take their Advanced Highers instead of a foundation year at university.

As the Walker brothers were wending their way to the school, joining all the other Caddies, their immediate problem was not that they would have to board for a week in January. Their father, Joseph, had lectured for the past ten years at Edinburgh University, since Dunalastair Engineering had developed closer ties with the University and had funded his post. Now Dr Walker had been appointed as the first Dunalastair Professor of Electrical Engineering. This meant that he worked away from home, catching the first train to Edinburgh at some ungodly hour on a Monday morning, returning on a Thursday afternoon, and going to Dunalastair Engineering on a Friday.

Their mother's job at Corscadden Surgery meant that, on the whole, she did not have to work away, other than for the occasional night or two, but nights away had become rather more frequent recently. This is where the boarding facilities at Strathcadden Academy were particularly good, for each boarding house had a number of rooms that could be booked by parents in such circumstances. For the two brothers, this was like a sleep-over with their friends in Asher House. And they did not have to rush to be on time for registration.

The more pressing problem was the wind. At nearly three hundred metres above sea level, Strathcadden tended to catch the wind in the autumn and winter. It could also become very cold, but they are a tough breed in Buchanan and Kyle of Tonsil. Kilts were a popular style of dress across the whole region, so the Caddies never felt self-conscious, and boys and girls alike were used to the wind whipping round their bare legs.

Today was Monday 11th November, when the Annual Act of Remembrance was to be carried out at the old Saint Oswald College Memorial outside the Chapel. The Secondary Fifth and Secondary Sixth Years were, according to tradition, joined by the CCF, Air Cadets, Sea Cadets, the Mayor and dignitaries from the town. By tradition, a church service followed the Act of

Remembrance. Aidan, who had recently started playing the organ at school, was playing for the service. He confided his anxiety to Ewan, “I don’t want to mess it up, Eejay.”

“Of course, you won’t, Aidy,” replied his younger brother. “You have been practising all week, haven’t you? What are you starting off with?”

“*Highland Cathedral*. I did it with the pipe-band on Thursday. Finally, there’s ‘Spirit of God’ to *The Skye Boat Song*.”

“Neither of those is difficult.”

“No, but when Mr Mitchell is staring at you...”

“If he complains, give him the book and tell him to play it himself,” retorted Ewan.

“Imagine the din,” said Aidan, who knew that the Headmaster was somewhat digitally challenged. “At least one thing, I’m out of this bloody wind.”

Ewan reached out to his brother. Although Aidan was eighteen months older than him, Ewan was rather taller. Both youths were slight, and Aidan looked younger than his seventeen years. Ewan felt quite protective towards his brother who was not always worldly-wise.

Normally for Aidan, first lesson on Monday would have been French. Today, the timetable had been suspended for a final rehearsal for the Act of Remembrance. Aidan went to the chapel, but it was locked. It was an over-awing building, designed by the architect Edwin Lutyens, which had been inherited from the Saint Oswald College. Like the building it was housed in, the organ was an impressive instrument with pipes that towered into the roof. The instrument had been the jewel in the crown for the old school. It had been refurbished only ten years before Saint Oswald College

had folded. In its presence the pupils had done their militant Sunday devotions.

Nowadays the building was used as a chapel for High Days and Holy Days, an assembly hall for year assemblies, and a theatre for school concerts and performances. In the summer, it hosted the examinations. Like all Scottish schools, Strathcadden Academy was not a denominational school, but an informal ethos of progressive and Celtic Christianity still underpinned what went on there. Religion, let alone public-school Anglicanism, was never forced on the pupils. The majority were at least sympathetic to the teachings of Jesus of Nazareth, even if they oft did err and stray like lost sheep.

The organ was not played as regularly as it should have been, and those who did venture onto the massive instrument found that it could be quite cantankerous, not playing notes when it should have and playing notes when it had no damned business to do so. It seemed to have a mind and spirit of its own. Organists have often told how they have a rapport with their instrument. This one seemed to have a certain amount of malevolence.

Aidan's first job was not one that he relished. He had to go to The Dragon's Den in order to pick up the key for the organ. Normally he would have collected the key from Mr McEwan, the Senior Depute, House Leader of Asher House, and chaplain for the school. Mr McEwan was holding meetings to ensure that the day went like clockwork. It had to; the two-minute silence was to be held on the dot of eleven o'clock.

The particular Dragon that Aidan was going to see was Ms Bryant, Head of Music. Unlike the Headmaster, Ms Bryant thought the wretched contraption was a complete damned waste of money, especially as its maintenance came out of her departmental budget. Besides, she never played it herself, and the artists (if they could be called that) were generally teenage boys who

had got tired of bashing the ivories and wanted to pull and push lots of buttons. She was a highly talented player of strings, but something of a feminist Prima Donna. Her dealings with staff, pupils, and parents were characterised by an incivility that was breath-taking – a trait that gave her an alternative moniker, “The Ice-Maiden”. Her figure led to a third label, “Michelin Woman”.

Aidan wondered whether Ms Bryant was going to be the fiery Dragon, or the Ice Maiden. Whichever it was, Michelin Woman would apply. He knocked on the door.

“Come in!” at which command Aidan shyly stepped in.

“Oh, it’s you, Walker,” she said, indicating that a skinny seventeen-year-old youth was not a sight she wanted to see.

“Madam, I need to get the key for the organ,” replied Aidan, who correctly decided that the minimum conversation with The Dragon was the wisest way to proceed.

Ms Bryant raised herself from the desk and manoeuvred her ample body to the filing cabinet and opened the top drawer. There was a clinking of several bunches of keys. She tossed the chapel keys over towards Aidan, who, for a change, caught them.

“I want those back immediately after the service, Walker,” she said in a tone of voice that suggested that Aidan’s failure to do so would not be in his best interests. “And don’t you dare give them to the Headmaster.”

It was clear that Aidan was looking puzzled. Why shouldn’t he give them to the Headmaster? Ms Bryant added, “That’s for me to know, and for you to wonder, Walker. Shut the door as you go out.”

“Thank you, Madam,” said Aidan as he quickly stepped out of the room. Thirty seconds in The Dragon’s Den was thirty seconds too long. Aidan Walker was naturally very polite and

sensitive to the point of being rather shy. Ms Bryant had not acquired her monikers for nothing, he thought.

Part of Ms Bryant's rudeness stemmed from her status as a forty-three-year-old spinster who was an embittered and raving Marxist. She was the sort of feminist who simply hated men. She did not go much on women, either.

While Aidan Walker was pondering the question about why he should not give the keys back to the Headmaster, Ms Bryant was thinking that the dozy drip would do just that. A couple of years ago, Mr Mitchell, who was a keen but somewhat digitally challenged pianist, prevailed on another Secondary Six organ "artist" to give him the key. As soon as the chapel had emptied of Caddies and other important people, Mr Mitchell decided he would have a tinkle on the organ. He found a triumphal march, pulled out all the stops and began to hammer out the tune. Not only did he manage to produce an appalling din from the instrument, but also, he succeeded in tying the registers up in an electromechanical knot that he could not untie. The result was a continuous sounding of E, F-sharp, G-sharp and B, a drone that had the acoustical qualities of a nest of angry hornets. So, the mighty instrument had, within ten minutes, been rendered completely unplayable. What Ms Bryant had to say to the Headmaster was never recorded, but his stare at teenage organists was not one of disapproval, but of longing that he could be at the console.

The school could not afford the astronomical sum to untie the knot. Instead, the errant notes were pushed pack shut, and the relevant stops were taped over, protected by masking tape, onto which was written, "Do NOT use". Since all budding organists found, like Aidan Walker, a request for the key a trial by fire (or ice), none had dared to experiment by pulling the disused stops.

Aidan found himself seated at the organ. The mighty instrument seemed to have grown mightier since he last played it on Thursday evening. He had stopped late at school so that he could spend the evening practising. At Saint Oswald's only the elite of the keyboard were allowed anywhere near it. Dr Cauley was its last custodian, and he was very protective towards it. Somehow the cantankerous leviathan had realised that plebs, albeit talented, were getting at it. As far as it was concerned, the young Walker was just one such. If the instrument could have spoken, it would have told Aidan that not only was the Headmaster a pleb, but a complete philistine.

Now the keyboards seemed to have grown since he saw them last. Each stop was that bit wider. When he turned the blower on, it seemed to hiss at him like an angry cat, as if to say, "Don't you mess with me, Walker."

The instrument was definitely a bad tempered klavier.

Each of stops marked "Do not use" was leering at him, "Come on, Aidy, come and pull me". The notes of *Highland Cathedral* were doing a slow march across the score. As they did so, Aidan's insides tightened themselves into peristaltic knots as intense as the electromechanical knots Mr Mitchell had tied up in the organ. Aidan played through *Highland Cathedral* once. To the untrained ear, it sounded a perfectly reasonable rendition of Michael Korb's much loved tune. To Aidan, it was an arrhythmic and tuneless cacophony. Aidan left the chapel for a moment.

When he got back, Mr McEwan was there setting out the chapel. "I thought you were around, Aidan," he said gently. This helped Aidan to relax, for in class, it was strictly "Walker". Mr McEwan was a gruff miner's son from Midlothian, but like most of the staff (except the Ice Maiden, who had a heart of stone, if she had one at all) he had a heart of gold. He could see the young man's anxiety.

“Sorry, Sir,” replied Aidan. “I think I got stage fright.”

“Aidan, you will be fine, sonny. Not that many can get the sounds that you do out of that contraption.”

“Why does Mr Mitchell stare at me when I play?”

“You don’t know? Now I should not tell you this...” and with that Mr McEwan retold the story of how the Headmaster had managed to wreck the instrument, and how mad Ms Bryant had become. She had indeed been the fire-breathing dragon on her visit to Mr Mitchell’s office. Aidan felt considerable relief that the staff found Ms Bryant just as trying. Mr McEwan’s Midlothian accent pronounced the name as “Bray-ant”, which seemed to fit very well.

“...So, Aidan, you can only do your best. You always do, laddie.”

Wrapped up in his cassock and surplice, Andrew McEwan left the chapel to officiate at the Act of Remembrance at the War Memorial.

The Saint Oswald College War Memorial commemorated five hundred old boys who had died in the squalor of the Great War, and seventy-five who had died in the Second World War. Almost the entire year group who left in Nineteen Fifteen had lost their lives, and three quarters of those who left in Nineteen Sixteen and Nineteen Seventeen. Every single life had been one that was full of potential and had been cruelly snuffed out in the mud of the Somme or the trenches of Ypres. All of them were under twenty-five; most were eighteen or nineteen when they had stopped a bullet or piece of shrapnel.

The Memorial stood on a raised grassy bank, around which were flower beds with bushes that showed off their autumn colours. On two sides stood Strathcadden Academy staff and students, while on the third and fourth sides were members of the

Rover Scouts, CCF, Air Cadets, and Sea Cadets. (Of course, most of these were Caddies.) In place of honour were guests from the town and the Royal British Legion.

The wind had increased to a near-gale. Petulant gusts threatened to disrupt the very neat turn-out that the Strathcadden students had tried so hard to achieve. On the wind drifted the sound of a lone bagpipe, before the school pipe-major, Karen Lawlor came into view round the end of the chapel. She was the Head Girl, a tall and elegant eighteen-year-old who had achieved some of the school's best grades in her Highers. The wind was whipping up her kilt and the yellow tartan sash that was slung over her shoulder. Karen was made of stern stuff, and she marched up onto the dais and came to attention at the War Memorial. She played a second lament. For a second time, she continued playing without batting an eyelid. A true pro, she came to an end, stopped playing and came to attention.

Mr McEwan started off the Act of Remembrance with a prayer, and wreaths were laid at the foot of the memorial. Despite the petulant gusts of wind, which blew a couple of the wreaths over, the whole ceremony was carried out with great solemnity and dignity. The clock struck eleven and the two-minute silence was observed. A sea cadet sounded the Last Post before an old soldier, a veteran in his nineties, recited the fourth verse of R.L. Binyon's famous poem in a steady and loud voice:

*They shall grow not old, as we that are left grow old:
Age shall not weary them, nor the years condemn.
At the going down of the sun and in the morning
We will remember them.*

To which all replied, "We will remember them."

Mr Mitchell was very pleased and proud of how seriously his students took the solemnity and dignity of the occasion despite the very trying conditions. As he gazed over the Higher and

Advanced Higher students, he could see the petulant wind catching their kilts that were flapping everywhere. As Mr Mitchell was not a Scot, but came from West Yorkshire, he did not feel it to be right or proper to wear a kilt. And he was glad he was not doing so.

Aidan Walker went out to attend the ceremony, taking up position outside the chapel porch. There he was generally out of the wind, so had no trouble with his kilt blowing about. As Mr Mitchell invited everyone to the service in the chapel, a thought hit Aidan like a thunderbolt. He had not thought of anything to play as people filed into church. He scuttled back to the organ. It was still letting out that hiss, “You haven’t practised for this, Walker. You are about to make a real fool of yourself. What are you going to do now, kid?”

“You’ll see,” Aidan snarled back at the cantankerous instrument. “I am playing you and you are not playing me. Got it?”

“We will see about that, Walker. I have class, you know. I am not used to being played by mere youths and plebs.”

“So, what am I?”

“You, Walker, are both. There are going to be eight hundred people in church today, and I am going to make you look a complete prat. Only the best fingers played my keys until this place went down the pan. Now look what I have to put up with. I have class, you know.”

“If you had class, you would bloody well cooperate with me and not call me a pleb. We don’t do class round here. You should know that at your age,” snarled the youth.

Aidan got out a hymn book and picked a page at random. Fortunately, he was good at sight-reading and had a talent for improvisation. He played a couple of hymns with simple variations.

Just as he came to the end of the second piece, he heard the pipe-band starting their instruments outside. He placed the score of *Highland Cathedral* onto the music stand and waited for the massed pipes (all three of them) to enter the chapel.

“You’re a clever little twat, Walker. Don’t let it go to your head,” hissed the organ. “The Headmaster is staring at you. You’re going to get a right bollocking at the end of this.”

“Shut up and get on with it!” Aidan hissed back.

The bagpipes were playing through the first verse of *Highland Cathedral* as they came into church. Aidan prepared for his cue on the second verse and came in. Two more verses and suddenly, unexpectedly, the pipe-players came to attention. But Aidan was into the next verse. Shit! A split-second decision to play on, else it would have been obvious to everyone what had happened. And finally, he slowed at the end with a *rallentando* and was bright red when he played the final chords.

“Walker, you plonker,” hissed the organ. “Lawlor’s looking at you. She’s going to have your guts for garters! Wouldn’t like to be in your shoes.”

“I think I agree with Miss Bryant,” muttered Aidan, staring at the pipes rising high into the chapel roof.

“What? With Michelin Woman?” hissed the organ. “I thought she fancied you.”

The great instrument’s insolence was wearing Aidan’s patience thin, and he mouthed, “Shut up! I am playing you. I am in charge here. Your job is to sound every note that I play, and in the order that I play them.”

“How dare you talk to me like that, Walker?” The air reservoir blew off with an audible hiss. “When Dr Cowan was here, he knew exactly what to do with a boy who was gay. He

caned him until he stopped being gay. He would have made minced meat out of you, Walker. In those days, they produced gentlemen who were leaders of men. And now look what's here. I have pedigree, you know. Look at my builder's plate."

Aidan looked at the plate – *Henry Willis & Sons* – one of the finest organ builders in the UK. But clearly Mr Willis's men had had a bad week with this job. Meanwhile Mr McEwan was concluding the opening prayers, and it was time for the first hymn.

"Baby-Face, you're on again," hissed the organ. "There are eight hundred in church today, and I am going to make you look a complete prat."

"Piss off and do as I tell you!" snarled Aidan and started the introduction to Gustav Holst's tune *Thaxsted*. The hymn was a new one, *Let streams of living justice flow down upon the earth*, thoroughly appropriate as streams of living justice had somewhat dried up at the time of The Great War. And the congregation sang lustily these new lines to this much-loved tune. Despite the organ's best efforts to trip up its young player, nobody noticed that one of the F-notes was not playing, and Aidan deftly covered it up.

"I am still going to get you, Walker, you little smart-arse," hissed the organ. "Typical of today, socialist propaganda of the worst type..."

The organ did not have time to insult Aidan any further or go into a right-wing diatribe, as Aidan sharply pressed the OFF button on the blower. He joined the other prefects who were sitting centre-stage. Like all these events at Strathcadden Academy, the students were the focus. And it was time for Mr Mitchell to read the first reading from The Bible, Ewan to read the second reading, and Emma Belson to read the whole of Laurence Binyon's Poem, *For the Fallen*. After that Mr McEwan got up to preach his sermon.

Andrew McEwan was a Christian socialist, with a gruff exterior maybe, but a heart of gold, and a man who had influenced many of Aidan's political views (such as they were for a youth of seventeen). While Mr McEwan meticulously prepared all his English students for their examinations, he had the seldom-praised gift of educating them as well. Not every one of his students necessarily agreed with every view, but that was not the point; they could reason and structure a coherent argument based on evidence, not prejudice. And that came over eloquently and passionately in his sermon.

“This time one hundred years ago, nobody in Europe knew what was coming to them in less than nine months. Life was changing for the better. Electricity was being rolled out to most cities. Fresh running water and sanitation were improving the health of ordinary people. People were, for the first time, visiting each other's countries and seeing the glories that they had to offer...”

The organ tried to make its point rather less eloquently by letting out a long low rumbling farting sound as the air-pressure in the reservoir faded away.

Aidan glanced along the row of his fellow prefects. Samuel Fulton, a tall youth looking a bit like a Viking with his long blond hair done in a ponytail sat bolt upright in the large throne that had been made for the founding headmaster. With his Head-boy's ceremonial boss and yellow tartan sash, Fulton looked every bit like a displaying capercaillie¹. Dr Cowan would not have approved.

¹ A capercaillie is the largest member of the grouse family that is found in the Highlands of Scotland. Males display by fanning out their tails and making a curious “song” that consists of a series of pops and wheezes. They are large birds and can be quite aggressive. Apparently, girl capercaillies find this rather attractive.

The Oswald Boss and Sash was not a Saint Oswald College tradition at all; it had been introduced by Mr Duffy.

While Mr McEwan preached, Aidan listened intensely. A shy and sensitive young man with a very powerful imagination, he put himself in the position of kids little older than himself, waiting to go over the top. In its previous existence, this chapel had seen seventeen- and eighteen-year-olds being brought up to be leaders of men. Aidan would be eighteen next August, although he looked no older than sixteen. There must have been many similarly baby-faced young men who went over the top and stopped a bullet, led by a similar young officer who was the first to collapse onto the barbed wire. He knew all about it from History, but Mr McEwan was bringing it to life. He felt for those who sweated blood as their capillaries burst under the high blood pressure brought about by a racing heart. He knew as well as they did, that soon those hearts would not beat much longer. He felt for them in their intense fear, justified by the fact that within twenty minutes, forty thousand would be dead.

“...At this time, we must humble ourselves before the Lord our God to pray that sinful men (for women are, with few exceptions, much less likely to) will be restrained from waging war. We must confess and remember the many things our nations have done wrong in the past and work together to put it right. Above all, we must learn from history. We will remember them.”

And Aidan Walker switched the Blower back on. He had tears in his eyes.

“What are you bawling your eyes out for, Walker?” hissed the malevolent instrument as the air pressure built up in it. “Real men played me, not fairies. In those days they had hairs on their chests by the time they were eighteen. They were leaders of men...”

“...Who had a bullet between their eyes as they went over the top? Now shut up and sound the next tune properly.”

The next hymn, *Dear Lord and Father of Mankind, forgive our foolish ways*, was very appropriate and the organ deigned to sound the tune *Repton* properly. Aidan relaxed more, as the final tunes, *The Skye Boat Song*, *I the Lord of Sea and Sky*, and *Servant Song* were written in G or D major that required no F-natural keys.

And finally, everyone was filing out of church, while Aidan played Bach's much-loved chorale, *Jesus Joy of Man's Desiring*. Again, this was written in G-major, so the obnoxious F-key was not in much demand, although he did wonder if the cantankerous instrument was trying to make the keys sticky for the triplets that gave the tune its character.

Although it had tried its best and failed to make Aidan a complete prat in front of eight hundred people, the defeated organ was not in the least bit ashamed. "You think yourself a right little smart-arse, Walker. You seventeen-year-old vanity teens haven't lived..."

"Shut your face!" Aidan snarled and stabbed the Blower off for the final time, before turning off the light and pulling the console shut. As a lover of keyboard music of all types, Aidan had never felt this feeling before – that the sooner that damned contraption was melted down and converted to firewood, the better.

"Thank you, Walker." It was Mr Mitchell. "Do you think I could have the key?"

"Miss Bryant told me to bring it back to her."

"Don't you worry, lad. I will give it back to her."

Aidan was naturally a very biddable student. Mr Mitchell's tone of voice suggested that if Aidan knew what was good for him, he had better not think other than to give the Headmaster the key, and immediately, if not sooner. And he did, before slipping out of the side door. As he did so, he could hear the vituperative hissing

of the organ, and he felt sure that Mr Mitchell was getting a similar mouthful of abuse – which was what he got as Ms Bryant came down the corridor.

“Walker!” she yelled, “Which bit of ‘don’t give the Headmaster the key’ didn’t you understand? I told you to give it to me in person!”

“But Madam...”

“Don’t you Madam me, Walker! You unspeakable idiot! I am putting you on head of house report to Mrs Batchelor. You know what that means, five discredits and a House Leader’s detention. Now get out of my way!”

Not being one to deal with others with due ceremony, Ms Bryant pushed the youth to one side and hurled herself into the chapel from which a melodious pastorate was emerging. Mr McEwan came down the corridor. He saw the shocked expression on Aidan’s face, and said, “What’s up with you, laddie?”

“Miss Bryant has put me on House Leader’s Report and given me five discredits, Sir,” replied Aidan who was trying to hold back tears. He had always hated being told off, let alone being shouted at in such a rude way. And being pushed out of the way like that was the pits. “I gave the key to Mr Mitchell because he asked for it.”

“I heard her shouting,” replied Mr McEwan. “A couple of things: firstly, I am your House Leader, not Mrs Batchelor, and secondly, I am the Senior Depute. Miss Bryant has to send it through me, and I will over-rule it as completely unfair. And Mr Mitchell will agree with me, not her.”

“Thank you, Sir,” said Aidan, who, unlike his elder and so-called better, had a reputation for being unfailingly courteous and kind to everyone, staff, and pupils alike.

Mr McEwan was about to say something when the pastorate stopped with a dissonant tone cluster followed by some loud shouting that was most ungodly. Mr McEwan launched himself into the chapel, partly to prevent murder, and partly to give Ms Bryant a large piece of his mind. Aidan Walker hung back, ready to dive away into the lavvy at the end of the corridor in case they caught him earwiggling.

Ms Bryant had certainly put her Dragon hat on. She yelled into the Headmaster's face in a manner that was not going to enhance her career prospects, "I told you never to touch this instrument again. Who gave you the key?"

Mr Mitchell, as befitted his role as Headmaster, resisted the temptation to descend into a crude slanging match with this harridan. To keep calm, though, took all his self-control, but he remained icily cool as The Dragon breathed her fire. "Aidan Walker did because I asked him to. I was going to have a quiet ten minutes before going back to my guests."

"I gave that airhead a strict instruction that the key was to be given back to me. He did not follow that instruction, so he is on House Leader Report with five discredits," Ms Bryant snapped, "and I expect you to back me, Mr Mitchell. I will not have my authority undermined by that effeminate numbskull."

Andrew McEwan pitched in. Although strict and gruff, he had a strong sense of fair play and would always stand up for the underdog. He had cut his teeth some twenty years before while working for a particularly capricious and vindictive headmaster in an independent school in the Middle Riding of Yorkshire. The latter had tried to frame him with the police and only had escaped charges of attempting to pervert the course of justice because of his many links with old boys' networks. A bad-tempered prima donna was a piece of cake.

“Catherine, please do not use such emotive language to or about our students like that. Do you understand how the House Leader Report works?” said Mr McEwan smoothly.

“Of course, I do!” she snapped, turning round to face her second adversary who had sneaked up on her, rather unfairly in her opinion.

“So, you understand that the award of a detention and five discredits is done by the House Leader. Do you know who Aidan Walker’s House Leader is?”

“Of course, I do – Annie Batchelor. Right?”

“Wrong. I am.”

“So what, Mr McEwan? I expect you to back me fully by punishing Walker’s bare-faced disobedience to a reasonable instruction.”

Mr Mitchell interjected, “I am the numbskull, as you would put it. I asked for that key, and Aidan Walker gave it to me because, unlike you, Catherine, he is a very cooperative student. Are you still suggesting that Andy should move your House Leader Report forward?”

“Of course, I am, Headmaster.”

Mr McEwan replied, “I do not intend to process it, Catherine, so I wouldn’t even bother writing it. I think the whole thing is so completely unfair, especially as Aidan has worked so hard to give us such excellent music over the last hour. I would also advise you to drop your homophobic references to him and get over it. Do you agree with that, Keith?”

“Of course, Andy. Indeed, if I see five discredits placed against Aidan Walker’s name, I will cancel them myself, so I really wouldn’t bother. As for your reference to his sexuality, I suggest you get over it. There are many students who have those

tendencies; it is part of teenage life. And the Regional Council's Code of Conduct addresses homophobic bullying. Perhaps you need to re-familiarise yourself with the Regional policy on Equality and Diversity. So, I would not pursue that any further, if I were you, Catherine. You do get my drift, don't you?"

With a scream of rage, Catherine Bryant got the headmaster's drift, before stomping out of the chapel. Just as she was leaving, Ms Bryant slipped, and screamed out several obscenities, before steadying herself and continuing on her way. The clacking of heels on the stone floor gave Aidan time to scuttle into the lavvy and hide there, until they died away. Flushing the apparatus to show that he had used it for its correct purpose, he crept out again.

He felt miserable – all this scene over two wretched pieces of metal with a green plastic fob. Was this the way they were going to thank him for his battle with that cantankerous contraption that had spent the best part of an hour insulting him? Even from the lavvy he heard what Miss Bryant was saying about him. How did she know? Yes, he was effeminate, but that was his nature. He certainly preferred being that way than being an aggressive alpha-male who was always looking for a fight. All he wanted to do in his life was to please others. And it hurt him when others were not pleased with him.

Meanwhile the two men were chatting. "Andy, I don't know what to do about Catherine Bryant. I am getting loads of complaints about her. She seems to have got worse. If I do anything, the unions would be on me like a tonne of bricks. You know your stuff about the unions."

"Just follow the procedure to the letter, Keith, and show evidence of what you have done. As long as you have dotted every 'i' and crossed every 't', and show that you have been fair, there will be no trouble. You know that I will advise you."

“Thanks, Andy.”

“So, what are we to do about young Walker? He was very upset about it when I saw him a few minutes ago. I think we should take Catherine’s appalling outburst as evidence of her bad relationships with students.”

“True,” replied the Headmaster, “but I think we need to apologise to Walker. It was my fault entirely. He did exactly what I asked of him. What did you think of his playing in the service?”

“I thought it was brilliant. That contraption up there is not an easy instrument at the best of times. It has a mind of its own and certainly could do with tuning.”

“I agree on both counts, Andy. He is a very talented young man. He played beautifully. As for that thing, Willis has quoted two hundred thousand to get the fourth manual back into a playable condition. I have no idea where we would get that sort of money from. I wonder if young Walker is still around... Walker!”

Aidan came into the chapel. He seemed in an emotional state and was struggling to control himself. Mr McEwan went up to him.

“Am I in trouble, Sir?” Aidan spluttered. “Is Mr Mitchell going to shout at me as well as Miss Bryant? I only did as I was told. Was my playing that bad?”

“No, laddie, no one is going to shout at you at all,” replied Mr McEwan, putting his long arm around the distressed youth, and hugging him.

“Aidan, lad, we’re the ones in trouble, not you,” said the Headmaster gently. Aidan looked at him in surprise. It was the first time the Headmaster had called him by his first name. “First thing I must do is to apologise to you for Ms Bryant’s behaviour to

you. I was the one at fault, not you. You did exactly the right thing. And you played really well. You were a credit to the school.”

“You may think this stupid of me, Sir,” said Aidan, who was still somewhat choked up. “That organ seems to hate me. I know a bad workman blames his tools. It seemed to keep on being rude to me.”

“You are not the only one, lad,” the Headmaster chuckled. “It hissed at me like an angry cat. I’ve had a number of people who told me they wouldn’t play it again.”

The old instrument added its contribution with a low rumbling farting sound.

“Aidan,” continued the Headmaster, “you played really well, and I am going to see to it that the school recognises the contribution you made to a very successful morning. Now I must go and look after my guests. They’ll think I’m being terribly rude.”

Aidan smiled shyly and said quietly, “Thank you, Sir.”

Andrew McEwan looked at Aidan. Aidan was rather shorter than he and was very much a small boy in a lanky body. His gentle and shy manner reminded him of his son-in-law who had met his daughter as a young teenager. Sam was now a tall strapping young man of twenty-nine and father of twin granddaughters and a grandson. He had first come across Sam at that dreadful school in the Middle Riding of Yorkshire. Sam was one of the only ones who seemed to have any remotely human feelings. The rest were spoiled rich kids of self-made men and women, arrogant and insufferably rude.

Anyway, the bursar had had his fingers in the till, and the bloody place had got its come-uppance. Here at Strathcadden Academy, the students were, with very few exceptions, kind and thoughtful. Those that were not kind usually ended up being shunned by their peers, until they learned to be so. And Aidan was

one of the kindest and most thoughtful of the lot, a young man who genuinely lived to please others. He did not give a hoot whether Aidan was gay; lots of others in the school were. And many were openly so. The thought of someone like Aidan being sent over the top to collapse on the barbed wire sickened him.

When Aidan had achieved something, he could get excited and would bubble in a way that was very engaging. By all counts, Aidan should have been bubbling, but seemed very flat, so Mr McEwan sat by him in one of the pews. He saw that Aidan was still choked up. He again put his arm around the boy.

“Aidan, you were brilliant. I know you had stage-fright,” he said.

“I did my best,” replied Aidan. “I just didn’t expect Miss Bryant to call me an airhead and an idiot. I wouldn’t call anyone any of those. I just wanted to please everyone.”

“And you did. You can be sure that Mr Mitchell will have something to say to Ms Bryant. I heard what she said. You would have to be deaf not to hear it, the way she carried on. If Mr Mitchell doesn’t, I will. I am the Senior Depute along with Mrs Horsefall. And she would agree with me as well.

“Now, Aidan, listen to me carefully. Ms Bryant will put a report through to me. You will be notified on your school e-mail account. Please forward it to me immediately as a priority, and I will know to look for it. Please mark it with ‘FAO ARM’. I have hundreds of e-mails every day, which my secretary sorts out for me. If I tried to answer each one in turn, I would never get anything else done. Will you do that for me? Also do the same for Mr Mitchell.

“As for your playing, remember what Mr Mitchell said. There are some experienced musicians who try that organ once and

say, 'never again'. They complain that it's unplayable. You played it today? Was it unplayable?"

"No Sir."

"You were absolutely on top of it, and you knew what to do at once."

"But what about me playing on when the Pipe-Band stopped? Karen Lawlor will kill me for that."

"You realised the mistake at once. If you had stopped, it would have sounded awful. You would have fallen through the floor. But you are a true artist. I think it sounded better to have the solo organ at the end. Of course, Karen won't. You know what she's like; she is gentle like you. Do you compose anything yourself?"

"Yes. I have had a go, but I have never played them other than at home. Mum and Dad really like them."

"Why not play them here?"

"Yes, I will give it a try."

"Good lad," Mr McEwan replied. "Mr Mitchell will be delighted. Now, I need to go to our guests, and you will need some lunch. I will see you in English in Lesson Five."

Chapter 3

Tuesday, 12th November 2013

Aidan and Ewan were into school early that morning. Mum had brought them in as she had to go for a conference in Inverloker. As they walked up the drive, Ewan again put his arm round his brother and told him not to worry about Ms Bryant. “Most teachers here have a heart of gold, so they say. Miss Bryant doesn’t have a heart at all.” And with that, the two brothers separated, Aidan to go up to Greator House (the name for the Highers Centre), while Ewan went to Asher House.

When Aidan had logged on to his school e-mail account, he noticed an e-mail from the Headmaster:

Please could you come to see me in my office at 08.30, Tuesday 12th November? Please tell my secretary, Mrs Laidlaw, that you are there.

Yours sincerely

K Mitchell

Aidan was anxious about this. As a biddable student who always kept his head low, he had never had reason to be summoned to the Headmaster’s office. That was normally for the naughty boys and girls. Perhaps Mr Mitchell had changed his mind and was going to back Miss Bryant. As a result, he would have five discredits and a House Leader’s detention.

He wished he had not logged on, but it would not do to miss a summons from the Headmaster, who would most likely have had him hauled out of class and given him an even worse bollocking. Not that five discredits really mattered. He had a very high total of credits. He was not necessarily the brightest of the students in this high-performing school; his high marks were due to his conscientious and serious approach to his study. In other words, he tried damned hard. He steeled himself to face the music.

Facing the music took on a different meaning as Aidan arrived at the Headmaster's Office. He could hear *Classic FM* on the radio. Surely, if he were due for a bollocking, the radio would not have been on. Errant students due to have the errors of their ways pointed out to them would hardly arrive to the cheerful tones of *Classic FM*. Also, Mrs Laidlaw had a reputation for being like Cerberus, the three-headed and vicious dog at the entrance to Hades. Since one of his subjects was Classical Studies, he had the inkling that getting past Mrs Laidlaw was going to be the first of his trials. Unexpectedly, it seemed that this particular Cerberus had been plied with some of the best quality dogfood.

"Ah yes, Walker," she said warmly, "Mr Mitchell is expecting you. You're his first appointment, so he's really keen to see you."

She went to the door and told her boss of Aidan's presence.

"Walker, come on in, lad." called the Headmaster.

Aidan went through shyly, wishing that he were anywhere else. The door closed behind him. Well, if he were in trouble, the Headmaster would not be beaming at him.

"Take a seat, Aidan," he said. The use of his first name seemed to have a calming effect on the nervous youth.

"Now, Aidan, I want to thank you for your contribution to yesterday. I am doing this in person for everyone. I would like you to play for us at all the formal occasions. Will you do this for us?"

"Yes, sir," replied Aidan.

"That's great. I tried to get one of the music staff to do it, but pressure came from someone for them not to. I won't say who because that would be unprofessional of me."

Aidan nodded. He was pretty sure whom the Headmaster meant but was far too polite and discrete to probe any further. Aidan asked, “What do Mum and Dad think?”

“I rang your mother yesterday afternoon to tell her how well you had done at the Remembrance Service. She was thrilled.”

“Yes, she was. She told me that you had rung, Sir.”

“I am glad of that. We need more boys to act as musical role models. There aren’t any boys taking Highers in Music, let alone Advanced Highers, and that concerns me.”

Aidan left the Headmaster’s office in a bit of a daze. Here was the Headmaster, the most important person in the school, asking him to play for the “high days and holy days”. And he was just a baby-faced seventeen-year-old who could play the piano and organ. The latter he had taught himself, along with snippets of know-how he had gleaned from the Web. He knew that The Dragon did not like boys and would make every effort to prevent them from even accessing the Music Department. He also knew that there had been many complaints.

As he went down the stairs from Mr Mitchell’s office, he noticed Karen Lawlor coming upstairs to get her pat on the back. They had a chat about yesterday. Karen thought the extra bit on the organ was great.

After he had thanked all the students who had made yesterday go so well, Mr Mitchell had turned the radio up again and listened to the piece that was being played. It was working with young people like Aidan Walker and Karen Lawlor that made his job so enjoyable. There was a wealth of talent at Strathcadden Academy, and he felt uniquely privileged to be able to share in it.

He took great pleasure in leading such a unique school, a community school that could give any of the posh independent schools a damned good run for their money. Not every Caddie was a model student, of course. But that was true everywhere. In some of the schools he had taught at, they were pretty rough. But most of them were rough diamonds: get them on your side, and they would do anything for you. Yes, he got cross with them, but cross because he was disappointed.

For Mr Mitchell, that delusion evaporated rapidly when Mrs Laidlaw came through, followed by the Janitor and one of his team. John was always careful in such circumstances to have a trusted witness. He looked grim. From previous experience, if John the Jannie ever came to see Mitchell, there had been something terrible that had happened.

“Headmaster,” said John, “I have something that you need to know about.”

John got out a small polythene bag that contained some roll-up tobacco, some roll-up papers, and a large lump of strange looking light brown material.

“Where did this come from?” said the Headmaster, who had a nasty feeling that he knew exactly what it was. He had dealt with stuff like this before as a head of year. There was always a big investigation followed by a big rumpus.

“It’s cannabis, Headmaster,” John replied.

“Where did you find it?”

“In Miss Bryant’s office in the Music Department – I was doing a light fitting, and I saw it on the desk. The place stank of it. She’s been smoking it there.”

“So not only has she been smoking on the premises, but she has also been making reefers?”

“Yes, Headmaster. The smell was obvious. I was a copper once, and we did no end of drug busts. You don’t forget the smell.”

“Could you have a look on the CCTV and see if she has been sharing it with students?”

Immediately after the janitor and his assistant had left, Mrs Laidlaw came through to the office with a second piece of bad news, “I have just picked up an e-mail from a parent about Cathy Bryant. I don’t think you are going to like it.”

And like it he did not; Mitchell recoiled in horror. He already had grounds for severe disciplinary action on two counts. Now there seemed to be a third. His wayward Head of Music was clearly determined to go out with a bang. And it did not come any more unpleasant than this one:

Dear Mr Mitchell

I found this link on my daughter’s computer, and I think you should know about it, as it concerns a member of your staff, Miss C Bryant, the Head of Music...

The link (with the password) led to the student’s social media accounts. The student had picked up many posts from Catherine Bryant’s account. The posts revealed that Ms Bryant was using her social media to broadcast to quite a large audience of followers of whom several seemed to be students at the school. There were references to drugs, which fitted in well with what the janitor had just brought up. There were many uncomplimentary references to Strathcadden Academy in general, and to Mr Mitchell in particular. There were links to several websites. When Mr Mitchell opened one, he immediately wished he had not. The others were blocked by the school’s filters. Mitchell was on the phone to the computer technician who informed him that the sites

were the kind he would not want to look at, even for all the beer in Coruscadden.

“Good grief, Keith,” said Andrew McEwan as he looked at the screen. “This is filth. And she has shared it with our students. We need to get her away from here now.”

As his euphoria evaporated like wisps of morning mist, the phone rang, and Mitchell picked it up. It was Colin Buchan, the Director of Education at Buchanan and Kyle of Tonsil Regional Council.

“Keith, Colin here. I need to talk to you urgently about one of your staff.”

“Which one? Is she the one I am thinking of?”

“Probably. Catherine Bryant. Yesterday I had another phone call from one of her neighbours in her block in Glasgow. She had an alcohol and drug fuelled party on Friday night. She has had lots of them, and it has got too much. She threatened this couple and swore loudly about Buchanan and Kyle of Tonsil Regional Council in general, and Strathcadden Academy in particular. The police had to be called to calm the situation down. She was arrested. Drugs were found in the flat. She has been charged and is on bail. I confirmed this with Police Scotland yesterday afternoon.”

“Colin, she has brought the party over here as well.”

“What do you mean?”

“Our janitor went to do some work in her office and found that she’s been smoking cannabis. I’ve got a bag which has roll-ups and a block of resin.”

“Good grief! She has brought that stuff onto school premises. I don’t think it’s in the Region’s interests that she should continue to be employed. You know as well as I do that Council

employees who act in a way that is prejudicial to the Council's good name and reputation render themselves liable to serious disciplinary action, even if they are not doing Council business."

"It seems to fit. Her behaviour has been getting increasingly erratic. I have already taken Stage One disciplinary action against Catherine Bryant for a range of complaints about rude and aggressive behaviour towards students, staff, and parents in this school. It's on her record."

"Yes, I have it in front of me. I was adding this new complaint to take it to Stage Two."

"I think it's going to have to be Stage Three. Not only have there been drugs in school, but I have just had an e-mail from a parent, which I will forward to you as soon as I have got off the phone. Ms Bryant has been busy on social media spreading very uncomplimentary material about the school in general and me in particular. She also names other staff and several male students. There are links that go to websites that are the kinds that you and I would not want to know about, let alone look at..."

Mitchell's heart felt like lead. Ms Bryant had been indulging in drugs and this web-based filth under his watch, and he had not noticed a thing. He should have noticed it and taken decisive action. But what evidence had there been? Surely, he should have known about it; most things got back to him. Caddies were a nosy lot and knew each other's business better than their own. And they gossiped. If you wanted something to get out, tell a Caddie, and it would be round the town in a day.

Catherine Bryant was not a nice woman who was very balanced; she had a chip on both shoulders. There had been the Stage One disciplinary that was not at all pleasant. She had first of all sworn and cursed before going all tearful. She would not do it

again and would make it up to all the people she had offended. She conceded that she was lucky that she had got away with an oral warning.

Mitchell and McEwan had both had long meetings with her about the declining standards in the Music Department, which had once been the jewel in the Strathcadden crown but was now decidedly tarnished. There had been many complaints about her extreme attitudes which had frequently transgressed the border of what was professional. It had become increasingly a matter of serious concern that no boys were studying music for Highers. There was a wealth of musically talented boys in the school as well as girls. The key question was why. And the answer came from the University of the Truly Obvious – Ms Bryant hated boys and made it obvious. In reality, no girls liked her either.

Both McEwan and Mitchell had moved mountains to help her to follow the Regional policies on equality of opportunity. All to no avail, and it was no longer if, but when, it would be necessary that serious disciplinary action would be taken – a prospect that neither relished. It always ended in tears. However, Ms Bryant's behaviour to Aidan Walker the day before had been unacceptable and inexcusable, and showed that she had learned nothing from previous incidents. Now her dismissal was inevitable.

“Andy,” said Mr Mitchell, “How are we going to entice Cathy Bryant up here if she is going to be suspended? She has an unalienable right to privacy.”

“Get that stuff to Colin Buchan, then get hold of Margo Gledhill. She will need to know. Get onto the phone to her now. We'll talk to Ms B here and go on about her attitude to staff and pupils. After that we'll bring up the drugs and web-based filth. But now I need to do my morning duty.”

Keith Mitchell had never had to deal with any issue this serious, and he was glad to have Andrew McEwan to guide him.

By a stroke of luck, Margot Gledhill was passing through Corscadden when she picked up the call and would be in Mr Mitchell's office within minutes. If this was not an emergency, she did not know what was. There was going to be a lot of music, but not the type that Keith Mitchell liked. Especially as he heard the familiar voice shouting, "What the bloody hell do you think you are grinning at, Claxton?" from outside the office. This time it was going to be a less-than-easy chat.

Mitchell was wrong. It was not less-than-easy; it was hellish. Ms Bryant pushed through the door. Her ego resulted in her head almost getting caught there. Mr Mitchell started off easily enough, "Thank you for coming, Catherine. I am glad you've come. I was actually about to send for you. I noticed that you put that House Leader report on Walker..."

"I am so glad you have taken it seriously, Keith," replied Ms Bryant. "I saw Walker coming out of your office half an hour ago. He didn't seem at all put out by his five discredits and his detention. He was grinning and I said, 'What are you grinning at, Walker?' He seemed to have the arrogance turned up full today."

"Yes, I heard you, Catherine," replied the Headmaster. He was going to indulge her fantasy before letting on. "And with Claxton as well."

"We must all do our bit to stamp on such disobedience," Miss Bryant added smugly. "That will pull that vanity teen down a peg or two. Anyway, I must be getting on."

"Catherine, before you go, why do you call Walker a vanity teen?"

"He is typical of the boys round here: the sort who spends a lot of time preening himself in the mirror. He has a string of boyfriends."

“That’s hardly fair. What evidence do you have? It seems a sweeping generalisation about him. Why do you have it in for him so much?”

“Because he is born into inherited wealth. That makes him part of the bourgeois elite. He needs pulling down a peg or two. I will give him an extra discredit for looking so arrogant.”

“Catherine,” said the Headmaster, leaning back into his chair, “I am not sure that you understand the system of sanctions and rewards we use here. A discredit is there to note some aspect of a student’s behaviour or performance that is not up to standard. Hopefully, the errant student will note the errors of his or her ways and change them for the better. What the student has done has to be tangible and backed up by evidence. Because a student looked arrogant is hardly a justification for a sanction. I once got the cane for the heinous sin of having a brother who was a particular teacher’s *bête noire*. It hurt as well. It is the same thinking that *The Dear Leader* uses to justify an execution because someone didn’t clap enthusiastically enough. Pathetic, isn’t it?”

“Well, I must go,” replied Ms Bryant, “I have work to do, you know. But I am delighted you have seen sense and backed me up with the action I have taken.”

At this point Mr Mitchell decided to pop Ms Bryant’s balloon of self-delusion. “Don’t go,” he said. “We haven’t begun yet. Mrs Gledhill from Region is coming to see you as well.”

“What do you mean? I came to make sure that you had backed me about Walker. Who asked her to put her big nose in? I’ve got work to do.”

“Actually, I was not just going to discuss discredits with you. Andy McEwan has over-ridden your House Leader Report. And those five discredits as well. As far as we are concerned, we

did not consider Aidan Walker's behaviour as anything other than exemplary..."

There was a knock on the door, and Andy McEwan came in from his morning duty. "Sorry I am late, Keith. A couple of wee laddies were about to have a set-to."

"Don't worry about that, Andy. I was just going through with Catherine what we discussed yesterday about Aidan Walker."

Andy McEwan was the last person that Catherine Bryant wanted to see, and she looked daggers-drawn at both men. "WHAT?" she yelled. "You have done WHAT?"

"Just as I said," replied the Headmaster. "You know me. I am fair in all my dealings with everyone. If a student's behaviour, attitude, or performance is below standard, it naturally needs to be challenged. But there was nothing that needed challenging in this case. I asked Walker to hand me the key to the organ, which he did without question. Actually, he did tell me that you had asked him to give it to you, and I assured him that I would pass it back to you. Walker complied in a perfectly reasonable manner to a reasonable request."

"I gave him a strict instruction to give them to me," Ms Bryant retorted. "You know full well the reason. I had banned you from playing the instrument after you had made it unplayable. Walker disobeyed my instruction. Nobody disobeys me."

"Catherine," said Mr Mitchell calmly, "you seem to have it in for Walker. Why?"

He did not enjoy hearing Ms Bryant airing her prejudices, but she was giving them all the evidence they needed to justify her dismissal. It was also a good way to stall for time before Margo Gledhill came in on the act.

“I taught his brother last year and was his tutor from S1. He’s a cocky and sexist little shit – typical of rich kids who have too much money. Those Walkers need bringing down a peg or two. Aidan Walker is just the same.”

“Yes. You were going on about it a few minutes ago. But you have never taught Aidan Walker. How much do you know about him?”

“He is Ewan Walker’s brother. Gay Ewan is a cocky little shit, and Aidan is the same. Both are effeminate and Aidan is limp-wristed.”

“Catherine, there are many of our students, males and females, in this school who have issues with their sexual orientation. I certainly do not give a damn about any boy or girl who has same sex attraction tendencies. When this place was Saint Oswald College, the first headmaster would cane anyone who was same sex attracted. But he never stamped it out. In those dark days homosexuality was a criminal offence. Anyway, I am deviating from the subject, but we will return to this in a few minutes.”

“I don’t think it’s very fair for you to take sides with a student and undermine me.”

“Both Andy and I take sides with what is right and fair. Your treatment of Aidan Walker seems to have been motivated by some kind of unfounded malice towards him. If anyone needed to be bawled out, it was me, Catherine. Andy, what do you think?”

“I couldn’t agree with you more, Keith. I think you have chosen the wrong ones, Catherine. I gave you the chance to back down yesterday, but I fear you made the wrong choice. I heard what you had to say to Walker yesterday and it was not pretty. As for the way you describe them, that is not the two Walkers I know. I am proud to have them both in my house. Ewan is more

outgoing. Aidan is quite shy. Both of them are sensitive and unfailingly kind and courteous to others. This does not seem to be the case with you. I have warned you several times that your extreme version of feminism breaches all the Regional policies on discrimination and equality of opportunity. You are skating on thin ice towards serious disciplinary action.”

“I am not going to be patronised by two middle-aged chauvinist pigs,” shouted Ms Bryant.

“Catherine, you can do better than that,” said the Headmaster smoothly. “And I feel that much of the conversation up to now has been well below what I would expect from one of my Heads of Department. I don’t think we will achieve a meeting of minds on this one. We are a community here. Karl Marx, who influences your thoughts so much, wrote quite a lot about communities. In fact, the word ‘communism’ has the same roots as community.

“As Headmaster here, I have to be scrupulously fair with everyone. I will challenge students when their behaviour, attitude, or performance, are not up to standard. And I support all my staff as they do the same, as long as it is done fairly. However, staff, students, and parents expect me to challenge others if they are not up to standard. That includes staff.”

“Are you suggesting that my performance is not up to standard? I am a first-rate teacher as well as being a top violinist.”

“I know you are a talented violinist, Catherine. On the other hand, I have to be fair to everyone, not least you. This is the bit of my job that I hate, but I am going to have to say this. I am concerned about all aspects of your performance: behaviour to staff, parents and students; attitude towards others; and the performance of the department for which you are responsible.”

“WHERE’S THE EVIDENCE?” yelled Ms Bryant.

Several students outside had heard Ms Bryant's broadcast question and stopped outside the Headmaster's first floor office to see if they could get some more fun from upstairs.

"I think the Dragon is giving Mr Mitchell a wee roasting."

"Can ye no see the smoke coming out the ae windae."

"Yew laddies! Dobson! Drewitt! Blackford! Git yeselves to yer lesson!"

Upstairs, the Headmaster was blissfully unaware of his audience and continued, "I have the answer to your question. Andy, pass me that folder, could you?"

"What do you know about disciplinary action, Mr McEwan?" Ms Bryant shouted. "You have it in for me. It's all unfair. Typical male chauvinist pigs that have it in for me because I am a woman!"

"Quite a lot actually. I was a union rep for many years and represented a good number of our members against a particularly nasty and devious head. As for fairness, I give you my written guarantee right now that Mr Mitchell and I will follow the procedure to the letter. We have bent over backward to give you chances to improve before we have had to go down the disciplinary road. I can tell you right now that there is sufficient evidence for as long as you have been here to start a disciplinary process several times. We wanted you to improve and for us to support you. Instead, your performance has got worse if anything."

"Support? Don't you patronise me!" she snapped.

Mr Mitchell spoke as he opened the thick folder, "I don't think you really understand what we are trying to put over to you.

I have a whole file of letters and e-mails to me, and e-mails that you have sent. They make rather unpleasant reading.”

“How dare you go through my e-mails? You have no right to do that.”

“We have every right to look at e-mails that are sent on the school network. Despite the disciplinary meeting last January, you have continued to bully staff, and to be rude to students and parents. Looking at the sanctions and rewards, you dish out at least thirty discredits for each credit you award. It’s so obvious. I have also noticed how drastically student numbers have fallen in the Music Department since you were appointed. I know that numbers go up and down. One or two years may be unfortunate, but the trend seems to suggest something else. Especially as only girls seem to be doing music. We do have a lot of musical boys here...”

Bryant continued her juvenile and sexist diatribe about musicians who were boys. It was even more wearisome for Mitchell and McEwan than dealing with protracted fallouts in Secondary Two. Bryant ended up her speech with some disparaging comments about the Walker Family Trust

“Do you know what the Walker Family Trust is?” Mitchell asked

“Some patronising do-gooding by a bloated millionaire trying to salve his conscience.”

“It’s more than that. Charles Edward Walker is the owner of Walker Bros. You are right that he is a very wealthy man. He could have bought himself a yacht and gone to live in the Bahamas. No, he lives in this town, and he has set up the trust to enable good to come from his wealth. This school depends on the Walker Family Trust for a lot of what it does for the students. Your

department has taken a lot of Walker Family Trust money. So, I would stop biting the hand that feeds you.”

“Bully for him!” replied Ms Bryant. “We shouldn’t take blood money from bourgeois capitalists who get rich off the backs of their workers.”

“Spare me the communist propaganda,” sighed Mr Mitchell, who was rapidly tiring of the infantile tirade to which he had been subjected for the last ten minutes or so. “Communism is so nineteen seventies. I want to move on. Could you now explain why the Music Department refused this year to contribute towards the Act of Remembrance yesterday?”

“It’s elitist. It’s all about praising capitalist and imperialist pigs who wanted to make more money by selling arms to corrupt and imperialist powers to suppress the workers. Besides, I don’t do God.”

“I have asked you to spare me your teenage communist propaganda. That we had any music at all was thanks to Aidan Walker and Karen Lawlor and her pipe-band. And you berated Walker over a wretched pair of keys with a green plastic fob. Well, I have passed the keys to the janitor to have some more cut for him, for me, and the Deputes. Mr McEwan already has a set. You will no longer have a set. As for the organ, we are taking the responsibility for its upkeep off your department since you have allowed it to fall into such disrepair.”

“Over my dead body!” screamed Ms Bryant. “I am going to my union!”

“That is your unalienable right. I have told you that we are going to do everything by the book. Firstly, we have given you time to improve. There has been no improvement, so we will have to go down the hard road.”

“Why is that old codger here?”

Andrew McEwan bridled. He might have been over sixty, but he was fit and enjoyed very good health. And he certainly was not overweight. Unlike Ms Bryant, he did not smoke, get unpleasantly drunk, or partake in the consumption of various obnoxious chemicals. Controlling himself so as not to give Ms Bryant a gob-full, he replied, “You obviously don’t understand aspects of Scottish Law. Everything has to be witnessed. That’s why coppers go around in pairs. Mrs Laidlaw has been writing everything down so that we have a fair record. Your union representative has every right to look at the record.”

Mr Mitchell spoke. He was heartily fed up with the juvenile ranting from Ms Bryant. He spoke coolly and professionally, “Ms Bryant, I want to bring things to a close on this matter. I can see that you don’t particularly like us as an institution, and that is borne out by your tweets and social media entries. You have committed the grossest of gross professional misconduct in your homophobic and sexist rants. We have heard enough to give evidence before the Regional Council Disciplinary Committee. In the light of everything that we have heard and your alleged criminal behaviour, we will be recommending that you are suspended with immediate effect. The disciplinary meeting will be considering your dismissal from the staff of this school.”

“You can’t be serious!”

At this point, Mrs Gledhill, the Assistant Director of Education with responsibility for pupils’ safeguarding, slipped into the room.

“What’s she doing here?” snapped Ms Bryant.

“Now, there are two other matters. You asked us for the ‘Evidence’, Catherine,” said Mr Mitchell coldly, and turned round his computer monitor. It certainly had the Evidence on it, prurient and disgusting images every bit as foul as Ms Bryant’s language.

They were on Ms Bryant's social media accounts showing some guilty pleasures that were utter filth.

"How dare you snoop on my social media pages?" she yelled. "What I do out of school is my bloody business!"

"Not when it's been drawn to the Region's attention and shared with our students. Not when it has been forwarded by a parent who found it on her daughter's computer. Now I am not going to identify the student to you, but I am going to tell you now that you are the subject of a serious safeguarding investigation."

"You can't be serious. Where's your sense of humour?"

"Ms Bryant," said Mr McEwan coldly, "you should know that the Academy code, which is also Regional policy, strictly forbids staff from sharing social media with students."

"Who asked you to join in, Mr McEwan?" she snapped. "You keep your big nose out of it. Besides, I have never had students as friends."

"True, but clearly you have students as friends online. As far as keeping my nose out, I certainly will as far as that filth is concerned. But I am here as Senior Depute discussing problems concerning your performance and conduct as a member of staff in this school. And you are aware that not only have you committed gross professional misconduct but also are facing police charges that concern an alleged serious criminal offence."

"What I do outside this place is my business!"

"Not when you bring it in here."

"What the hell do you mean?"

"This," said Mr Mitchell, getting the bag of smoking materials and the block of resin out of his desk drawer. Ms Bryant looked shocked. She had noticed the stuff was missing and had

wondered if some sneaky Caddies had gone into her office and nicked it. Now she had her answer.

“Where did you get that from? How dare you go into my office and snoop about?”

“No, Catherine, I didn’t get that from your office. The janitor found it.”

“How dare he go into my office?”

“You had asked for a light fitting to be repaired. He complied with your request and found this on your desk. You know as well as we do that smoking is absolutely banned on all council premises.”

“That’s none of his business.”

“It is when there is cannabis. The smell gave it away. He has been a copper before and knows about drugs.”

Bryant had had a number of contacts with policemen concerning the use of recreational drugs. She was not well disposed towards the police.

“Typical of him. Can’t keep his nose out. Once a pig, always a pig.”

“No, Ms Bryant. Mr Murton is a highly valued member of our staff. I will not have you describe him in such derogatory terms, especially as you are the one at fault.”

Margot Gledhill made her first contribution to the scene. “Ms Bryant, I have been listening to what you have had to say to the Headmaster and Senior Depute. What I have heard suggests to me that it makes you an unfit person to work with young people. If you look in your terms of employment with the Council, you will see, and I quote: *Employees are expected to uphold the highest standards of behaviour both within the workplace, and out with their place of work. Any*

action that is considered prejudicial to the good name and reputation of Buchanan and Kyle of Tonsil Regional Council will be treated most seriously, regardless of whether the action took place while performing duties for the council, or while the employee was not on duty. Employees who breach this condition may face disciplinary action. Parents will be most concerned that a member of Region staff has been charged with a serious criminal offence and is due to appear in court at the end of February,” she said.

“How the hell do you know?”

“Police Scotland have told us. You should have told the school and the council about it as soon as you arrived at work yesterday morning. That will be taken into consideration as well. Ms Bryant, I have to tell you that I will be conducting a full investigation into your behaviour with regard to possible breaches of safeguarding, without prejudice to other disciplinary action that you will be facing. In addition, the regional council considers the taking of recreational drugs on school premises as a most serious breach of professional conduct. It is being treated as a police matter.”

Mrs Gledhill added, “This is a major breach of your conditions of employment. We are passing the whole matter to the Joint Council and School Board’s Disciplinary Committee for the gross professional misconduct. They will be particularly interested in the material that has ended up being shared with a student. Our first priority has to be the safety and welfare of our students. You have been broadcasting inappropriate material that has now been shared with minors...”

“It’s free speech, you idiot! Where’s your evidence, Mr McEwan?”

“Here it is. Do you want to see it? Also, I have quite a bit of other stuff in the computer. It has all your social media conversations. What do you make of that?”

“Bollocks!” yelled Bryant. “I’ll sue you for slander!”

Mrs Gledhill added, “The material we have seen there is certainly a safeguarding issue. There is ample evidence of sharing of inappropriate material with a girl who is a minor. There are also explicit tweets and texts. The council will be invoking all the procedures to restrain you from meeting and associating with other people under the age of eighteen.”

“You cannot be serious. You can’t do that!”

“We are deadly serious. The welfare of the child is paramount. I shall be talking to the student and her parents as soon as you have gone. As far as Buchanan and Kyle of Tonsil Regional Council are concerned, we will be applying to the Buchanan Sheriff Court for an interim interdict this afternoon. You will have the right to be defended, and we will ensure that you can attend. In the meantime, you are suspended from all council activity, and the Joint Council and Schools Board will, no doubt, consider dismissal from your post.”

Mr Mitchell added, “Ms Bryant, I am sorry that we will have to suspend you with immediate effect, with a view to holding a disciplinary meeting. Naturally, you will be allowed to attend, and you have the right to be represented. The evidence from this meeting will be used, as well as the statements and paper evidence in this folder. Naturally your union or legal representative will have access to it and the full transcript of this meeting. I can assure you that the meeting will be conducted fairly to consider all the evidence. In the meantime, you are suspended and must leave the premises forthwith. I must also tell you that I will be making a full report to the Educational Institute of Scotland who will consider your fitness to practise as a teacher.

“Now, I want you to go calmly, without using emotive terms or language. You may, of course, consult your legal representative. You will be notified of the Joint Council and

Schools Board's Disciplinary Panel meeting which will take place at a location off the school premises. This will be sent to your address in Glasgow unless you give us another contact address. Of course, you are entitled to bring your representative with you to the meeting. You will be now escorted by me, Mr McEwan, and Mrs Gledhill to your office to collect your personal belongings, and you must leave the premises immediately afterwards. The police have been called and will be investigating the issue with the drugs."

Mrs Gledhill spoke, "Ms Bryant, since this is such a serious case, the disciplinary hearing will be heard at the Council offices. Since there have been drugs, the police will no doubt wish to talk to you about that. In the meantime, due to the gravity of the safeguarding investigation, the Council will be applying to Buchanan Sheriff Court for an interim interdict to restrain you from entering the town of Corscadden for a period of twenty-eight days. This will be heard this afternoon at Buchanan Sheriff Court, and you may attend the hearing to defend yourself. I would suggest that as soon as you leave the school premises, you take legal advice on how you will make your case for the defence. I should advise you that the breach of an interdict is considered a serious contempt of court which can be punished by up to two years imprisonment."

Although she had been advised to go quietly, Catherine Bryant was something of a Prima Donna and flounced off stage shouting and screaming abuse at Mr McEwan, Mr Mitchell, and Mrs Gledhill. She tried to slam the heavy oak door in their faces, but the spring denied her the pleasure.

When she got to her office, Bryant was in the highest possible dudgeon. She slammed the door on them and refused to come out. Her exit from the scene was conducted by two constables from Corscadden Police Station. The Diva had an audience in the form of a good number of nosy Caddies who were alerted by the blue air around The Dragon. It was worth taking a couple of minutes off task to see the performance.

While Mrs Gledhill went to start her investigation, the other two players of the scene went back to the office. Mr Mitchell sank back in his chair and sighed. "I don't know what to say, Andy," he said. "We've both tried to give her a way out, but she was bent on self-destruction. I have never had any member of staff who has so set out to do so much that's plain wrong. That stuff must have addled her. Normally, when they have done something, they are contrite and want to put things right. She doesn't."

"She wanted us to do something stupid, Keith. She would have taken us to the cleaners. That's why it's doubly important that we do everything by the book. Everything has to have evidence to back it up. Remember that she is innocent before proven guilty."

"Not by the evidence we saw."

"It's typical of people of that kind," Mr McEwan said. "They hate others benefitting from someone's wealth, but they themselves are stinking rich."

"How is that?"

"Catherine Bryant is from a very wealthy family. She has an endless pot of money for her to indulge in drugs and alcohol. Her salary from this place just about pays for her posh flat in Glasgow. All this Marxism and militant feminism is just a front. Her fortune makes the Walker Family Trust look like small change."

"Well, Andy, there is a stupid bugger born every minute and I am one of them for appointing her."

Chapter 4

Wednesday, 20th November 2013

Secondary Fifth- and Sixth-Year common rooms in any Scottish school tend to be vibrant places, just like Sixth-Form common rooms south of the Border. And this was certainly true at Strathcadden Academy. Greatorex House, the Higher Study Centre, was opened in 2008, and was a state-of-the-art and high-quality building designed by a highly regarded architect. After the Langhouse debacle, the Buchanan and Kyle of Tonsil Regional Council had become very rigorous about its selection of contractors.

The building was of a tasteful modern design that blended in sympathetically with the older buildings around it. The common room for Secondary Five and Secondary Six was on the top floor, and was light, spacious, and airy. There were areas of soft seating and tables around which students could sit and chat. At one end there was an extensive computer suite, and a quiet study room. There were beautiful views over the playing fields and the River Cadden to the hills beyond.

As always, the common room on the top floor of Greatorex House was abuzz. At one table you might find some aspiring thespians from Mr McEwan's English class under the delusion that their teenage interpretation of King Lear that was published on *You-Tube* was a major contribution to the development of drama – ignoring the fact that King Lear was not set at a time at which its characters wore blue kilts (Douglas Blue Modern), blue jackets, and green knee-length socks, and one of the lighting rigs (a modified standard lamp) tipped over in the middle of Act II Scene 3.

Somewhere else you would find a group of seventeen-year-old boys earnestly testing each other on the Highway Code as they prepared for their Theory Test – and others discussing driving

lessons and how not to fail when they went on Test. Since Aidan Walker had passed his driving test two weeks before, he was often to be found with this group dishing out pearls of wisdom about not parking on double yellow lines, or how not to stall on the hill-start.

Elsewhere other boys would be relating their experiences of driving their cars too damned fast. Actually, these tales were mostly fantasy, more akin to *Grand Auto Theft 5* than anything that they really did on the road. The girls who drove didn't do that kind of inane bragging.

Many of the girls would be discussing who was dating the most gorgeous boy in the school. Other girls were furiously texting as if there were no tomorrow, showing the feminine skill of multitasking as they were simultaneously holding animated conversations of who was the most gorgeous celeb.

On other occasions boys would be trying to attract girls. If they were black grouse, they would be in a lek, dancing about and hissing, while the girl black grouse walked about totally unimpressed. The two performances were remarkably similar. Dr Cuthbert, a keen ornithologist, had made that comment several times.

It was into this vibrant place that Dr Cuthbert, Aidan's Classical Studies teacher, and Head of Secondary Five and Six, came in with a young man in tow who was looking completely bewildered. In a school like Strathcadden Academy, it was not unusual for new pupils to turn up halfway through a term. Mostly they came when parents relocated to Strathcadden. In a few cases they were refugees from independent schools: either the parents were no longer able to afford the astronomical fees, or the child had had to leave the school for some other reason.

The staff would refer to these young people affectionately as the *waijs and strays*. They tended initially to feel not at ease: firstly,

as they were well out of their comfort zones among strange people. Secondly, they found it a culture shock to be addressed by their surnames, although it was often softened with the suffix, “laddie” or “lassie”. Thirdly, the majority of the male strays had never worn a kilt before.

The particular waif and stray in this case was seventeen-year-old Christian Dominic Hayward Salway.

He had joined the school after a year at Beckton Sixth Form College in the Carlsborough area of the northeast of England at which he had been subjected to systematic bullying, much of which was falsely homophobic. The culprits had been identified after he made a suicide attempt and were suspended from the college for a couple of weeks. They vowed to take revenge, which centred on repeated cyber-bullying, including trolling on his *Twitter* account and his other social media pages. Someone hacked into his computer and connected him to pornography of the most extreme and disgusting kind. On one occasion he was attacked in the street in broad daylight and knocked unconscious. Nobody came to help. The worst bit was that the flat which he shared with his single mother was laid siege to by bullying thugs from the surrounding estate. In the previous April, despite being under-age, Christian went to a pub for a drink with his “friends”. His drink was spiked with ketamine, a powerful horse anaesthetic, and a psychoactive substance whose name Christian had forgotten, but referred to as “that shit”. For three weeks he was on an intensive care ward, the first week on a life-support machine.

Not surprisingly he had performed badly at his AS-levels. The principal, who was more concerned about benchmarks and performance indicators than the well-being of one of her students, told Christian that he should leave.

With breath-taking incompetence, the Sowerland Police handled the subsequent investigation into what was an attempted

murder. Justice was denied to Miss Salway and her son; in September, the culprits were found not guilty and were free to leave the court. Miss Salway was given a police escort from Carlsborough. The Mayor of Carlsborough, a tough ex-copper himself, was disgusted and said so loudly and forcibly.

Miss Salway, a radiographer in a local hospital, sensibly decided that a new start was essential, and got employment at the Edinburgh Royal Infirmary.

Miss Salway had managed to get a flat in the Sciennes area of Edinburgh, but nowhere for Christian to continue his education, until a colleague mentioned about Strathcadden Academy. And Mr Mitchell was deeply sympathetic and assured them both that Christian would be well-looked after in Asher House.

Christian Salway certainly fitted the dictionary definition of waif. Although not as small as Liam Cosgrave, who was affectionately known as Woodmouse, or, simply, Mouse, he was skinny and underweight. He had long hair, and being decidedly baby-faced, looked markedly girlish. Christian's blazer was just a little too big. The kilt was small, really for a fourteen-year-old, chosen so that it would fit his waist and not fall down. Therefore, it was slightly short, although not as short as the kilts worn by some of the girls. Even so, Christian was so skinny that the belt was on the last hole, and it was still loose.

As a result, it was little wonder that Christian Salway, who had never lived away from home before, was looking rather anxious. And Dr Cuthbert knew exactly which student would act as Christian's buddy.

"Walker, laddie," he said, "I have a waif for you to look after. His name's Christian Salway. Salway, laddie, do you mind if I tell Walker about what you told me?"

“No, Sir.”

“We’ll talk in my office,” replied Dr Cuthbert. He took both young men to his office and told Christian’s story in detail. As Aidan listened, he felt deeply moved. And as they walked out of Dr Cuthbert’s office, he had his arm around his new mentee.

“I’m Aidan,” he started, “but my friends call me Aidy. Do you prefer Christian or Chris?”

“Chris. My mother calls me ‘Christian’ when she goes mad at me.”

“What does your mum do?”

“She’s a radiographer at the Edinburgh Royal Infirmary. She got the job a couple of months ago and we’re living in a flat in Sciennes. I am boarding here.”

“And your dad?”

“I don’t have one.”

“Oh!” Aidan went red as he realised that he had put his foot in it.

“Obviously I do have one. But I don’t have a clue who he is; nor does mum. He was a student at York University. Mum was twenty and something happened. Don’t worry, Aidy, you’re not the first and you certainly won’t be the last. What do your mum and dad do?”

“Mum is a doctor at the town surgery. Dad is a professor at Edinburgh University.” Aidan wished that he had not blurted it out like that.

“I’d love to meet them. I have never met a professor before.”

“Of course, you will.”

They left Greatorex House and saw Miss Salway's dilapidated hatchback parked in front of College House, the main school building. Miss Salway was talking to Mr Mitchell.

Miss Salway spoke to her son, "Good luck Chris. I will really miss you. You've got a new start here. And they will look after you. The Headmaster promised that. Aidan, keep your eye on him."

And with that the car drove off. If Christian had had a tail, it would have slowly dropped down as he gazed towards the car as it turned towards the town. Aidan picked up on Christian's anxiety. "I promise you, Chris," he said gently, "we will look after you here."

They went through the main door to reception, where Christian had left two bags. "I'm meant to be in As..."

"Asher House. I'm in Asher House," said Aidan. "I'll take you over. We'll see Mr McEwan, the House Leader, and he will show you your room. It's not far, about a hundred metres or so."

Aidan carried the two bags towards Asher House. As he did so, he noticed the increasing anxiety in Christian. Now they were in the house and Mr McEwan was waiting for them.

It was a spacious bed-sitting room that awaited Christian. Normally the single bed-sitting rooms were for the students doing Advanced Highers. He had missed a lot of his AS level work due to being in hospital. The principal of Beckton Sixth Form College had suggested that it would not be in Christian's best interests to return to the college, except for when he sat his exams. He had failed them all. The lack of a roommate did not worry Christian. Being a single child, he had never had one before.

Christian put his laptop (the only thing of value he possessed) onto the desk. He sat on the bed and looked at Aidan. Tears filled his eyes, and he said, "Aidy, I'm really scared. I hated

school and really looked forward to going to Sixth Form College. Now I am back at school. What will people be like here? I feel weird dressed like this. Mum bought this yesterday. It cost a fortune, and she doesn't have any money. I promised her that I would get a job to help her pay. Do you have a job?"

"I work at Walker Bros in Kirkstoun Place in the town centre. There are lots of jobs for kids in the summer."

"That's where I got everything."

Having put his foot in it before, Aidan thought it would be tactless to say that his granddad owned the place. Christian asked him, "What kind of school is this? Is it a posh fee-paying place? How would Mum afford to send me here?"

"It's an odd place this," replied Aidan. "It's a state school, so there are no fees. But kids in Secondary Five and Six who come from a long way away board here from Monday to Friday. The Regional Council pays for it. A few parents pay for it but if you can't afford it, there is a trust that pays the school."

"Mum mentioned that. She spent a long time with the Headmaster. I feel so out of place. What will people think of me? I'm English; you're all Scottish."

"Chris, this is a great place to live. Believe me. No one will do what your mates did to you."

"Bloody close killed me."

"With friends like that, who needs an enemy? No one would do that here. You will have real friends here. What happened anyway?"

"Just what Dr Cuthbert said," Christian replied. "At school they took the piss out of me because I didn't have a dad. I was a geek and a swot. I didn't fit in. It was a really rough place, and the teachers didn't give a damn. All they did was to say that we kids

were thick and how on Earth would we get our GCSEs? I did. I got the best marks in the school. But only twenty percent of kids in our school got five GCSEs. I hated it. It was a dump. The whole place was falling to bits. We had to share a textbook between three. But the Head always had money to take the worst kids to France.

“At Sixth Form College some kids from our school came and continued where they left off. They would troll my social media pages and hack my computer. They reported me for having porn and the cops came round. Don’t tell anyone, but I tried to do myself in and was nearly sectioned. Then they called me a loony and a psycho.”

“Chris, of course I won’t. You can say what you want to me, Mum, and Ewan.”

“Who’s Ewan?”

“My brother. He’s doing Highers this year and you will see him in a lot of your lessons. If you can’t get on with Ewan, you won’t get on with anybody. We’re very close, and we will both look after you. I promise you.”

“What are you doing this year, Aidy?”

“I’m doing Advanced Highers and hope to go to Uni.”

“What subjects?”

“English Literature, French, German, History, and Classical Studies. What subjects are you doing?”

“English, Maths, German, Art, French, Spanish and Economics. I have Mr McEwan for English. What’s he like?”

“Like all of them, he seems gruff, but he has a heart of gold. The teachers here really care. Mr Mitchell is very good at getting good teachers. They will make you work hard, but they will work

just as hard for you. If you get stuck, they will help you. The kids really respect them, and they respect the kids. There's only one who doesn't and that is Miss Bryant. We call her The Dragon, or The Ice Maiden, or Michelin Woman, because she's fat and ugly. And she's rude to us, the parents, other teachers, and even the Headmaster."

Christian looked at himself in the mirror. For one who swore he would never wear a school uniform again, he felt decidedly odd wearing a kilt. Since he looked rather girlish anyway, he felt decidedly feminine. He asked, "Aidy, why this uniform? Most kids in Sixth Forms wear trendy clothes."

"It is weird, but the kids here really like it. In the mid-nineties the boys came in skirts a couple of times because it was so hot. So, they had a vote on it. The uniform was designed by some Secondary Three girls. They ask us every couple of years, and almost every kid says keep it. We call it the *Caddie-style*. Lots of the young lads wear kilts in Corscadden anyway."

Christian sat there on the bed. He had never come across this before. Everyone hated school in the depressing area in which he had lived in outside Beckton. He had done his best and had been beaten up and had been almost killed because of that. And here was a school where the kids seemed really proud of it. He asked, "How do the kids get on with this school?"

"We like it. I promise you; you will like it as well. We could go on to uni when we're seventeen, but most of us stay on to do our Advanced Highers. It's not perfect but nowhere is. We're proud to be Auld Caddies."

"Old Caddies? It sounds like something from golf."

"We like our town. Corscadden is Auld Caddie Toun to us and when we leave here, we are Auld Caddies. The boys are Caddie Laddies, and the girls are Caddie Lassies. It's all on the website."

You'll be an Auld Caddie in two years. I promise you will be proud of it as well."

There was something about Aidan that made Christian feel safe. Aidan was genuine and trustworthy. Aidan continued, "Ewan will look out for you as well. Jordan came as a waif and stray, and Ewan took him under his wing. You will like them both. Let's have a look about the place."

"Daft question, Aidy, but how old are you?"

"Not daft at all. I am seventeen, eighteen at the end of August. I was a summer baby. How old are you?"

"Same age as you. I turned seventeen at the end of last August as well. I was one of the youngest in the AS year. I thought you were younger."

"I'm just backdated," Aidan smiled. He felt an increasing bond with Christian. "Would you like to stay with us tonight? Mum's back late. Ewan and I cook the dinner."

"Cool. I'll sing for my supper. I cook for Mum a lot. I once wanted to train as a chef. I like cooking."

"Eejay and I are at your command! We better ask Mr McEwan first."

"EJ?"

"That's Ewan – Ewan James Samuel Walker. Aunt Jenny called him that and it stuck. He is the youngest in Secondary Five."

Aidan showed his new friend around Asher House, all the important rooms like the student kitchens on each floor, the bathrooms, the lavvies, and the houseroom and the study rooms for the Day-Caddies. They called at the House-Leader's apartment.

Mr McEwan asked them how they had got on and thought that it was a good idea for Christian to spend the night at the Walkers.

They started walking around the school grounds. For once it was a calm and bright day in what had been a very wet and windy November. Christian looked over-awed at what he was seeing. “I’ve never seen a school like this,” he said. “It looks like those posh schools you hear about – a bit like Hogwarts.”

“It was,” replied Aidan. “It used to be called Saint Oswald College. There was another school up at The Huise.”

“The Hoose?”

“Langhouse is on the other side of the town. It’s known as ‘The Huise’. It’s a scheme that they built in the sixties. The old school was built up there at the same time as the estate, but it fell down. They moved it here when the other place closed. They used all the old buildings, and that’s why it looks so posh. We’ve got a posh school here and don’t have to pay for it. And it’s as good as any posh school. The teachers are good and there’s lots of sport and other things to do. That’s College House.”

“They didn’t do much sport where I was. Just a bit of footy. I was no good at it. The head said that sports were elitist and made some people feel bad because they lost. What sports do you do, Aidy?”

“Count me out for footy. I can’t kick a ball to save my life! As for rugby, that’s where I learned that there were fairies: ‘Walker! Git in there, ya fairy!’ I stopped playing in Secondary 3. I do cross-country running. It’s easy. You put one foot in front of the other. I also play badminton and tennis.”

“I’d like to try those, Aidy.”

“Cool,” replied Aidy. “You look like a runner. And I’ll show you the badminton courts. They are in the Sports Centre.”

“I have done some running. You need it to get away from Carlsborough or Beckton.”

On the way, Aidan pointed out the Old Chapel, which looked very like something from an English public school; the library; and the various classroom blocks. They passed the Sports Centre, a state-of-the-art facility for the school and the town. They walked around the playing fields, past Dibben House, Edwards House, and Fenton House. As they were walking back, they bumped into Ewan and a couple of his friends who were returning from a training run.

“Chris, have you got any kit?” Aidan asked. “We’ll go for a short run. Start as you mean to go on.”

“It’s back in my room.”

“I’ll get mine from my locker and we’ll get changed and do a 2k, nice and gently. Don’t overdo it, or you will feel stiff tomorrow. Those over there are The Wests.”

The Wests was a sinister single storey building erected when much of the Saint Oswald College was built. It housed the boys’ lavatories, known in those days as *The Lats* (short for latrines), but known now as *The...ae...Lavvies*. In the old days of Saint Oswald College, an all-boys’ school, disgusting initiation ceremonies took place there that were only stamped out in the mid nineteen seventies. It had been rather neglected and overlooked in the many developments that had made Strathcadden Academy such an attractive school. It had a squalid and noisome air, and Caddie Laddies used the facilities in the building only in desperation, preferring other lavvies that were in the houses or at suitable points around the school. Although decidedly old-fashioned, The Wests had been improved over the years. This was a relative term. Initially there were no partitions at all to protect the users’ privacy. The idea was that boys should be trained to suffer every deprivation that the Empire could bring.

Later, partitions were placed between each apparatus. Not that this improved matters that much, for not only were they rather low, with a large gap between the bottom and the floor, but also there was no door to each cubicle. It was only in the nineteen seventies that doors like those in a saloon bar in the Westerns were finally added, which marginally protected the privacy and dignity of the users. Nowadays The Wests was predominantly used for the needs of Caddie Laddies about to go out onto the sports field. With the facility being right next to the changing rooms, two entire rugby teams could use it, with room to spare.

The Wests contained apparatus that was of industrial quality and had been designed to last a hundred years. Indeed, the apparatus had more than outlived that expectation, being close to one hundred and twenty years old. Each cistern was made of cast iron, which had, by total coincidence, been made of a formulation that ensured almost no corrosion. Each apparatus still worked as perfectly as the day that it was installed. Little plumbing maintenance had ever been needed, beyond the replacement of the valves. The plumbing itself had been carried out by a local man who was a master craftsman, and nearly one hundred and twenty years later, the pipework remained perfect.

The perfect action of each apparatus included a deafening roar as it was activated. It sounded like a loose-coupled freight train rushing down a hill.

When The Wests was first constructed, Dr Cowan (the founding headmaster) wanted to be assured that the drainage system could cope. There may have been an occasion in which, by sheer coincidence, two rugby fifteens had just bonded, along with the referees and others, and all decided to get up at exactly the same time. Therefore, the Headmaster commissioned an appropriate number of soldiers from Cardean Barracks to flush the apparatus simultaneously. There are records neither of how the soldiers were selected (“I want thirty-five volunteers, you, you, you...”)

the drill adopted (“At the command chains...pull! Wait for it!”). Decibel meters had not been invented at that stage, nor were the soldiers issued with ear defenders. The test was a total success, and the drains coped admirably.

Two factors had ensured the preservation of The Wests. Firstly, the Regional Council could be rather parsimonious as far as spending money was concerned. To be fair, the Council had spent a lot of money over the previous years on the Strathcadden Academy site. Since all the apparatus still worked perfectly, they saw no reason to replace them. As they demurred, the Victorian Legacy Preservation Association got to hear about The Wests and its collection of turn-of-the-twentieth-century sanitary ware in perfect condition. Despite the fact that no member of the Victorian Legacy Preservation Association had ever used The Wests, a preservation order was slapped on it. As a result, thirty-five pedestals and cisterns (each marked *The Ro’boro*) were set to continue their unbroken service.

Additionally, there was a urinal that could accommodate three at a standing.

The Wests was no worse than what Christian had had to put up with at the Grange School in Beckton.

The facilities for the girls, The Easts, was housed in a building that was a mirror-image to The Wests and was a much more modern and wholesome place.

The two boys went past the old sports centre. Connected to The Wests, it consisted of changing rooms, a large sports hall and some smaller rooms that had weights and other exercise equipment that was designed to toughen up the First Fifteen. Some of the older exercise equipment looked as if it could have been used for interrogation accompanied by torture. It too had been built at the same time as The Wests, and Old Oswaldians (old

boys of Saint Oswald College) remembered the place with more than a frisson of fear.

Beyond that stood the Languages and Science block (Harrison House) and the Technology Block (Johnston House). At the end nearest Asher and Baxter Houses was the canteen, where Caddies had their lunch, and boarders, known as Distant Caddies, had their breakfast and tea. It was a modern and spacious building erected soon after the foundation of the new school, since the original Saint Oswald's dining hall was not really adequate for the numbers that used it. This had been converted to dance and drama studios, while a fully equipped theatre had been added as an extension. The dance and drama studio were named Kinmond House.

“Why these names?”

“The buildings are labelled A to M, but they are named after local dignitaries in the town, or from the old school. When you have English with Mr McEwan, you will be in A2.05. That means that you are in Asher House, second floor, room 5. That's his English room. When Saint Oswald's was here, the houses had names of Empire battles. They changed them when Strathcadden Academy came down here. They put Distant Caddies into one half of the house, and the other half they turned into classrooms.”

“How do you know all this stuff?”

“Eejay did a big project in Secondary Three about Saint Oswald College. It was so thorough that the school published it.”

The two boys went back to Asher House to change into their running kit.

Some minutes later, Aidan and Christian were outside Asher House. Aidan took his new friend through some stretching exercises before they started. By this time, the Senior Rugby Squad had finished their practice, while the Women's Football Squad were

training on the all-weather pitch outside the sports centre. While the senior rugby squad's successes were imaginary, those of the women's football squad were real and tangible. They were near the top of the table in the West of Scotland Women's Football League.

Now they were out of the school grounds and into the Cadden Country Park, before backtracking on the path along the river. It was starting to get dark by the time they got back to Asher House. While Christian felt quite out of breath, Aidan had hardly started to break sweat.

"Chris, I'll be back in ten minutes or so. I'll see you up there," said Aidan before scampering off at what looked like a break-neck speed. He was not the Captain of the Strathcadden Academy Cross-Country Running Team for nothing. Christian, in the meantime had started to feel more at ease. Nobody at his previous school would have ever given him the time and attention that Aidan had. He was feeling a powerful bond towards Aidan, more a brother than a friend. Both of them were young looking for their age, and Aidan was one of the most elegant young men he had ever seen. He was naturally skinny, fitting for an athlete. Aidan's boyish face exuded a shy charm and genuine empathy.

And Aidan was thinking similar thoughts as he ran round the 2k for a second time. He felt a similar bond with Christian. Aidan was a young man who genuinely wanted to please and to be liked. And he was delighted that he had clearly pleased his new friend. Christian was a little shorter than he and had an athletic build. Aidan had coached runners for a year and could recognise that Christian had a definite talent for running.

Aidan was right. Christian Salway was an immediate hit in the Walker household that evening. Ewan found their new friend utterly gorgeous. Chris was immediately at ease with him. The three of them were like puppies. While Aidan and Ewan were not

bad at cooking, Christian was in a league of his own in the kitchen. Ewan and Aidan looked with amazement as Christian chopped vegetables just like a pro. Mary and the boys enjoyed a wonderful evening, where they all bubbled away in the excitement of each other's company. Finally, Christian, worn out by a long and at times quite exhausting day, fell asleep. Aidan saw him twitch gently, and a warm glow passed through him. He was snuggled up to Mum, and Ewan was on the other side. Both were mummy's boys.

Christian was one of many friends the boys brought home. Ewan had had a steady boyfriend for the last two years, who was a regular part of the family. A thought passed through Mary's mind. She could not put her finger on it, but there seemed to be similarities between Christian and Aidan, as if they were non-identical twins. Chris was a long-haired blond and was and so like Aidan, or Joby. Both Aidan and Chris were smooth skinned with little body hair – just like Joby. Ewan was a boy version of her. Aidy's mannerisms were identical to Joby's, and those of Chris seemed to be almost identical. The only difference was that Aidy's hair was shorter, and dark brown. But don't be so ridiculous!

Ewan took more after his mother, who was equally caring and devoted to her sons, but more outgoing. Practising under her maiden name at the town's GP surgery, Dr Fairbairn, Mary was a good doctor who treated the whole patient rather than just the symptom. She was also a specialist in haematology, work that took her frequently to Glasgow and Edinburgh, and all points between. There was a small general hospital in Corscadden, the Strathcadden General Infirmary (known as 'The Strathie'), although the most seriously ill patients tended to be sent to Stirling or Perth. Mary would often perform minor surgical procedures, as well as patching up people who had had accidents.

She was a truly dynamic woman. As well as carving out a career for herself as a highly skilled doctor, she had also been the mother of two active boys. And a third, for Joby was that much younger than her, and was young for his age. In many ways he was still a teenager. When Aidy and Eejay were very small, Joby was doing his doctorate in Edinburgh and shared a flat with two other young men of his age. His flatmates teased him about being a toy-boy, but he did not mind. Back at home, he was a good father, always willing to get stuck in. Joby's sisters were always there to help their little brother and sister-in-law. As the boys got older, Joby's great pleasure was to do boyish things with his sons, and that gave Mary more space.

With the gentle encouragement from their sporty parents, both Aidan and Ewan were excellent cross-country runners. Their mother had coached them to be good tennis players.

Strathcadden had become popular as a centre for hill-walking; the hills around were not as extreme as the Highlands, but still, something of a challenge. The Strathcadden Skyline was a popular walking route with well way-marked paths. Aidan and Ewan would often run the Strathcadden Skyline, which would take three to four hours, before returning to Brewster House to flop out like two exhausted puppies.

Mary Walker had a love for culture and music, which she had passed on to both her sons. She was a talented amateur pianist who performed regularly in music society concerts, and she could match many professionals. It was with her encouragement and tuition that Aidan had become such a proficient artist on the keyboard. And Ewan was no slouch either at tinkling the ivories.

The next day, after school, Aidan and Ewan were spending the night at Asher House. He and Christian were going to play some badminton after supper. The court had been booked for an

hour. Aidan's friends Cameron and Nick were going to join them. After Christian and Aidan had got changed, they went down to the canteen and met up with the others. Christian enjoyed the jovial chat and banter around the table, and a couple of Aidan's female friends, Leah, and Kirsty, came to join them. Christian felt that Aidan was the brother he had never had. Yes, for the first time in a school, Christian felt safe and wanted.

That Ewan Walker was gay was well known. He had come out two years before, but it had been obvious since he was quite a bit younger. Ewan's orientation, according to many psychologists, stemmed from the fact that his mother was the dominant force in the Walker family.

In Secondary Three, Ewan had thought it would be right that he had a girlfriend, so in Tutor Period he tried a chat-up line with Chloe Grey that was so clumsy and inept that she slapped him hard across the face. This sent his adrenaline skyrocketing. In Aidan, this hormone prepared him for flight. In Ewan it prepared him for fight (before flight). The result of which was that he lunged for Miss Grey with the intent of knocking seven bells out of her. Fortunately, several other pupils restrained Ewan, for if he had made contact, he could have been expelled. In the event he had used words starting with 'f' and 'c', and many other words he never thought he knew. It was agreed that he had clearly picked them up from his father.

After that, the flight kicked in. Ewan rushed out of the classroom and out of Fenton House. A far corner of the playing fields by the river was where he chose to hide, and Aidan was called out of his Chemistry lesson to 'bring him out of orbit'.

Ms Bryant's report did not do her reputation any good; it was a complete fabrication which some elementary sleuthing by Mr McEwan disproved. Ewan had been suspended for the day while

the investigation had been carried out. Student statements all tallied that Grey had slapped Walker hard across the face and he had gone mad. It was certainly unusual for this normally gentle and kind teenager. Miss Grey was suspended for three school days, and Master Walker had been told to come back in. He had a House Leader's detention and five discredits for using foul, threatening, and abusive language.

The upshot was that Ms Bryant had a very stiff interview with Mr McEwan about the use of the disciplinary system to write reports that were truthful, and the importance of equality of opportunity for boys as well as girls.

After this, Ewan was scared of girls. He was already scared of Ms Bryant.

While the tendency had been there for many years, at the age of thirteen, his crushes on other boys had been cemented by an incident in which, during an ICT lesson, some girls had gone off-task and accessed a porn site. The in-your-face nature of the contents made him feel sick. The IT teacher caught them, and they were all on House-leader's report. And his form tutor in Secondary 3, Ms Bryant, had really given him what-for. She had never liked Ewan, and this was a heaven-sent opportunity to make his life a misery, constantly reproaching him for the sexist degradation of women.

Ewan had got into further trouble when he had had enough of Ms Bryant's repeated humiliation and replied, "I am gay! That means that I am attracted by boys! You, Miss Bryant, are the biggest sexist degradation of women."

"Do you mind repeating that, Walker?"

Ewan was full of adrenaline and didn't mind repeating it more forcefully, "In case you are too thick to understand, I am gay! That means I am turned on by boys. Is it any wonder with women

like you around? Miss Bryant, you are the ultimate sexist degradation of women that I have ever met.”

The resulting screech was heard throughout Fenton House.

On this occasion he was told off both by Mr Mitchell, and by his parents. Ewan remained convinced there was a definite twinkle in Mr Mitchell’s eye. Ms Bryant was one of the very few people who could not get on with Ewan, but she could not get on with anyone. Not that he knew it at the time, but his street-cred rose markedly as a result of that encounter, not just among the boys and most girls, but also among the staff.

Ewan was, by now, totally scared of women.

When other boys teased him about being gay, Ewan adopted the strategy of reflecting it back on them, “Do you fancy me, Jonathan? Let’s meet behind Baxter House and I will be all yours.” And he would waggle his bum suggestively. However, Ewan’s sexuality had limits. He detested filth and pornography. It was a limit shared by other gay boys, of which there was quite a number in the school.

Ewan’s experience in Secondary Three had not been good. Ms Bryant had written the worst report that he had ever received. “This student’s attitude is casual and frequently crosses the border of insolence and discourtesy. Many of his contributions have been obscene, flippant, and derisory...”

Ewan had wanted to do Standard Grade Music, but Ms Bryant flatly refused to have him and was brusque to the point of rudeness about it. As she was with Aidan’s request to do Music for one of his Highers. Ewan asked to move tutor group, but by that time, it was nearly the end of the school year, and in Secondary 4 he would have Mrs Learmont.

Ewan had the Fairbairn genes rather than those from the Walker side. This meant that he had sandy hair and was taller than

both Aidy and Dad. He always had his hair longer than Aidy's and it was wavy like Mum's. Like Aidy's and Dad's it was neatly cut and styled, but it covered his ears and came down to his collar. Like the rest of his family, he was skinny and bordering on being underweight. His shape, colouring, and agility resembled those of a red squirrel, hence his nickname. Buchananshire was a stronghold of that particular ginger rodent. As he grew, he became more like Uncle Alex, Mum's little brother.

The overall result was that Ewan Walker was outstandingly good looking, and Caddie lassies wanted to be his girlfriend. However, he had a T-shirt that he frequently wore under his school shirt with the legend, *Sorry Girls. I love boys*. Ewan had many close male friends, all of whom were attractive to him. The closest he had come to a real boyfriend was Matthias Fischer, a fourteen-year-old German boy who was his exchange partner from Corscadden's twin town of Dringhausen am Palus.

Towards the end of Secondary Three, Ewan's prayers were answered. For one Tuesday in April 2011, a waif and stray landed in S3CB in the form of Sebastian Jordan Stephen Melhuish. Thirteen months older than Ewan, Jordan (as he preferred to be known) should, according to his age, have been placed in Secondary Four. However, as a result of his arrival from south of the border, he was not yet ready to tackle Standard Grade examinations. Ewan was excited by the arrival of any gorgeous boy, but Jordan seemed to tick all the boxes. He had a very gentle manner, and like Ewan, he was a serious and thoughtful young man. Both boys felt a very strong emotional and physical bond to each other. Not only was Jordan thoroughly attractive, but also, from the start, was a soulmate for Ewan to love. And they fell in love almost instantly.

Unknown to Jordan's father, his mother had been playing away with a high-flying banker from London for three years. She had successfully covered her affair up. At her new partner's behest,

Sebastian (as his mother called him; his father called him Seb) had been entered at the age of twelve for the Common Entrance Examination to Public Schools. He failed badly, and his mother was furious, not just with him, but more so with the comprehensive school that had not taught Jordan any Latin. The school retorted that Sebastian was of average, if not lower than average, ability

Recently, Jordan's mother had walked out on his father for the banker. She had simply got bored with her husband and son. That Sebastian had failed the Common Entrance was for her the final straw. Therefore, the two had had to leave the family home. For both Jordan and his father, it was a very traumatic experience. They had not seen it coming. For Jordan, a gentle, sensitive and serious young man, it was fortunate that not only did the school intervene to support him, but also his new boyfriend could also provide him with the love that he so needed.

Melhuish senior had rented a small house near the Border, not far from where his parents lived. His job took him all over Europe, so Strathcadden Academy was the answer for Jordan. Deeply hurt by his mother's rejection of him, Jordan felt he could not trust women. However, having lost a mother, he had found a younger brother who loved him for what he was. Jordan and Ewan shared many common interests, for example, music, the same sports, and the same subjects. Through his friendship with Ewan, Jordan found great comfort in the aesthetic and the cultural and soon considered Corscadden to be his real home. In short, the two boys became almost inseparable.

Now, a couple of years later Ewan and Jordan were doing their homework together in Jordan's room in Baxter House. They never submitted the same work, of course, but they would discuss it so that each learned from each other. Since Jordan had been to a school in an area of the North of England where non-excellence was the aspiration, he never realised that he actually was an intelligent boy. His marks went up from about 55 % to 85 %.

In Brewster House, Professor and Mrs Walker were having a long-awaited cuddle on the sofa while they were watching the evening news. These evenings on their own were valuable to them. The boys were safe and regarded their weekly stay at school as an exciting sleep-over. So, the house was quiet. There was something homely and romantic about the two people in early middle age, snuggled up together. She lay against her young husband, and the steady slow beat of his heart was quite soporific. And her hands started to twitch.

She could not put her finger on it, but she felt she was losing her fitness. She would train in the gym, or go running, but it seemed to knock the stuffing out of her. There were odd aches and pains. Occasionally she would bleed in places where she had no right to bleed. Somewhere in her haematologist's mind she could smell a bloody rat. But that was nonsense; most of her haematology patients were much older. And there was evidence that it could run in families, and there was no one in her family who had got cancer of any description. Both her mum and dad were in their seventies, and each was the picture of health. No, she put it down to the strain of a busy job that brought most of the money into the Walker household.

Also, she had written a long and scholarly article on the management of patients with different treatments of leukaemia for the European Journal of Haematology. It had taken her several months of almost non-stop work, which had seen her on the computer until the small hours of the morning. Research for the article had taken her to several European universities. Now at the end of January, she was going to give a presentation to the European Society of Haematology in Bern. It was no wonder she felt so tired.

Like many doctors, she was her partners' worst patient (and vice versa). While she routinely would stick various sharps into patients as an essential part of their treatment, she intensely disliked having similar sharps stuck in her. Sometimes she would pass out, which generally made the treatment of her ailments rather simpler for her partners. She would give it until she got back from Bern before she would mention it to Russ. Surely, she would be better by then. The last thing she wanted was Russ sticking sharp objects into her.

Chapter 5

Saturday, 14th December 2013

Christian Salway was amazed at what he had achieved in the few weeks that he had been at Strathcadden Academy. Academically he was rapidly being recognised as a potential highflyer. He had worked very hard to catch up, and his teachers were delighted at his progress. He was delighted not to be taunted as a swot because he wanted to achieve. He had been accepted by Aidan's and Ewan's friends and had been somewhat adopted by the Walker family. As his mother had to work over Christmas and New Year, he was going to be with the Walkers and, for the first time in his life, have a proper family Christmas.

Christian never imagined himself as a sportsman and athlete. He had been playing badminton for just a few weeks, and now he was in the senior squad, about to take part in a junior national competition. And he was training regularly with the school cross-country team.

He had been brought up in an area where there was only one sport – football. And participation was to turn on the wide-screen plasma TV on a Saturday afternoon. Playing football professionally was all the youngsters of his age wanted to do. They would be paid more in a week than most people in Carlsborough or Beckton would be in a year. They would get rat-arsed in Tanswold. If you did not support Carlsborough, you were a nobody.

Wild horses would not drag him to the footy pitch again. A well-meaning but superficial tutor at the sixth form college in Beckton suggested he should ingratiate himself with his tormentors by joining in with their kickabouts. Not a good idea. He was useless. Notwithstanding, he was roped into the college team as goalkeeper, and they lost 9 – 0 at home. The whole game served

to remind its crowd that it was at the very grass roots of football. It was rubbish.

As for the goalkeeper for the college side, his effectiveness was similar to the worms under the grassroots. He was booed off the pitch. His humiliation was complete, and even those few students in the college who had feelings for him ribbed him about it. They did not mean it, of course, but the effect they had on him was the same as treating a graze with rough sandpaper. The home defeat was so catastrophic that it provided some entertainment for his tutors in the staffroom. And the Principal made some “funny” comments about it in an assembly. He had responded by giving her a cold stare, known as “the look”. She had berated him publicly for being such an embarrassment to the college. As for the tormentors, they had a field-day.

As for rugby, he just took one look at Samuel Fulton, the academy’s captain of the senior rugby squad, and thought better. He might as well have stood in the south-bound track of the Great Central main line to stop one of the immense freight trains hauled by a “Twin tri-bo” electric locomotive. He had been told that the bigger they are, the harder they fall. But they would probably fall on him and smash him to pieces. Christian had spent a long time in two different hospitals, and he had no intention whatever of going back into another.

Although the school looked a bit like Hogwarts, that was the only similarity. He was still getting used to being called “Salway” by the teachers, although the suffix “-laddie” seemed to soften it. Christian was well used to being called “Salway” by his fellow students at The Grange, and Beckton Sixth Form College. There it was prefixed by a belched “Eh”. At least the girls had it as well, “Talbot-lassie!” And he was getting used to the kilt.

Back in Beckton, they would certainly have laughed at him playing badminton, that is, if they knew what badminton was. Most

kids of his age in the area in which he had lived were getting overweight from too much operation of the TV remote, and the junk food diet. Since his mother had a medical training, she knew too much about the effect that junk food had and ensured that her son had a proper and decent diet. As for running, the villains could leg it just enough to get away from the coppers, who would collapse in a heap about two or three seconds before the villains did. If any of the coppers were fit, the arrest was much more likely. But for those kinds of people, arrest was an occupational hazard, as was the court appearance, the community service, or the Antisocial Behaviour Order. The ASBO was a badge of honour, an accessory that made them “real ’ard”.

He was different because he was skinny and had his hair long in a place where most men were overweight and had shaved heads. Even the women looked like men. Christian had a brain which he used. There they did not think it at all cool; they aspired to non-excellence. And they hated anyone who was different. He was different because he hated sex. He had seen pornography and found it utterly repulsive. And they called him gay and hated him for it. And when they had put gay porn onto his computer, they had told the police who arrested him. And that was when he tried to top himself and almost got sectioned. And they told everyone and anyone that he was a loony. And they hated him so much that they had tried to kill him.

Here, the kids were kind. For Christian Salway, Aidan and Ewan Walker were not just friends; they were the brothers he had never had. He missed mum, of course, but she had to work all hours to pay for moving up to Edinburgh and contribute towards his boarding. He would get a job in the summer to help her.

He wanted her to come up to Corscadden. It was so much nicer than Sciennes – and incomparable with Beckton or Carlsborough. If he heard emergency vehicle sirens at all, it was to help someone who had pranged their car on the main road. The air was fresh and did not reek of chemicals. People would not fill your face in because you looked at them in the wrong way or were different in some way. Since Christian had only a slight build, he was different to the obese generations that populated his area. As well as the bullying at school, he had been assaulted. In Beckton he had been a prisoner in his own home. Here in Corscadden, he could go into the town after school and at weekends. And other Caddies he met would ask him with genuine interest how he was settling in.

He owed so much to Aidan and Ewan who had befriended him. He loved Aidan as a brother. In other words, for the first time in many years, Christian felt safe and wanted.

He was very much wanted by the Strathcadden Academy cross-country team, about to compete in his first race.

Christian was among friends, in his running gear, ready to compete in the *Sliverside Trail*, a tough 10 k that involved about 500 metres of climb. As captain of the host team, Aidan had devised the route, and had set it out, with marshals (volunteers from the students and staff) directing the competitors at various points on the way. John the Jannie (with his...ae...vannie) had humped much of the stuff and placed all the signs.

The wind whipped about their legs as they picked up their numbers and pinned them on. They went to the start line with a couple of hundred others. Aidan and Ewan both hugged Christian as they reached the start outside the Sports Centre.

Mr Mitchell, who was once a fell runner in Yorkshire, sounded an air-horn, and Christian found himself in a seething but fast flowing mass of humanity. He could see Aidan and Ewan

about fifty metres ahead, and they had already broken away from the crowd. And Christian was by now picking up the pace, and he was moving his way up the field.

It was a tough and competitive race.

Towards the end, a small but enthusiastic crowd of supporters was urging the runners on. The last push, but a competitor from another team was pushing Christian all the way and he was still there. The taped path was narrowing to the finish funnel, and Christian got there just before the other bloke. He saw Ewan and Aidan sitting on the grass still panting after their exertion and aimed for them. He had just beaten Jamie Clutton from Dallennan Harriers by 0.67 seconds and collapsed onto his friends in a panting heap.

Christian's heart was by now wanting to burst through his chest, and he gasped for breath, sitting on the ground like a winded cheetah whose prey had got away. Both Aidan and Ewan were hugging him. Both were bubbling in breathless excitement, "You were twenty-second out of two hundred and fifteen! Your time was 44 minutes and 12 seconds!"

Christian was now getting his breath back, and his heart was no longer trying to escape from his ribcage. After a couple of minutes, he could actually say something simple and coherent, "Thanks, guys."

Christian got round to thinking about his friends. He asked, "How did you get on Aidy?"

"I came in third and Eejay came in fifth, ten seconds behind me."

"That's great!" replied Christian.

“You were great as well, Chris. You were only three minutes behind us. Your first race! You need to warm down, else you won’t be able to move tomorrow. We’ll get our tops on first.”

The three boys put on their sweatshirts before they got too cold. They were still breathing heavily as they went through several rounds of stretches, before flopping down onto the grass in a warm steaming huddle. They went to join the supporters who were encouraging the others home. Karen Lawlor was the first of the Caddie Lassies home, followed by others of the team. It was almost dark by the time the stragglers came in, including one or two of the PE staff from Strathcadden Academy. Marshals were bringing down the signposts, while John the Jannie was picking up the stuff in his wee vannie.

Strathcadden Academy was the winning junior (under 18) team for both men and women, while Dallennan Harriers were the winners overall. As Christian looked at the results list, he could not believe it, twenty-second out of two hundred and fifteen. He was not as fast as Aidan or Ewan, but he had only been playing the game for a couple of weeks, and he had run faster than ninety percent of the field, including experienced runners like James Clutton of Dallennan Harriers. As for Aidan and Ewan Walker, that is where the sibling rivalry expressed itself. Neither would give any quarter to the other while on the course, nor for that matter, on the badminton court.

That evening, Joby cooked the supper. All sat around the table in the kitchen bubbling away with excitement about the day’s achievement, especially for Christian. Both Joby and Mary were bowled over by how much Christian’s confidence had come on since their sons had adopted him. They were so proud to have sons who gave themselves so selflessly to others. While many of Joby’s colleagues had children, who showed every teenage angst and sibling rivalry, Aidan and Ewan just seemed so at ease with

each other. Their rivalry was entirely through sport, but good sportsmen they were in the old-fashioned way.

While Mary was an outstanding doctor, her skills at cooking were not that refined. Joby was not bad in the kitchen.

Aidan and Ewan had benefitted greatly from their home-economics lessons and would come back bubbling with enthusiasm to practise what they had learned. They could cook up a treat based on what they had done at school. Christian's cooking, learned at his mother's knee, was something else. The kitchen of Brewster house was normally very much the boys' domain. Joby and the three boys could out-eat a horse, but remained very skinny, partly due to their high metabolism, and partly due to their active sporting lifestyle. Mary enjoyed good food and regretted not being very good at producing it.

Although she had not taught her sons their culinary expertise, she had been very influential in getting them to love culture, music, art, and literature. It helped that Joby had installed in the drawing room a very high specification Hi-Fi system, equipment that he had saved up for and bought as a student. The bay window in the drawing room in Brewster house was the stage set for two loudspeakers that looked like superior electric fires. (This was not surprising as their manufacturers had bought a job lot of cases for the electric fires when that particular product had been a commercial flop.) On one occasion, the infant Ewan had experimented with sticking a small screwdriver into the case while music was playing. The resulting firework display was matched by the fireworks from his father. Although the speaker was repaired, the hole and scorch mark remained thirteen years later.

A few days later, the infant Ewan repeated the words that his father had used to his mother and grandparents to be told, "That was not nice." And Joby got his ear bent by his mother,

sisters, and his wife for using such horrible words in front of the children.

Joseph and Mary Walker owned a very large collection of vinyl LP records which occupied three tall cabinets in the drawing room. Joby had built the cabinets (like much of the furniture in Brewster House) in his workshop in the garage. They had both amassed the records as students in the late nineteen eighties, just as the compact disc was knocking vinyl off its pedestal. These were played on a record deck of very high quality that was mounted on a shelf that was well out of the way of little fingers belonging to the infants Walker. It was at such a height that when the Masters Walker could get anywhere near it, they would be sensible enough not to mess it up.

A concession had been made to the CD by the presence of a high-quality CD deck. The whole system did what it was designed to do, namely, to give the Walker family hours of pleasure in a wide range of music from classical to modern-day rock. Joby particularly liked the progressive rock of the late nineteen seventies and early nineteen eighties. And the music had been inspirational in the talents that both Aidan and Ewan had developed.

Now Joby had put a record on the record deck, and sat in his “listening chair”, while Mary and the three boys were on a long settee. Her sons snuggled up to her, and Chris snuggled up to Aidy. She smiled at them and said “Softies.” She felt so much joy in the lovely young men that were her sons, and this beautiful young man they had taken in under their wing.

There was something about Mum that was not quite right. Aidan did not know what it was. She looked tired, but she was a hard-working doctor and was particularly busy at the moment. Surely doctors were good at diagnosing themselves if they were ill and making themselves better?

Chapter 6

Wednesday, 25th December 2013

It was a sad fact that in his seventeen years Christian Salway had never experienced a family Christmas. His grandparents had joined an independent evangelical church with a fundamentalist, puritanical, and dominant pastor from the USA, and neither showed much interest in their grandson. This was not because they did not like having a grandson, but more because they were embarrassed about the circumstances of his conception and birth. As for his natural father, presumably he was now about forty, and had a small brood of Christian's half-brothers and sisters. Or was he a boomerang man?

Back on the vast and soulless estate where he had lived on the outskirts of Beckton-on-Sower, Christmas was about total self-indulgent hedonism. Obese and shaven headed men would pour into the boozer as soon as it opened and stay there until throwing out time. It was not much different to most other days. Others would stuff themselves on cheap Xmas food and beer bought from a cheap supermarket at Barton Chadwick. After that they would flop behind the plasma screen and watch *Mary Poppins* or the *Sound of Music* both of which had been screened every Christmas since before his mother was born. Some would fall asleep, snoring, belching, and farting in turn. Others would get grumpier as the alcohol coursing in their blood was converted to acetaldehyde, bringing on the thumping headache that formed the bulk of their hangover.

Often there would be some massive family argument. He had seen it as a kid when the neighbours opposite had had a massive set-to. He did not know what it was about, but he was frightened by it. Like Aidan, Christian hated arguments. He would rather hide than fight.

Last Christmas in Beckton, his “mates” had come round to the flat and tormented him and Mum. By the time the Sowerland Police arrived, they had got bored and dispersed. The policemen had even told Mum that she would be best advised to move to a new house somewhere completely different so that she would not need to bother them in the future. And that was one of the many incidents that had made Mum think about moving to Edinburgh. It had all been part of the bullying to which Chris had been subjected in Beckton over the past five years.

The police were slow and inefficient about getting Anti-Social Behaviour Orders taken out against Chris’s tormentors. By the time the ASBO was granted, Christian was depressed enough to consider suicide. However that would be a slap in the face for his mother, who had given herself so selflessly to his nurture.

As far as a Christmas with his family was concerned, the one last year was no different. Often Mum had to work; people didn’t stop being ill because it was Christmas Week. Sometimes they were ill because it was Christmas. Either they would overload their bodies with rich food, and this would clog up their arteries, or they would get so drunk that they ended up with alcohol poisoning. Some would celebrate the Season of Good Will by taking some obnoxious chemical that would send them on the trip of a lifetime, often a ticket to Hell and back. For a few, the journey was one-way only. Some simply fell ill and needed hospital treatment to get better.

Others would drive far too fast in their cars and end up off the road, or, even worse, hitting other people who were simply minding their own business.

Christian was now with a family for the first time where there was a mother, father, and the two young men who had befriended him at his time of greatest need. And he was going to enjoy the company of the wider family. And he was snuggled up

with Aidy, with a great sense of warm contentment. Even though Brewster House was not an easy house to heat, there was warmth of a different kind, the warmth of a harmonious and sweet-natured family. Ewan was already up, making breakfast for his parents.

Despite his name, Christian was not at all religious. His mother used to go to church but was somewhat looked down on by others. It was not actively hostile, but it was more of a patronising indifference. Christian had tried to join in as a child. The other children accepted him but were discouraged by their parents from having too much to do with “that boy who didn’t have a father”.

Certainly, Christian was never invited to their houses, and they were discouraged from going to his. As Christian was a particularly intelligent and sensitive boy, it hurt him greatly. As he grew older, the fact that the church was holding fast to such Nineteenth Century views at the start of the Twenty-First did not impress him. He knew about Jesus of Nazareth and his preaching about love, but he saw precious little of it there. If this was a foretaste of Heaven, he really did not want to spend Eternity there.

While Christian had, when pressed, stated that he was a humanist, he disliked the methods of the Evangelical Wing of Atheism. Also, he knew that God was about somewhere and somehow. And that God was not very pleased with him. He declared Hell to be so much mediaeval superstition, but if God wasn’t that pleased with him, he would be going to the Hot Place. Indeed, a man in Carlsborough was preaching about Hell, Fire, and Damnation, and he had told Christian that he would be the first into the fiery furnace.

But after breakfast, he was going to church for the Christmas Day Service. For a young man who had impeccable manners, it was unthinkable for him to refuse. He was going with his best friends whose gentle kindness and humanity were to him

true humanism. He could see that the Walker family were Christian, but they never forced it on him. It came up in conversation, not as pious platitudes, but as naturally as what birds there were in the garden. For one of Aidan's many talents was as an amateur wildlife photographer.

The Walkers had kitted him out with a kilt of Sawyer Tartan, since there was no tartan for the Salway name. And Christian was rapidly developing his sense of identity as a Caddie. Although he had only been there a few weeks, he was truly feeling at home in Corscadden. If he never went back to Sowerland, it would be too soon. And there were many of his new friends who were converging on St Columba's Church, the large church in the town centre. He immediately felt welcome and several of his new friends were chatting eagerly.

The church, although two hundred and fifty years old, was a bright and warm building inside. It had been tastefully refurbished with comfortable seating a few years before. The new lighting enhanced the architectural features in a way that was most pleasing. Christian remembered little about the service, except that Aidan was jumped on by the minister to play the organ as the regular organist was not feeling well that morning. Mr McEwan preached the sermon, a thoughtful but humorous meditation on the true meaning of Christmas. Some of Mr McEwan's word-pictures were quite close to his own experience.

Christian had heard about Jesus, but how could he relate to this son of God, who was this remote and uninterested figure? He had heard God described as supreme, a deity, and divinity. There were lots of long words that meant little to him. When he last went to church with Mum, an American evangelist had preached a long and homophobic sermon that included snide references to men who were effeminate, humanists, and those born out of wedlock. The man quoted a lot of Shakespearean sounding texts that were meaningless to Christian. Some people were glaring at him, and

the preacher's eyes seemed to drill straight into Christian and his mother. Christian returned the look which goaded the man even more. Christian again had been left in no doubt that if it had existed, he would be heading for the Hot Place.

The Walker Family had somewhat enlarged as they returned to Brewster House. Aidan and Ewan's grandparents and aunts were joining them for lunch, Jenny and Sarah with their husbands. While nominally lunch, it was going to be in the late afternoon. The kitchen was going to be the boys' room. The grown-ups were to make their own entertainment in the Drawing Room. Joby and Mary were banned from the kitchen, unless fetching their guests their nibbles and wine.

Christian was now *chef de cuisine*, conducting the many movements of the concert of fine food for the coming feast, with Aidy and Eejay as his supporting acts. This suited Mary to the ground, not just because she was challenged in the culinary department, but also, she didn't want to over-do it. She was feeling better. It must have been just a low-level dose of flu she could not shake off. As for Joby, he was going to be the sociable host for his mum, dad, sisters, and husbands. As for *Mary Poppins*, she was not going to get a look-in. The sound of music would come from the much-cherished record deck, amplifier, and loudspeakers (complete with the hole and scorch mark that the infant Ewan had put in the right hand one of the pair at the turn of the millennium).

While the adult company of the house were enjoying the conviviality in the drawing room, Christian was now in the dining room teaching his charges how to lay a table with silver service, a skill that he had learned at The Hermitage Country House Hotel in Tanswold. He was doing the cooking properly and it was going to be served out properly and elegantly as well. The Walkers were a family known for their elegance.

And so it proved. Dinner was even more successful than Christian had hoped. His new apprentices at silver service followed their instructions to the letter. And he received acclaim from all round the table for the excellence of his culinary skills. He was not so much as an extra mouth to feed, but an artist feeding the existing mouths with a symphony of superb flavours. Each course had its own twist that made the eating ever more pleasurable. Unlike his previous experience of Xmas excess in Beckton, Christian appreciated the way that the Walker family enjoyed their food with elegance. While all felt satisfied, gluttony was not in it, and when all retired to the drawing room at the end of the meal, Christian was delighted that he had given the Walkers the best Christmas present he could have possibly given. They had been so good to him over the past few weeks. Now he had given back in return.

“Chris,” said Ewan as they loaded the dishwasher, “that was wonderful. We’ve never had a meal like that before. Usually something goes wrong. Last year we were at Grandma’s and Granddad’s, and she burned the bread sauce and dropped the sprouts on the floor. Granddad had to calm her down. Three years ago, Mum forgot to turn the oven on for the turkey. It was all Dad’s fault for putting her off.”

“We did it in style as well, Eejay,” Aidan added. “Chris, you were the star.”

Christian smiled gently and self-effacingly. It was a new experience for lots of people giving him acclamation. His mother did it, but until now, precious few others had. And he appreciated the encouragement from his friends, and the other gentle people who were in Brewster House. The only other thing he could wish for was that Mum was here to enjoy it as well.

Although the conversation over the kitchen sink and dishwasher would have made very boring television, the gentle love

and care in Brewster House was a real boost to him. And he did not care about boring television. He had been brought up to be good-mannered and did not find bad manners to be in the least bit funny.

It had been an excellent Christmas lunch. Around the table there had been all sorts of warmth, mirth, and conviviality. Now the table had been cleared, and “Aunt Martha”, the family name for the dishwasher, was busy at its first of several loads.

The Walker family conviviality transferred from the dining room to the drawing room, a large, comfortable, and airy room, made more comfortable by the modern wood-burning stove that belted out the heat. As he finished taking loads in from the dining room through to the kitchen, Aidan noticed that Aunt Jenny had fallen asleep in one of the armchairs. The Christmas pudding Chris had made had clearly worked its magic. He could feel its warm glow in his own stomach. As he went into the kitchen, Ewan and Christian were finishing off the pans. Aidan couldn’t help but notice how tired his mother looked.

“Mum, you look all in,” he said, “are you OK?”

“Just a bit tired, that’s all,” replied his mother.

“Go and join the others. Ewan, Christian and I will finish off.”

“But...”

“No buts, Mum,” said Aidan firmly. His mother had said that to him plenty of times in the last seventeen years. “Go and snuggle up to Dad. We kept that place for you.”

Aidan escorted his mother through to the drawing room and made sure that she did as she was told. He did not leave her until he was satisfied that she was cuddled up to his father, who put his arm round her. The deep and genuine affection between

his parents always touched Aidan. In the early part of the Twenty-First Century, so many people gave up on each other at the first sign of trouble. He knew how many kids at school had parents who had separated.

“Thanks for all you, Chris, and Eejay have done, Aidy,” said his father. “Lunch was great. Gran’s asleep already and so is Aunt Jenny. A nice rest in here, then shall we go for a short walk before tea?”

“Cool.”

“We are just going to go upstairs for a few minutes; we will be down.”

Mary watched Aidan leave the room. As a teenager, she was something of a tomboy, but she would have given her eye-teeth for a boy like that. For Aidan was her model for her teenage idol. He looked so elegant in the blue Tweed jacket she had bought a few weeks ago. The red lambs-wool jumper went so well with the jacket and tie. She was particularly proud of her choice of Walker Michael Tartan for the kilts the boys were wearing. Aunt Jenny had bought both the boys elegant and expensive shoes; Ewan was so proud of his that he got Aidy to photograph him that morning, and he had sent pictures to all his friends at once.

And Christian fitted in so well. The boys had befriended him, a shy seventeen-year-old who had just joined them at school. He looked younger than seventeen, almost girlish with his long hair. Although he was originally from Northumberland, he had got used to wearing the kilt. Although not dressed as elegantly as her sons, Mary appreciated that he had put in the effort.

Mary snuggled up to her tomboy’s toy-boy, and like most others, was asleep.

As Aidan went across the hall to the kitchen, he could not help feeling worried about his mother. She had looked tired for a

few weeks. And that was not like her, because she was a woman so full of energy. But she would always assure him and Ewan that she was alright, just a bit tired. She was a doctor, so she should know. And doctors would heal themselves, wouldn't they?

Aidan and Ewan Walker were not only brothers, but each other's best friend. Yes, as small boys they had occasionally squabbled, but that was firmly dealt with by their mother, to whom they were both very close. Aidan, who was eighteen months older than Ewan, was initially very jealous of his baby brother. The sibling rivalry had expressed itself in the toddler-tantrums of the "terrible twos". By the time Aidan was five, he had become very protective towards his little brother and a very deep bond between the boys had formed. Now, as Aidan was in his last year at the Strathcadden Academy, he would be going to university, which would mean he would have to leave Ewan at home. As the two boys were inseparable, this would be hard.

Aidan had put his mother's state of health out of his mind as he, Christian, and Ewan went upstairs.

The scene of this conviviality, Brewster House, was a sizeable Victorian detached villa in a large and mature garden. There was a curved driveway to the front of the house, which faced west, to the side of which there was an extensive array of rhododendrons that flowered prolifically in the spring. The front door had a small but perfectly formed portico and was topped with a semi-circular fanlight. Inside was a spacious hallway from which a staircase to the left curved elegantly to the landing. To the left lay a large dining room, while straight ahead was the door to a substantial kitchen diner. Off the kitchen there was a large utility suite which had storage rooms off it. One of these had been converted to a wet room, often used by Aidan, Ewan, and assorted friends when coming back from a run.

Slightly to the right was a corridor that ran to the back of the house. Almost at once a side corridor led to the drawing room, a large dual aspect room that had two bay-windows. It also had a modern wood-burning stove that made a substantial contribution to the warmth of the house in the winter. Further down the corridor there was a large study with two desks, one for Joby and one for Mary. Both had computers so that each could do work from home. Beyond the study lay the boys' games room which they used to do their homework, play games, watch videos, and socialise with their friends. At the end of the corridor was a door that led to the garden.

Outside, behind the house, was a double garage. Originally one side was for the car, and the other side contained Joby's big-boy's toys, woodworking machinery that made a lot of noise and mess, while using a large amount of electricity. From his workshop, Joby produced beautifully crafted furniture that adorned much of the house. Above the garage, in the roof-space, was a substantial room for the boys to make a large amount of noise. Ewan and his friends had formed a band, and they practised there. Not surprisingly, it was called the noisy room. The noisy room also had a small kitchen and a bathroom. There were also two rooms that could have been used as bedrooms.

Upstairs, Brewster House was as spacious as it was downstairs. The wide curving staircase led to a wide landing. To the left was the master bedroom, which was above the dining room and looked out over the driveway. It had an en-suite bathroom and a dressing room. On the other side of the landing there was a guest room above the drawing room. It was dual aspect, with a bay window that overlooked the garden. Next to the front guest room there was a corridor that ran to the back of the house. Off the corridor to the left there was a staircase to the two smaller attic bedrooms. There were two bedrooms beyond the stairs, which had a door between them. These were occupied by Aidan and Ewan,

and Christian when he was there. To the right there was another large guest room that was also dual aspect, looking over the large and spacious garden.

In between the two guest rooms was the family bathroom which could be accessed from the corridor, or either guest room in a Jack and Jill arrangement. It was a spacious room converted from a bedroom many years before. There was a large Victorian style free-standing claw-footed bath and a matching wash-hand basin. A bidet of similar style had also been installed. There was also a shower cubicle in which the occupant could experience a shower as powerful as a jet spray.

In pride of place was “The Throne”, as Granddad put it, a large Victorian lavatory obtained from the architectural salvage yard in Corscadden. It was a lavatory, not a toilet or a WC. Both the pedestal and cistern had been manufactured at least a hundred and forty years previously by none less than Thomas Crapper of London. Clearly designed for an outstanding gentleman’s bathroom, it had been evicted many years before when the householder had done up that particular room. It had spent the intervening years in exile in an outhouse of a workshop. Now fully restored, the apparatus was ready to do another hundred years’ duty in the bathroom of another gentleman’s residence.

It was nothing like The Wests at Strathcadden Academy, other than being of the same era. Although the lavvies in The Wests were nearly as old, they were utilitarian objects which added to the general noisome air of the place.

The Throne was aptly named. It was shaped like a giant soup tureen that would not have been out of place on the dining room table in a stately home. The front formed a spout, the tip of which was moulded into a dolphin. The dolphin was leaping vertically in a way that could have been considered most improper. It was topped with a large wooden seat, mounted on two ornate

wrought-iron brackets bolted to the wall. It could have easily accommodated a rhinoceros.

The user perched on the seat and was firmly based, with no risk of sliding, as could be the case with more modern apparatus. But to reinforce the point that its purpose was to remove what had been eaten a day or so before, rather than to serve it, the pedestal was coupled to a high-level cistern and the whole apparatus was designed to be seen and heard to do a really good flushing job. As well as *Thos Crapper, London*, the cistern proudly carried the legend *The Cloudburst* and the pedestal was branded *The Colossus*. Its appetite knew no bounds, as Ewan had found out when he had flushed away his trousers as a four-year-old. In the Walker household, there had never been any worry about what *The Colossus* could swallow. It had removed material for one hundred and thirty years without complaint and would continue to do so as long as Brewster House stood.

The Colossus had also been placed by the window. Although it had been intended to put frosted glass to protect the modesty of the user, this good intent had been forgotten over the years. Therefore, the users of *The Colossus* could enjoy un-paralleled views over the garden, into Corscadden, and up Strathcadden. When flushed, its roar was characteristic and the quarter-peal from the copper pipes as *The Cloudburst* refilled could be heard throughout the house.

Mary had furnished the room with tasteful items and there were pot-pourris and other scents of the most exquisite kinds. A visit to *The Colossus* was a most regal experience.

One notorious family memory recorded that a seven-year-old Aidan fell down (was pushed?) into the depths of *The Colossus*. Ewan had tried to flush him away, but fortunately even *The Colossus* refused that particular offering. A thoroughly drenched Aidan had

to be rescued, and Ewan got a good telling off and time on the naughty stair.

Outside was a large garden with extensive lawns, borders, and vegetable beds. In one corner was a trampoline for the boys to burn off excess energy. There were trees that Ewan climbed often, with the ease of a squirrel. Aidan was scared of heights, so did not join in. There was an extensive water-garden that Joby had made some fifteen years before.

The garden was the place in which the tom-boy Mary Walker showed her girly side. She was a keen gardener, having picked up much gardening lore and wisdom from both her father and her mother-in-law. She jealously protected it from Joby. His job was to mow the lawns. He had a powerful rotary machine, a ride-on mower, and for the posh bits, a high-quality cylinder machine. These and the noisy big-boy's toys had displaced the cars from the garage.

Brewster House was in Priestfield Avenue, one of Coruscadden's most sought-after addresses. There were thirty large houses that were similar to Brewster House but had individual features that made each distinct from the others. They had similarly large gardens. They had been made for the owners of the mills and other companies that were the economic lifeblood of Coruscadden when the railway came. Some had been turned into flats. Some had smaller houses built in their gardens over the years. Despite the generally up-market nature of Priestfield, the large houses could be bought at about the same price as a flat in Edinburgh's New Town. The money from a small flat in London could secure you a space on Priestfield Avenue.

The Twelve Days of Christmas have long helped people to get through the gloom of the deep Mid-Winter. For the Walker Family, it was a time of harmony and solace in the delights of the

family at its best, a functional family that would make the dulllest of dull television but would be uplifting to the most jaded. No competitive prima-donnas here. No alpha males proclaiming their territories. After Boxing Day, Granddad and the Aunts had gone back to work. Charles Walker led his business by example and expected his senior managers to do just the same. If his staff were going to be in, so was he. The Christmas Sales were particularly important for Walker Bros.

Christian had never made the connection between the Walker family and the large department store in the centre of Corscadden. Aidan and Ewan had never boasted of the family fortune to their friends, as both thought that bragging about wealth was oafish. However, Christian was about to make the connection for himself. So impressed was Charles with Christian's efforts at Christmas that he called the young man in for an interview, as a result of which he was taken on for a holiday and weekend job to work in the all-day restaurant at Walker Bros. It was a popular venue for the customers and was one of the most profitable departments of the entire store.

Christian soon proved that he was more than just a Saturday boy by his competence at serving the customers promptly and attentively with his calm and friendly personality.

In the meantime, Aidan and Ewan were modelling for the new stock that was going to be on sale in the spring. In Brewster House Joby and Mary appreciated the quiet days to prepare for their conferences at the end of January. The only sound to be heard was the tapity-tapity of computer keyboards, or the spluttering of the coffee-machine in the kitchen.

In the evening Brewster House came alive. The boys would come in from playing badminton in the Strathcadden Sports Centre after work. They would bubble away with light-hearted and rapid banter in the kitchen as they prepared the evening meal. Joby

would go in and join them, showing that in his thirty-nine-year-old professor's body, there was the brain of an active and lively teenager.

Mary was still working on her presentation for the European Society of Haematology in Bern. Each treatment management regime that she was covering required detailed research amongst learned articles in the literature. There were lots of statistics that she had to collate on a spreadsheet and present the data as graphs. If she were not on her computer in the Study, she would have everything on her laptop in the drawing room, while her highly active brain was being soothed by a CD of classical music. The LPs were Joby's department. It was at times like this that she was glad she was challenged with culinary matters, and the boys did it all. But with the raucous laughter from the kitchen, there were also times that she wished that Joby would grow up a bit or at least put a sock in it.

With Mary's presence in the kitchen, the conversation would have its cultural tone raised somewhat. Christian had initially found the dining conversation of the Walkers rather highbrow. He felt rather ignorant at first. Instead of wallowing in ignorance as they would in Beckton, he threw in what he had learned with Mr McEwan and gained a deepening insight to Scottish literature (or for that matter whatever else this highly intelligent family was talking about). Also, somewhat to Christian's surprise, the family were quite socialist. Their socialism had its roots in their Christian faith, which did not seem that far removed from Christian's own socialist views that were rooted in his belief in the inherent goodness of Humankind.

Christian's own experience of rich people was not a pleasant one. Back in the Beckton area, they were brash, snobbish, and flaunted their wealth to draw attention to themselves in a vulgar and narcissistic manner. They had friends in high places. But they were fair-weather friends. Should any of their number fall

on hard times, as many did in the crash of 2007, all contact would be quietly (or not so quietly) lost. Nobody ever mentioned them again in polite society, until, of course, they had bounced back and made themselves richer than before. Now Christian had added two and two together and realised that the Walker Family Trust was not the construct of some faded and patronising group of dogooders from the Victorian era, but a modern and gentle family who was keen to share its good fortune with its community. If this was not “loving your neighbour as you love yourself”, he did not know what was.

There he was again, going on about the Bible.

And Ewan had just rung his boyfriend on his mobile phone to wish him a happy Christmas. Jordan was spending Christmas with his dad and his grandparents in Keillor.

Christian had not seen his mother for some weeks. She had had to work all God’s hours in a busy hospital and had been in all over the holiday week.

It was a natural thing for Laura Salway to venture to Coruscadden to see her son and to meet this lovely family who had taken him under their wing. And she did so at Hogmanay, at the same time as Mary’s parents, who had spent Christmas at home with Uncle Alex. Laura knew how the Scots celebrated Hogmanay and was thrilled to spend it with not just one, but two proper Scottish families. It was great fun. And she found Joseph Walker rather dishy. Aidan looked so like his father. And Ewan looked so like his mother. Both were outstandingly handsome young men. Somehow Christian seemed to have more than a passing resemblance to Aidan and Joby...

Chapter 7

Friday, 3rd January 2014

All good things come to an end, and on the Friday after New Year, Laura and Christian went back to the flat in Sciennes. It was then that both Aidan and Ewan realised how close they had become to their new friend. It was only going to be for a few days, but they missed him and told themselves not to be so damned ridiculous. A good run would do them good. Chris would be on the early train from Edinburgh on Monday morning, with other Caddies who stopped at the school during the week. Christian enjoyed the weekend with his mother. The flat was near The Meadows, the large park that is a feature of the Southside and was a superb place for him to run.

The winter of 2013 to 2014 was exceptionally wet; in some places it was the wettest on record. There were terrible floods in the South of England and for much of January and the early part of February the South and West coasts had been lashed by storms of incredible ferocity. In the mountains and hills of Scotland, there was a lot of snow above four hundred metres. Therefore, running in the hills became somewhat restricted for Ewan and Aidan, so the bottom of the valley would have to do. They would get their father to go along. He had clearly softened up as he got further into middle age. He would occasionally wear running tights under his shorts, which both Aidan and Ewan shunned. Yet he could still keep up with them for the first couple of kilometres. After that he would start to flag, before giving up and trotting home. He was entitled to; they were half his age. And for someone nearly forty years old, he was pretty fit. Their mother tried but hardly got to the end of Priestfield Avenue. There was definitely something not right with her.

Other times they would drag Joby to the Strathcadden Sports Centre, to play Badminton. This time their father could give them a good game for their money. Not for nothing had he been in the Edinburgh University badminton team in the late nineteen eighties. On one occasion, Joby and Chris had beaten Aidan and Ewan quite convincingly. Those few days were carefree for the male Walkers, with lots of male bonding between father, sons, and their new friend. As for Dr Mary Fairbairn, the lecture she was preparing for the European Society for Haematology was continuing to take her time, along with the scholarly article she was writing for the Journal of Proceedings. She loved it that the males were bonding so well, but she certainly preferred them to bond outside the house.

And Happy Days were back again. Caddie Laddies and Lassies descended onto Dallennan Road and Dennistoun Avenue from the town, surrounding villages, and beyond. Christian Salway found that he was not the only one who got on the first Corscadden train at Edinburgh's Waverley Station. Like all modern electric trains, it was warm, fast, and smooth, easing him back to life as a Caddie Laddie. He was no longer at all self-conscious about his kilt and navy-blue jacket. If ever there was a place that represented his ideals of gender equality, Strathcadden Academy fitted the bill.

For the staff at Strathcadden Academy, fitting the bill was not exactly what they felt about twilight training they had to do after school. Once school had finished at five o'clock (the school day was longer to allow for sports and other activities after lunch), they trooped more or less grumpily down to the assembly hall (the Old Chapel with its cantankerous organ) for Continuous Professional Development. Some of this could be truly useful, giving teachers new ideas to try out. As Headmaster, Keith

Mitchell was keen for his staff to try out new ideas and take risks. If it did not work, they had had a go. If it did, brilliant! And share it.

On the other hand, it could be dire. Some facilitator would descend from the Flip-chart University. She would soothingly assure the staff that she was a facilitator and that they were the experts on the subject in hand. She would carefully mix the staff up from their departments (“getting you out of your comfort zones”), and dish out creamy-white sheets of A1 and lots of highly coloured felt-tip pens. She would get them to brainstorm words onto the flipchart and reverently place them around the walls of the Old Chapel. On one occasion the old portrait of Dr Cowan framed one such sheet. It would not stick so she pressed a piece of sticky-tack firmly onto the old codger’s nose and there was a small, but quite distinct ripping sound of the canvas below.

As part of the general toughening-up procedure to prepare old-boys of Saint Oswald’s to meet all privations of the British Empire, Dr Cowan regularly reinforced his one-to-ones with up to six strokes of a well-aimed cane. After such one-to-ones, many a boy had wanted to plant rather more than sticky-tack onto Dr Cowan’s hooter.

There would be small group activity to play some kind of game. And the conclusions would be written lovingly onto yet more creamy-white flipchart, to be lovingly and reverently placed on any available surface, while the facilitator cooed and purred at the depth of insight shown by expert professionals. After that, the staff would leave, wondering what they were supposed to do with that, and she would leave in her little car £550 + VAT richer. And the final task in this solemn little ritual was for John the Jannie (without his...ae...vannie) to remove the flipchart paper for recycling and remove little annoying lumps of sticky-tack from the bare-brick walls of the chapel. And there was a tiny little rip and stain on Dr Cowan’s hooter.

An alternative was for a facilitator to stand at an overhead projector facing a screen in a corner of the library. She would read from photocopied acetates that had excerpts from learned articles that were totally illegible to the audience. That she was almost as inaudible to the audience was neither here nor there. Nor did it matter that her audience had no clue about what the research was saying. She still got her £550 + VAT.

Or would it be the woman who treated her audience as primary school children with a PowerPoint and handouts written in **comic sans** font replete with smiley faces? She suggested that the school should be redecorated in garish primary colours, and that all tables and chairs be replaced by beanbags. There was nothing childish about her fee - £550 + VAT.

No, this one was going to be a big one. The fees that the school had paid to previous speakers were a fraction of what this one was going to cost. And other schools were going to be in on the act as well via video-links. Mr Buchan, Director of Education at Buchanan and Kyle of Tonsil Regional Council, had heard that this consultant was keen to demonstrate how ICT could be used to deliver staff training over several sites. The speaker was coming up from the South of England and expected to be put up in a luxury hotel overnight. He gave a long list of equipment that was to be provided at the schools' expense. He demanded an astronomical fee from each participating school. He expected the conference to start at seventeen hundred hours on the dot. Mr Buchan's reaction was to mutter to his secretary, "Who the bloody hell does that man think he is?"

The same reaction came from Mr Mitchell and Mr McEwan when they were called to ask if they could host the event. Strathcadden Academy was, after all, a leading school in the use of Information and Communication Technology.

John the Jannie (with his...ae...vannie) and his assistants had spent the afternoon preparing the stage in the old chapel, including setting up a number of video cameras and a large recording desk. There were three overhead projectors and large screens. There was a lot of mobile phone chatter between Mr Donaldson, the IT systems manager, and his colleagues at Dallennan Academy, Inverlucker Academy, Cardean High School, Kyle of Tonsil High School, Trochanter Junior High School, and Craigmurchie Academy. The idea was that the remote audiences could field questions from their mobiles on *Twitter* or from their laptops through a wireless network. A rock-concert would have taken less time to set up.

In pride of place in the centre of this hi-tech backing act stood a single easel bearing a brand-new flipchart supported by a number of felt-tip markers of different colours.

The teaching staff at Strathcadden had no break but had been enjoined to be down in the chapel at five o'clock prompt for the act to start. It was going to be a good act, with all the equipment that was mounted on every conceivable bracket. Even the stage lighting had been set up fully.

Mr Buchan had arrived that afternoon and had afternoon tea with the Headmaster and his team. Tea with the Headmaster would suggest bone-china cups and saucers with delicate fairy-cakes on doilies. In reality it was coffee in large mugs and a packet of *Hob-nobs*. The only thing missing was the speaker. Now they went down to the chapel while Mr McEwan waited to meet their guest.

At seventeen fifteen, there was a certain amount of uneasy rustling from the audience. And one or two rather uncomplimentary messages were starting to appear on the feedback screen:

I am bored.

When are we starting?

I have better things to do.

Is this a new style of minimalist lecture?

On the dot at seventeen eighteen and thirty-six seconds, a large sports utility vehicle sped up the drive and parked blocking several cars in. The occupant got out, pushing past Mr McEwan in a way that was neither polite nor congenial. McEwan concluded quickly that not only was he drunk but also thought that he recognised Mingy from his time at the Tanswold School Trust. If it were Mingy, he had clearly had a lot of corporate luncheons and was decidedly overweight, bordering on the obese. He had no hair; what little he possessed was close-shaven.

Andy McEwan's suspicions were confirmed when the shaven-headed lump waddled onto the stage without apology for his timekeeping. There was a slight but definite slur in his voice. The audience were somewhat bemused as he reached into his bag and got out a number of cans of lager and put them on a small table.

"I am Anthony Scott, but you may call me Tony. I am going to use this conference to empower you to discover actionable tools and breakthrough strategies to help you leverage the power of ICT, social media, and traditional communications to forge stronger employee engagement, drive bottom-line results, and prove your worth. My purpose is to give you a competitive edge over rivals. I want you to think out of the box. I want you to do some blue-sky thinking, if you are capable of thought at all in these wild parts. Education is a tough, results-led business. It's competitive and most of you look like you are not really dynamic enough to be at the cutting edge to extract the max. No scraps will hit the floor. It's got to be hard; it's got to be competitive..."

No, we are at the coalface. We shift 16 tonnes and what do we get: another day older and deeper in debt.

McEwan sighed as he went to his seat. He remembered Scott's mantra from almost fifteen years before. It had not changed. Scott had told the Headmaster of Tanswold School that he was an old codger and well past it. He had agreed with that assessment of Stoate at the time. However, Andrew McEwan had patched up his many grievances with his old boss. Although the Tanswold School Trust had been wound up in 1998, he still owed it a very deep debt of ingratitude. He had previously locked horns with the loathsome creature in front of him, and he felt that he would do the same before the evening was out. Fifteen years ago, Scott was simply a crude, rude, and obnoxious little man. He was just the same, but he had learned a lot more corporate speak as well as consuming too many corporate luncheons.

To his audience's disgust, Scott spat out his chewing gum onto the stage and put another fresh bit into his mouth. He got well into his patter, "...there are a lot of deliverables that you are going to need to action. You need to have a dynamic leadership team that will move you forward into the twentieth century..."

Hype-synthesis and no deliverables.

It's rude to talk while chewing gum.

My pupils get a detention for chewing gum.

"Excuse me, Tony" said a voice from the audience, "the twentieth century is history; we are well into the twenty-first."

"That's what I mean. I am looking at this place. The fact pattern is that it is hidebound by its heritage, and its leaders have jumped the shark..."

Why don't you jump into a pool full of sharks?

“It doesn’t appear to have come out of the nineteenth. Do you know what a calculator is? Or do you still use the abacus? Are you not in agreeance that you need to get into the computer age? Look at the place we are in now. It’s like Hogwarts. This hall looks like a church. I have no time for mediaeval superstition. I was speaking to the alpha pups in my focus groups. They laughed at me for going. They thought this place was, at the end of the day, some kind of educational mausoleum. You have to go down the road with these.”

He showed a tablet computer. The audience looked at him askance. There was a certain amount of muttering. McEwan was starting to get decidedly hot under the collar. He leant over to the Headmaster and said quietly, “What barrel has this one been scraped from, Keith?”

“I don’t know, Andy. You had better ask Colin. He set this up.”

Scott glared at them and snarled “Don't let me interrupt your little sidebar, gentlemen, but we have 30 more slides to get through here.” Scott stared at the screens. The content was not complimentary:

Is the flipchart just a prop?

Get him off!

I know what an I-pad is. I use one.

“Bully for him,” Scott snarled. He opened a can of lager and drank from it. “I am surprised that anyone in this Babylonian orgy knows what a tablet is, apart from the *Ritalin* that they prescribe to the inbreds in these parts. The tall foreheads here are starting to rub my rhubarb.”

“Is it your normal technique to insult your audiences?” another voice called from within the audience.

“I am being belligerent. I don’t believe in this Kumbaya bullshit. I am base-lining to get you all on-line with this, so your backward organisations are same-paging on this. You need to explore the deep blue ocean of the unlocked potential there is to ensure the strategic aim is to standardise the infrastructures to drive down operating costs through supply-based consolidation and leveraging group spend as well as exploiting best-in-class technologies and practices to provide robust, scalable and agile services with excellent stake-holder experience. You cannot put the toothpaste back in the tube...”

Why don’t you jump into the deep blue ocean?

Get the holder to stick a stake right through his heart.

He doesn’t have a heart. He’s a corporate robot. He knows all the management bollocks.

I know what tube I would put the toothpaste up!

“Look, this is not rocket surgery. You have to think out of the box. There has to be a waterfall from your leaders, and you have to buy in to the buzz.”

I would rather buy into a wasps’ nest.

“That’s typical of the cheap snide comments that are just for a laugh!” Scott realised that he ought to do something with the blank flipchart. He wrote “Key word: Computer.” He fiddled with the laptop for a couple of minutes while he found the file for the key-note presentation. Scott started the display on the central screen. “This will give you a helicopter view of the power of ICT when it gets into your organisational DNA.”

It was a highly slick presentation on corporate ICT communication. It reflected its author’s knowledge of corporate ICT jargon. It also reflected its author’s limitations of spelling, punctuation and grammar. Unfortunately for the staff at the six

other schools, nobody could see the top of the screen. The bottom appeared as a patch of fuzzy light as in an impressionist painting. Scott had never thought to connect his laptop to the video link, nor did he have the software to do so. Instead, he lit a cigarette.

I use a platform when I'm waiting for a train.

When asked about the content, he did not have the knowledge density but made up for it by accusing the questioner of being a Luddite. As for the distant colleagues, they made up for missing the presentation by busying themselves on their keypads.

Jargonaut!

Ignoramus!

Are there any leave-behinds?

This is corporate ICT porn from a PowerPoint Bunny!

A PowerPoint-less pre-mumble!

“More snide comments. They think they’re funny, don’t they? This is not my first rodeo, you know. You have to dynamically reallocate your resources to maximise your intellectual infrastructure. The future is 4G but knowing this area you would think that 2G was pretty smart stuff. Now can we do a stir-fry in your think-woks? I have a quiz for you. Give yourselves ten points if you can say yes to each of these questions. The maximum score is three hundred.”

The quiz consisted of thirty questions that asked participants if they used social media, played cloud-games, and used video-linking software. As a result of bitter experience, the council discouraged its servants from using social media in the line of its work, so it was little surprise that the scores were low. Scott was not at all fazed.

“I am not surprised. Where have you been for the last three years?”

“At Strathcadden Academy.” A ripple of laughter rose from the long-suffering audience.

“That is a typical kind of snide comment for a cheap laugh,” snapped Scott.

“Working my bollocks off to get my students through their exams,” continued the voice. “Can you tell us how we can implement this?”

“I am ignoring that question,” replied Scott petulantly. “Remember, I am the change-agent acting as a catalyst to see you column-shaking by the close of play. I recognise you. You sat on my left and barracked me all through my presentation.”

I can do that anywhere.

“I wasn’t aware that I had been to one of your presentations,” replied Mr Farjeon.

“Well, you did. Two years ago, in Manchester.”

“I have worked at Strathcadden Academy for seven years now. I have had no business to be down in Manchester. Will you apologise?”

Snake venom is a good catalyst.

What’s your quiz? Can we join in?

“I will not apologise. I am getting fed up with this pointless counter-posing. By removing your cubicle walls, we hope to cultivate the opportunity for cross-pollination.”

With the wasps?

I use a cubicle to have a dump. I don’t want the walls removing.

Just right for a lecture that is just so much shit.

The tweets on the *Twitter* feed had risen in intensity to angry squawking like small birds having a commotion in the bushes at the bottom of the garden. And the tone was lowering all the time. And Scott was trying to keep his temper, not helped by the fact that he was by now thoroughly plastered. He opened another can, drank half of it, and let out a loud belch that resonated about the Old Chapel. He excused himself, but not too politely, “I need a Jimmy Riddle. Where is it? In the meantime, you can mesh your synergies.” And he threw down his cigarette end on the floor and scrubbed it with his foot.

While the cat was away, the mice came out to play. The buzz from the audience was a mixture of bemusement, amusement, and outrage. Mr Mitchell was a plain-speaking Yorkshire man who had no time for management-speak. His meetings could be blunt at times but were remarkably free of metaphor. Everyone knew where they were with Keith Mitchell. And he had decided to amuse himself by developing a piece of treeware. On one side he had written the management speak, while on the other side the insults to the audience. The management speak was outdoing the insults by about three to one. He looked round to his colleagues. Mr Buchan, the Director of Education, was looking decidedly embarrassed. Mr McEwan was doing a sterling job at holding his temper.

“A smell test indicates quite clearly to me that there is definitely some pushback from this meeting,” Scott started when he returned. “We need to vector this meeting forward, as it comes to a hard stop at seven. This point is where the rubber meets the road.”

“Tony, you know quite a lot about computing. But do you have any experience at teaching?”

“I am an educational professional with experience of implementing integrated education communication solutions to deliver a range of targeted deliverables. I can vouch for that. One of your high foreheads was at a school I worked at, weren’t you Mr McEwan?” Scott did not realise that he was about to score a massive own goal.

“Aye, you were,” replied McEwan grumpily. “You came as the Bursar’s assistant at my previous school.”

“Oh, how vanilla! He was Financial Director, Mr McEwan, and I was the Financial Manager. You were a Luddite that we got rid of. You were useless and you falsified your exam results. So, we got rid of you. You were just meat and potatoes. You didn’t add value to us.”

It took McEwan all his humanity and Christianity not to go up on stage and deck the speaker. Mr Mitchell came to his rescue. “Mr Scott,” he said quietly, “Mr McEwan has proved himself to be one of our best and most loyal members of staff. He is my Senior Depute. We know about how you and your ilk tried to shaft him. And he was exonerated, and he got a very substantial compensation for your act of libel. Now there is a law on libel and slander in Scotland, so you had better apologise immediately for these highly offensive comments. You are in front of a whole crowd of witnesses here, every one of whom will stand up in court to testify as to what you have just said. Are you prepared to retract that statement?”

“That’s not on my radar tonight,” replied Scott, who emptied the can of lager down his neck. He proclaimed his territory with the vestigial remains of the primeval territorial bellow of the alpha male by letting out simultaneously a loud belch and fart.

I would spit-ball that.

Who are you to teach me how to teach?

Orchestrate 24/7 web-readiness.

“You grey-sourcers are the major players and you need to get off your fat arses to move things forward,” replied Scott. “It’s a funny place this. All those boys in skirts. Is it a drag party here? I would call them transvestites. They are certainly gay. You can’t tell the boys from the girls here.”

Can’t we have a hard-stop now? Can this Meandertal put rubber to the road?

Kilt, you moron! I wear one! Are you calling me a transvestite? Shift your fat carcass up here and I will show you transvestite!

At the same time, Mr Mitchell’s mobile buzzed. As all pretence of manners seemed to have left the Old Chapel, he opened up the e-mail. It had come from Mr Kerr at Inverlucker Academy. *Hi Keith. We have had enough. I cannot allow my staff to be insulted any more like this. Could you pass this on to Colin? Kindest regards, Peter.*

Almost immediately, a tweet came. *Inverlucker going off-line. Over and out.*

“What the fuck?” snapped Scott.

“Quite agree, Tony!”

“I am no longer going to put lipstick on this fucking pig!” Scott shouted. This was the final straw. The audience, who had stoically put up with Scott’s tirade, light on content, dense in corporate jargon, erupted. A slow handclap was followed by booing. And Scott, by now blind drunk, tried to continue, but his car crashed and came to a hard stop. Mr Buchan was now on stage and asked him to leave, which he did, but not before he gave Mr Buchan, the audience, the world, and Uncle Tom Cobley a gobful of abuse.

The major players watched as Scott staggered towards his sports utility vehicle, swearing and taking a swing at a Caddie Laddie who was a boarder. The lad jumped nimbly out of the way and Scott collapsed onto the SUV and fumbled with the keys. Mr Mitchell was not feeling in the least bit sympathetic and got his mobile out to inform the police that a highly drunken driver was taking to the road in a matt black BMW X5, registration: X-ray Delta one three...

Scott slammed the door shut, fumbled with the keys, and managed to start the big car. The four-and-a-half litre engine bellowed into life, and he slammed it into reverse to turn round. In doing so he restyled two cars, one belonging to Mr Buchan, and the other to Mr Mitchell. The car was now pointing roughly in the direction of the way he came in. He could hear angry shouting and swore as he put it to Drive and floored the accelerator pedal. Scott was in too drunken a state to notice that he had not put his headlights on, or that there was a small group of teenage boys and girls making their way back to Asher and Baxter Houses.

He had gone about fifty metres when he noticed a flash of bright yellow on the sports bag of one of the students and he pressed the horn. He yelled an obscenity. The students leapt out of the way just in time. There was a bang as a sports-bag struck the offside mirror and almost immediately another bang as the great car flattened a bollard recently installed by John the Jannie. Scott got out to inspect the damage. It had not occurred to him that he may well have struck at least one of the students.

“Look what you have done to my car!” he yelled. He rounded on the students with revolting invective. The students looked shocked and Christian Salway snapped, “Nobody say a thing! He wants to pick a fight!”

Mr Mitchell and his colleagues were going back into the chapel to apologise to the staff for the evening’s performance.

They heard the commotion and saw exactly what had been going on. “He’s now attacking our bloody students!” shouted Mitchell in his broadest Airedale. He never normally used swearwords. “Mr Scott! Get your bloody hands off them now!”

Like all bullies, Scott was fundamentally a coward and knew to shift his fat carcass when trouble was on the way. And there were several angry major players on the way, and in the distance, he could hear a police siren. The engine of the big car was still running, and he put his foot to the floor again. His mobile was ringing, and he answered it as he sped off. It was unfortunate that the school had a long-established one-way system that had been inherited from Saint Oswald’s. And he tried to exit through the entrance. Not only were there road bumps to restrict the speed of vehicles, but also there was a barrier. He hit the last road bump at about four times the permitted speed, and the suspension could not take it anymore. There was a metallic bang and tinkling as bits of metal showered onto the road. The car started to handle oddly. There was a second crash as the big car smashed through the barrier at the entrance. The suspension collapsed and the big car slid along the road in a shower of sparks. The momentum pushed the car into another vehicle that had two young women in it before pushing the wreckage into another car.

Scott’s hard stop had turned into a literal car crash of major proportions.

Major was the adjective that was applicable to the criminal charges that Anthony John Scott faced as a result of his drunken rage: causing an affray; causing injury by dangerous driving; driving while using a mobile telecommunications device; drunken driving; driving with no insurance; procuring the hire of a motor vehicle by deception; driving while banned; using a false licence; identity theft; causing criminal damage to the entrance barrier of Strathcadden Academy; causing criminal damage to a motor vehicle belonging to Keith David Mitchell and to a motor vehicle belonging to Colin

Charles Buchan; resisting arrest; and assaulting a police officer by spitting at him. And major were going to be the fines that would accompany the inevitable custodial sentence for such a list of crimes.

As he sobered up, not in the luxury of the Queen's Hotel, but in the cells at Corscadden Police Station, it slowly occurred to Scott that he had left his laptop behind at the school. He need not have worried. The custody sergeant reassured him that it was in their safe hands. Initially that was a relief. Everything was password protected. As he continued to sober up, he had a nagging feeling that it had been left on. Easily accessible would be a whole range of picture files of illegal and extreme content that could accurately be described as evidence that would well and truly shaft him. Knowing those tall foreheads, they would find everything.

Which they did. The folders had obvious names. The Headmaster took one glimpse at the stuff on the computer which made the Evidence on Ms Bryant's social media pages look like a teddy-bear's picnic. He handed it to the cops at once.

Added to the litany of charges were the three thousand images of extreme pornography. Anthony Scott spent a very uncomfortable several hours with Sergeant Nelson. And he would have a lot of explaining to do to his boss when he eventually got back to London after being released on police bail. Sergeant Nelson knew how to deal with bullies and played on his prisoner's cowardice. Once he had progressed from remand to being a con, Scott would end up on the rule, doing solitary for his own protection. HMP Barlinnie was not a very nice place.

It slowly occurred to Anthony Scott that financial ruin would be quite a likely outcome as well. The BMW X5 had been hired with a false licence, and he would almost certainly have to reimburse them the price of £50000. There were the other four cars he had wrecked. They were probably worth the best part of

£30000. There would be the court fines and costs that Sergeant Nelson assured him would run to about £100000. He would lose his licence for at least three more years. The driving ban would start as soon as he got out from prison.

“I’ll have to sell my flat in London,” Scott complained. “I have been depending on the equity to pay off my debts and upgrade.”

“I don’t think you will need worry about that,” replied the Sergeant smugly. “Where you’re going, you won’t have to worry about your debts. You will have plenty of time to think about what you’re going to do to repay them when you get out. You will be sharing a very big house on the outskirts of Glasgow, but your room will be a bit small and basic. I wouldn’t want to go there; the residents are very low types, a bunch of criminals in fact.”

Scott sat and contemplated his future. In the short-term it was nasty and was leading straight to the slammer. In the long term, he would be in dingy bedsits with rip-off landlords eking an existence that would give him a very large dose of reality. And, self-pityingly, he said so.

“Perhaps you should have thought of that before you took it on yourself to drive well over the limit,” was Nelson’s considered reply.

The police were business-like and professional in getting statements from everyone involved. There was general outrage at the way Scott had behaved. Mr Buchan had apologised profusely to everyone, before getting on the blower to the Director of Legal Services to sue Scott for serious breach of contract, and for slander against Andrew Richard McEwan.

A few days later, Mr Buchan e-mailed all the staff at the seven schools to apologise for the speaker’s outrageous behaviour towards them.

Chapter 8

Saturday, 18th January 2014

Normally at a weekend, the young Walker brothers would have been at home in Brewster House. As well as the many other things that these talented young men did, they had a love for music, and they would practise in the room above the garage, where they could make as much noise as they liked. Their father, Joby, had his man-space below full of big-boys' toys that could do a range of artistic things with wood. When running, the machines would make a lot of noise and use a prodigious amount of electricity. It would keep all of them out of their mother's hair, and she would listen to CDs and play the piano, before going back to her learned article and lecture for the European Society of Haematology.

But now it was all done, and she was, as Dr Mary Fairbairn, going to Bern. By total coincidence, her husband, Professor Joseph Walker, Dunalastair Professor of Electrical and Electronic Engineering at the University of Edinburgh, was going to a week's conference at Lausanne. They found themselves seated together on an aeroplane departing from Edinburgh for Geneva. Joby's parents and sisters were at the London Fashion Week, where buyers from many stores were eying up what would adorn their most elegant customers. They had a keen eye and nose for what the customers in Buchananshire wanted; they would sell at a good profit, so the enormous expense of the expedition was certainly worth it.

Aidan and Ewan were boarding at Strathcadden Academy. They had plenty to keep them busy. On Saturday, there was a 10-k junior race over at Buchanan. Aidan and Ewan won the race, and Christian came sixth. Mr Drummond, Head of PE, had suggested that the Brothers Walker should train as triathletes, as they were so talented at running and cycling. There was one problem with this idea. Neither was a strong swimmer, nor had the least desire to do so.

Joseph Walker and Mary Fairbairn had arrived at the Marsh Carlton Hotel in Lausanne. It was an imposing edifice raised on a hill in the middle of the town surrounded by small but well-formed gardens. Joseph was giving a keynote lecture on Monday on the subject of *New Types of Locomotive Traction Motors*. Not only would there be academics from several European Universities, but also bigwigs from many European railway companies. If the Dunalastair system of motor control and traction motors were to be adopted, there would be considerable and positive implications for the prosperity of the company. It would also justify seven years of work from Edinburgh University.

Joseph was looking forward to meeting his fellow academics. He had read many of their learned articles in preparation for his own research, and contributed many of his ideas to the debate, all of which had been well-received. His lecture had to be good and engaging to sell the idea to railway managers and the unions. His lecture would be in English, although he was ready to translate key points into German or French. Since he was fluent in technical French and German, he was confident that he would be able to field many questions with answers where the true meaning would not be lost in translation. While his Italian was adequate, it was not fluent. Knowing his luck, a belligerent union leader from the *Ferrovie dello Stato Italiano*² would be there and give him a hard time.

Joby had asked Mary if she was alright. She seemed to find walking more of an effort, which she had never done before. Like him, she was athletic and so fit. But now she seemed to be struggling. She put it down to a worse-than-normal dose of flu. She did not give up when she was ill, a point she was constantly making when Joby was ill. Yes, he knew that when he was ill, he

² Italian State Railways

was a complete baby. If Mary took to her bed, she must have been dying. But she had not. She was here with him in one of Europe's most beautiful countries.

And, if she were not better by the time they got home, she would have herself checked out by Russ Conway, her partner.

Joby loved Switzerland as much as he did Scotland. They took their trains seriously, unlike in Britain. After all it was a man from Southern England who had cut Corscadden off from the rest of the nation by removing its rail link. His early life was in a town that struggled to survive in a transport limbo. His family had a car; it was lucky. The buses were infrequent, slow, dirty, and expensive. Joby was in his twenties when the trains came back and saw the transformation. He had seen his hometown, and his father's business, prosper, not through the actions of someone from the South of England, but through the European Union.

Although not a part of the European Union, the Swiss took their railways seriously. Clever engineers had forced railways up hillsides where they should really never have gone. There were villages in the mountains that had trains but no motor roads. He owed his living to the electric train, as much of his academic research was into making electric trains even more effective than they were already.

Joby recognised himself in the mirror of Aidan. Joby was the geek of the Walker family; professors were geeks. While he was considerably more practically minded than many of his colleagues at Edinburgh University, there was a lot about human interaction he found quite hard to understand. He did not like alpha males, the sort that had infiltrated the university in its many layers of management structure. Management-speak made him shudder.

It was not as bad as in the Health Service. Mary would have to go to meetings about deliverables and targets. They were, in reality, patients. After these meetings that were replete with

management speak, she would come back grumpy and would sound off for much of the evening about these numbskulls from Glasgow or Edinburgh, or even worse, from London.

As a professor and head of department, meetings were a tedious part of the brief and would hold Joby away from what he did best, trying out new ideas and translating them to electrical circuits and machinery, or teaching students. He loved telling people about what he had found out. He would get excited and bubble away, just like he did as a teenager nearly thirty years before. Aidan was so like him in that respect, even though Aidan's academic interests were much more highbrow.

Ewan was more like his mother. While both boys were naturally very gentle, quiet, and thoughtful, Ewan had his mother's feistiness when it came to it. In other words, while Aidan would hide in a hole, Ewan would snarl and hiss at his antagonist, before bolting off into the hole. That had led Ewan to be in trouble with Ms Bryant on a few occasions. In reality Ewan had stood up for what was right against a bad-tempered prima donna.

Although he was nearly forty, Joby felt more in need of his wife, to whom he was very close. As a child he was something of a mummy's boy (his sisters were daddy's girls), and he had a very strong feminine streak in him. And the same was true for Aidan and Ewan. And now they were walking slowly to the main-line station in Lausanne for Mary to catch her train to Bern.

On Sunday afternoon, Aidan, Ewan, Christian, and Jordan had spent a convivial couple of hours up in their boy-cave above the garage at Brewster House. They were playing some music, enjoying Aidy's compositions. They were full of life and raucous, great fun for a Sunday afternoon in January.

Aidan was a skilled amateur musician. He would have liked to have done a Higher and Advanced Higher in Music, but like many other boys at Strathcadden Academy, had been put off by the Head of Music, Ms Bryant. She had a downer on boys, something that had been noticed and commented on. She had suddenly left in November in the company of policemen. There was gossip among most nosy Caddies that she had been taking drugs.

There was a wealth of musical talent that had been squandered in the school. For the last two years there had been no school orchestra to accompany high days of the school calendar. Musical accompaniment for any ceremony in the Old Chapel (which doubled up as the school assembly hall and theatre) was provided by volunteers, for example Aidan Walker.

While Christian was not a musician himself, the four boys discussed it and resolved that they would see Mr Mitchell to see if they could get a school orchestra going again.

The next day at the Marsh Carlton Hotel in Lausanne, Professor Joseph Walker had delivered the keynote lecture *New Types of Locomotive Traction Motors*. to a generally appreciative audience. There were difficult technical questions in German and French that he fielded fluently. As an encore, he started on his research into the use of brushless DC motors for railway traction and their control. The day was Joby's, and he could relax for the rest of the week. And that evening he set up his laptop with a joystick and piloted an Airbus A 320 from Geneva back to Edinburgh. Joby was becoming more of a home-bird as he got older.

Mary had now arrived at Schloss Hünigen, a country house hotel set in glorious parkland outside the city of Bern. The station

in the village of Stalden was only just across the road. Check in was courteous and efficient.

Chapter 9

Tuesday, 21st January 2014

Joseph Walker knew only the very basics about what had happened at Schloss Hünigen that morning. He knew that Mary had had a bath. She had eaten very little at breakfast. She had clearly read her bible study notes, for they were still on the coffee table next to an armchair by the window. The bible itself was on the armchair. Mary had delivered her lecture, and it had gone down very well. She had asked for a doctor in impeccable German before she had flopped forward onto the lectern and collapsed on the floor.

Professor Dr Andreas Fischer, the consultant haematologist at *Inselspital* (Island Hospital), the University Hospital in Bern, quickly examined his patient. Her condition called for immediate treatment, and he was on his mobile to his colleagues there to send an ambulance at once, if not sooner. And a paramedic on a motorcycle had arrived at the hotel within minutes. Other blood doctors were clucking about like so many spare parts and Professor Fischer ordered everyone who was not doing anything useful out of the room. Coffee was available in the lounge.

Mary had had a minimal awareness of what was going on, but had had the strength to say, again in German, “Can someone get Joby?”

With siren blaring, the ambulance had taken her and Dr Fischer to the hospital. She had passed out again, so the insertion of several sharps presented no problem whatsoever. Several blood samples had been taken, which seemed to confirm Dr Fischer’s initial diagnosis that the eminent blood doctor from the Highlands of Scotland had been laid low by an undiagnosed leukaemia that was in blast crisis. An immediate blood transfusion had been

essential, along with intensive care to stabilise the patient's condition.

After that she was rushed to undergo several scans as there was every possibility that she had suffered a stroke.

In Lausanne, things were going swimmingly for the Dunalastair Engineering Company. The lecture by their Professor of Electrical and Electronic Engineering from Edinburgh University had been an overwhelming success and the Sales Director, Robert Lewis, had pressed home the advantage by following up a number of contacts. George McDonald, their boss back home, was delighted when Robert rang through to report. And now Robert and Joseph were relaxing over coffee when the latter's mobile rang. Later Robert described how his colleague went ashen but still managed to hold a conversation in fluent German.

"Good grief, Joe! You look like you have seen a ghost," said Robert as his colleague put away his mobile. "What's happened?"

"It's my wife. You know Mary, don't you Bob?"

"She's my doctor."

"She needs every doctor she can get. She collapsed this morning while giving her lecture in Bern. She's in intensive care at the University Hospital. It's serious. I need to be there now. How am I going to get there? I don't know when the trains are!"

"You stay where you are, Joe. I will sort this at once." Rob opened his notebook computer to find that there was a train every half hour. It would take just over an hour to get there. He rang George to tell him the bad news and put him onto Joby.

“You must go. Don’t worry about anything. Rob can look after things. Anything technical he can ask you or e-mail you. It’s more important you are with Mary. We are thinking of you.”

Joseph Walker knew that George McDonald meant it. George had been his boss from the very moment that he had entered Dunalastair Engineering as a student intern twenty years before. He also played golf with his dad and had recently taken Dad flying. He was a boss of the old school. He was a stickler for detail, but very caring. If anything got past George MacDonald, it was perfect in every detail, and it did exactly as it said on the tin.

Like a dead man walking, Joseph Walker got onto the Bern train at Lausanne. Normally he would have loved the chance to travel on a Swiss train. It was clean, punctual, smooth, and quiet, and he should have enjoyed the glorious countryside from his window seat. But not this time. Beset with shock, he went through all sorts of emotions from deep worry to intense anger. Why had she not told him how ill she was? She was a bloody doctor, and a blood doctor at that, and it seemed to be a blood disease that had felled her. Why hadn’t she treated herself? What would he do? She looked after him and did it so well. What would he do about the money? He was hopeless with money. Personal finances frightened him. Bugger it! He was a professor, a brainy doctor. Surely a few transactions on a spreadsheet would not be that hard. After all he had a multi-million budget at the Engineering Department, and he had to give a strict audited account back to the University. How would the boys take to the loss of their mother? Would they go into melt down and try to numb the pain with obnoxious chemicals? It did not bear thinking about. No, Mary was going to pull through. She was made of tough stuff, wasn’t she? Her mum and dad were tough old people. She was as well. She had tried to make a man of him, albeit without much success. The train went into a tunnel.

Mary was going to get better. She had treated hundreds of patients. Her medicine was not always easy, but many of her patients had got better and enjoyed years of good quality life. She would get better, wouldn't she? Oh God! Although Joseph was not outwardly religious, he and Mary shared a Christian faith. She would go to heaven. But that meant she would leave him here. And what would the boys think? They were Christians as well, but a blow like this could stop their faith dead.

Despite the turmoil going through his mind, Joseph Walker did not forget his manners and refused coffee politely in French. Normally on train journeys, he would notice some little detail that was absurd. He used to do that with the news bulletins as well. He would have no idea what the interview was about, but would notice somebody cavorting in the background, or the Downing Street cat being let in through the familiar gloss-black door. Normally he delighted in the absurd, a characteristic that he had passed on to his two sons. But not today. Although he seemed to other passengers to be staring intensely at the passing countryside, Joseph observed nothing. The journey to Bern lasted one hour, but to him it seemed a day. Finally, the train arrived at Bern and Joseph was glad not to have to wait for a taxi.

Mary's room on one of the upper floors of the *Inselspital* had a wonderful view of the ancient town. But she was not in a position to appreciate it. She was still undergoing a blood transfusion when Joby arrived, and she was also hooked up to a drip, through which a machine was injecting a dose of powerful cancer-fighting drugs. She was wired up to various monitors, which showed her vital signs. An oxygen mask covered her face. The nurse met him at the door. "Professor Dr Fischer would like to see you, now," she said quietly, and ushered him to the office.

The conversation was in German, as Professor Fischer's English was sufficient to get him by, but not to explain complex medical concepts. It was just as well that Joseph Walker had

excellent German. “Herr Dr Walker,” said the Professor extending his arm in welcome, “I am so pleased you are here.”

“How is she, Herr Professor?” replied Joseph.

“Oh please, call me Andreas. May I call you Joseph?”

“Of course.” Joby was not fussy about the way people addressed him, as long as it was kind and respectful.

“Joseph, please sit down. Would you care for a coffee?” He spoke to his secretary and asked for two coffees. “Thank you so much for coming.”

“It has been a massive shock.”

“Of course, it has.”

The coffee arrived. Professor Fischer took milk, but Joseph, as always, had it black. It was a high-quality coffee, freshly percolated, and the taste made up for the circumstances.

“Joseph, I am so sorry, but I have bad news for you about Mary. She is in serious trouble. She is seriously ill, and the leukaemia is at an advanced stage. She also has a viral infection, and her immune system has failed. I am not sure that we have caught it in time. She is having a big blood transfusion. I sent samples of blood to our lab, and they have found a very high count of immature white blood cells. The cancer has spread. We did a scan on her. She may have had a stroke.”

“She is a blood doctor like you. Why didn’t she recognise it?”

“We doctors are good at treating others. We don’t always do that well with ourselves. I never try to diagnose my own illnesses; I always get one of my colleagues to doctor me.”

The two men talked for another ten minutes, before one of the Professor’s registrars came in with a file of notes. Fischer

looked at them carefully. Joseph could see that the notes referred to Mary, but that is all he could glean from them. He was an engineer, not a medic. On the other hand, he could see the Professor's concerned expression.

"Joseph," said Fischer, "I am afraid that these confirm my worst fears. I feel that Mary has not much time left. She has had a CT scan and the results are concerning. But we will do our best."

Tears filled Joseph's eyes. He knew that Mary was in good hands. This was Switzerland where they knew a thing or two about hospitals. After all, if this had been London, Mary could have been still waiting on a trolley in A & E in some decrepit hospital, surrounded by violent drunks. This place was spotless. He was ushered through to Mary. She was not the living Mary he knew. Within a few hours she had been reduced to a living husk, everything of Mary having been sucked out of her by some huge obscene spider. He sat next to her and whispered, "Sweetie, I'm here. Joby. What has happened to you?"

He held her hand, but it was cold and limp; she was deeply unconscious. He knew that even unconscious people can hear and pick up stuff that is said in their presence and recall it once they were better. This could include unguarded comments from doctors and nurses about "being a gonner". So, he talked to her about what he had been up to in Lausanne, how pleased Rob was and that they were not far off from clinching some valuable deals. Dr Fischer had told him how good her talk had been despite the fact she was so unwell. After that he just sat with her; whichever way he did things, they would be wrong. "You sat there blethering on and on about nothing." Or "You just sat there saying nothing."

From time to time, Joby had to leave the room while doctors and nurses changed things about, removed sharps from Mary, and stuck fresh sharps into her. He was glad she was not aware of what was happening. More blood came and went, and

fresh doses of powerful and obnoxious chemicals were injected into her. And the complex computer equipment that monitored her vital signs continued its monotonous bleeping.

Chapter 10

Wednesday, 22nd January 2014

Muriel Walker had a feeling that something was wrong. She had no idea what it was. She and Charles, as owners of Walker Bros of Corscadden, had visited the fashion houses in London for London Fashion Week. For them it was a hideously expensive journey, and to one or two of their colleagues, a complete damned waste of money. Jenny and Sarah were involved as buyers. Charles and Muriel had left them in London to sort out contracts. Although it was a very expensive extravaganza, it put Walker Bros on the list and kept the company at the forefront. And Charles Walker had a good nose for what his customers wanted.

They were on the train back to Edinburgh (First Class, naturally) and part of the fun was to be pampered. They had always chosen to travel on the East Coast Line. While it was possible to get to London on the Great Central Line, the latter was designed to connect to the Continent, rather than the Capital. The Great North Eastern Railway was a company that prided itself on customer service. And they lived up to Charles' and Muriel's expectations in full, serving them coffee, as they wished, an excellent luncheon, and as the train sped towards the Border, a superb high tea.

But still, Muriel had that nagging feeling that there was something wrong.

The train arrived bang on time at Edinburgh's Waverley Station; there had been some slight delays on the way, but the driver showed all the skills of his enginemanship to make up the time. The Corscadden train left punctually, arriving at Corscadden on time after a smooth and uneventful journey.

But she still felt that something was wrong. Had somebody broken into Laurieston Villa? Of course not! The Calladines were keeping an eye on things. They had moved next door not long

after the Walkers. Muriel and Charles were close friends of Jim and Margaret. And when they had got back on Tuesday evening, not a thing was out of place. Poppy had, as always, every canine need attended to. The tropical fish in the big tank in the kitchen were well and racing about the tank. Muriel told herself not to be so ridiculous.

On Wednesday Muriel was going to Shona for coffee. She was still feeling there was something wrong but could not put her finger on it. Nor could she put it out of her mind. She found an excuse to go into Walker Bros in case something had happened to Charles. After all he was no spring chicken, and he was still working at an age where many would have retired.

Charles Walker never forgot the roots of his business, the customers, and his staff. Therefore, every day he would spend at least two hours on the shop floor, serving the customers. He was mostly to be found in Tailoring and Costumes because that was where his own skills and knowledge lay. He kept in touch with his salesman side, but more importantly, he made sure that his customers were completely satisfied with their purchases. Also, he gleaned a lot of ideas from his customers as to what they wanted to buy. And by providing them with what they wanted, he ensured the continued success of Walker Bros. Therefore, when Muriel went through Tailoring, she was not in the least bit surprised to see her husband measuring up his customer for a bespoke suit.

Charles was perfectly fine.

But Joby was not. He had been persuaded to go back to Lausanne at the end of the afternoon. He could take the hint that he was completely in the way and being something of a spare part. And that was the way he felt. He wanted to ring Mum and Dad, but they were away in London, and he had never bothered to put their mobile numbers on his phone. He preferred to use the

landline. He was a big boy now and had to take this sort of thing on the chin. When Rob asked him how Mary was, he truthfully told him that she was in a very bad way. Although exhausted, Joe (as he was known at work) slept badly that night and was up to catch the 08.20 train to Bern.

The hospital had promised a bulletin in the morning, and at 09.00 prompt, it came. Mary's condition had not improved and was starting to give cause for concern. When the train got into Bern at 09.30, he ran from the station to the hospital, rather than wait for a taxi. It was not very far, and he was very fit for a man of nearly forty.

Mary had just returned from another scan. She looked grey. What little colour there was yesterday had drained from her. They were putting clean sharps into her; she must have felt like a pincushion. The nurse came through to him and told him that things were not looking good.

"Where's Herr Professor Doktor Fischer?" Joby asked the nurse in his flawless German.

"He has gone back to the conference in Stalden," she replied. "They are very worried about her."

Joby went back into the room. If anything, there was more sophisticated equipment guarding his wife. He had an irrational fear that if he touched her in the wrong place, bits would fall off her and the whole thing would stop. And she would stop too. He held her limp hand and immediately started to feel like a spare part. A minute passed, just like in the *Monty Python* sketch. He had always delighted in the absurd, and you did not get much more absurd than *Monty Python*. The sketch, *A Minute Passed*, tickled him as a teenager. But there was nothing absurd in this version of it. And there was nothing remotely funny. Every minute of this lonely vigil seemed to last an hour, and every hour a day. The oxygen mask

was doing the breathing for Mary, and there was the monotonous bleeping from the life support equipment.

After about three hours, Joby was persuaded to have some lunch, and the chaplain would be there when he got back. He had to force himself to eat something; he really did not have the appetite for anything. They were as good as their word in the Intensive Care Ward. They had found the Chaplain from St Ursula's Anglican Church in *Jubiläumsplatz* in *Kirchenfeld*, a posh suburb of Bern. Joby was relieved about their choice. Although his German was impeccable, he doubted that it would express adequately his deepest fears.

Joby had never encountered death in the raw. His grandma had died when he was fifteen and his granddad had died in 2002. Grandma was in her late seventies and Granddad was ninety-two. He hadn't been there on either occasion. Old people did die; it was an unfortunate fact of life. But he had felt their loss keenly. Now his dearly loved wife of eighteen years was in the same position, passing away before his very eyes.

Mary was not old. She was not even fifty, and she looked much younger. She was so fit as well. Only a few weeks before, Joby and she had been running and playing badminton in the sports centre. This was obscene.

And he said that to the Chaplain. Joby was not a religious man. He was not particularly fond of church, although he was delighted that both his sons were committed Christians and had been confirmed in their mid-teens. He disliked organised religion and intensely disliked the purple poetry of traditional Victorian hymns. When Andy McEwan had described some of them as having lines that were so bad, they were almost sexy, he certainly agreed. Although he would state that he was at heart a Christian, he found God rather difficult – especially when he was a teenager and had confessed in confidence that he was having difficulty with

his orientation. Some people at church had heard about it and shunned him as if he were filth.

Much to Joby's relief, the Chaplain was not one of these people who were full of religious and pious platitudes. Instead, he listened patiently to Joby's incoherent outpouring of grief and hurt. When he told the Chaplain about his experience as a teenager, the Chaplain was horrified and disgusted and told him that those words were not of God. Joby told the Chaplain that the younger of his two sons was openly gay, and that if anyone meted out such treatment to him, he would give them a flea in their ear.

While Joby had excused himself, a doctor came in and talked to the Chaplain. It was by now almost evening. And when Joby had come back, the Chaplain said to him, "Joby, you need to prepare for the worst. Mary has taken a turn for the worse. We will go in and be with her."

"I'm not very good at death-bed scenes," said Joby.

"None of us are. It's not at all easy."

Joby and the Chaplain sat down either side of the bed. The lonely vigil resumed. After a few minutes, the machinery started to sound alarms, and within seconds the nurses and doctors were surrounding the bed. They asked Joby and the Chaplain to wait outside. A crash team went into Mary's room with a trolley full of yet more sophisticated equipment including what Joby recognised as defibrillation paddles. He sat outside the room while people went in and out. He could hear what they were saying, and it was not comforting. He could hear the alarms sounding as each system in turn shut down. He sat there immobile and helpless. All went quiet, and after a couple of minutes the doctor came out. "I am so sorry, Herr Walker. Your wife has just passed away. There was nothing more we could do."

Joby and the Chaplain went back in. Mary was lying there, and all the equipment had been disconnected. Inwardly Joby had been saying:

“Lord have mercy; Christ have mercy; Lord have mercy.

“Our Father in Heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come, your will be done on Earth as in Heaven. Give us today our daily bread. Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us. Save us from the time of trial and deliver us from evil. For the kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours. Now and for ever. Amen.”

And Joby said it out loud. To his surprise he did not burst into tears like they did in the films. He sat there in helpless shock for several minutes until a couple of orderlies arrived to take Mary down to the mortuary. He had not a single clue as to what to do next.

At Schloss Hünigen, Professor Andreas Fischer felt his mobile ring. Unnoticed, he slipped out of the conference room and answered. It was his registrar. Dr Mary Fairbairn had died of a stroke and heart-attack shortly after 17.30. Her husband was now on his way back to Lausanne. He went to another room to write a eulogy, which he would deliver at dinner that evening.

So, as the delegates to the European Society for Haematology sat down for dinner at eight that evening, Professor Fischer announced (in English), “Please could we observe silence for a few minutes. My friends, you will all know that our dear friend and colleague, Mary Fairbairn was taken ill yesterday morning. She was taken to the University Hospital in Bern where she received the best treatment possible from my team. It is my very sad duty to tell you now that she passed away at 17.30 this evening. Her husband, Dr Joseph Walker, was with her. Clearly, we wish to pass our condolences to Dr Walker and his family...”

It was only when he arrived back at the Marsh Carleton in Lausanne that it occurred to Joby that he ought to do something but still had no idea what. He was a dead man walking. Fortunately, his colleague Robert Lewis was there to meet him. He shook his head. Robert replied, "I am so sorry, Joe. Have you told anyone yet?"

"No. I don't know what I've got to do."

"You must tell your family at once."

"How do I get her back home?"

It was fortunate for Joby that Rob had had to deal with a similar circumstance a few years before when his aunt had passed away on holiday. "Joe," he said, "I will sort things out for Mary. I will ring the consulate now and tell them what has happened. Now get on the phone to your family"

Joby got out his mobile and rang his parents at Laurieston Villa. Almost immediately he heard the familiar and comforting voice of his mother as she answered in her usual way, "Corscadden 2375..."

Charles and Muriel Walker were in the drawing room at Laurieston Villa when the call arrived. After she had put the telephone down, she looked shocked but now knew full well what was wrong. She said, "It's Joby. Mary got taken ill yesterday and was taken to hospital. She has died."

"Good God! I didn't realise there was anything wrong with her. She's no age."

“Joby didn’t either. He thought she was just under the weather. You know she had that lecture to do. She did it and then collapsed. Joby is saying something about leukaemia.”

“We need to go to Geneva at once,” said Charles.

“Will we get tickets at this time? The last plane would be going about now. We would be lucky to get tickets for tomorrow.”

“What about Aidy and Eejay? No. I think we should let Jenny and Sarah know tonight. Let’s tell Andy McEwan about it tomorrow. At least the boys won’t have a bad night’s sleep.”

Charles and Muriel started the sad process of telling their friends and family about the death of their daughter-in-law. Charles had a long talk with George MacDonald, Joby’s boss at Dunalastair Engineering. He would get in touch straightaway with the Dean at Edinburgh University. No, Joby was not to worry about a thing and would have at least two weeks’ compassionate leave. And Joby had helped them to secure contracts that were worth at least eleven million pounds. Indeed, George thought about taking them over to La Blécherette Aerodrome which was next to Lausanne. He had flown there several times. While they were talking, George looked at the weather, which was going to be completely unsuitable for a long-distance flight in the kind of machine that he owned.

In a small town like Corscadden, bad news travels fast. The death of a much-respected medical practitioner started to make the rounds quickly. The next morning, a notice appeared on the front door of the Corscadden Surgery on the High Street:

It is with great sadness that we have to announce the death of our colleague, Dr Mary Fairbairn, who passed away in Bern on Wednesday 22nd January at the age of 49. This will have come as a great shock to many of her

patients, whom we will continue to support. In the meantime, our thoughts are with Dr Fairbairn's family, her husband and two sons. Russell Conway.

At the same time a notice appeared in the staff room at Strathcadden Academy from the headmaster:

It is with great regret that I have to announce the sudden and unexpected death of a great friend and benefactor to our school, Dr Mary Fairbairn. Many of you will know her as Mary Walker, mother of Aidan and Ewan Walker and a parent member of the School Board. Charles Walker, their grandfather, has asked us not to discuss it at the present time. Andy McEwan and I will be seeing the boys and will be taking them out of school until their grandparents can pick them up. They will be back at school next week. Please keep an eye out for them as they will be in a state of some shock and distress.

The note left on the board in the Electrical and Electronic Engineering Department at Edinburgh University was more succinct and to the point.

Due to a family bereavement, Professor J O B Walker will not be in the department for the next week. He apologises for his absence. Please refer all queries to Dr Belson and Dr Proudlock.

Aidan and Ewan Walker knew nothing of this. Thursday 23rd January 2014 was starting like every other Thursday; it was going to be a routine Thursday. For Aidan, it was going to be a German test first thing in the morning. He was completely unfazed; he spoke German fluently and was developing a deep love for German literature. Mr Etherington was a tough teacher who worked his class hard, but they always got good results. The next lesson was Classical Studies with Dr Cuthbert. Ewan was starting the day with a Mathematics class with Mr MacKay. It was cold and windy, but, hey, what was new about that?

Aidan had just finished his test and was checking over his work when a runner from Secondary Three knocked on the door.

There was nothing unusual about this. Every day two pupils would be taken off timetable to meet visitors and run errands for the Receptionist and the Headmaster's Secretary. Jamie Crawford came in and said, "Could Aidan Walker go to the Headmaster immediately?"

Aidan got up obediently. He was worried. He hadn't done anything, but summonses from the Headmaster usually meant trouble.

"Aidy, are you in for a bollocking?"

"Get on with your work, Cunningham!" was Mr Etherington's considered reply. "Walker, leave your test with me."

Aidan was a sensitive and anxious boy who hated being told off and did everything to avoid trouble. His mind was in turmoil. He could not think of anything. Why did Mr Mitchell want to see him at such short notice? It could not have been anything to do with his idea to revive an orchestra in the school now that the Dragon had gone. Mr Mitchell was always positive to suggestions like that from the pupils. Had he overstepped the mark? Was Mr Mitchell going to tell him to sod off with that idea? No, that was not Mr Mitchell's way, which was why he was so respected by staff and pupils alike. Had someone set him up or framed him with something that he hadn't done?

It had happened to Andy Cunningham (who had just joked about Aidan's impending bollocking). He had been at a posh school near Perth, and someone had planted drugs in his locker. The headmaster there had taken a dim view of the matter and given Andy the push. But Aidan could not think of anyone who would want to do that to him.

As he got to the Headmaster's office in the old part of the school, he saw Ewan. "Why does the Headmaster want us, Eejay?" he asked.

“No idea,” replied Ewan. He could see that his older brother looked anxious and needed protection. “I haven’t done anything, and you haven’t. I noticed Grandma and Granddad’s car parked in the visitors’ spot. They looked like they were going somewhere.”

The two boys sat down and waited on a wooden settle with a leather seat for a short time outside the Headmaster’s office on the first floor. It was at the top of a wide staircase. The building had been constructed in the Nineteenth Century in the Victorian Scottish Baronial style. The staircase had oak panelling around it. Halfway up the staircase was a large stained-glass window. Both felt for the boys from Saint Oswald’s who waited there for chastisement from Dr Cowan. And they were both heartily glad that corporal punishment had been banned for close on thirty years. In Scottish schools they had used the tawse, a leather strap on the hand, and it hurt like hell. So did the cane across the backside. They were there for no more than five minutes, but it felt like five hours. Mrs Laidlaw, the Headmaster’s Secretary, ushered them in.

To the boys’ surprise, Grandma and Granddad were there, along with Mr Mitchell and Mr McEwan. They were normally jolly people, but today they looked totally solemn. Indeed, Aidan had never seen them looking like that. His heart was pounding, and he felt sick, far worse than when he got stage fright in November in the Old Chapel.

“Come and sit down, lads,” said Mr Mitchell. If they were in trouble, Mr Mitchell surely would be behind his desk and telling them to stand. “Mr Walker, do you want me to talk to Aidan and Ewan, or do you?”

“Aidan, Ewan,” started their grandfather. “I have some really bad news for you. Your dad rang us last night. Your mum

was taken ill on Tuesday after she had done her lecture. She passed away yesterday. I am so sorry.”

Both boys stared ahead, stunned. To Aidan, the study, with its heavy oak panelling, began to toss like a ship on the high seas in a storm. His face lost all colour, and he mumbled something that was barely intelligible, but the word “lavvy” was just about decipherable. He rushed out of the study as he did not want to leave what Sophia would have called a “godless mess in his wake”. He darted across the landing into one of two heavy oak doors, and Mr McEwan followed him into the male staff lavatory.

“Walker!” yelled Mr Farjeon, “Students are not to use the staff toilets.”

Aidan hurled himself into a cubicle and knelt down and was violently sick.

“Andy, what the hell’s that boy doing?” said Mr Farjeon indignantly. He was not used to teenage youths rushing in pell-mell while he was doing his business. The sound of what Walker was doing in the cubicle turned him off.

“Have you not read the Head’s notice?” was McEwan’s dusty reply. Much to his disgust, Mr Farjeon saw that Walker was attending to the effects of his shock at the other end, and the cubicle door was open. While dealing with traumatised teenagers was not something Mr McEwan had had to do often at Strathcadden Academy, he remembered back to his previous existence when there had been a serious food-poisoning outbreak. It had cost his son-in-law’s sister her life. On that occasion, the Headmaster had been a waste of time and a waste of space. Fortunately, Keith Mitchell was a different kettle of fish.

“I’m sorry, Sir,” said Aidan as he came out to wash his hands. “Please could you tell Mr Farjeon that as well? I know I

shouldn't have been in here, but I wouldn't have made it to The Wests."

"Don't worry, laddie. Mr Farjeon will understand. Now shall we go back to your grandma and granddad? Are you alright now? Just let me know if you are feeling ill again." And Mr McEwan put his hand over Aidan's shoulder. Aidan Walker seemed so skinny and waiflike. Mr McEwan took Aidan back into the Headmaster's study. There Ewan was cuddled up to his grandmother, still looking stunned. He was in a foetal position, his legs bunched up. Tears were streaming down his face, but he was too shocked to cry. And it was time for Aidan to care for his younger brother. Seventeen and fifteen: they were no age to have to put up with this.

Aidan held Ewan. Granddad spoke, "Boys, Grandma and I are going to Geneva to pick up your Dad. He is as shocked as you are. He needs us. Aidy, you know how you are like your dad. Mr and Mrs McEwan are going to take you to their daughter's flat in Edinburgh. She's Jessica and her husband is Sam. Sam works with your dad, so knows about you. They live near where your dad has his Edinburgh flat in Marchmont."

"Can't we come with you, Granddad?" said Ewan. He wanted to hold on to Grandma.

"No, Eejay. We only have two tickets, and Dad will need us. That does sound rather selfish, but we'll be here for you just as soon as we get back from Geneva."

Mr McEwan added, "Jess and Sam know exactly how you feel. Sam lost his sister when he was your age. You will really get on with them; they are lovely people."

Back in Languages HG.06 in Harrison House, Mr Etherington was having a little one-to-one with Andrew

Cunningham. "So, Cunningham, that was a little tactless, wasn't it? Walker is not the kind of lad who gets into trouble."

"No Sir, it was just a joke," said Cunningham defensively. He decided to let Mr Etherington know that he was no walk-over. "If you really want to know, it happened to me last year."

"What do you mean?"

"I was told to go to the headmaster's office while in a lesson, and I got a bollocking and was kicked out of my school near Perth. If you really want to know, someone planted drugs on me, and I copped it." As Mr Etherington was looking askance at him, Cunningham said forcefully, "I don't do drugs!"

"I am glad to hear it."

"So why are you getting so arsy with me?"

"Because, Cunningham, Walker was going to the Headmaster's office, not for a bollocking, but to get some bad news. And your asinine comment was not helpful."

"Bad news?"

"Yes, his mother has died."

"Oh shit!" said Cunningham as he contemplated how well and truly he had put his foot in it. He liked Aidy, and it was never his intention to pile more hurt onto him.

"Yes, you may well say that, Cunningham. I think you need to engage your brain before you engage your gob. I suggest you should apologise to Walker for your little joke. I don't think, in the circumstances, he would have found it in the least bit funny."

All students were in lessons when the Walker brothers went across to Asher House. Grandma and Granddad helped them to

put a few things into a sports bag, and they went down to the living room in the McEwan's apartment at the front of the house. Having taken their shoes off (they always remembered their manners), the two boys snuggled up on the settee and held each other closely. Aidan felt as if he had been punched in the stomach. His mouth tasted as if something very nasty had taken up residence there, and his insides were tied up in knots.

Ewan was still stunned and unable to believe what was happening. He felt like a zombie. He saw the comings and goings on Dennistoun Avenue, but they were meaningless. Normally the birds on the bird table in the front garden would have delighted him. They were but nothing. He felt just an enormous hole, like a whirlpool, into which he was continually falling.

Their mother had been an enormous influence on both of them. Both loved their father dearly, but he was their dad. He could not be their mum. Aidy was not just a brother, but also Eejay's best friend. And Aidy was holding him close. Aidy did not say anything, but he didn't need to. They needed and had each other. Ewan put his head against his brother's chest and could hear his heart beating. They had often done that. Aidy's heart rate was normally slow and steady, but today, it sounded stressed, the effect of the big shot of adrenaline that had led to Aidy's very hurried exit from the Headmaster's office. Aidy stroked his brother's hair gently, just like Mum had done when Ewan had been ill or come a cropper in some way or another.

For Ewan, it was strange. He was the one who normally looked out for his older brother. Aidy was so worldly-unwise, so anxious, always wanting to do the right thing, and to be loved. Ewan was the feisty one, like his mother. He did not have much of Dad's looks. He was a male version of Mum with her wavy hair. He had light sandy brown hair, inherited from his mother. Ewan looked at his brother and said, "Aidy, thanks. I need you. I love you. I wish Jordan was here too." His eyes were full of tears.

“Ecjay,” replied Aidan, “I need you. You have always been my strength. We must stay strong for ourselves and Dad. It’s going to be very hard. But remember, I love you too. Mr McEwan told me that Chris is going home to Edinburgh this weekend. He lives not far from where we’re going to be. Chris will look out for both of us.”

Ewan gazed into his brother’s eyes, which for the first time had tears in them. This was an ideal place for the two of them. They had had a massive bolt of adrenaline, which had sent them fleeing into their hole together. Actually, it was a very well-appointed hole, a large drawing room, as big as that in Brewster House, homely and warm. Above all it was private, and no-one would mock two distressed young brothers for hugging and holding each other.

Andrew and Joan McEwan had a large black flat-coat retriever called Jake. He had a wonderful temperament and was very friendly with a good nose for distressed students. They would pet him and be soothed and comforted. Teenagers would pour out their worries to Jake while they could be more reticent to Mrs McEwan. Jake snuggled up to the two brothers. They swore that he was trying to stroke them as they did with him.

Mrs McEwan came in with two mugs of sweet tea. Both liked and trusted Mrs McEwan. Like her husband, she had a heart of gold, without the gruff exterior. She sat down and spoke to the boys gently and soothingly. And both let their pent-up emotion out and wept. Neither was ashamed to have done so either.

Lunchtime saw its usual comings and goings in Asher House. Caddies would come into the house at lunchbreak before the afternoon sports and other activities. Afternoon school started at three o’clock, by which time it was starting to get dark at that time of year. Aidan and Ewan were content to remain in the drawing room, holding each other close, trying to be strong. That

they could not manage was entirely understandable. Eventually both fell asleep in each other's arms, with Jake watching over them, to be woken an hour later by Mr and Mrs McEwan.

Joan McEwan had a very close relationship with her two daughters, Angela, and Jessica, both of whom lived in Edinburgh. Angela (or Anjie) was thirty-four and very much a single girl about town, and a partner in a busy estate agency. Jessica (Jess) was two years younger and had enjoyed a teenage romance with a vicar's son when she was sixteen. Although the boy was two years younger than she, it was a relationship that read like something out of *Mills & Boon*. This delightful boy was the son of the Rector of Alverston in the Middle Riding of Yorkshire and was now her son-in-law.

Jess had supported Sam through the loss of his sister, Gemma, as a result of a food-poisoning incident at an independent school. It was a time that the school, where, coincidentally, Andrew had worked, had become the subject of a number of very public scandals. Most of these were the results of spectacular own goals from the incompetence of a vindictive and capricious headmaster and a bunch of elderly socialites who regarded the school as an extension of their property rather than a means of educating students.

Fortunately for the McEwan family, Andy had survived malicious attempts to frame him, for which he got compensation that was worth at least ten years' salary. And Mr Duffy had had the well-placed confidence to take him on fourteen years ago.

Now he was the Senior Depute and very much the power behind the throne for Keith Mitchell. And it was their good fortune as well that the students at Strathcadden Academy were some of the most delightful young people it was possible to get. They were all very biddable, and the two boys asleep in her living

room were among the kindest of all of them. She struggled to come to terms with why something so terrible had happened to these delightful young men.

It was another coincidence that their son-in-law, Samuel Proudlock, was a colleague of Aidan's and Ewan's father. Therefore, who was better placed to care for the two boys for a short while, until their father got home?

In the late afternoon, Joan found herself driving towards Edinburgh with Andy, and the two Walker boys in the back of the silver Audi. Such was the nature of the A825 road that it was usually much quicker, and easier, to catch the train from Corscadden. It was little wonder that Corscadden had been a backwater "while the trains were off". But Aidan and Ewan needed their privacy. While Ewan's tendencies were common knowledge, the two were cuddled together for much more compelling reasons. Sending them on the train would have exposed them to public gaze, and that would not have been fair. Andy and she would be back late that evening, but Asher House was in the capable hands of the house tutor, Miss Fraser.

For Aidan and Ewan, the journey was interminable. It was a comfortable car, and they were warm and snug together. Neither had eaten anything, nor did they feel like it. In the dark, each brother was cuddled close. Ewan adored his brother; Aidan was not just his brother, but his best friend. Ewan so wanted his boyfriend, Jordan, there as well.

Ewan did not give a damn what people thought about his orientation. Two years ago, he had announced it unsubtly to the family while he was having an argument with his mother in front of Grandma and Granddad. If Ewan had wanted to outrage Grandma and Granddad, his strategy had failed completely. "Eejay", said Granddad, "I have known that for years, since you

were ten.” (The effect of announcing it to Ms Bryant was rather different.)

It was after seven when they finally arrived in Marchmont Crescent.

The Proudlock Family lived in the top-floor flat of a spacious tenement house, one of many in Marchmont Crescent that were typical of this leafy residential area of Edinburgh. They lived within a hundred metres or so of the Meadows, an extensive area of park that was the feature of Southside. Sam took the boys up to the flat, while Joan and Andy spoke to their daughter in the car.

“You’ll look after them, Jess,” said Andy.

“Of course, Dad. Mum’s told me about them.”

“They are very fragile at the moment,” said Joan. “They have sat for several hours holding each other on the settee. They haven’t eaten anything all day. Aidan was so shocked that he was sick.”

“Is it any wonder, Mum? I’ll get them to eat something. Edward is coming up this weekend; they will like him.”

“Their friend Christian is coming home tomorrow. He’s a lovely lad...”

Up in the flat, the two boys stumbled in on the life of a young family. Samuel Proudlock did not look the traditional academic with his nose stuck firmly in his books. He was the busy father of three young and lively children: twin girls, Olivia and Sophie, and a baby boy, Kieran. Olivia and Sophie were active three-year-olds, while Kieran was eight months, crawling about eagerly. Added to that menagerie were two cats (neutered) who were little more than kittens and had retained many of their kitten ways, a gerbil in a large cage, and a tank of tropical fish.

It was clear to both Aidan and Ewan as to why they were here. They would have so much to distract them that they would not be moping about. Both boys adored children, and the girls went for them like a shot. “Daddy,” they squealed with delight, “Aidan and Ewan wear skirts just like us!”

Both boys smiled shyly. Since Olivia and Sophie were identical, the boys had to work out which was which.

Aidan smiled for the first time that day, and the two girls crawled over him. The door to the flat opened and Jess came in with some things that her mother had brought from Corscadden. The distraction provided by Aidan and Ewan was a boon for Jess, who had a short window of time to put some things away, before it was time to put the children to bed.

In the meantime, Ewan excused himself and went to the bathroom. The chaos in the Proudlock household was a welcome distraction, even through the closed door. He would have had a fine rooftop view from his lofty perch, but he could only see the rooftops etched out in the orange glow of the streetlamps. There was a dark space that he felt sure was the communal garden behind the tenements. His contemplation was interrupted by Sophie who raced in stark naked, got her potty out and sat down at Ewan’s feet. (The lock had been removed from the bathroom door to prevent little Proudlocks from being locked inside.)

At the same time, the two cats came in and started playing hide-and-seek in Ewan’s kilt that was lying near his feet. When it was time for Ewan to put his kilt back on, the cats thought it was part of the game and a black (Barney) and a ginger face (Orlando) appeared at the top as he pulled it up. Both cats scrambled up Ewan’s jacket and sat perched on each shoulder as he went back to the living room. Aidan was playing with the girls who were tumbling over him and giggling with delight.

Now it was time for the girls to have their bath and go to bed. Sam was in charge of this one, and there were squeals of delight from the bathroom as their father played with them as they bathed. Olivia and Sophie Proudlock were definitely Daddy's girls. Jess was sorting out Kieran, while Barny and Orlando were sorting out the Walker brothers. Their kilts were a wonderful playground of hide and seek. The tetras in the tropical fish tank were racing about and the gerbil had become active.

The girls snuggled up to Ewan while Aidan read their bedtime story. Like the Walker family, the Proudlocks were not in the least bit prudish. Family life was a happy and loving chaos. It was also fortunate that the elderly couple in the flat below were hard-of-hearing; much of the row from above went unnoticed. And what did make its way downstairs was drowned out by the telly.

In Lausanne there was nothing chaotic, and for the widower Joseph Walker, there was nothing happy about his stay. His mood was as grey as the weather. To escape from the pain, he had buried himself in his work and the events of the conference. Much of it just flowed over him. He made polite small-talk and acted as an excellent ambassador for the Dunalastair Engineering Company and Edinburgh University. He wrote a detailed report of the trip for the Dean and for George MacDonald, his boss at Dunalastair.

On Thursday, the day after his loss, he had to make a difficult journey to Schloss Hünigen to pick up Mary's effects. And there was the tedious bureaucracy involved to repatriate Mary's body. Fortunately, the British Consulate were being most helpful and doing their best to get things sorted. He knew Mum and Dad were coming on Thursday evening and he longed for them to get there.

Joseph wanted to be home. His aeroplane ticket was valid for Sunday and that was the day that had been arranged for Mary's coffin to make its solemn journey back from Geneva after transport from Bern in a "private ambulance".

When Charles and Muriel finally arrived at the Marsh Carleton in Lausanne, they were ushered up to his room. Joby was looking like a lost teenage student, not a professor of thirty-nine and three quarters. And when his mother came in, he rushed over into her arms and cried like a child.

"We're here," said Charles soothingly, "and we are going to take you home."

Having let off the pressure from his emotional safety valve, Joby was starting to feel safe again. His parents were comforting and homely people who had always been there whenever he had needed them. He felt that sometimes he took them for granted. But they were there as a steady and permanent anchor, as they always had been. Yes, it was a banal cliché, but totally true, and that was the way he liked it.

For Joby, home was where the heart was, and his heart right now was in Corscadden, not at Brewster House, but at Laurieston Villa. He wanted to be back in the times when he had his sisters around him; he was very much the baby brother. He thought back to the time when he was a teenager with his model trains. They were still there. His railway system was a model of an electrified railway, and the overhead wires had worked, and they still did. He had made the signals change electronically when the trains had passed. The whole thing was made in exquisite detail.

Anything to escape the grief that was crushing him.

Joby was not very good at God. Mum and Dad were much better than he. So was Mary. But was her demise that had come so suddenly and unexpectedly some kind of punishment? Was it a

particularly nasty way of saying, “It was going so well, wasn’t it?” – a kind of cosmic gotcha. Joby thought long and hard about it. True he did not like church that much. But no wonder. He had been cold-shouldered by some of the more traditional of God’s Holy People when he had had teenage orientation difficulties. He had just thought other teenage boys were pretty and attractive, as was he.

Even when he married Mary (six months after Mary had become pregnant with Aidy), there was still a certain amount of sanctimonious suspicion among some of God’s Holy People. This time it was not just about Joby’s teenage crushes, but also that a baby was conceived not in wedlock. But Aidan was living proof that his train had entered the right tunnel on the right line. With Ewan, it was all rather embarrassing...

There had been times when Joby regarded God as just a mediaeval superstition, albeit a powerful one that made people spend shed loads of money to build churches. Joby had listened to evangelical atheists but never found them particularly convincing. He hung on to the simple tenets of his Christian up-bringing. His parents, though very wealthy, were inspired by their faith to do a lot in the community.

So why was God doing this to him? Over the last couple of days, he had prayed as he had never done before for Mary to be brought back to health, but to no avail. Yes, there were the pat answers that Mary was living in Heaven as she had never lived before. Although Joby could easily imagine Hell – some parts of Glasgow resembled it, and he had heard of the dysfunctional town of Carlsborough in the Northeast of England – but he found it hard to imagine Heaven. Somehow the idea of angels on clouds playing harps did not seem to enthuse him. And the Book of Revelation to St John was decidedly scary. Joby had felt very lonely over the last couple of days; he could understand the words from the cross, “My God, why did you abandon me?”

Joseph Walker poured out his confused feelings to his parents, who sat and listened without saying anything.

Back in Asher House, Christian Salway was in his room. He was missing Aidy and Eejay, but one of the benefits of this age of technology was almost instant communication. His mobile phone buzzed and there was an e-mail from Aidy telling him what had happened today and where he should meet them in Marchmont Crescent. It was only five minutes' walk from the flat he shared with Mum in Sciennes. Chris settled down to get his homework completed for Monday. He was enjoying his rather more traditional and challenging Scottish education. And after his experience in the educational slums in Beckton, Strathcadden Academy was an academic palace. For the first time in years, he had felt safe. He had feared that he would never be accepted in a Scottish school, but the Caddies had taken him to their hearts. For that he was deeply grateful to Aidy and Eejay who had befriended him from the start.

Back in Beckton, kind and gentle boys like Aidan and Ewan Walker would have had a very hard time indeed. In Carlsborough, they would have been stabbed. Being kind and gentle was viewed as a sign of weakness. Since Christian looked slightly girlish, he really did not stand a chance. Even the girls vied competitively like so many alpha females, and many were shaven headed to make themselves "look real 'ard". Christian hated Sowerland. He had said many a time that if he never saw the place again, it would be too soon.

Beckton was part of the Sowerland Conurbation and was as unattractive as its name. When he had described the people of Carlsborough and Beckton, Joshua told him that they sounded like a bunch of psychopaths. Joshua was right. Now he could be himself. And he liked wearing the kilt, that wonderful garment that

looked brilliant on both women and men. Some people said that kilts made men look sexy. He agreed.

And being himself was to gaze at pictures on his laptop of Aidy and Eejay who had acted as models for teenage male fashion for the Walker Bros website. Christian was interested in fashion and design. If anyone said that that was gay (in the sense of contemptible), there were plenty of men in the fashion industry. Although it described events sixty years before, Christian had read *Something Wholesale* by the travel writer Eric Newby. He wondered if Lane & Newby ever had visited Walker Bros along with *McNoons* of Perth and *Throttle & Fumble* of Sheffield.

Christian had done a good number of shifts at Walker Bros and was due to do five days over half-term. He had picked up that the Walker Sisters were due to take over soon from their father. They had been down to London Fashion Week, and he wondered what it would be like sitting by the catwalk. After all, Eric Newby described doing the same in Paris in the Nineteen Eighties. So, Christian went to do the next best thing, to use *Google* to search images. These got his creative juices flowing and by the time he went to bed, he had drawn a number of sketches in a small sketch book. Next time he met Granddad Walker, he would talk to him.

As he lay in bed, Christian was thinking about model girls and boys wearing his designs. He wanted to emphasise not just the beauty of the young woman, but also the beauty of the young man. At the time that Eric Newby had been writing, Christian Dior in France was designing clothes for women that revolutionised the world of fashion from the austere days brought on by the terrible cataclysm that was the Second World War.

In many ways he wished he had been born on the Continent, rather than on these damned islands. In Beckton and Carlsborough nobody had artistic or poetical feelings. Actually no one had any feelings, full stop. They were backward looking and

xenophobic, a hot bed of support for various extreme right-wing political parties. Humanist socialism did not get a look in.

Humanist – he nearly thought Christian – socialism. Aidy and Eejay were clearly Christians, and they were socialists. There was no difference whatsoever between their view of socialism and his. It was just the Christian bit. He had always thought of Christians as being backward-looking and square. Certainly, that was the view that had been formed in Beckton, although, to be fair, the Christian religion was hanging on there by its fingertips, and in Carlsborough, it had been snuffed out altogether. Carlsborough was the largest community in the entire country that no longer had a church for any denomination. Where there were churches in Beckton, they were cold. Some regarded Mum as a “fallen woman” and their old-fashioned and snide behaviour towards her stuck in his throat as so much hypocrisy, especially as one or two of them were openly racist. Or there were the alpha males who went about with their little bits of fluff. There was an old-fashioned word for it: adultery.

Christian’s thoughts wandered back to Aidy and Eejay. He felt for them deeply and wanted to reach out to them. He would be able to do that when he got to Edinburgh tomorrow. But how could their god, who was at the centre of their being, so they said, allow such a dreadful thing to happen?

It was the same question that Aidan and Ewan asked as they talked to Sam and Jess in the top floor flat in Marchmont Crescent. Sam and Jess knew that the last thing that they needed was a trivial answer to what they were going through. Sam had been through a similarly traumatic experience nearly sixteen years before.

“Ed, my little brother, is coming tomorrow. He really wants to meet you,” Sam started. “He’s a few months younger

than you, Ewan. But I used to have a big sister, Gemma. She was the same age as Jess. She and I used to go to this posh school in Tanswold in the Middle Riding of Yorkshire. Dad is the Rector of Alverston which is the big town round there – about the same size as Corscadden. It was our grandma who insisted that we went there, and she paid for us. It was a lot of money per term. I used to go to Alverston Grammar School. All my friends were there, and I liked it. But I had to go to Tanswold because Grandma thought that local schools were ‘common’. It was full of the *nouveaux riches* of Beckton and Carlsborough.

“In May ’98, there was a bad outbreak of food-poisoning at the school. Loads of the kids got salmonella. I can’t remember the reason, but I didn’t have lunch in the canteen that day – just as well. Gemma got it. She was a strong athletic girl. She got me into running, athletics, and Badminton. We used to play a lot. She collapsed outside the Headmaster’s office, and he just shouted at her. He did nothing about her but eventually she got taken to hospital. She didn’t recover...”

Aidan saw how it still hurt him to this day and said gently, “Yes, Mr McEwan told us. He used to work at your school.”

“Yes, he did. He was one of the only decent teachers there. I was off for a few days but went back because there was going to be some kind of tribute to Gemma in the weekly church service that we had there on a Friday afternoon. Instead, there was a tirade from the Chaplain, a miserable little man whose only concern was his social status. There was nothing about God, just public-school Anglicanism, all about standing on your own two feet, and being brave. What a load of bollocks! I was upset and Biggles made me stay behind for a detention.”

“Who was Biggles? The headmaster or the chaplain?” Aidan asked.

“The headmaster, a bloke called Stoate. He was into aeroplanes. He kept on going on about them in assemblies. The chaplain we used to call ‘d’Arsehole’. He was slimy and a creep, and he got done for having extreme gay porn.”

“I’m gay,” said Ewan nervously.

“No this was hard-core, stuff you and I wouldn’t want to know about. Total filth. Anyway, Dad came up to the school, told Biggles to take a running jump and the next Monday I was back at Alverston.”

Jess came in, “As if that wasn’t enough, Biggles tried to frame my dad. He was Head of English there. He accused him of falsifying examination results and sexually abusing me and my sister. Dad was an NSM and Biggles wrote to the Bishop, as well as releasing totally false allegations against Dad. Dad was the union rep for the teachers at the school, and the union took the school to court and won huge damages. We had to go into hiding.”

“What a twat!” Ewan interjected.

“You can say that again. Jess helped me a lot through that,” said Sam, “and she and I started to go steady. Biggles caught us snogging in the public gardens near the school, went mad and thumped us both. He got a criminal record and a big fine. He had a lot of problems.”

“Like the bursar who had his fingers in the till,” Jess added.

“What happened there?”

“The bursar played about with the school’s money and lost most of it during a property crash. He was also thick in with some dodgy characters who supplied contaminated meat to our canteen. He got seven years for fraud and another three years for gross negligence. Soon after he got done for the meat scam, which he was using to try to recoup the money he had lost.”

“What happened to the school?”

“It went down the pan soon after. There were all sorts of funny dealings with tax and so on. There was a bloke who had a big estate, and the school was one of the things he used for tax evasion. They got him in the end, but it was so long and complicated that he died before the case ever got to court. The school is now a country house hotel. His place is now open to the public.”

Sam looked at Ewan and Aidan. They were so like he was when the events they were talking about happened. They looked so young and vulnerable. Both had pulled their legs up onto the settee. Aidan was sitting cross-legged while Ewan had his arms round his knees. And they looked so tired. Sam remembered how Jess had cuddled him for the first time out in a spring garden while their parents were inside. And her love had been a balm for his aching void within. Sam had never found a simple answer as to why horrible things happened to such nice people. Nor did his father, who was a vicar, and was meant to be good at God. He just hoped that being there for these two lovely young men would be comfort enough.

The two brothers curled up under the duvet on the sofa-bed in the living room, and were almost immediately joined by the two cats, who purred contentedly each time one of the boys moved.

It was the friendship, love, and support from people like Jess and Sam, and their friends who were going to get them and Dad through this, not pious platitudes. They needed evangelical religious tracts like a bullet through the head.

Chapter 11

Friday, 24th January 2014

Over that weekend Samuel and Jessica Proudlock worked hard to distract the young brothers from the death of their mother. Although the boys were in a strange flat, it was fortunate that both Sam and Jess shared many of the boys' interests.

On Friday, Jess took the children to the nursery. As an accountant, she could work at home, but on Mondays and Fridays she would go into the office to attend meetings, deposit work, pick up new work, and meet clients. Normally Sam would cycle over to the King's Buildings, the Science Campus on the outskirts of the city, with its wonderful views of the Pentland Hills. Today, he had taken the day off to look after the two boys, and Aidan and Ewan were fascinated by his love for music.

The third bedroom in the flat was a study and was kept locked to keep inquisitive little fingers from valuable equipment. Not only were there high-quality computers, but also Sam had a good quality keyboard, and Jess had a violin and clarinet. Jess had a degree in Music, but she found there was little call for music graduates. Therefore, she had retrained as an accountant, and employment was easy to get. She had remained a highly talented amateur musician, playing with the Marchmont Orchestra. Sam was a good pianist and played the church organ. He was amused to hear of Aidan's argy-bargy with the old Saint Oswald College organ. Fortunately for him, the instruments he played were not nearly as cantankerous.

Meanwhile, Ewan was shredding on Sam's electric guitar.

"Your school had a reputation for good music," said Sam. "But I haven't seen them for a couple of years. What's happened? Jess is a judge for the annual Scottish Schools' Music Festival."

“Michelin Woman,” said Aidan, “sorry, I mean Miss Bryant. She said it was too elitist. I think it was that she was too lazy to organise it. And she hated boys. Anyway, she’s gone now.”

“Who taught you music? You play really well.”

“Mum did to start with. She sat with me and Ewan at the piano. She was really good at the piano, and I really liked it. Dad plays as well. When I got more advanced, Mrs Shepley came up to give me lessons. I am due to do Grade VIII in July.”

“Dad taught me the electric guitar,” said Ewan. “And Mr Shepley taught me classical guitar, and Mrs Shepley taught me violin.”

Sam detected a tear in Aidan’s eye. Just the word ‘Mum’ seemed to cause him pain. “What happened at school?” he asked.

“The Dragon – that was the other name for Miss Bryant – she wouldn’t have anything to do with an orchestra; despite the fact she had been the leader of one. She said it was too elitist. She also said that boys didn’t have the ability to make good music...”

“What bollocks!” said Sam. “Where do they get them from?”

“Mr Mitchell said that she was his biggest mistake. Anyway, she’s gone.”

“And good riddance!” Sam concluded. “Have you thought of getting the school orchestra going again?”

“Yes. We were chatting about it in the common room,” replied Aidan. “Eejay, Chris, and I have talked to Mr Mitchell about it, but...”

“It will be a great way to remember Mum,” said Ewan. “She gave us our music. It’s a gift for life.”

“I can’t think of anything better to remember your mum by than to dedicate the new orchestra to her. Aidan, I would love to hear some of your music. Your dad tells me a lot about it.”

Aidan had brought his laptop; it was inseparable from him. He loaded the software for the printer and printed out one of his tunes. The *Imperial March of the Royal Arse Hortillery* he did not think appropriate. He did not feel that *A Night on the Tiles* would ever be completed. At the moment he just did not feel the humour for it. Instead, he printed off a tune he called *On Sliver Bank*, which was a gentle and lyrical pastorate. That was his usual style. As Sam listened, he immediately recognised the talent that dripped from this shy teenager.

Ewan played one of his guitar pieces. This was a more improvised performance that reminded Sam of the Album *Tubular Bells* that Dad still had from his youth in the nineteen seventies. Sam got out a tune that he had written in memory of his loss. It was called *Gemma’s Song*. It was a delightful piece that skipped along brightly and illustrated the joyful love of life that was so distinctive of Gemma Ruth Chamberlain Proudlock. That a talented young life had needlessly been snuffed out by the pig-headed negligence of an arrogant old man was to all of them an obscenity: and the old man had got away with it scot-free. But it helped Sam to share their pain.

For the rest of the morning, they talked about music and played old LPs. Sam had a record deck that was normally stored in the study so that little fingers could not mess it up. Dad had given him a good number of albums that he had bought when he was a kid. The music from *Rick Wakeman*, *Mike Oldfield*, and *Genesis* was of the Progressive Rock genre. It was as fresh to these teenage ears as it was to a twenty-nine-year-old and his fifty-eight-year-old father. It was soothing to, but did not take away, the aching void that Aidan and Ewan felt for their mother.

Joby had an aching void that was even harder to fill. He longed to be with the boys. Although Ewan had contacted him on *Skype*, it was a poor substitute for actually being there with them. He was relieved that they were with Sam and Jess. Sam had been a good find for the Department, a highly talented and academic engineer, who was full of bright ideas. Although it would be some time off yet, when it was his turn to retire, Joby was confident that Sam would take over his Chair. By that time, surely, he would have got over his loss, for time has a habit of healing many wounds. But for Joby, the wound was not just raw, it was still bleeding, and anything at the moment was a mere sticking plaster. Although a grown man, he was mightily relieved that Mum and Dad were there with him. He did not know how he would have coped otherwise.

And there was a lot to cope with. The legalised protection racket that was travel insurance was threatening not to pay out for the hospital fees, the private ambulance, and the repatriation. The bill would run to about twenty thousand pounds. While Mary's life was insured to the hilt, surely it was a matter of principle and honour that they should pay out. It was not as if she had deliberately sought to die. Far from it.

They were saying that Mary, being a doctor, should have known that there was something wrong with her. She should not have travelled with that sort of condition. Unfortunately, Joby was not the sort of man who knew how to argue with these shysters. So there resulted a conversation (to a premium rate UK number) that sounded like something out of *Monty Python*. By the time Joby had finished, he might as well have told them to take a running jump and paid for everything himself.

Fortunately for Joby, but less so for the insurance company, his father was not such a pushover. Charles Walker was on to Derek at Gordon Morton Solicitors who dealt with all the legal affairs for Walker Bros and the Walker Family Trust. Derek would make minced meat of a set of London wide boys who

renege on contracts that were entered into in good faith. Charles was now onto the London wide-boys and spivs. They tried at first to say that there was no way that they could talk to anyone who was not the policyholder. That she was dead was of no concern to them.

“Please get me your manager,” snapped Charles Walker.

“He’s in a meeting.”

“They are always in a meeting. Get him out of the meeting and onto the telephone now. This call is costing me a fortune. Nice little money spinner you have in making claimants ring a premium rate number. I shall be billing your company not just for the cost of this call, but also, I will be charging you £5 a minute for my time. Do you mind telling him that?”

The call-centre operative did mind telling him that. No, he could not possibly give the manager’s name or his direct line. It was more than his job was worth, and he invoked every bit of industrial legislation from the Data Protection Act to the Health and Safety at Work Act, and to Unfair Dismissal legislation.

There ensued another increasingly acrimonious stand-off in which Gordon Morton Solicitors of High Street, Corscadden were mentioned twice. Finally, the operative surrendered to the now incandescent owner of Walker Bros (It did not help that he did not cover up the mouthpiece very well when he said, “Gary, I’ve got this old Scots geezer. He wants to speak to Dean. Is he still at coffee?”) Finally, he had to admit that Dean was finished with his meeting and, “...his direct line is 0207...”

While the call centre operative was not very co-operative, Dean (on 0207...) was confrontational and abusive. This was not going to put Charles Walker off. He was not the proprietor of Walker Bros of Corscadden for nothing. He had seen off Max the Axe, and many other bankers. He could hold his own with the

hedge funds and other financial spivs, skills that he had learned in the University of Hard Knocks. The little wide boy called Dean was really a push over, and Charles Walker had a deep understanding of business and contract law. Dean was no match. He would see what he could do.

“Thank you, Mr Haywood,” was Charles’ concluding comment, “I expect a confirmatory letter to be sent to my solicitors in Corscadden. You may text it or fax it by the end of work today. I will cancel my bill for £453.46 + VAT if my solicitors confirm its receipt by fax this afternoon. If not, I will submit my expenses to you through them, and, no doubt, they will want to recoup their expenses as well. Their number is 01781 43 4431.”

“Joby, they will be paying out. Derek will see to it.”

“How did you know all that stuff, Dad?”

“I made it up as I went along. I could tell he didn’t have a clue. He has agreed, so he’s in it both ways. Either he authorises payment and keeps stumm about it, or he goes and bleats to his boss who will find out how little he knows about his industry. That won’t look good on his reference, would it?”

When Christian Salway and Jordan Melhuish arrived at the Proudlock flat, they found their friends up to their arms in small children. Olivia and Sophie were having a lovely time with Ewan. As Aidan and Ewan were in jeans, the girls could not make comments about skirts and the kittens could not explore. But when Christian and Jordan arrived, the cats made a beeline for their kilts and had a wonderful time underneath. Since both Christian and Jordan liked children (each was an only child and had always longed for a brother or sister), they too joined in the fun. Edward Proudlock arrived. He was a tall and lanky youth with long black wavy hair, almost a carbon copy of his older brother. Like his

brother, he spoke with a soft Derbyshire accent. Although Christian was initially from Northumberland, he had quickly picked up the Buchananshire dialect.

Precociously the girls checked both Christian and Jordan. When Jordan went through to the bathroom, they followed him and announced to everyone what he was doing. And the cats pulled the kilt, which had been folded on the side of the bath, onto the floor and played hide and seek in it.

While Chris went home to be with his mother, the others remained at the Proudlock flat. Ewan was so pleased to have Jordan and spent the night cuddled up to his boyfriend. And Aidy was on the other side of the sofa bed, while Edward had a second sofa bed. Ewan felt very safe. There were lots of places for the cats to rest and as any of them stirred they would readjust themselves and purr. The gerbil was active in the night, and the tropical fish continued to race about their tank.

The next day, Saturday 25th January 2014, was to celebrate Jordan's seventeenth birthday (which had been two days before) and Ewan was due to spend the day with him in Corscadden. Now, the activity had been transferred to Edinburgh. There was no lie-in; Olivia and Sophie saw to that at seven thirty. And they found that all four boys wore sports kit in bed: T-shirt, running shorts, and socks and a jumper as the flat was a bit cold at night.

After breakfast Chris arrived in his running kit – round The Meadows, past the Pollock Halls into Holyrood Park, up to the top of Arthur's Seat, and back again. They found out that Ed could hold his own with them. It was a run that Ed had done several times with his brother, and he had planned the route with Chris. It was windy up at the summit of Arthur's seat, but the five boys ignored the wind whipping around their bare legs and they took in the panoramic views of the city laid out below them.

After lunch, it was over to Sam to take the boys to play Badminton at the university sports centre at The Pleasance. To make up the numbers, a couple of Sam's post-graduate students came to play as well. Jess had taken the children to a party in Morningside. Sam had set up a knockout league, and he and Ed got knocked out first round. Sam's students won, but Ewan and Jordan had given Sam's students (two top players from the Intra-mural ladder) a good run about the court.

To give the Proudlock Family a rest, the boys went over to the Salway flat over in Sciennes. It was less spacious than the one in Marchmont, but it was cosy and comfortable. The monthly rent was an arm and a leg. Chris, Ed, and Aidy were going to cook; Ewan and Jordan were given strict orders not to go in the kitchen. Laura had some work to do. Now, for the first time, Jordan and Ewan had time to be together on their own as boyfriend and boyfriend. They did not need to say much. They snuggled and cuddled, and Ewan gave his boyfriend his birthday present, a silver Celtic cross to go round his neck. And he accompanied it with a small bunch of flowers.

"Thank you so much, Eejay," said Jordan.

"And thanks for coming," replied Ewan. "Aidy and I really appreciate it."

Chris, Aidy, and Ed produced a wonderful meal, and the bubbling conviviality of a mother and five teenage boys soothed the pain considerably. Laura Salway kept on noticing how Aidy seemed so similar in many ways to her own son. It seemed uncanny...

Chapter 12

Wednesday, 5th February 2014

For Joseph Walker and his two sons, the time between Mary's repatriation and her funeral was emotional. Joseph was particularly vulnerable, and his two sons became protective towards their father. He was so lost. Of course, Jenny and Sarah came round to Brewster House to help to look after their kid brother and their nephews. Sarah was feeling the loss of her close friend acutely. She too had shed many a tear. Hewitt & Sons, the undertakers, were also very kind and helpful. Christian came round and cooked for the family; he enjoyed any excuse to get into the kitchen.

The funeral was not going to be a solemn affair. It was to be a celebration of life. The Walker family were a family who had always loved life and had little truck with the self-righteous pomposity of some churchgoers who had faces like wet Sundays. Mary had given much of herself to the community and the church. The church in Corscadden was at the centre of its community, and the Rector, Reverend Robert Matheson and his team were keen to make St Columba's Church a community asset.

Some years before, the Victorian Legacy Preservation Association had kicked up an awful fuss when it was first proposed to remove the pews. They were of dark pitch pine and gave the church a dour air. That few of the Victorian Legacy Preservation Association ever darkened the doors of St Columba's Church was neither here nor there. Eventually the church was emptied of the pews. They were upcycled, ending up in pubs, peoples' homes, or tea shops. The church was redecorated throughout, and new lighting and sound systems were fitted. The church was thus able to double up as a concert hall, dance space, theatre, or an exhibition space. A cafe in the crypt proved very popular as it sold good food at reasonable prices. And worship of God occurred on a Sunday and Wednesday morning, and a Sunday evening.

The church promoted Christianity as life before death as well as after. The ministry team was forward looking, with a mission to make the church relevant to the life of the town. The ministry team was helped by the fact that Corscadden was a close-knit and friendly community whose people naturally supported each other. It was a community that welcomed outsiders into its bosom, as Christian Salway had found.

The church in Scotland had worked hard for many years to break down class divisions, and Corscadden had been at the forefront with its rectors, none more so than Mr Matheson, who had been at Edinburgh University at the same time as Andy McEwan and had shared a flat with him. Mr Matheson was a champion of the underdog, and was a hard, plain-speaking ambassador for Christ. Yet he had a very gentle side with those who needed his help. He would be fierce with the pompous and self-opinionated but would equally come alongside gently with those who were hurting.

The Walker family found his ministry a great comfort in their time of need. He did not have trite answers to their hurt but sat and listened as Joseph and his sons poured out their feelings about bereavement. There were no flash-bang revelations or insights, but just the simple miracle of people coming alongside the Walkers as they came to terms with their loss.

Aidan and Ewan Walker returned to Strathcadden Academy where they felt safe and supported. The humdrum routine of lessons and sporting activities gave them an anchor, just as it did for many young people when life had given them a rotten turn.

The loss of Mary Walker (Dr Fairbairn) had also been a grievous blow to many people in Corscadden. For not only was she a conscientious doctor who treated the whole patient, not just the disease, but also was a councillor for the Priestfield Ward,

Chairman of the Corscadden Music Society, and a founder member of the Corscadden Festival Society. None had realised that she had been so ill. It was also a shock to Strathcadden Academy where she was on the School Board.

The funeral happened on the Wednesday before half term at St Columba's Church. Mr McEwan had allowed Secondary Years 5 and 6 to go to the church to support Aidan and Ewan. He remembered how when he was at Tanswold School back in the late nineties some of the sixth form had gone to be close to their dying friend, Gemma Proudlock, and Stoate, the capricious headmaster there, had expelled them. One girl, Lucy Simpson, who would never have said boo to a goose, called Stoate a callous bastard. She was totally right. Mr McEwan had officiated at Gemma's funeral and the whole sixth form had gone to say farewell to a much-loved friend. Stoate had gone ballistic but was roundly told where to get off.

There would be no repeat of that at Strathcadden. All would be free to go down to St Columba's Church in the town centre to support their friends, if they wished to.

And so it turned out. The Walker brothers were well-liked in the school, and a very large number of the Years 5 and 6 went to the church to be there with them. As for their father, a good number of his friends, acquaintances, and colleagues came to express their sympathy for his dreadful loss. Walker Bros was closed that day with notices stating, "Store will be closed today due to a family bereavement." It was not just that there was standing room only in the church, but also outside in Kirkstoun Place where the service was relayed by loudspeakers and on a television screen.

The service had been planned by Joseph Walker and his two sons. Aidan was to pay tribute to his mother by playing some pieces on the organ. Ewan was to read some of his poetry. Joseph was going to speak about Mary, while Mr Matheson was to preach

a sermon based on Matthew 25:40, *The King will reply, 'Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did it for me.'*

So, it was to more than a full house that Mary's coffin was brought down the aisle to the massed pipes and drum led by the pipe-major at Strathcadden Academy, Karen Lawlor. She was playing *Highland Cathedral*, and Aidan came in on the organ at the right time. The massed pipes had increased by a third, from three to four with the addition of John Murray from Secondary Year 4 who played the drum. It was a dignified scene and befitting to the solemnity of the occasion. This time Aidan stopped playing as Karen and her band came to attention. *Highland Cathedral* had been a favourite tune of Mary.

Christian, as a friend of the family, sat in the front and was soon joined by Aidan who had left his perch on the organ stool and had slipped unobtrusively to the chairs that had been reserved. On the other side of the aisle sat the Fairburn family, most of whom, not surprisingly, he had not met. He felt uncomfortable, but that was no surprise; a funeral service is not meant to be a comfortable experience, especially as he had very nearly had one for himself. However, he felt more at ease as this was a congregation that had a substantial element of young people, and it was going to be conducted in modern English. And he didn't feel the chill that he had felt last time he was in a church five years ago. The regular organist at St Columba's was now playing a gentle Scottish air, and then the Reverend Matheson came up to speak.

Christian was a good singer, and the hymns (apart from the first) were modern, reflecting Mary's view that church worship should be of the present day, not stuck several centuries behind the times. And then he watched as Joseph, Aidan, and Ewan went to the front and stood at the lectern. Joseph started, "Thank you all so much for coming. When I met Mary, I was a very young twenty-year-old and was in the start of my doctorate. I didn't look much

older than about seventeen. Jenny and Sarah, my sisters whom most of you know used to tell me that I acted more like ten. Mary was nine years older than me and was in her final year of training as a GP. Mary didn't mind my clumsy chat-up lines. She told me later that I sounded so sweet.

“Mary enjoyed the things that I did. We would cycle, camp, or do hill-walking together. She was sporting as well. I would give her a good run, and she would then hammer me on the Badminton court. She was a good shot at tennis. I was useless, but with her gentle coaching, I found that I could give her as good a game as she gave me.

“Mary very much became a daughter to Mum and Dad, as well as a sister to Jenny and Sarah, her closest friend. Bethan, Richard, and Alex, Mary's mum, dad, and brother, who are with us today, still love coming up to Corscadden. And I and the boys will continue to go down to the Borders each summer.

“Mary loved life. She was devoted to others and was inspired to do many different things by her Christian Faith. Her faith was not a po-faced denial of what life could bring. Mary believed that her faith allowed her to live life to the full. She would often tell me that she believed in life before death as well as life after death. She brought up our two lovely sons as Christians, and all of us share the zest for life that Mary brought us. Although I am heart-broken at our loss, I rejoice that she is now more alive than she ever has been. She lives on in our sons. Aidan has her musical talent and Ewan has her looks and personality. Mary, in the words of our first hymn, we will meet again.”

The words were heart-felt, and a round of applause came from the congregation and outside. Then Ewan stepped forward and spoke, “I can add little more to what Dad has said. She gave me and Aidan unconditional love, whatever we had done. She could be strict with us. Although we could kick off a bit, she was

right. If only she had paid as much attention to herself as she did to us, and everyone else. I have written a short verse that I would like to use to give her as a present of my love:

*I wander up on Lufen's paths.
The breeze, it blows with soothing breath,
And sunlight dapples summer balms
On scent-rich flowers of purple heath.*

*The curlew calls on Lufen's peak.
O'er moor and tarn I heard her speak.
Her rippling music running free.
To soothe and wash all over me.*

*Skimming o'er the heather tops in flight
The grouse glides and calls out to me,
"Get back! Get back! Get back!"
Before he hides and is gone from sight.*

*The pipit rises high in spring
So high on whirring chattering wing.
And falls back chattering to the earth,
To touch and thrill my pounding heart.*

*Good Christian soul, spread now your wings.
From Cadden's wooded Vale arise!
To our God speed on your flight,
And make your home in His delight!*

"Mum, we'll never forget you."

Christian was captivated by the imagery. He knew that his friend had a gift for poetry, and the words seemed so real to him. He seemed drawn by something that was more powerful, a gentle but irresistible force. He could not tell what it was, but it seemed

exciting. Then Aidan, his closest friend, who had stood by him, loved him, and made him confident, went to the lectern and said, “My thanks to Mum are not words. I want to thank her that she gave me the gift of music. Music has been a great comfort to all of us these last dark days. It touches when words fail. I want to play for you a piece that I have written, called *Lufen Tarn*. It is a short pastoral tune written in the meditative key of D. To me, it reflects Mum as I want to remember her. It is also my thanks to God for my life as well as hers.”

The music washed over Christian, and he marvelled at his friend’s God-given talent. There he was again, going on about God. Well, it was a church, and if you didn’t do God in a church, what was the point of a church? He knew that Aidan and Ewan were from a Christian family, and that their belief underpinned what they did. It was a Christian family that was utterly different to the Christianity that he had come across in Sowerland. There was life and joy in the Walker household. It had been noisy and full of laughter. From his short time working at Walker Bros, Christian had met Mr Walker. He was a hands-on boss, always there to help and support his staff. Although Christian was very much the new-boy, and very part-time, he was made to feel every bit as much a part of the organisation. And it was the same whenever he went to Brewster House. He was part of the family, another son to Joseph and Mary. But now he was watching Mary being given her rites. It was a solemn and sad occasion, but somehow there was an atmosphere of life, love, and light.

While the Walker family went to the cremation, Christian went back to Brewster House. There had been a problem for the catering for the family get-together for that afternoon. It would have been natural for the restaurant at Walker Bros to have done the catering, but they had long-booked engagements. Bereavement never comes at a convenient time. But Jim and Margaret Calladine

from next door had offered their help to Charles and Muriel. Christian had never met them before but felt instantly at ease with them. Presently the three of them along with Jordan were hard at work in the kitchen at Brewster House, so that when the family returned, a beautifully prepared spread was awaiting them and various friends.

Christian had heard about one Scottish wake where they had all got so legless that they had tipped the boat over as they rowed between islands with the coffin, and it had gone overboard, floating off into the middle of the sound. Fortunately for all, it had been fished out complete by a passing trawler. In reality, the Walker family's get-together was a rather more sober affair. Despite everything, however, there was the noisy conviviality that was the hallmark of Brewster House. It was exactly as Mary Walker would have wanted it.

Chapter 13

Wednesday, 5th March 2014

Bereavement never comes at a convenient time, nor is it ever a welcome visitor. But life has to go on. And that was the attitude of the Walker family. Mary would never have wanted things to grind to a halt on her behalf; she was too full of life – particularly as her nearest and dearest would be the first to say that she was alive as never before. Since they believed in life before death as well as after, they got on with it.

Joseph Walker was back at work at the University of Edinburgh. He had totally forgotten what he had been up to before he went to Lausanne, but within a couple of days, it all came back to him. Aidan had forgotten what he was learning for his Advanced Highers and underperformed in his mocks. That meant that he got Grades B rather than A. As for Ewan, his sixteenth birthday on Thursday the twenty-seventh of February was a much-muted affair. He spent the evening with Jordan in his room in Brewster House. He had little appetite for much else other than the company of his boyfriend. He had done his mock examinations for his Highers; he bombed out completely and had to re-sit them all. Ewan never did things by halves.

Their sporting prowess suffered somewhat as well. Ewan and Aidan were beaten soundly in a badminton tournament. During a 10-k race over in Buchanan, Aidan tripped over a tree-root and went tumbling down a bank into a patch of brambles. By the time he had recovered and extricated himself, he was well down the field. Ewan could not get it together at all in the race and dropped out in disgust. Christian was the first Caddie Laddie home.

Music was a great comfort to Joseph, Aidan, and Ewan. At weekends after dinner, they would sit in the Drawing Room at Brewster House (it was a posh house, so had a drawing room) and

listen to the Progressive Rock from the Nineteen Seventies which was Joseph's favourite genre.

It was at this stage that Aidan started to compose music in large amounts. Although not as accomplished as his brother on the keyboard, Ewan had a wide range of instruments he could play. He was a highly capable guitar-player. As well as the normal electric guitar, he played acoustic and bass instruments. Although Miss Bryant had absolutely refused to teach Ewan the violin (and had forbidden him from ever setting foot in the Music Department), he had learned it. There had been a lot of screeching and scraping at first, but now he could coax quite complex tunes from it.

Aidan's music was perfect for Ewan, and Aidan accompanied his brother on the keyboard. The boys would spend much of Saturday and Sunday up in their "studio" above the garage at Brewster House, while their father used his noisy boy's toys below.

The first couple of weeks back at school were not particularly easy for Aidan and Ewan. Aidan became rather withdrawn. He remained conscientious and polite but seemed to have lost his mojo. Where previously he would be keen to answer, he was hesitant. His academic work was done well but was not outstanding. Often, he appeared dreamy; in earlier days his reverie would have been interrupted by a well-aimed piece of chalk, or blackboard rubber. These days not only would the guilty member of staff be sacked, but also electronic whiteboard markers were far too expensive to hurl at gormless students. So, a grumpy, "Walker, laddie, will ye no pay attention?" would have to do.

Ewan was more thorough. While Aidan remained gentle and polite, Ewan had a short fuse. His bad couple of weeks started with his failing his Mock examinations spectacularly. By a cruel chance, the exams started the very first day they went back, and he

just had forgotten everything. He failed in all six of his subjects and picked up six discredits. He had also picked up a discredit for dropping out of the Buchanan 10-k. Mr Drummond had been furious with him. By his own admission, Ewan could be “the gay one with the gob” and had given some backchat to Mr Drummond. And now his (albeit refined) gob was getting Ewan into bother. He did not intend to pick up discredits, but he did so in the same way as a cat picks up fleas on her travels.

Ewan Walker was openly gay. He did not mind being referred to as Gay Ewan. He simply found other boys attractive. He had no interest whatever in sexual activity, the very thought of which he found repulsive. Normally he could take classroom banter about his orientation in good humour and was clever enough to turn it back on whoever was the source. But at the start of a French lesson (in which Mrs Learmont was going to go through the mock which Ewan had so spectacularly failed), a bit of banter got out of hand. Simon Cairns was its originator. “It’s Gay Ewan!” he said. “Look what I have found for your collection.”

Normally Ewan would have wiggled himself in a suggestive way, and said, “I’m all yours Simon.” But not on this occasion. Cairns was not always sensitive and pushed his luck. “Open your bag and I’ll pop it in!” He clearly was not reading Ewan’s body language. He started to open the zipper on Ewan’s rucksack. At once Ewan saw what the picture was; it was a pornographic image that disgusted him. Not surprisingly Ewan’s sense of humour had taken a temporary vacation. After all it was not fair; Ewan fancied boys but hated filth. He shouted out, “You do that again and I will break your fingers, you little shit!”

There was a stunned silence. Never had Ewan reacted like that before. And Mrs Learmont stood in the door glaring. It was by total coincidence that she had been talking to three candidates for a teaching post in Modern Languages, and Ewan’s words had made an unwelcome intrusion into their discussions. And they

were looking with a mixture of incredulity and disgust at the tall, skinny, and rather effeminate youth who had just come out with this mouthful of filth. He screwed up the image and threw it towards the bin, but it missed and landed at their feet. They could clearly see the content.

“Do you mind repeating that, Walker?” Mrs Learmont demanded.

Ewan did not mind repeating it, word for word. Cairns had not got the message and was doing limp wrists. It was lucky that Mrs Learmont was there because there could well have been a set-to. Walker was revving up to carry out his threat. In reality, it would have been rather one-sided as Cairns was the fly-half for the First Colts rugby team. Although Walker was rather taller, Cairns was a muscular youth who would have wiped the floor with his opponent. Walker rounded on the audience behind Mrs Learmont. “Yes, I am gay! I’m not a fucking monster!”

Mrs Learmont’s face was red with outrage and embarrassment. “Walker! How dare you?” she yelled. “Get out of this room now. Wait outside and I will deal with you after the lesson.”

She turned to her visitors and commented, “I am so sorry about this. He’s one of our nicest kids as well.”

It immediately occurred to her that if this display of disgusting manners was characteristic of the nicest pupil at Strathcadden Academy, it did not say much about the rest. She sidled back to her guests to qualify her statement. And by the time the lesson ended, she would have happily put Walker across her knee and given him a good hiding.

At the end of the lesson Ewan Walker was still pumped up on an unpleasant cocktail of adrenaline and testosterone. Unlike his brother the effect of the former hormone was to set him up for

fight rather than flight. Usually, Ewan Walker's fight mode was brief. Subsequently flight would kick in and he would make himself scarce rapidly. Today, he was spending rather more time in fight mode. He was angry with everything and anything. He was in a deep hole, and he was continuing to dig with the fury of a warthog. The result of this was that in his interview with Mrs Learmont afterwards he was the very picture of an immature and petulant teenager.

For his pains, Ewan Walker received one discredit for using foul, threatening, and abusive language, and a second discredit for showing grossly disrespectful behaviour in front of visitors. Additionally, there was a detention and a referral to his tutor.

"Mr Farjeon isn't going to be very pleased," Ewan complained at the end of his one-to-one with Mrs Learmont.

"I don't suppose he will," she concluded.

Ewan was entirely right in his analysis of his form tutor's reaction. At lunchtime he found himself waiting outside the physics lab next to the Science Office on the top floor of Harrison House. The office was a large room where all the science teachers worked. He had been in there a couple of years ago when he was in Secondary 3. Mr Farjeon was the Head of Physics. One physics lesson, Ewan had connected the input terminals of a something-or-other-scope to the mains. His work-partner had suggested to him that if he did so, the electrical waves on the screen would leap out of the instrument. Instead of green electrical waves, there had been a bright yellow flash, a loud splut, and the circuit breaker went. Finally, there was smoke rising languidly from the instrument. And smoke was billowing from Mr Farjeon's ears. On that occasion Mum and Dad had been landed with a bill for nearly £400, and Ewan was grounded for a month.

Ewan Walker was still trying hard to be an alpha male as he waited for Mr Farjeon. It was a forlorn and pathetic effort. In

reality he was a gamma male through and through. Only Aidan was more of a drip. With Mrs Learmont (a beta female) he had been given the rounds of the cookhouse. In the presence of a true alpha male, he was toast. As it proved when Mr Farjeon summoned him into the office. It was not going to be any worse than the interview he had when he had fried that thingamabob-scope. He was wrong. It was much worse. Dr Cuthbert, Director of Higher and Advanced Studies, was sitting there staring at him icily. Mr Farjeon went to a desk with a computer which had something important looking on the screen.

“Well, Walker,” Mr Farjeon started coldly, “what have you got to say for yourself?”

“Mom’s deed,” Ewan mumbled petulantly, staring at the floor.

“Walker, can we have that in English, not Ewan-babble? You’re not on the BBC.”

“My mother’s dead, you idiot!”

Mr Farjeon’s face went burgundy. He put it close to Ewan’s and shouted, “How dare you talk to me like that, Walker? I am not going to be spoken to like that! Who do you think you are?”

“Will ye no’ lay off me, Mr Farjeon?” Ewan shouted back, standing, and putting his face close to his tutor’s and invading his personal space. Ewan’s accent, normally akin to the refined tones of Morningside, had thickened up to pure Buchananshire, as spoken on The Huise. It always did in moments of intense stress.

“Will ye no talk properly, Walker?”

“Who are you to tell me to talk properly, Mr Farjeon? You come from Falkirk, so don’t you tell me how I should talk! You

cannae think of anything other than to get at me for the way I talk?” Ewan was demonstrating his status as the gay one with the gob.

“Sit down at once Walker!” Farjeon yelled. He was livid. He was proud of his Falkirk accent. It gave him street-cred and thought that Walker’s refined Morningside tones seem to fit with his limp-wristed demeanour. Mr Farjeon was feeling very tempted to give the boy a damned good slap. Although Walker was taller than him, Farjeon was fifty percent heavier and would have given Gay Ewan a lesson he would never forget. But Mr Farjeon’s feet would not have hit the ground until he had ended up in the unemployment office via the sheriff’s court. Besides old Misery-Guts was there and would not approve.

Farjeon continued, “Are you so thick-skinned that you don’t know what I have asked you in for? Do you think that I am wasting my time for a wee bit o’ blether? Now you listen to me, Ewan Walker. I have here a good number of reports about you, and I want to know what you think you are doing.”

“No comment.”

“You start off by giving up in a cross-country race and you told Mr Drummond that you couldn’t be arsed with it. What kind of attitude is that?”

“I wasn’t feeling that good. What’s wrong with that?”

“I’ll tell you, laddie. You were representing the school. You made the running team look like a load of donkeys. After that we have six discredits for poor performance in your mock examinations. 13 % in History. You wrote nothing! It’s a disgrace! You got a discredit for your mobile going off in Geography. Miss Hart couldn’t believe it.”

“I couldn’t help it if a text message came in. I had forgotten to turn it off.” Ewan replied petulantly.

“You should not have your mobile in school time anyway! It should be left at home or in your house. If that happened in one of your Highers in June, you would have your exam stopped. Don’t you realise that?”

“Of course, I do, Mr Farjeon. Do ye think I’m thick?”

“Of course not, Walker, but I am concerned about your piss-poor performance in your mocks. It’s as if you had learned nothing whatsoever.”

“I forgot everything. My mother has died.”

“So what? What kind of excuse do you call that? You got Credit Grade 1 in your Standard Grades, didn’t you? Or did you cheat?”

“I don’t believe what I am hearing,” shouted Ewan, who was justifiably aggrieved. “How dare ye question my integrity?”

“Shut up, Walker! I have no’ finished with ye yet. Today’s performance with Mrs Learmont was the pits! So, what did you say to Cairns?”

“Mrs Learmont would have told you.”

“I want you to say it, Walker!”

“I’ll tell you, Mr Farjeon, sir. He was trying to put a filthy picture into my rucksack. It was disgusting. I said, ‘you do that again and I’ll break your fingers, you little shit’ – and I will.”

“And what did you say to Mrs Learmont’s visitors?”

“I said, ‘I’m gay. But I am not a fucking monster’. They were staring at me. That picture wasn’t mine.”

“No wonder. I have the image you threw at Mrs Learmont. It’s disgusting. It’s against God’s Law!”

“You don’t do God, Mr Farjeon! You keep going on about it! So, what’s God’s Law to you?”

“Don’t you question what I believe or don’t believe, Walker. If you are visiting gay pornographic websites, you should be bloody well arrested and put away. It’s perverted. You certainly should not bring that stuff into school. Thirty years ago, I would have given you six of the strap for being gay.”

“It was Cairns who printed it and was trying to put it in my bag. You can ask anyone in my class. I hate that sort of thing. I may fancy other boys, but not for that.”

“I don’t give a damn about what you like or hate. Those people were visitors to our school and one of them is going to be teaching here. At least one pulled out of the interview. What kind of impression do ye think that gives to visitors? How dare you behave like that? Would you like me to behave like that to you in front of your parents? You don’t appear to be in the least bit sorry about it.”

“No comment.”

“As far as being gay is concerned, Walker, is that you do a bit of growing up and stop being gay. You certainly do not broadcast your filthy habits to the whole world. If you stop being gay, people won’t tease you about it. As for the kind of filth that gays get up to...”

“I don’t do that kind of thing, Mr Farjeon!”

“Ewan Walker, go to your control panel, find the arrogance control and turn it down! You are just as arrogant as you were when you wrecked that oscilloscope when you were in S3.”

“I am not arrogant, Mr Farjeon.” Ewan was feeling tired from his attempts at being an alpha male in general, and his battle with Mr Farjeon in particular. Mr Farjeon seemed to be out to

score points off him and had no intention whatever of giving him a fair hearing. He was starting to lose it, and his eyes were going red.

“Your parents would be ashamed of you at the moment,” replied Mr Farjeon. “I am too. Your behaviour, attitude, and performance are completely unacceptable. I am putting you on tutor report and making a House Leader’s report to Mr McEwan. I never thought I would have to do this with a student doing Highers. I will also put you on a student improvement contract. I suggest you start to think about how you are going to improve, boy. Your mother would be turning in her grave. You are gutless, clueless, and useless!”

“She was cremated, Mr Farjeon!” Ewan was crying by now.

“Don’t answer back, Walker! You are immature and combine total incompetence with total irresponsibility. You are a unique combination of being a waste of time, a waste of space, and a waste of God’s good materials. Your mother will be ashamed of you when I contact your parents. You are a typical gay – dominant mother and ineffective father.”

“How many more times, Mr Farjeon, do I have to tell you that my mother is dead? She wasn’t cremated as a beauty treatment you know!”

Dr Cuthbert had watched the whole proceeding with an icy contempt. Craig Farjeon was a fantastic teacher, but not that good at carrying out disciplinary interviews, as was being pitifully demonstrated in front of him now. As for Ewan Walker, he was just being a petulant teenager. He could see through Ewan’s pathetic attempts at being a tough guy. “Not a particularly good performance, eh, Walker?” he said icily. “We cannot afford to have this kind of play-acting. In fact, I would advise you not to make a career on the stage. I think you need to understand that your place in Advanced Highers has been put in some jeopardy by your

performance and behaviour over the last couple of weeks. You need to understand the implication of your removal from Advanced Highers. Universities are competitive and will not be interested in a student who has been asked to leave school. So, I suggest that you go away, do a bit of thinking, do a bit of growing up and get on with some work before June.”

“So, Walker, here are the targets that I am going to set you for review at Easter...”

“My mum’s dead!” Ewan repeated. He was now in flight mode. Tears were rolling down his cheeks. “I will tell Dad what you have said to me.”

“So you keep on saying, Walker. Turn the tap off, please.” Mr Farjeon replied icily. “And you are going to tell Mummy and Daddy of me?”

“No comment, Mr Farjeon! This interview is now terminated!” Ewan shouted before rushing out of the room. The door’s spring denied him the pleasure of slamming it hard.

Dr Cuthbert sighed and got up to go back to his office. He had to do some thinking. He slinked out while Craig Farjeon was typing furiously on the computer summing up the meeting on the academy’s reporting software. There was venom in those keystrokes.

“You managed to bring the tears on, Craig,” said one of his colleagues as Mr Farjeon went back into the staff room which the scientists shared with the modern linguists. Mon, the head technician had the coffee percolating for lunch, and a lovely aroma pervaded the room.

“I think I need this one, after that meeting.”

“Who was that you had in?”

“Who do you think? Gay Ewan. He kicked off in Lorna’s lesson and threatened to break Simon Cairns’ fingers. He told the candidates that he was gay. He had the arrogance well and truly turned on. Then he had the tap running and flounced out. Little twat blew up my best oscilloscope a couple of years back – thought he was so clever – until mummy and daddy got the bill. Typical gay – dominant mother and ineffective father.”

“Take no notice. He’s just a squirt who fancies himself. Put him in front of a mirror and he would gaze at himself for hours.”

“Walker’s one of my best students,” Miss Hart interjected. “He works very hard.”

“He didn’t in his mocks,” snapped Farjeon. “That’s one of the other things I was going on at him about.”

“His mum had just died. It’s understandable.”

“Spare us the bleeding heart, Claire. You’re only just out of college, and your head’s full of do-gooding drivel. Just wait a few more years and you would want to give the likes of Walker a bloody good slap. He damned nearly got one off me.”

Farjeon was like a rutting red deer stag that had just seen off a very young rival, one that was little more than a calf. Now Farjeon was bellowing his triumph to all the females and carried on for several more minutes. Claire Hart and a couple of others had had enough and left the room.

“Craig, why was Alastair in there with you?” asked another colleague.

“No idea. Put a shot across Gay Ewan’s bows I suppose,” Craig Farjeon replied. He opened a lunchbox that contained a sandwich the size of a coping stone. Walker was the third student

from his form that he had reduced to tears in the last few days, and he had the feeling of a job well-done.

A job well-done was not the feeling that Alastair Cuthbert had as he sat down in his office. He wanted some time to think, before students from Secondary 5 and 6 descended on him with their myriad queries. He poured himself a coffee from his percolator, which he had set going before going off to observe Craig Farjeon doing his one-to-one. The whole thing had been unnecessarily personal, aggressive, and confrontational. Not that he was particularly into sympathetic understanding at any cost. But in this case, there had been little understanding shown, sympathetic or otherwise. It was more like a red deer rut. True, Ewan Walker should not have behaved in that way in French. But it was so out of character with him that there must have been something underlying going on. Of course, there was. His mother had died suddenly. As soon as he got back after half term, there were the mocks. He said he had forgotten everything. He was not lying there. He had bombed out across the board. Mostly he had left blank paper. "I would have probably done the same myself," Dr Cuthbert muttered to himself. The whole tenor of the interview was of scoring points in a particularly vicious way. It was no surprise that a desperately unhappy and angry young man had fled from the room.

The conflict was that Craig Farjeon was a very good physics teacher, but a lousy form-tutor. The Standard Grades, Highers, and Advanced Highers had shown improving results year-on-year ever since Craig Farjeon had taken on the job. His teaching was outstanding, and he had received accolades from colleagues and inspectors alike. He had great energy and enthusiasm for his job.

On the other hand, Craig Farjeon was clearly not a people person; he held grudges. True, Walker should not have blown up

that oz-whatever-it-was-scope, but silly little boys do that kind of silly thing. It was bloody dangerous, but wherever there are pillocks you get danger. And where there are people, you get pillocks. And the Walkers had dealt with their son firmly and fairly. And that is where it should have been left.

Some of Craig Farjeon's comments had truly transgressed the border of the homophobic. Thank God things had moved on from when he was at school in the seventies. He had had the tawse and it bloody hurt. One of his friends had got six of the best from the headmaster for telling his tutor in confidence that he had a crush on other boys. He wondered whether Craig had something to hide. He was an excellent football player, and a mainstay of the staff footy team. Furthermore, he had had some starts with Corscadden Town. He knew that Craig Farjeon tended to regard anything that was not football or rugby as not being manly. That was, he thought, a little sexist. Certainly, Farjeon was now thirty-seven and showed no sign of a girlfriend, although there were rumours from nosy and gossiping Caddies that he had at times been a "naughty boy" and "spread his wild oats".

That was not relevant to the decision that Dr Cuthbert had to make, whether to keep Craig Farjeon in his tutor team. There had been several complaints from students about Mr Farjeon's tutoring style, and from what he had seen, there appeared to be some substance to them.

Ewan Walker slinked off the school site using the path between Baxter and Asher Houses. He went down Dennistoun Avenue, heading towards the town centre. He needed space. He wanted to get himself as far away as possible from the ghastly Craig Farjeon. He needed to be deep in the countryside where he wanted to have some serious thinking. If necessary, he would do the ultimate. He caught an early afternoon northbound stopping train,

getting off at Maunder. Although the train was busy, there were seats, but he preferred to stand. Like all the trains on the Great Central Line, it was a sophisticated and fast electric train. The journey to Maunder was over in minutes.

Maunder was not a place where Ewan wanted to linger. It was one of those “places on the main road”. Yet, it was gateway to a number of long-distance hill and woodland walks that Ewan had been on many times. He and Aidy had done quite a bit of their running on the woodland paths of the Rowallan Nature Reserve, before getting a return train to Corscadden.

Maunder station is approached from the south by a two-kilometre tunnel, and Ewan had the madcap idea that he could do his thinking in there. The fact that what he was doing could get him a serious fine for trespass, or that trains would be passing within centimetres at speeds of over two hundred kilometres an hour did not seem to penetrate his preoccupied skull. The tunnel passed under high ground below Barrock Cross where the River Cadden exchanged its narrow valley of a petulant mountain stream for the wider expanse of Strathcadden. The high ground separated two legs of a meander of the River Cadden, which had formed a deep and narrow valley. It was half an hour before he had descended to where the railway emerged on the other side. He found a gate onto the railway and slipped into the tunnel, finding a refuge about fifty metres in. The tunnel was built on a curve, and he could see the eerie glow of a green signal lamp reflected on its wet walls. At least his refuge was dry, and he was out of the wind.

His chosen spot for meditation was not a good one, but if he concluded that if he had had enough, he could launch himself from the refuge into the path of a train. The driver would not realise that he had “had one under”. The heavy locomotive hauling a two thousand tonne train at twenty-five metres a second would not notice the impact from a sixty-five-kilogram teenager.

Ewan realised what a bad place this was. A shockwave boomed through the tunnel as a high-speed passenger train entered at the Maunder end. Immediately there came an apocalyptic wind that raged through the tunnel. The rails started to ring and finally there was the shrill roar of steel wheel on steel rail. Ewan had to hold on to some cable to stop himself from being sucked in by the slipstream of the train. His ears hurt. Now there was another low rumbling coming from the other way. This train was slower, but the Twin Tri-Bo electric locomotive made up for it with a loud roar of traction motor fans as it toiled up the hill with its heavy train. Again, Ewan's ears hurt.

Maunder Tunnel was an evil place. The place was dank and there were whiffs of sewage. The overhead electric wires buzzed and crackled. There was another apocalyptic wind while the southbound stopping train raced through. Ewan was convinced that both eardrums hit each other as the driver sounded the horn before emerging from the tunnel. Ewan decided that the tunnel was definitely the way into Hell and got the hell out.

A kilometre down the line, the driver of the 14.15 from Dallennan to Glasgow via Cardean stopped at signal CN 163 and rang the signalman at Corscadden signal box to report that she thought there was a trespasser within Maunder Tunnel. All traffic was stopped, and two linesmen were sent down to check out the situation.

Ewan had slipped under Rowallan Viaduct. It was a draughty place but was well sheltered from the rain that had started. The wind had got up and it was blowing a hoolie. The arch he was under had the footpath and there was a ledge conveniently placed so that weary walkers could rest their legs. A wide wooden plank had been added for their convenience.

There was a single overwhelming thought in his mind – *God gave you a brain. Use it!* Dr Cuthbert had told him to go away and

do some thinking. Hopefully, he would also do a bit of growing up so that he would do well in the June exams. Nobody could accuse him of not doing as he was told.

Ewan was angry but not with the blazing anger that lashes out without regard for anyone. With him that kind of anger would burn itself up in minutes. He had got into trouble with it before, and he would kiss and make up. No, this anger was a new experience. It was a slow smouldering anger that was gnawing away at him. This one sapped his energy and natural joy of life. The colour of his life was now as if the colour control had been turned down. Over the last four weeks, since Mum died, everything had become sad and joyless. He had become reluctant and petulant with adults. He had been grumpy with Aidy, which he thought would never happen. He had even been offish with Jordan. And he loved Jordan. Ewan realised he was on the way to clinical depression, and that he needed to get things straight.

The root of his anger was that Mum had died. Not that she had asked to be ill with a serious cancer of the blood. But Mum was a bloody doctor and a blood doctor at that. She should have known what was wrong with her and healed herself. There was an expression that Ewan had heard of *Physician heal thyself*, so why didn't Mum heal herself? It was a bloody stupid thing to have done and look what trouble it had caused. Dad had been knocked for six; Aidy and he had found Dad in tears. He was lost without Mum. So was Aidy. They too had shed tears.

No, Mum had been cremated and her ashes scattered in her favourite spot in the garden of Brewster House. Everyone had been so kind and was continuing to be kind. But life had to go on, and this was the hard bit. Dad, Aidy, and he would get over it in the end. He never wanted to be like Queen Victoria who spent the rest of her life in depressed grief. Ewan was no fan of Victorian values. They were based on a religious prudery that was utterly hypocritical.

As he sat under the viaduct, Ewan's mind was racing. He was not unique in that he was having difficulties with his orientation and that he had chosen to fall in love with another boy. What Mr Farjeon had said was totally unfair. Another track his mind raced along was the Great War. The likes of Aidy would have had to go over the top, leading their men, and being the first to cop one. Not all Germans were monsters. He and Aidy had met Kirsten, Andreas, and Matthias Fischer in a student exchange with Corscadden's twin town of Dringhausen-am-Palus. He had become very close to all of them. The thought of being ordered to harm them made him cry out in distress.

The linesmen had carefully checked Maunder Tunnel and found no evidence of a trespasser. There were a couple of dead foxes, but foxes did not know about not trespassing on the railway and certainly did not know what had hit them. Now the backlog of trains was passing through. Ewan equated the trains coming out of Maunder Tunnel with one of his father's metaphors and disappeared behind the scenes.

Ewan returned to his perch while the trains rumbled above him. And his mind continued to race. He wanted Mum, the one who would cuddle him and encourage him, the one to whom he could snuggle up and feel safe. She was the rock on which his house was built, but that rock had been founded on sand, and it had rolled over. It was so unfair. She had been a good person, living her Christian faith for real, not just pious words. She was fun loving and enjoyed life to the full. So did Dad, Aidy, and he. Brewster House was fun, full of music, laughter, intelligent conversation, and friends. It was the same lovely house, but its character was missing. Ewan remembered the family holiday to France in the summer, with both Mum and Dad chattering away easily and noisily in fluent French. Ewan was not just fluent in German; he also loved the French language. It embarrassed him

no end that many Brits were so lousy at languages. At least Strathcadden Academy made languages compulsory, so that all Caddies could speak some French or German. The beauty of France seemed to go hand in hand with Mum, for she was a very beautiful woman. And again, Ewan began to cry.

The thought of France took him back to the fact that he had kicked off in a French lesson. He was disgusted at the way he had behaved, but in mitigation, he had felt dreadful these last weeks since Mum's funeral. He didn't mean to do so badly, but his mock results were appalling, and he was due to re-sit them next week. He had forgotten everything and had given up. That was not normally his nature, and he was ashamed. He had not set out to get as many discredits as he had, but they had stuck to him like teasels did on a country hike. He wanted to make amends to those many whose noses he had managed to get up. He really wanted to say sorry to the interview candidates. Had one of them really withdrawn because of his stupid outburst?

Ewan was now feeling decidedly cold in his retreat below the railway bridge. It was starting to get dark, and it was lashing down with rain. The wind had risen to a gale, as it often did at that time of year. Strathcadden had some extremes of weather. Often it was very benign and mild, but sometimes it could be quite vicious and ferocious. This evening it was the latter. The bridge was doing a good job of keeping Ewan dry, but it was a draughty place. He was feeling lonely, and his anxiety level was rising further. He wanted to be with Aidy. He wanted Jordan, his boyfriend. He had been offish with Jordan lately and wanted to say sorry. Ewan had been selfish and self-indulgent, and was angry with himself for behaving like that, even though the root cause was entirely understandable. As for wanting to jump from a tunnel refuge into the path of a train, that was the ultimate insult to life. Death was an obscenity, and he was disgusted that he was even thinking of

imposing its consequences on Dad and Aidy, both of whom would have gone to pieces completely. They needed him as much as he needed them.

Ewan was by now cold and hungry. He had not eaten since breakfast, and it was getting dark. He had been an attention-seeking twat, and his mad-cap escapade needed to come to an end. He tightened his kilt around his thighs and pulled his legs up to keep himself warm. He got out his mobile. The battery was flat. Shit! He was now in the middle of nowhere under a high-speed railway line with no contact to get home. He could walk back to the main road, but it was dark and raining heavily. He thought he saw a distant flash. It could have been a spark from the pantograph of a northbound train. A few seconds later he heard a distant rumble. He thought it could be an approaching goods train. He hoped it was but had a feeling it was different. He was right and this was confirmed for him by a second flash, followed by a more definite rumble. Ewan was frozen to his spot; he hated thunderstorms, and there was one heading right in his direction. To go back to Maunder over the top was out of the question. It was one downside about living in the uplands of Western Scotland: thunderstorms were possible at any time of the year.

The thunderstorm was brought about by atmospheric turbulence over the hills of the Western Highlands, an unfortunate blend of climate and geography. It was not some malign attempt at frightening Ewan James Samuel Walker, but it had that effect. A bolt of lightning struck into the wood some fifty metres from where Ewan was crouching terrified. There was an intense bang like a shell burst, which decayed to a prolonged booming rumble. Ewan yelled with fear. He was trembling and tried to hide his face. The storm repeated the act, this time with more energy. Ewan adopted the foetal position and curled up. He cried out in fear as each bolt of lightning crossed the sky. In his mind's eye, each bolt was a shell burst, each scything down young men like him, and the

next would be on him. And the imagery of Aidy as a boy-officer in a kilted regiment collapsing from a bullet raced across his terrified mind, followed by that abhorrent thought of his sticking a bayonet into Matti. Ewan screamed loudly and sobbed as he never had sobbed before. He did not think he was going to last the night and prayed that somebody would be missing him and calling for help.

The alarm should have been raised by Craig Farjeon during afternoon registration. Instead, he just dismissed Ewan Walker's absence as being worthy of yet another discredit and detention, giving it no further thought. If he chose to "twag it" (a Caddie expression that had been imported from Yorkshire via Mr Mitchell), he should accept the consequences. Besides, Mr Farjeon was not feeling particularly well disposed to Master Walker. Ewan Walker had left his rucksack in the Science Office when he had flounced out. Mr Farjeon had a snoop in it and had seen written in Ewan's planner in his neat handwriting, "Craig Farjeon – ..." (there followed a four-letter word that Ewan considered one of the most revolting in the entire English language). Notwithstanding the fact that the junior Craig Farjeon had written similar sentiments about his own teachers, he took it up to show Dr Cuthbert to give him more ammunition to get rid of Walker. Dr Cuthbert had taken the rucksack and been icily dismissive and Farjeon wondered what had rattled Old Misery-guts' cage.

Dr Cuthbert made short work of Simon Cairns, warning him never to print off any further pornographic images and try to plant them on other students and giving him two discredits. He carefully avoided using his preferred phrase, "little shit-stirrer", on the basis that it could render him liable to disciplinary action. Instead, he used the more professional version, "one who causes trouble among his friends". Dr Cuthbert advised that the pornographic image incident could well rebound on Cairns, as he

must have been looking for that kind of filth to print off and must have known where to look. Other Caddies would surely be nosy and gossip about it. Simon Cairns was left in no doubt about Dr Cuthbert's disappointment and was advised to consider how he could make amends.

Dr Cuthbert wanted to discuss the disastrous one-to-one with Ewan Walker, so he went off to find him. Although Strathcadden Academy was quite a large school, it was usually not that difficult to track students down, but in this case it was impossible. Some of Secondary 5 said that they thought that they had seen Ewan going off site on the path between Asher House and Baxter House. By now Alastair Cuthbert was feeling decidedly alarmed. He found Aidan Walker in the Common Room and asked him if he knew where his brother was. Aidan immediately rang Ewan's mobile, but there was only the messaging service.

"Do you want me to check in our room, sir?"

"Yes. We need to do that. Have you any idea where he would have gone?"

"When Eejay is upset, he likes to get away from people. He could be anywhere, sir."

Dr Cuthbert, Aidan Walker and Christian Salway went down to the twin room the two brothers now shared in Asher House. It was empty. Nothing had been disturbed since before morning school. Aidan was looking anxious. This sort of thing scared him. If Ewan had left the school grounds, it would have been picked up on the school's CCTV cameras, so Dr Cuthbert rang the number for the Janitor's Lodge.

John the Jannie had a computer that continually recorded CCTV images, and it was possible for him to identify the fact that Ewan Walker had indeed left the school premises. The images

showed a tall skinny youth in a black ski-jacket walking up Dennistoun Avenue. It was high time that the Police were called.

The police in the form of Constables Denny and Miller were round within minutes, and the Headmaster and his Depute had been informed. They made notes on the informants, "Sorry to bother you with this. You, sir are..."

"Alastair David Cuthbert. I am Director of Higher and Advanced Studies in this school."

"Your date of birth?"

"Twentieth of February 1958."

"And this lad?"

"Aidan Iain Alexander Walker. My date of birth is thirtieth of August 1996. I'm a student in this school and I am staying at Asher House. I am Ewan's older brother."

"And you?"

"Christian Dominic Hayward Salway, date of birth twenty-fifth August 1996. I am also a student here, and I am staying at Asher House. I am a friend of Aidan and Ewan."

"And the laddie who you are reporting as missing?"

"Ewan James Samuel Walker, date of birth twenty-seventh February 1998. He is one of our Secondary Five students. He is staying at Asher House."

"Is there any reason that he may have gone missing?"

"He has been having a hard time in the last few weeks. His mother died at the end of January, and he has taken it hard. He has had some difficulties in school and there was an incident today, which was dealt with by his form tutor in a manner that gave me some concern."

Aidan and Christian looked at each other. They knew that Mr Farjeon did not think the world of Ewan. They knew about that follicle-scope that Ewan had ruined, and that Mr Farjeon had never forgiven Ewan about it. Although Christian had never been taught by Mr Farjeon, he knew that Mr Farjeon could have some forceful views. But when, prompted by Constable Denny, Dr Cuthbert elaborated about what he meant by being concerned, both were somewhat taken aback. The boys had also found out Dr Cuthbert's first names, a nugget of gold for nosy Caddies.

“So, Mr Walker,” said Constable Miller, “do you have any idea of what your brother may have done?”

“He rarely gets upset in the way that Dr Cuthbert has described, but when he does, he goes away from other people. He takes himself off by himself.”

“Any idea where he might have gone?”

Constable Denny was on the radio to the control room, which also watched over the Corscadden CCTV system. Sure enough, a youth fitting Ewan Walker's description was seen heading towards Corscadden Station. A call by another officer to the booking office confirmed that a youth in a kilt had bought a day return to Maunder.

“We often go running there, officer,” said Aidan, getting out his laptop from which he was inseparable. Aidan started *Google Earth* and after a short while was able to focus on the area around Rowallan Country Park showing the path they would take from Maunder Station. Within a minute or so, Constable Miller was on to the Strathcadden Mountain Rescue, “...Ewan James Samuel Walker, date of birth 27/02/1998, height about 1.85 metres, weight 63 kilograms, slight build, blue eyes, sandy light-brown collar-length hair. He was last seen wearing a black ski-jacket, dark blue school blazer as worn by Higher and Advanced students at Strathcadden Academy, light blue shirt, blue tie with diagonal grey

stripes, a green full-sleeve V-necked jumper, blue-grey kilt with black tartan pattern, dark green knee-length socks with a single yellow band, and black slip-on shoes. His brother thinks he is somewhere in the Rowallan Country Park area and has taken the drover's track from Maunder Station. Dave, could you assemble your team and a couple of sniffer dogs?"

Aidan was keen to go out to Maunder with the search team but was left in no doubt that he would be a liability, and he should remain back at school. Of course, they would let him know the instant they found Ewan and took his mobile number. Christian took his friend back to Asher House while the two police officers went blue lights to Maunder.

In the meantime, Mr Mitchell, the Headmaster, and Mr McEwan, the Senior Depute, were both sharing a pink fit about the gross failure of Craig Farjeon in his care and safeguarding of a vulnerable young person. They were not selfish about it either. They allowed Dr Cuthbert to join in as well. It was just as well that Craig Farjeon had gone home. All three of them could have been guilty of joint enterprise in causing grievous bodily harm to Craig Michael Farjeon, aged thirty-seven and a half. It was left to Dr Cuthbert to give Farjeon a hard time the next morning. Short of murder, Dr Cuthbert was given a free reign.

For Millie, a border collie, and Rikki, a golden retriever, this was going to be another piece of fun, sniffing out new smells with Daddy. Both were primed with a good sniff of Ewan's running shorts, before they set out up the Old Drovers' Road from Maunder. The command "Find it! Seek-seek!" was the start of the fun, and Millie was onto something almost immediately. The dog team followed, and they were sure that they were heading in the right direction after their briefing from the police. The scent was not strong, as the heavy rain had washed much of it away. Millie

would have her nose in the air, while Rikki would stop and push his nose into various little nooks and crannies. Ewan may well have been skinny, but there was no way that he would have fitted into any of those.

They got to Barrock Cross, the col where the drover's road went back down towards Strathcadden. If they turned left, the path would take them to Barrock Head. If they turned right, they would head up the Maunder Skyline to Barrock Hill. The rain had stopped, but the dog team could see the occasional flash of lightning in the Highlands to the north. Another shower cloud was heading its way up Strathcadden. Barrock Cross was not a place to linger on a foul evening like this.

The dogs did not mind at all. Although they hesitated at Barrock Cross, Rikki's olfactory membranes were picking up molecules which were sending messages to comparator circuits in his little brain. He clearly liked them; they were the same as what he had smelled in Ewan's running shorts. Although Ewan was not at all prudish about his natural needs, he would not have cared to investigate the pheromones that had their sources in his personal private property. Dogs never thought twice about it, much to their owners' embarrassment, and cared not a jot about anyone's status. Millie picked up the scent, which had its source in the ecological disaster that Ewan had set in train a couple of hours before.

"Dave, the dogs seem to have picked up a scent and we are heading into Rowallan Country Park, down the Old Drover's Road. Could you arrange a team to move in from Corscadden Road? We will rendezvous at the railway under Rowallan Viaduct and make a sweep of the woods. Over..."

And from Millie's and Rikki's viewpoint the evening was getting even better. They had both locked on to the molecules from Ewan's offering that were beckoning them, just as a navigation beacon attracts aeroplanes from all directions. Ewan's

pheromones had a touch of class to them. They went racing down the path into the wood, while the rescue team followed them. This rescue was going to be successful and compared with many, a stroll in the woods.

Ewan's emotional melt-down had exhausted him. He had stopped shivering, was very cold, and now he recognised that he was in the early stages of hypothermia. He simply prayed that somebody would get him out of this before he slipped away. He was by now crying quietly. He did not want to die. He had only just started his life, and now, because he had been an obnoxious prick, he had got himself into a situation that he could not get out of. What would happen now? It would be the end for Dad and Aidan. He heard another distant peel of thunder. Would this ever let up? Ewan heard a furious barking, but he could not bear to open his eyes, in case he saw Cerberus, the three-headed dog that was the fearsome gate-guardian to Hades. Actually, he thought that Maunder Tunnel was a pretty good route there. He started again to tremble in fear. He opened his eyes momentarily and saw the dim outline of a dog with some kind of harness that seemed to stand out from the rest of the animal. Perhaps he was hallucinating. Or he had gone down to Hades. There certainly seemed to be more than one bark. Maybe Cerberus was using two of his heads to bark with, and the third was asleep or having the night off. That was it. Cerberus had one head on duty, the next on stand-by, and the third off duty. What a clever dog! Ewan closed his eyes again and hoped that Pluto's minions would get there before Cerberus decided to make him dead meat. He could hear voices now. "Dave, the dogs have picked up on the target... We now have sight of the target...Over."

Dr Cuthbert had gone on quite a bit about Hades in his Classical Studies lessons in Secondary Four. But he had never mentioned walkie-talkies. Maybe Pluto had got with it as far as

Information and Communication Technology was concerned. Pluto was not a nice god, and Ewan did not want to meet him. The fact that he was a target also freaked him out and he expected cruise missiles to home in on him. A light shone on him. This was it and he cried out in fear.

“Ewan, I’m Mike. Reach out and touch me. You are safe now.”

The terrified youth did so. Rikki and Millie had stopped barking. Rikki ambled up to Ewan and put his nose right up his kilt, checking for himself that this was indeed the correct target. Pheromones and other molecules confirmed a perfect match with the scent of the running shorts.

“I want Jordan and Aidy.”

“Jordan? Aidy?”

“Jordan’s my boyfriend. I am gay. Aidy’s my brother.”

“Ewan, give Rikki a hug,” said Mike. “He deserves it. And so does Millie. We’ll tell Jordan and Aidy that you are alright.”

Ewan was a bit wary of strange dogs since one had nipped his bum while he was out running. But Rikki was friendly and pushed his nose up at Ewan. Often it was a good idea for rescued people to pet the search dogs as a way of immediate comfort in a stressful situation, and Ewan was no exception. As Ewan rubbed his back, Rikki stood there with his mouth open and tossed his head. Millie wanted some of it as well and poked her nose into Ewan’s face.

“...We have our target. He is safe and well. He has no injuries. He has mild hypothermia, and we’ll stretch him out to the car park. Russ can check him out. Over...”

Ewan was first of all wrapped in a foil blanket and into a thick sleeping bag with just his face poking out, which was placed

on a stretcher for the walk back to the carpark on the Corscadden Road. The warmth was starting to return to him, and he felt snugly.

Over in the car park at Maunder Station, Constables Denny and Miller reported the successful conclusion to the rescue and awaited the next job to come their way.

Back in Asher House, Aidan was having his own emotional melt-down. It was much quieter and more restrained than Ewan's performance, although Ewan had let rip to no audience apart from a couple of voles and a red squirrel who had taken no notice of him whatsoever. Aidan had an audience, his best friend Christian Salway who listened carefully, but was wise enough to say little and hold his friend close.

Joseph Walker in Edinburgh had his emotional melt-down one afternoon up in the Pentland Hills while he was in a place where everyone else was not. Since Aidan was a young version of his father, it was reasonable to suppose it was dignified and quiet. He wept like a baby.

Chapter 14

Thursday, 6th March 2014

The next day, Ewan was sure that neither Mr McEwan nor Dr Cuthbert would run out to meet the prodigal son, let alone kill the fatted calf and throw a massive party for him. He was not going to ask them to make him as one of their hired servants. Instead, he was going to apologise for being such a complete ned and beg them not to throw him out. He also wanted to make his peace with Grandma and Granddad, Dad, Aidy, Jordan, and lots of others. He had caused a lot of upset; he was sure. And they all must have been very cross with him. The condemned young man did not eat a hearty breakfast. It was a very nervous Ewan Walker who went to see Dr Cuthbert in his office, and Mr McEwan, House Leader of Asher House and Depute Head was there as well.

Ewan was a tall youth but felt like a very little boy. He was the youngest in his year group, and in Secondary One, he had been the youngest in the entire school. And he knew he had a lot of growing up to do, which had not been helped by his flouncing out and getting into such a mess that the mountain rescue team had had to be called out. Ewan felt so vulnerable that he asked that Aidan, Christian, and Jordan should go in to support him.

Although Dr Cuthbert had a gruff exterior, he was at heart a kindly man, as was Mr McEwan. Both knew that they were dealing with a very distressed and anxious teenage boy who had had to face a situation that neither of them had faced until they were well into middle age. And they knew full well that they would have to deal with Ewan very gently and sensitively if they were not to have an encore. Therefore, they spent a goodly amount of time reassuring Ewan that he was not going to be in trouble.

Ewan started by giving his apology. “I want to say sorry for being a complete fucking twat these last few weeks. I have been

a bastard to everyone. And I want to make it up. Please don't throw me out."

"These aren't the words I would want to use, Ewan," said Dr Cuthbert. "Things have been disappointing, but understandable in the circumstances. But what Mr McEwan and I want to know is what brought things on yesterday. We want to help, so you never feel you need to do that again. As for throwing you out, of course not."

Ewan sat holding Jordan's hand. He looked rather pathetic and vulnerable.

"I tried to tough it out. I went into melt-down, Sir," said Ewan. "I miss Mum so much. I didn't want that thing to happen in Mrs Learmont's class. I lost it with Simon."

"I have dealt with Cairns. He is in no doubt that what he did was inappropriate."

"It was what Mr Farjeon said to me. He doesn't like me. And he called me gutless, clueless, and useless – a waste of time, a waste of space, and a waste of God's good materials."

"Your assessment of him suggests that the feeling is mutual." Dr Cuthbert showed Ewan the entry in his planner. "It's not that helpful either, although I am sure we have all done it in our time."

Ewan had gone red and was cringing with shame and embarrassment.

"We are here to help you and to support you. You must understand that. We want you to do really well in your Highers and Advanced Highers. You are academically one of the most able students in this school."

"You are brighter than me," said Aidan. Ewan looked at his brother and held him closer. He was crying.

Ewan looked at Dr Cuthbert, and said, “You are right, sir, I need to grow up. I want to do it. I want to get things right. That’s my target. Next week I want to do well in my re-sits...”

Ewan shared with them more calmly the thoughts that had raced through his mind, while Dr Cuthbert and Mr McEwan listened carefully. The emotion was confined to tears running down Ewan’s cheeks and dripping off the end of his nose.

“I promise you, that will not happen,” said Dr Cuthbert. “We have moved on from war being just a yarn. The Great War was an obscenity, but it becomes an even worse one if we forget what it entailed. Don’t let your imagination run riot.”

And the conversation continued, convincing Ewan that he was a much-loved student at the school and that things would come out right in the end. His first target was to re-sit his Higher Mocks and get good grades.

Although it is cheesy to relate it, Ewan did precisely that.

Although Ewan Walker was more than ready to kiss and make up, the same could not be said about Craig Farjeon. There had been a number of complaints about his going over the top when doing one-to-one reviews with students, and many of his reports on the school student monitoring system had been what journalists call “hot takes”. This had prompted Alastair Cuthbert to sit in on his one-to-one with Ewan Walker. There had also been a complaint from a female member of staff about Farjeon making crude comments of a sexist nature. Another female member of staff had complained about the way Farjeon had gone on about his “conquests”. Dr Cuthbert had been through what Farjeon had written on the school’s reporting system and had found many emotive and pejorative terms, suggesting that Mr Farjeon had become too emotionally involved when typing these reports. Dr

Cuthbert had had occasion to advise Mr Farjeon about what he had entered, but clearly the latter had taken no notice.

Such was Farjeon's self-confidence (or arrogance), that, when he was asked to go up to Dr Cuthbert's office, he genuinely believed that Old Misery-guts was going to congratulate him on his firm handling of a piece of unacceptable behaviour from a rather spoiled brat. The atmosphere in Misery-guts' office could not have been more icy, even though its pervading smell was one of filter coffee. Dr Cuthbert got straight to the point, "Craig, you are going to tutor a group in Secondary One. Lorna Learmont will be taking over with immediate effect."

"WHAT?"

"I will show you this. The Head got it this morning. I think it sums up yesterday's one-to-one with Walker."

Dear Mr Mitchell

Thank you for trying so hard to contact me yesterday and thank you for all your reassurance that you offered to me. I apologise for being so hard to get. I was involved with one of those interminable faculty planning meetings with the university management. Fortunately, it was entirely successful.

I was shocked at how Ewan had taken himself off, and as I explained, I would have returned immediately to Corscadden if the news had reached me before I went incommunicado. I did manage to speak to Ewan last night. He was very tired and very upset about things. It is not often that he becomes as upset as this, but when he is, he does like to take himself off to where everybody else isn't. I confess that he clearly has picked up the habit from me. In the circumstances, I am not at all surprised that he has been so distressed and unsettled; it has been a horrible time for us all.

I was surprised at the approach taken by his tutor, Mr C M Farjeon. He appears to have made no attempt at supporting Ewan through this difficult time. Although the incident in the French lesson should not have happened, and Ewan was the first to say that, Mr Farjeon's reaction could not have been

more offensive. I do not consider it to be polite, let alone professional, to use phrases like gutless, clueless, waste of space, waste of material, etc., when dealing with a student. In my position as a head of a university department, I would be facing a serious investigation, if I used expressions like that. I am not saying that I have never felt such sentiments, but I have always been careful to say the right thing to a student.

While that aspect of the interview with Ewan suggests that Mr Farjeon needs to work on his social skills, I consider his references to Ewan's sexual orientation as unacceptable. I am fully aware of Ewan's attraction to other boys. I was the same at his age. And there are a very large number of boys and girls in every secondary school who have similar issues. Even at a university I have to deal with these at times in my department. To condemn them in the terms used by Mr Farjeon, including the crudities such as 'arse-bandit', is nothing other than homophobic bullying, as is the worn-out old cliché about dominant mothers and ineffective fathers.

Mr Farjeon repeatedly referred to my late wife, which caused Ewan considerable distress. I have to wonder whether Mr Farjeon has ever undergone bereavement. It is not an experience that has much to commend it even if you are middle-aged. A young person would be traumatised. Ewan told me about Mr Farjeon's desire to act as Dr Cowan would have at the start of the last century. His nurture of leaders of men was cruel and barbaric. Mr Farjeon's behaviour is the same.

Finally for Mr Farjeon to suggest that Ewan cheated in his Standard Grade Examinations is slanderous.

Ewan and Aidan tell me that Mr Farjeon has never forgiven Ewan for the damage he did to an oscilloscope during Secondary Three. We paid immediately for a replacement and dealt with Ewan firmly. It should have been left at that. Mr Farjeon refers to Ewan as a spoiled rich kid. He clearly has a chip on his shoulder.

Therefore, please could you speak to Mr Farjeon, as I would be very interested in his views?

Yours sincerely

Joseph Walker

“What a load of baloney,” snapped Farjeon. “Spoiled rich kid gets a bit of a dressing-down and he goes bawling off to mummy and daddy...”

Although this had started as an informal meeting about a minor reallocation of tutorial duties, there followed what Dr Cuthbert recalled as a difficult conversation which was high on emotion, but low on insight. Sexist bloke-talk was mentioned several times, in the context of Farjeon’s “conquests”. A reminder of the council’s policy on homophobic abuse was raised once as a result of several of Farjeon’s less well considered comments. The possibility of escalation to formal disciplinary action was mooted twice.

“...You’re just old-fashioned and stuck-up,” Farjeon’s voice was rising to a strangled scream and his face was purple. “You are so far up yourself you don’t know whether to talk or fart! You...You... CHRISTIAN!!”

With that Farjeon got up and left the room. Dr Cuthbert’s office did not have the benefit of a door spring, and the wall shuddered as Farjeon slammed the door. Inside, Dr Cuthbert congratulated himself for remaining icy-cool. It would have been so easy to descend to Farjeon’s level and indulge in a slanging match. He had been totally professional in the way that he had restrained himself from wringing his colleague’s neck. He sat down to compose a long e-mail to Andy McEwan, especially bringing attention to Craig Farjeon’s frequent use of foul language. It was an entirely appropriate word to describe Farjeon’s attitude to life in general, and women in particular. Alistair Cuthbert could not help but agree with Ewan Walker in his assessment of Craig Farjeon

with that four letter pejorative that was one of the most offensive in the English language.

As for being called a Christian, well that was what Alistair Cuthbert had always been since he was eighteen. And the ethos of the school was influenced by Socialism and Progressive Christianity.

As for Craig Farjeon, he returned to have his lunch in the Science and Languages staffroom and ranted on about how he ran rings round Misery-guts. Punctuated by adjectives and adverbs meaning “cursed” and “exceedingly”, his rant covered many aspects of life, the universe, and everything. Colleagues remembered that they had to do bits of marking or had a test to write. By the end of lunchtime, Farjeon was on his own, while two female colleagues were seriously considering putting in a complaint, and one of the technicians was finding out the grievance procedure. It was not his day; his new tutor-group were Wee Caddies, and he had a difficult lesson with his Secondary Three class.

Nosy Caddies had heard his exchanges with Dr Cuthbert, and long tongues were gossiping into big ears.

That evening, Jordan went to see Ewan in his room in Asher House. They did some study together. Jordan sensed that Ewan was starting to engage more with what they were discussing but was still struggling. Eventually Ewan said, “I need a cuddle. Jordie, I have been offish with you, and I am sorry...”

With that Ewan’s eyes went red and he choked up. Jordan held his boyfriend tight. Although Ewan was taller than he and was normally a resilient lad, he was now so vulnerable.

“I understand, Eejay. Remember that it happened to me a couple of years ago when Mum kicked me and Dad out. You and

Aidy were there for me, and I am here for you. Why didn't you talk to me more, instead of running off yesterday?"

"I was trying to tough it out. Deal with it like a man, like they do in the films."

"They're just actors, reading from a script. They read out what the author tells them to. Also, they are old, older than thirty."

"Jordie, I feel like I'm ten years younger than I actually am, a little kid and I want to cry. I want Mum."

With that, tears flowed from Ewan's eyes, and they went over to the bed. Jordan held his young boyfriend in his arms. It would be tempting to write that loud sobs wracked Ewan's body, but they didn't. Ewan buried his head into his boyfriend's stomach and held him tight, while Jordan stroked his hair gently. Jordan loved Eejay. He was one of the most outstandingly beautiful young men he had ever seen, with a personality to match. He loved Ewan's sandy light brown hair, and smooth face. Ewan was over a year younger than him. And Jordan's face was still smooth; there were just a couple of wisps under his chin, but nobody yet had told him, "Melhuish Laddie, you need a shave."

He had only ever seen Eejay lose it once, and that was yesterday in Mrs Learmont's lesson. And Simon had asked for it. Like Eejay, Jordan did not like the prospect of gay sex. It was crude filth that Simon had printed off. Ewan and he were above that sort of thing.

In similar circumstances, Jordan would have said exactly the same thing, and he would have had a similar dressing down off Mr Farjeon. Ewan and he would hold hands in Mr Farjeon's tutorial class just to see how long it would take for Craigie Boy to come out with some crude comment that ran close to the boundary of what was professionally acceptable. Jordan was one of those who had made complaints when Craigie Boy had gone on about

his female friends as “fruit flies”. And when they had found out about the term being synonymous with “fag-hags”, they were livid.

By now Ewan had turned over, so that his head was resting on Jordan’s chest. He was not crying now but still looked so upset. Jordan turned the pillow round so it propped up his back against the wall, placing his hand on Ewan’s cheek and stroked it gently. Ewan held his left hand with both of his and looked up longingly. A deep wave of love flowed across Jordan. Ewan spoke very quietly, almost a whisper, “I need help. Will you help me?”

“Of course.”

“I need to see Mrs McEwan as well...” and he started to choke up again.

Chapter 15

Saturday, 15th March 2014

After Ewan's melt down, Strathcadden Academy put into action its support procedure for a student at risk. This involved a fair amount of gentle counselling from Mrs McEwan, whom the students regarded as their agony-granny. Joan McEwan had a knack of dealing with a wide range of teenage angst and was well liked by every pupil. Aidan spent time with her as well, and both were able to talk about the pain of their loss. Jake, their amiable black flat coat, helped distressed students by being there to pet.

Gradually Aidan came to terms with what had happened. He had never lost his gentle good nature, but he became less withdrawn, and started to bubble again, and Christian would bubble with him. As for Ewan, he had been even more devastated by the bereavement, and his emotional melt-down had been more spectacular. Afterwards he made a remarkable bounce-back, becoming, if anything, more protective of his older brother, and looking out more for others. He too became ever more deeply attracted towards Jordan both emotionally and physically. A deep emotional bond developed between him and Christian as well. All four thrived at their studies. Ewan became involved with the student mentoring scheme, coaching younger Caddie laddies and lassies that were having difficulties with work and other aspects of life at school.

For Christian Salway, life had got into a routine which he enjoyed. When he could, he would go down to Edinburgh to stay the weekend with his mother, who was working all hours at her job in Edinburgh's Royal Infirmary. This was not as frequent as he would have liked, due to her shift patterns. People were still ill at the weekend. He would also ring her regularly on his mobile. There were times when he could hear a man in the background, which made him wonder if there was a boyfriend.

Mum had had a couple of boyfriends when they lived in Beckton, but nothing came of them, thank God. Otherwise, he would be stuck in Sowerland, and the bastards who had tried to bump him off by spiking his drink with ketamine and that other shit, whose name he could not remember, would probably have succeeded. If he never saw Beckton or Carlsborough again, it would be too soon. The voice seemed vaguely familiar, a refined accent like Morningside. Where she lived was a ten-minute bus-ride from Morningside, so hearing a male voice from Morningside really should not have been a surprise. It could have been anyone.

During other weekends, he would either stay at school along with a small number of other Distant Caddies or spend the weekend with Aidan at Brewster House. He would do a shift at Walker Bros, or being part of the school running team, would race in parts of Scotland which he had never heard of. He now was very fit, and, like both Aidan and Ewan, he was of slight build and had a good power to weight ratio. He certainly could give them a very close run.

Christian had grown to love Corscadden. He was not just safe there, but he felt welcome. Aidan and Ewan had taken him under their wing when he was a waif and stray. Now he had been able to do the same for them. If it were possible for him to do so, Christian had grown even closer to Aidan and loved him as the brother he had never had. During the evenings in Asher House, Chris and Ewan would do their homework together. If Christian got stuck, he could always ask either Aidy or Eejay. They wouldn't tell him the answer but would work through the problem with him. When Aidan was down as a result of his loss, Christian was always there to hold him and support him. On other occasions they would sit together and drink coffee, chatting away or looking at things on the internet. Both avoided social media because each had had bad experiences with them. Ewan and Jordan did so for the same reason. Also, they had better things to do. Aidan followed the

then Prime Minister's thoughts on the matter, "*Too many tweets make a twit; too many twits make a twat.*"

Christian was developing his interest in art and fashion and would show Aidan his ideas. Aidan was elegant as befitted a descendant of a master tailor and proprietor of a prosperous drapery business; he had a good taste in fashion. Aidan would play Christian his compositions on his keyboard. He would have loved to use the organ in the Old Chapel, but it was now unplayable.

On several consecutive days, Aidan saw a large white van outside the Old Chapel and saw bits of the cantankerous old contraption being taken away. His fears were confirmed during the next Secondary Six assembly. He noticed that the console had gone and there was a large void where the old instrument had been. Well, it was truly knackered, and it would cost a blamed fortune to sort out. No doubt they would dredge up a keyboard from the Music Department and plug it in to the PA system for the next time a sufficiently loud instrument was needed.

While he lived in Beckton, Christian had attended the Grange School. Once the boys' grammar school for Beckton, its fortunes had declined along with the town. It lost its sixth form in the early nineteen eighties. The teachers had by and large given up, and by the time Christian had started in 2007, the school's reputation was indifferent. There were no schools that were good in the Sowerside Conurbation, and many parents tried to get their children into schools outside the much unloved county of Sowerland. While Grange School was among the least bad, it was still a hot house for mediocrity. Christian used to wear his school-tie and jacket properly as his mother insisted and was teased because he did not like having his tie done in the fashionable but slovenly manner that was the norm. When he started in Year 9,

they changed the uniform into that mediocre staple, the polo-shirt, and the sweatshirt. He hated it.

Even at Beckton Sixth-Form College, Christian had been teased because he could not afford the designer labels. Not that these clothes were of any better quality than what he and his mother could afford, but they were rather more expensive. Alternatively, they were counterfeit, which was a common occurrence at Beckton Market. Many of the students, boys and girls alike, could hardly fit into the designer clothes at all, due to their diet of junk food. In some cases, a tent would have been more elegant.

Wearing a kilt, knee-length socks, and leather shoes was initially a strange experience for Christian. He had never worn a kilt before, but he liked the style, with his blue blazer, light blue shirt, tie (which they always insisted on being done properly), and green full-sleeve jumper. He liked the way that the blue blazer for secondary Five and Six made the students look more mature. For the younger students the house colours of the sweatshirts and socks made Caddies a colourful lot. In short, he wore his uniform with pride, as did the vast majority of other Caddies.

The kilt was a popular garment among young men in Corscadden and other parts of Buchananshire and the Kyle of Tonsil. As well as his school kilt, he had bought himself a casual kilt that went well with a thick grey sweater he had. He was, by birth, an Englishman; his family was originally from the north part of Northumberland, just south of the Scottish border. Christian had a strong Northumberland accent which already had a decided Borders lilt to it. Although he had lived most of his life in Sowerland, he hated it and refused to adopt the local accent, a rather unpleasant cross-over between Yorkshire and Geordie. Since he had been in Corscadden, the Scottish part had become more dominant. Christian was a genuine Caddie, and was at heart

a Scot. And nobody had disputed that. And he felt at home in a kilt.

For him, the kilt was a wonderful garment. Like many other Caddies, Christian supported the equality of women. And surely a school dress that allowed both boys and girls to look fantastic was a definite stride for equality, far better than the ill-fitting trousers that many girls had to wear elsewhere. Christian was amused when he had first heard about the origin of the kilt as school-wear. When he was at the Grange School in Beckton, some boys had threatened to wear skirts to school one hot day but were warned off from doing so by the Headmistress. How sensible it had been of this place to get boys to wear a kilt, which was a manly garment in its own right. And several other secondary schools had adopted the dress as well.

Here, nobody teased him about wearing light sports-shorts either. Back in Beckton, the few people who played any kind of sport wore long football-type shorts that hung shapelessly around their legs. Christian had worn similar, but he found them uncomfortable and gone as short as he dared. That style of football shorts had left an indelible memory on him of the humiliation of letting in so many goals in that game at Beckton Sixth Form College. Although it was colder in the Southwest Highlands of Scotland, the sportsmen (and women) wore shorts of a comfortable length. They were wiry and tough up in Buchananshire. As a runner, Christian wore the lightest possible shorts, as did Aidy, Ejay, Jordan, and the rest of the running squad at Strathcadden Academy. Christian had made some designs of sportswear that looked good and comfortable on the athlete.

Christian was now making up a portfolio of his ideas for fashion for both young men and young women. This was part of his Art coursework. Joseph Walker had given him a graphics tablet that he could use with his laptop, which he used every evening after completing his homework. He was a good artist and would sketch

until late at night onto his laptop. The young men and women in his virtual catwalk were beautiful, even gorgeous, and the clothes they wore enhanced their good looks. He produced a presentation that animated the images to music. One evening he decided to exhibit the Salway Collection to Aidan, who was entranced. Aidan was taken by everything that Christian had produced and bubbled away with his friend as he imagined himself and Eejay wearing them. When the show finished, he said, "You should show these to Granddad. He's always looking for new designs. You know that he gets me and Eejay to model clothes for the store. I would love to model any one of those designs."

"Are you sure, Aidy?" Chris looked anxious. "He must have a lot of pros designing things for him."

"He goes down to London during Fashion Week. He takes my aunties with him, and they visit all the big fashion houses. He buys what his customers will buy up here. The trouble is with London is that they will stitch a bin-bag together and some airhead will pay three grand for it. He's really after good design, but at a reasonable price. Things have to be comfortable, good quality, and wear well to sell around here. Granddad has a good instinct for what sells. I don't know how he does it. Show these to Granddad. He will look carefully at them. If he doesn't like them, he will say so, in the nicest possible way."

"He won't rip them apart?"

"Oh no. Granddad is always looking for good design. He wants things that will sell, though. If the quality and the price are right, there will always be a market around here. They aren't interested in just the name."

"How come your dad didn't go into the business?"

"Granddad has an instinct for those who have good business sense. He could tell immediately that Dad doesn't have

any. Dad is very brainy – that’s why he’s a professor, but he would sink without trace in the commercial world. The same is true of me and Eejay. Granddad says that if the present Walker brothers took over Walker Bros, it would go bust in a year.”

“Charming. I thought you all got on well with your granddad.”

“It’s not like that, Chris. He loves us to bits. But he knows that Dad, Eejay and I aren’t cut out for business. He has spent close on fifty years with the business. There have been some pretty close shaves, but he has managed to pull it off in the end.”

After supper that Saturday, the Walker Family were in the Drawing Room at Brewster House. Christian had rallied his troops and produced a simple but beautiful meal. Although it was not his kitchen, he was lord of that domain, and Aidan, Ewan, and Jordan jumped to every culinary command. To Christian, the Walker family were the most elegant people that he had ever seen, and he enjoyed being at home with them. Aidy had set up Dad’s projector, and Charles and Muriel were feeling decidedly content.

“So Christian,” said Charles, “my grandsons tell me that you have a collection to show me. I’ve been looking forward to this all evening.”

Christian showed his presentation, basing it on what he imagined a fashion show to be like. Joseph’s eyes closed, only for him to be jabbed in the sides by his big sisters (“Joby!”), the rest of his audience watched transfixed at the skills that had been used to put the show together. It seemed that Christian’s model as to what a fashion show should be was actually quite prototypical. Charles Walker was well used to slick presentations. He was watching the fashion designs themselves. He got out a notepad and started scribbling notes at some of the designs. At several points he asked

for the presentation to be rewound so he could get a particular detail. By the end of the presentation, he had written several pages of notes.

Christian could not, of course, have realised it, but he had made Charles Walker break a life-long rule that when he was off-duty, he never talked or did shop. At the end, he said, “Jenny, Sarah, I think we have something to discuss on Monday morning. Christian, look at me... You have a God-given talent. You use it.”

Later that evening Charles was lying in bed at Laurieston Villa. Muriel was snoring quietly next to him. Unusually for him, he was lying there thinking. He had often worried about the succession of the ownership of Walker Bros. His daughters were taking over, but they were no spring-chickens, and neither had children of their own. Even so, that would not have necessarily guaranteed a succession. Walker Bros needed a person who would continue the family tradition of providing good quality products at reasonable prices. To survive the competitive world of retail, especially the fickle nature of fashion, you had to be several steps ahead of the game, anticipating not just what trends were coming, but also what would sell well in Buchananshire. He felt guilty that he thought that the current Walker brothers were not up to it. But Aidan and Ewan were in no way like Dad and Uncle Raymond. They would crash the business within months. The business acumen had run out by the time Joby had arrived; Jennifer and Sarah had hogged it all. Joby was highly intelligent – far cleverer than he – but was worldly unwise, a typical geek. To be fair to him, he had used his God-given talents. Being a professor in academia was by no means to be sniffed at. And that seemed to be the prospect for his two grandsons, two quiet and gentle teenagers who looked out for others.

And what a horrible and cruel thing to happen to Mary! Charles was a devout man but was angry with God for having taken Mary so suddenly and unexpectedly, leaving Joby and the boys behind in such distress. Mary was Joby's anchor; he was dependent on her for so much and was lost without her. He was like a lost teenager rather than a forty-year-old man who was the head of a university department.

Charles had known Jordan for a couple of years and found him a very pleasant young man, a lovely companion for Ewan. However, it was that new friend of theirs that had caught his attention. Although the same age as Aidan, Christian seemed more worldly-wise. He was now looking after Joby's finances and accounts. Mary used to do that. It seemed a strange thing that Joby could operate a multi-million-pound research budget but had a complete blind-spot in dealing with a domestic budget to run a (large) house that was difficult to heat. Although he looked rather younger than his seventeen years, Christian had a mature and talented head on his shoulders. Charles had meant what he said about Christian having a God-given talent and that he must use it. For Christian seemed to have a kind of Gumption that neither Aidan nor Ewan possessed. Additionally, he had an interest, in fact a passion, for what was at the heart of the Walker Bros business – good fashion design and a feeling for what would sell in Buchananshire. Jennifer and Sarah would be retiring in twenty years' time. He might still be alive, a nonagenarian, but he did not want to be lingering around like a bad smell. However, if Christian was half as good as he appeared to be, he could well be the man to take over. He would be in his late thirties by then, experienced in the way of the business, but with loads of fresh ideas – just like Charles had been when he had taken over from Dad. It was his idea to introduce the Man Cave in the basement. He remembered all those men trailing their wives looking bored and lost. He set up a tool-shop in the basement, and it was a perfect crèche for useless

husbands. And he did so at the right time. Wallace's had closed after old Mr Wallace had retired, and he bought the stock.

Charles knew how close Christian was to his grandsons. Aidan was inseparable from his laptop which he got for his fifteenth birthday. He was now also inseparable from Christian. That worried him a bit, not because of any nature of their attraction (after all Ewan and Jordan seemed joined at the hip) but for a more pragmatic reason. Aidan was going to go to Edinburgh University in September, while Christian would still be at school. Would Aidan miss his friend and underperform as a result? It was now apparent that Ewan and Christian were becoming close as well. The year after next, all of them would be at Edinburgh and no doubt sharing a flat. One or two in church had already gossiped about it all being rather unhealthy. What his grandsons got up to was none of their damned business, and the sooner those churchy types learned to keep their big traps shut the better.

There seemed to him to be a similarity between Aidan and Christian that was more than just two young men being very close friends. Christian had all Aidan's mannerisms. They looked so similar as well, just that Christian had long blond hair, and Aidan had brown hair that was shorter. Could it be that...? Don't be so ridiculous!

Charles Walker was, of course, right about the deep friendship between Aidan and Christian. The two boys were very close and inseparable. At school they would be together in the common room in Greator House. As Aidan was a prefect, he would be on duty, and Christian would often be with him, getting to know the younger Caddies who were as accepting of him as they were with Aidan. They would run together. They would play badminton together. Ewan, too, was the third part of this relationship. He was more up-front about the attraction that

Christian held for him. Ewan fancied them both, although he had his own boyfriend, Jordan Melhuish, who was in Baxter House. He loved Jordan and was pleased that Jordan too had taken well to Aidy and Chris.

The Friday evening of that week Aidan and Christian were busy in the kitchen. Their father was doing some work in his study setting the Semester 2 Electrical Engineering exams for his students. Ewan was upstairs completing some homework, before strumming his guitar. Christian plucked up the courage to ask Aidan about what his granddad thought about the collection.

“He must have been impressed. He was taking lots of notes,” was Aidan’s answer.

“He hasn’t said anything further.”

“Granddad thinks things through very carefully when it comes to the business. The fact that he was taking notes at all showed that he thought a lot about what you were doing. He was clearly going to talk it through with Aunt Jenny and Aunt Sarah. They have a meeting every Monday. Granddad will get back to you if he thinks if there is anything in it. Don’t give up on it yet, but don’t badger him either. Just think about the Championships tomorrow.”

The Championships that Aidan was referring to were the Scottish National Schools Road Race Championships that were being held in Cardean. Naturally Strathcadden Academy was well represented. The four of them were in the squad and Dad was coming to support them. Joseph Walker had spent many a happy hour in wild places watching his sons rising through the ranks in the cross-country circuit. This one was a 10-k race, as challenging a course for juniors as there ever was. Ewan was tipped to be the Under 17 champion; he was just over a week too old for Under 16 and was the youngest in his division.

It was a tough race, run in nasty weather. Although it was the end of March, it was still cold and driving rain made it a miserable experience for all the competitors. Ewan was the champion of his class. Aidan came in a very close second while Christian was a creditable fourth. Jordan was tenth. Strathcadden Academy won the team prize with Laura Watts winning the Girl's Championship.

Chapter 16

Saturday, 29th March 2014

The following weekend Christian was at work at Walker Bros. He was busy in the restaurant which was a popular place for customers to meet with friends and generally socialise. While it was not the ultimate gastronomic experience, it served good food at very reasonable prices. Christian's skills at silver-service were certainly appreciated by both customers and his colleagues alike. Towards the end of the shift, Charles Walker asked Christian to see him in his office. Christian was nervous initially. Why would an important man like Mr Walker want to spend time with him, a mere Saturday boy?

Mr Walker was his usual charming self and made as much of an effort in getting Christian to be at ease as he would his most important customer. He started, "Christian, I know a lot about your past. My grandsons have told me a lot about you. But what do you think about Corscadden?"

"I really like it up here. For the first time ever, I feel I have really been accepted."

"When you say that you feel accepted, what do you mean?"

"Your grandsons took me under their wing on the first day that I arrived at Strathcadden. I was totally lost and didn't really know what to expect. Aidan showed me about, and started to get me running, to get me to feel good about myself. He got me to enjoy his music, and Ewan is a really good poet. And your son and his wife welcomed me into their house. I was very upset when Mary passed away."

"We all were. It was a massive shock to everyone. I am very proud of Joby. He's so much cleverer than I am, but he doesn't have much business sense. I hear you are looking after his accounts."

“Yes. Aidy and Eejay asked me to do it when they found Dad in tears about it. I have everything on a spreadsheet. I didn’t want to intrude. I do it for Mum.”

“That seems an odd thing to do, a bit of role reversal.”

“When I was about ten, Mum got into bad debt. She was working but couldn’t make ends meet. She was struggling to finish off her radiography training which she had to give up when I was born. I had to go out to do odd jobs, like helping out in shops.”

“Isn’t that illegal?”

“Yes. But nobody thinks about the law in Sowerland. They just give backhanders to the cops, and they don’t bother them – unless something big happens, of course. Anyway, I ended up doing a lot of the cooking, housework, and so on, while Mum worked all hours to get some money and do her studies. I didn’t mind that. I made a spreadsheet for the accounts. If we couldn’t afford it, we went without. Mum had got into debt and struggled with the pay-day loan companies. A couple of years ago, we had to choose whether to eat or heat. Aunt Imogen and my great-grandparents helped as well but couldn’t do everything.”

Charles looked at his young employee with genuine respect. That was one thing that neither Joby, nor Aidan nor Ewan had ever had to face. Brewster House was a big and rather cold house, but there had never been any question about eating or heating. The last thing he wanted to do was to give out some patronising and pious platitude. “I feel humbled to hear that,” he said. “We have had some close shaves here, but nothing as bad as that. Are things better now?”

“Yes. They started to get better but took a dip a couple of times. I had that episode on Tanswold Viaduct. I had gone to pieces and was being stupid. My friends spiked my drink...” Christian stopped and looked pained.

“I heard. With friends like that, who needs an enemy?”

“Mum is still having to work hard, but we are getting on top of things,” Christian picked up again, having got a grip of himself. “I am away, as you know, but I still help out with the rent on the flat. My Aunt Imogen has helped out as she could, and my great-grandparents have as well. She e-mails the bills etc., and I keep the spreadsheet. I do the on-line banking for her as well. I hope you don’t mind that I intruded with your son’s accounting.”

“No, don’t worry about that at all. Joby is really grateful. He is the first to admit that he is useless with household budgets. He runs a research budget in Edinburgh, and every penny is accounted for, but with his own money, he really has no idea. Muriel and I had to do it for him. He’s still very much our little boy.”

“Aidy and Eejay are protective towards Dad.”

“I notice you say ‘Dad’ rather than ‘their dad’.”

“I never had a dad. I do not know who my biological father is, other than that he was a student at York University. Your son has become like a father to me. Aidy and Eejay are like my brothers that I never had. They are more than friends to me.”

“And you are more than a friend to them as well. You were there for Aidy when he needed a shoulder to cry on, and for Eejay as well.”

“I was very worried when he disappeared. I was so glad that they found him so quickly.”

“We all were. Mr Farjeon should not have dealt with him in the way that he did, especially in the state that he was in. Our Ewan does things in a more spectacular way than Aidan. I am very grateful that you stepped in and helped him. And so is Ewan. As

I said before, Ewan feels very close to you. He has lots of friends, including Jordan, but you are like another brother.”

“They are the brothers that I never had. Mum works all hours in Edinburgh as a radiographer, so I don’t see her that often. Aidy, Eejay and Dad are my family. They have given me confidence. I am a changed man from when I lived in Beckton.”

“I am glad you have said that. You have confirmed all that I have thought and have observed. And I can see that. You may wonder why I say that the current Walker brothers would be bad news for Walker Bros. Aidan is just like his dad. If you want to know what my son was like as a teenager, just look at Aidan. Ewan is more like his mother. Mary was a bit of a tomboy as a girl. She used to refer to Joby as her tomboy’s toy-boy. Joby was quite a bit younger than her. He was twenty when they first met. She was twenty-nine (and looked about twenty). Ewan is more up front about everything. Both knew more at the age of ten than I ever will, but they just don’t have much in the way of business sense. They will get good degrees from university, and they will do well in careers that get them to use the old grey-matter. You know our website?”

“Yes. The photography is wonderful. You use Aidy and Eejay a lot for modelling teen gear. And Jordan as well.”

“Oh yes. They are very handsome and photogenic. Joby is as well. He models the stuff for middle-aged men. Jenny and Sarah do the modelling for the middle-aged women. I use other members of my staff to help out as well. Muriel and I model stuff for those, ahem, shall we say, of more advanced years. We are both getting on somewhat.”

“You look very good on it, if you don’t mind me saying so, Mr Walker.”

“You are very kind, Christian,” replied Charles with genuine appreciation. “And you are known here for being kind and gentle – and meaning it. I find it really sad that kindness and gentleness were considered to be a weakness in Beckton.”

“That’s in the past. I really like Corscadden. Edinburgh’s a nice and vibrant place, but in Corscadden I can be myself. I feel a part of it. Your family have taken me in. I feel a part of it as well.”

“And this is why I wanted to talk to you. You are very much a part of my family. You managed to do something that very few others have ever done. You got me to break a lifelong rule of mine. When I leave this office, I am off duty. If I need to, I will work late – here. But when I go home, I never take my work with me. If a big Dick rings me at home, I always ring him back in the morning, when I have all my facts and figures in front of me. But a fortnight ago, I was so impressed by what you showed me that I jumped to it. You saw me making notes. And I have been giving a lot of thought to what I saw. Now there are two things I want to ask of you.

“Firstly, and this would be something that you can think about over the next couple of days or so. Ewan showed me your photography. He was really taken by it. And so am I. Our photographer who took all the pictures for our website has moved down south. He was one of our staff and did it at a very reasonable rate. I have approached professionals, but they charge a fortune. Your work is beautiful. You have a true talent. Would you do our photography for us? I would, of course, pay you what we paid our previous gentleman.”

“I don’t have to think about it. I would be very happy to do it. I have taken lots of pictures of Aidy and Ewan.”

“Yes. I have seen them. The second thing is that I am very impressed with your sense and knowledge of fashion. Fashion is

our bread-and-butter here. I am a tailor. As you have rightly said, fashion is something for which you have to have a certain amount of foresight. You were quite right in saying that what is fashionable in London may well go down like a lead balloon in Buchananshire. As Aidan puts it, they stitch a couple of bin-bags together, put it on an airhead, and charge three grand for it. How good are you with a sewing machine?"

"I have used one, but I haven't got one at the moment."

"Great! I'll sort out a sewing machine for you. Now, what I would like you to do is to make some prototypes of your designs and show them for real. I have some material and some mannequins spare. Get some Caddies to do the modelling. Aidan and Ewan are certainly up for it, and I know some of their female friends would do it as well. You could do it at the school."

"Would Mr Mitchell approve?"

"Of course. He's very keen on the idea. I was talking about it a few days ago at a meeting of the School Board."

"I'll do my best. Which ones do you want me to do?"

"Do them all. You have about thirty designs. Don't worry about doing them all yourself! Muriel and I are good with the sewing machine. Jenny and Sarah will also help, but we would like you to keep us right. You'll get all the credit, of course."

Christian considered the challenge. It was going to be a major task, but with a willing workforce, which he was going to have to manage all the same, it could be done. He was going to have to organise his time carefully between his academic work, his running and badminton, and his visits to Edinburgh. "Yes, Mr Walker. It's going to be hard, but we'll do it. And Aidy and Eejay are not going to get away with it either. When do you want it to be done by?"

“Mr Mitchell and I were discussing that. The school year at Strathcadden Academy ends with something of a bang. They have a couple of days where they celebrate all the achievement of the students. Parents come down from all over, including the distant Caddies. Your mother must come, of course. Your fashion-show will be a part of it.”

“Mr Walker, could I ask one thing?”

“Yes, of course.”

“I notice a lot of models have tattoos nowadays. I hate them. They remind me too much of Beckton.”

“So do I, so ours don’t. I just thought that I was getting old. You are totally free to select whatever models you want. Also, there isn’t a tattoo parlour in Corscadden.”

“Why’s that? I thought they were all over the place.”

“A bloke tried a few years ago but wasn’t all that good. For one thing he couldn’t spell, and his drawing wasn’t up to much. Nor was his hygiene. Three customers got an infection and ended up in hospital. He closed down and the Chamber of Trade swore that they would never allow another one.”

Christian was excited by the challenge. It was big and he was going to have to plan things carefully, but he was determined to bring it to a successful conclusion.

When Christian got back to Brewster House, he found Aidan in the games room sitting listening to some music. Ewan and Jordan were updating their photography blog. They were in their sports kit. He pulled up a beanbag and snuggled up to Aidy and told him about the conversation he had had with Granddad.

“Chris, he has given you a tall order,” said Aidan. Ewan and Jordan had also joined them. “That is what Granddad does to anyone who has good designs. And yours must be good because Granddad is interested in them. He wants to see those prototypes, and the show will take place at the end of next term, after your Highers.”

The size of the project was starting to dawn slowly on Christian. “How am I going to get thirty prototypes made? Your granddad said he would help, as would your grandma. He also said your aunts would help too. That makes five of us, producing six prototypes each. We have got about ten weeks to do it and to arrange and rehearse the show. What happens if it all goes tits-up?”

“It won’t. You are not going to let it. Eejay and I will help you. We have done stuff with the sewing machine. Gran taught us how to use it. We’re quite a dab hand with the machine, aren’t we, Eejay?”

“Yeah.” Ewan was gazing at Christian who was sitting cross-legged on the beanbag.

“Aidy, it’s going to take some organising.”

“Of course. Granddad clearly has plans for you. He has given you a hard test to do. He did exactly the same for Mr McRae, the General Manager, when he was interviewing. It’s his way of getting his people to show if they can manage a project. That means getting lots of people each to do a little bit to get the whole done. Think about a conductor. He doesn’t play all the instruments himself. There are fifty musicians each playing their part. He has to get them doing everything together, so all the little bits make a whole. So, you have got to get us together and manage us to get it all done. That’s what Granddad is looking for. The first thing is to plan the project and share it with your team. I’ll give you the e-mails.”

“Were you in on this, Aidy?”

Aidan smiled and replied, “That’s for me to know and you to wonder. Come on, go and get changed. We’re ready; we’re doing a 10 k this evening.”

Chapter 17

Sunday, 6th April 2014

Christian had his hands full, and he had to organise himself carefully to get his challenge underway. In many cases he was pushing at open doors. The headmaster was enthusiastic, as was Mr McEwan. He spoke to Mrs Frobisher in Home Economics. She gave him access to a workroom out of school, provided of course that he got everyone to tidy up. Several Caddie-Lassies from Secondary Four launched themselves at Christian, not just out of enthusiasm, but also because he was that gorgeous baby-faced blond they all fancied. They were joined by other artistic types from Secondary Five and Six. As a result, Christian had quite a workforce to manage; that was the point. He also had Aidan Walker who was constantly giving him tips on what he should do next. While they now were boarding during the week in Asher House (because Dad was working away in Edinburgh), Aidan and Ewan shared the room next to his, and one or the other was round most evenings.

Christian discussed his plans with all who were interested in the project and winkled out a couple who were merely there because he was so cutely gorgeous. It was not easy, but management was not an easy thing to do. After a couple of days, he was satisfied he had a good team. He was going to have the launch of the project at Brewster House the following Saturday afternoon.

Even so, the size of the task gave him one or two nights which, although not sleepless, ensured that he was awake for some time after he had put out his light. On one night in particular Christian's mind was racing. He had a big job on his hands. What happened if it went wrong? The Walker family of course would be very kind and supportive, but he would look like he could not organise a binge-drinking session in a brewery. No, that was not quite fair. Mr Walker had set him a management task that was a

big call for a thirty-year-old. But he would not have set him up to fail. It might have been the way in Beckton, but not the way in Corscadden. Mr Walker had paved the way for him, so he clearly wanted him to succeed.

Christian spent the weekend at Strathcadden Academy. He was still a Distant Caddie, even though he often stayed at Brewster House. Aidy and Eejay had gone to the Borders to spend the weekend with their other grandparents. Mum was working two shifts at the Edinburgh Royal Infirmary. Chris did an early and late shift at Walker Bros on Saturday. That night he found it hard to get to sleep. His mind was racing again.

On that Sunday morning, he had thought about doing a run, but it was a foul day. Even though it was early spring, there was sleet as well as driving rain. If Aidy and Eejay were going out, he would have gone out too. The warmth of their friendship made even the coldest run warm. But on this occasion, he would be on his own. Not that he minded running on his own, but not on a foul morning like this.

There were about fifty Distant Caddies who spent the weekend at school, the vast majority in Secondary Five and Six. Christian knew that a fair number went to an informal act of worship that Mr McEwan ran in the Old Chapel. As a matter of curiosity, he thought he would go down there as well. He did not like the idea of so few sitting in the empty hectares of the Old Chapel. It made him think of the Anglican church in Beckton where thirty people would have the space for five hundred, and there was more life in the graveyard. At least the Old Chapel had no graveyard.

When he got there, he found the great doors locked. He was about to go back to Asher House, when he noticed a couple of other Distant Caddies go through the Covered Cloister, which

ran along the north side of the building. Originally open to the elements, the Covered Cloister had had glazing fitted in the nineteen sixties and was now the corridor to the library. Shyly he followed them. Instead of turning left to go into the library, which he had done many times before in the previous months, the two Distant Caddies went through the door that went straight on.

A much smaller and more intimate building, whose architecture looked decidedly ecclesiastical, stood behind the Old Chapel. It was originally built as a memorial to the many hundreds of Old Oswaldians who had lost their lives in the Great War and was designed as a place for quiet contemplation. It was available for Caddies who felt they needed space and time out whether they were religious or not.

It was warm and the room's atmosphere was one of peace. The chairs were modern and comfortable – the room had been refurbished shortly before the Saint Oswald College closed. There was a warm smell of polished oak. There were about fifteen Distant Caddies, mostly girls. That did not matter to Christian who was in many ways quite girlish himself. Mr McEwan led the worship while a small group provided the music. Words were projected onto a screen. The singing was heart-felt. The service was quiet and reflective. The other Caddies were very welcoming towards him and pleased that he was there. The welcome was genuine, not the fixed smile and limp handshake that had greeted Christian and his mother on previous occasions. While much of the content flowed over Christian, he felt a sense of warmth and peace. He had a strange feeling that Jesus of Nazareth might have been there.

That afternoon, Christian wondered what it was all about and felt strangely unsettled. He went for a run, but the unsettled feelings would not go away. He felt he was catching religion, but

his experience of religion was sufficient to put him off for life. He spoke at length to Aidy on Monday evening. They concluded nothing, except that Chris should see Mr McEwan the following evening. Mr McEwan was an ordained minister, so he would be good at God.

A deep conversation with Mr McEwan on Tuesday evening cemented the feelings to make them into a certainty for Christian. The beauty of God had never occurred to Christian, but when he thought about the beauty of the area surrounding Strathcadden, it clicked. The lines *“Jesus take me as I am. I can come no other way”* seemed to be resonating in his mind.

That night there were no massive revelations, no mystic visions. There were a few celestial fireworks from a passing heavy shower. The rain rattled against his window. Christian was emotionally drained and exhausted as if he were being led to his execution. He got changed into the sportswear that he used in bed and flopped under his duvet. Aidy put out the light. Christian twitched a couple of times and slept. That was not very spiritual, was it?

The next morning, Christian awoke and looked at himself. He had not been executed. He looked no different whatsoever. He was still the long-legged smooth-skinned long-haired youth that he was last night. He had not gone grey or grown a massive beard. Unlike most seventeen-year-olds, he still had little facial hair. No one had ever said to him, “Salway, you need a shave, laddie!”

The world had not changed at all. He could see through the trees to the old Saint Oswald College buildings, which still looked like Hogwarts with a Scottish twist. And Aidy and Eejay were in, and presently they were on their way to have breakfast in the canteen with the other Caddies who boarded at the school during the week. It was all the same as it ever was. Nothing had changed, but to Christian, his senses seemed to have been turned

up a bit. Eejay had gone on ahead to intervene with a couple of Wee Caddies who were having a bit of a spat, for that was Eejay's nature, a gentle peacemaker. Christian was still himself. He was still a seventeen-year-old with the usual teenage hopes and anxieties. He did not feel fifty. He still had a deep bond with both Aidy and Eejay. Eejay was, as usual, wearing his kilt slightly short. And Jordan trotted up and hugged his boyfriend.

The bang and clatter of trays in the canteen was just the same, along with the banter from the school cook and her team, who seemed to work all hours. Did they ever sleep? As always Christian and his friends had a light breakfast of cereal and toast, with lashings of black coffee. Fried breakfast had never appealed to them. Aidy looked dozy and could well have fallen back to sleep with his face in his bowl of cereal. The same was true of many other boys and girls in the canteen that and every other morning.

As they came back from the canteen, Ewan, accompanied by a couple of his female friends, Claudia, and Gemma, noticed Mr Farjeon getting out of his sports car. All three of them had been in Mr Farjeon's Secondary Five tutor group. They had complained about Mr Farjeon's use of pejorative terms like "fruit flies". Dr Cuthbert told them that they were not the only ones to have complained on that issue.

"Looks like Craigie-Boy has been in a punch up," said Claudia.

"One of his conquests has ended in defeat?" said Gemma.

"Boyfriend's caught lover-boy bonking and given him a right good hammering," was Ewan's analysis.

All three were right. Craig Farjeon had been caught in the act by one of his teammates, who had not been very matey with him, considering that Craig's latest conquest was his bird. Farjeon had been dressed down by the manager of Corscadden Town, who

told him that his presence in the squad was prejudicial to good team harmony and discipline. Therefore, he would no longer be part of the squad. And Mr Mitchell decided that Craig Farjeon did not look like he was a good example to the students. Therefore, he was being sent home on sick leave until the bruising and swelling went down. A man of his age really should have known better.

Chapter 18

Friday, 11th April 2014

Christian felt he was more of a Christian than a humanist. He never thought it would happen, but it had. A feeling of lightness had come on him over the last couple of days and he felt that he had more energy. He needed it. As well as the hundred and one things he had to do at Strathcadden Academy, he had his shift at Walker Bros to do. He also had the Fashion Show to get done. And the immediate task was to launch the project in the congenial surroundings of Brewster House. It was during Friday evening that all three friends were somewhat surprised when Dad came in from work.

“Mum! What are you doing here?” was Christian’s shocked question when Laura Salway came through to the kitchen. “I thought you were working.”

“They don’t need me this weekend, so I thought I would come up with Joby, and see you, Chris.”

The reference to Joseph Walker’s nickname made Aidan and Ewan’s ears prick up. If the boys had been Labradors, it would have been obvious. “Dad, what’s going on?”

Christian was putting two and two together. He had heard a man with a refined Morningside accent in the background a couple of times when he had rung Mum. He was with Aidy the last time that Aidy had contacted his dad on *Skype*. Chris was convinced he had heard a woman’s voice with a Northumberland accent. And when he had rung Mum’s number, there was the distinctive ringtone that came over loud and clear on Aidy’s computer.

Like his mother, Eejay was up-front. “Looks like Dad has caught your mum on the rebound, Chris,” was his considered reply.

“You are a dark horse, Dad,” said Aidy.

Joseph Walker smiled shyly.

Christian explained to his mother all about Mr Walker's challenge. "You are going to help, aren't you Mum?" he said in a tone of voice that indicated that a refusal was definitely not an option. "You are a dab hand with a sewing machine. I've got a pattern for you to make..."

"Dad," said Eejay in a similar tone of voice, "I don't know what we're going to get you to do, but you are going to do something useful, aren't you?"

The boys had agreed that their father, surprisingly for someone so skilled with his hands, was not a dab hand with a sewing machine, even though he was the son of a master tailor. Any prototype that he put together would have been stitched with woodscrews. They were still at a loss to know what he could do that was remotely useful. Aidy piped up, "Dad, you could use that big plotter you have at work to print out the patterns."

"I suppose so," said Joby who resembled one who was really a couple of bricks short of a full load. Aidy could see his father's puzzlement. "Chris, what is all of this about?" said Joby.

"Dad, ask Granddad when he gets here tomorrow what is going on. Don't you remember Chris giving us his fashion show a couple of weeks ago?" said Aidan.

"Yes...of course. But I wasn't paying much attention. I had other things on my mind."

"Yes, Dad," Aidan replied, "like being a dark horse?"

The next day at lunchtime Christian's clothiers arrived at Brewster House, one or two with sundry other members of extended families, who may have been acting as chaperones, but more likely to have been there for the food. It was clear that

Christian was getting a name for his culinary skills. The projector and laptop were set up in the drawing room, and the briefing was intended to be carried out before lunch. It had been deliberately organised like this. Those who were simply there for the food would at least have to give respect by sitting through the talk. Also, it could be difficult to get people through to the start while everyone was eating. Another equally practical reason was that there would have been more traffic to *The Venerable* and to *The Colossus*. Both apparatuses were noisy and could be heard throughout the house when being made ready for the next user.

It was slightly surreal to watch a seventeen-year-old who looked rather younger taking the part of a thirty-nine-year-old man, but that was the role he was playing and did it to perfection. Christian not only spoke with enthusiasm, but also with authority. All present could see that he meant business. The initial fashion show presentation that the family had seen previously still looked slick. This time Dad paid attention, while still making eyes at Laura. So did the others. There were the designs of the prototypes. Christian had worked hard on the details. There were the samples of the materials. These had been provided by Walker Bros at a considerable cost, so material had to be used with the minimum of wastage. Quality was important as the garments were to go on sale. Clothiers could, of course, purchase the items themselves at cost price.

Christian went through his schedule. It was tight. Many of the prototypes would take about twenty hours of production (just the right amount for a Textiles project). The deadline was Monday 2nd June, to give the models time to rehearse the fashion show that would take place on Friday 25th June. This was the start of the weekend events that marked the end of the school year at Strathcadden Academy, and the start of the Corscadden Festival of Arts and Sports that took place during the following week. They would be exhibited in the restaurant in Walker Bros. Money raised

would go to charitable objects in the town. If anyone felt that the task was too big, please would they go now? Nobody did.

As they went through to the dining room for the luncheon that the boys had prepared, Charles said to Muriel, “He’s got his teeth into this one. He’s not going to let go.”

Laura Salway said to Joby, “Six months ago, my Christian couldn’t have organised anything. It’s a miracle to see the change. He was a scared little boy. He has changed to a confident young man.”

Both were right, of course.

A large amount of cloth was in the hall, while a platoon of mannequins stood to attention in the garage. The noisy room above the garage, where the boys could make as much noise as they liked, now had four sewing machines. It was going to be the quiet clothier’s workroom. Mum was going to help. Still, nobody had the faintest idea of what the contribution of Doctor Joseph Walker was going to be.

Aidan had another little bit of advice for his friend, “Chris, check Granddad’s work. He does odd things to test quality control.”

After lunch, Christian slipped off to do his shift at Walker Bros. He was not going to be big-headed, even though the introductory meeting had been a great success. He was a Saturday boy in the restaurant. On the other hand, his workmates at Walker Bros knew all about what was in the offing and were taking a great deal of interest in the challenge their boss had set. Christian had always been artistic and interested in design. His inspiration for the fashion industry came from reading *Something Wholesale* by Eric Newby in which Mr Newby wrote about his experiences after the war acting as a sales representative for his father’s firm. He had talked about that to Mr Walker, who remembered how his dad used

to order (sensible) stuff from Lane & Newby. Christian would have loved to meet Mr Newby and Mr Wilkins.

In the meantime, Joseph Walker and Laura Salway slipped out in the car to go off to a beauty spot, while Aidan, Ewan, and Jordan went for a run in Rowallan Country Park. The two brothers and their friend had caught the train to Maunder and had passed under Rowallan viaduct when they saw a couple in early middle age who were canoodling and snogging. Their father and his girlfriend did not notice at all as they passed him. But it gave the two brothers something to laugh about as they ran along the riverside path that led them back to Corscadden. And why not? They had not seen much of Laura Salway, but they had quickly warmed to her. If she could make Dad happy again, that would be wonderful – as long as he got those patterns done at work before next week which was the last week of the Spring Term.

Chapter 19

May 2014

Christian Salway spent most of the subsequent weeks working on the two biggest concerns of his life, his Highers, and his fashion show. When Strathcadden Academy re-opened for the Summer Term, the Fashion Show was coming together. Just as well, as there were fewer than eight weeks before the big day. As with the real thing, there were hissy fits among his clothiers which gave Christian challenges in which he needed to practise his management skills. He checked out the workmanship carefully; he was a hard taskmaster to please, but in the end all his clothiers got it right. As advised by his friends, he checked out Granddad's work extra carefully. On one gentleman's suit, he found that the legs had been stitched together where it would have hurt. He also found one sleeve in a girl's T-shirt had suffered a similar fate, and in a jacket, one pocket had been stitched very neatly at the top instead of the bottom.

"Whatever must have I been thinking about?" said old Mr Walker. "I'll sort it out straightaway. You know, you just can't get the staff, can you?"

Mr Walker was as good as his word. He sorted it out straight away and handed over three pieces of outstanding craftsmanship, worthy of a master tailor. Muriel Walker had produced a wedding dress of Christian's design that far outshone even the wildest hopes of its young designer. Muriel was a needle craftswoman of the greatest skill, and her work in every detail was exquisite. She helped her grandsons with details for the Groom and the Best Man. At least the Wedding part of the Fashion Show would be a total success.

The grand parade of lifeless mannequins up in the noisy room above the garage was now coming on, starting to look gorgeous with the Wedding Day scene complete. Christian would

spend time cycling around Corscadden supporting and encouraging his clothiers as their projects came together. One parent in the Langhouse (The...ae...Huise) said she had never seen her children concentrate so much. Christian had received more kind words in these last few weeks than he had ever had in a lifetime in Beckton. Aidy would drive him around in his late mother's car, a Ford Fiesta, to pick up the finished articles. Aidan was a cautious and sensible driver; no-one would have expected otherwise.

If his "friends" in Beckton knew what Christian was up to, they would have had a good belly-laugh. Afterwards they would have spiked his drink with a bigger dose of ketamine and that other shit whose name he had forgotten. But this was not Beckton, he kept on telling himself. This was Corscadden where they really liked him. He had even started to go to church with Aidy and Eejay. There was an evening service which was designed to appeal more to young people. No Sunday suits there, just jeans, casual kilts, shorts, T-shirts, and trainers. A good number of Secondary Five and Secondary Six were there, so Christian felt welcome. He wanted more than ever to make Corscadden his home. And he wanted his love-struck mother there so he could keep an eye on her.

One or two of his designs did not turn out quite right. A designer who was less gentle and thoughtful would have ranted and raved. Instead, Christian took the garment, thanked the clothier and got Muriel to put her skills to work to get it right. It was challenging at times, but she always made a good job of it.

Aidan had been tasked by Christian to write a suitable score to accompany the fashion show, while Ewan was to compere the show with suitable poetic lines. While Christian was managing his team, Aidan was putting his compositional skills to use. He had software on the computer at home which he used to compose and orchestrate musical scores. Aidan preferred instrumental music for

the simple reason that he was not that good at singing. Ewan could do that, for not only was Ewan a poet with a sensitive love for the English Language but also had a fine singing voice. Ewan enjoyed putting his poems to music which he did on his electric and acoustic guitars. Or he would accompany himself on the piano. He was not as good a keyboard player as Aidan but certainly was not at all bad.

None of them had the least idea how to make Joseph Walker into anything remotely useful.

When Strathcadden Academy reopened for the Summer Term, Mr Mitchell collared Aidan one morning with a cheery, “Walker lad, I have someone who is dying to meet you. I have told him all about you.”

Aidan followed the headmaster up to the main staff room. A young man of about thirty came out to meet him.

“Peter, I was telling you about Aidan Walker. He is going to show you around during tutorial time. This is Aidan Walker.”

“Hello, sir,” said Aidan shyly.

“So, you are the Aidan Walker that Mr Mitchell has told me all about?”

“Yes, sir. And you?”

“I am Peter Struther, the new Head of Music. I’m taking over from Miss Bryant.”

“Mr Mitchell, sir, could you tell Dr Cuthbert why I am not in tutorial.”

“Of course. lad. I have done so already. You’ll get your mark.”

“Walker,” said Mr Struther, who found it a bit strange to refer to his students by their surnames, “are you going to show me your keyboard skills? The headmaster has given me the key to the Old Chapel. There are no assemblies in there at the moment, so I’m told.”

“Yes, of course,” replied Aidan. There was one of the better keyboards from the Music Department in there. It would have to do.

Peter Struther had heard a lot about the talented students at Strathcadden Academy. It had a reputation of being one of the highest performing state schools in Scotland, if not the whole of the UK. It was going to be a contrast to where he had worked before, in “The...ae...Pans”. There had been some talent there, but music had not been the priority for many of his students. Hibernian and Heart of Midlothian had been. He was a supporter of Inverness Caledonian Thistle.

He had a big task for he knew the state that the Music Department had got into. Miss Bryant had achieved what could be best described as a car crash, and his job was to unbend the car and get it back on the road. His main problem was that, while the school had plenty of talented musicians, there was no school orchestra. Miss Bryant had disbanded it on the basis that it was elitist. The first challenge was to revive the school orchestra for the Scottish School Music Festival in Edinburgh, which Strathcadden Academy had won on five previous occasions. His second challenge was to set up a concert for the end of school year. The Music Department, although well equipped, was a demoralised shadow of its former self. Few students were taking music to Higher and Advanced Higher, all of whom were girls. Miss Bryant had made it clear how she disliked boys. His task was to re-engage the boys as well as the girls.

The Old Chapel was open and the two went in. Aidan stopped in his tracks and gasped. And it was not because it had been set out for the summer examinations. Where there had been a yawning gap in the North Transept, there stood gleaming pipes. The console was back, beautifully polished, waiting for the first musician to come and play its noisy keys. Aidan had not seen the white vans that had come up from Liverpool over Easter to reinstall the instrument that had been restored at a cost of about two hundred grand. The bill had been paid for by an anonymous benefactor.

“You’re the first to play that, and you’re going to show me your skills. Mr Mitchell told me about your talent.”

Aidan pulled up the roller cover to the newly restored instrument. It was the same as when he had last played it, except that there was no masking tape marked “Do not use”. There were a couple of stops that stood out; they had not been there before. Or he had never noticed them. There was a small brass plaque which had definitely not been there before. It read, *In grateful and loving memory of Mary Claire Bethan Walker (1965 – 2014), a warm friend of Strathcadden Academy.*

“My Mum,” said Aidan quietly. A tear ran from his right eye. “She taught me to play and love music.”

“Yes,” replied Mr Struther. “Mr Mitchell told me all about your loss. She sounded a wonderful woman.”

“She was.”

“And now you are going to share with me the talent she gave you, aren’t you?”

Aidan went to the cabinet that had some of the musical scores that had been inherited from Saint Oswald College. He chose a couple of pieces, and Mr Struther listened appreciatively as he played.

“That’s good, Walker,” he said as Aidan stopped playing. “You clearly have a talent. Can you play from memory?”

“Yes, sir,” replied Aidan. He played his own arrangement of Mark Knopfler’s *Local Hero*.

“Very impressive, Walker,” said Mr Struther whose appreciation was genuine. “I have a challenge for you. Show me some of your improvisation. Here’s something to get you going.”

Mr Struther gave Aidan a small musical fragment, and Aidan made up a piece that lasted for ten minutes, showing what an artist he was on the keyboard.

Peter Struther was left speechless. He was a professional musician who could turn his hand to a number of string and wind instruments, as well as the piano. The shy, skinny, and geeky looking boy sitting at the console had produced a performance that would have challenged any music professor.

“Why aren’t you doing music as one of your Advanced Highers?” he asked.

“Miss Bryant didn’t like boys doing Higher Music, sir. All the students are girls,” Aidan replied. “She certainly didn’t like me.”

“Why not?”

“Because I’m a boy. She wouldn’t let me do Music for Highers. Also, she didn’t like my brother, Ewan, because he was cheeky and gobby towards her. I didn’t like her either. I think if she had taught me, she would have cured me of enjoying music.”

“Quite,” replied Mr Struther. “I hear you compose. Could I see some of your compositions?”

“Yes, of course,” said Aidan who got out his laptop from which he was inseparable. In a couple of minutes, the machine had

booted up and its synthesised orchestra was playing one of Aidan's pieces.

"It sounds quite like Mike Oldfield."

"Yes, sir. Dad says that. He was writing in the early nineteen seventies when Dad was born."

"Oldfield was nineteen when *Tubular Bells* came out. Not much older than you. Now you have a friend called Salway, don't you?"

"Yes, sir."

"Now he went to the headmaster and asked him if the orchestra could be revived. He told Mr Mitchell that he and you had discussed it."

"We did, sir, but I hadn't realised he had actually seen Mr Mitchell. That was shortly before Mum passed away. Eejay and I were off for a week."

"Eejay?"

"My brother, Ewan. Eejay from Ewan James Samuel Walker. He's in Secondary Five. My Aunt Jenny called him that. When my father was born, she called him Joby – from Joseph Oliver Baxter Walker."

"The answer to your question is not just yes; it is going to happen this term. I have been told by the headmaster to get the orchestra back together, and to play at the Scottish School Music Festival in Edinburgh at the end of May. They will also play at the End of Year Celebrations, which I gather coincides with the start of the Coruscadden Festival. Will you play?"

"Of course, sir."

"Good. We have an organist and pianist. Now we need between forty and fifty other instrumentalists."

Mr Struther was as good as his word. It was not difficult to find a good number of good musicians amongst the ranks of the gifted and talented at Strathcadden Academy. There were, of course, the students doing Highers and Advanced Highers in Music. Additionally, there were other instrumentalists from all ages of the school, including the Wee Caddies. Within an hour or two, the artists found themselves playing more or less in time and in tune.

It would be a challenge for his young instrumentalists to be ready for the competition at the end of May, but, hey, pupils at Strathcadden Academy were always up for a challenge. Besides all the pieces were melodious, with themes which were easy to pick up for the very inexperienced amateur instrumentalists.

If the thoughts of Craig Farjeon and some others in the staff room were correct, Peter Struther was on a hiding to nothing. The other orchestras had been rehearsing all year, while the Caddies would have done about three or four weeks at best. Some others in response replied that if Craigie-Boy were so good, why didn't he show what should be done? After all, he had lots of time on his hands now that he had been thrown out of the squad at Corscadden Town. That did not please Craigie-Boy one little bit and did nothing to stem his sniping. A quiet word from Andrew McEwan did, especially as it was suffixed by the phrase "possible disciplinary action".

For Aidan, the revival of the orchestra was an extra demand on his time; it fell more to Ewan and Jordan to help Christian towards the successful conclusion of the fashion show. Rehearsals for the show were starting to take place, and Caitlin Summers from Secondary Five Drama took centre stage in organising the choreography. She had never been a girl to be trifled with and any hissy fits from the models were stamped on immediately.

As if all of this was not enough of a demand, the Higher and Advanced Higher examinations were on. All May, there were examinations after examinations. Christian, having spent much of his schooling in England, was surprised that there was no half-term at the end of May and into June. As soon as his Higher examinations were over, he was straight into Secondary Six work, and like a good number of other Caddies in Secondary Five, Christian found himself as a school prefect.

Shortly before the end of May, all the prototypes were complete and were set out on the grand parade of lifeless mannequins above the garage at Brewster House. Charles and Muriel Walker and their daughters were led around on a tour of inspection by their young designer. And, not surprisingly, all of them were highly impressed. Back in the drawing room Jenny and Sarah were keen to quiz Christian about it.

“What got you into fashion design?” asked Jenny.

“I have always liked people to look beautiful. I started to think about designs while I was recovering in hospital last year.”

“What happened last year?” Sarah asked.

“Some (quotes) friends of mine at Beckton Sixth Form College took me out to the pub after our mock exams and spiked my drink. I had a massive reaction and was in a coma for four weeks. It was weird; I could actually think, and I could hear what people were saying. It was during that time that I could see young people, men and women in these lovely clothes. I started to draw them when I woke up.”

Jennifer and Sarah sat looking rather shocked. They had not heard the tale of what Christian had suffered in Beckton-on-Sower and were appalled at the events that led his mother to bring him up to Scotland.

“That was attempted murder,” said Jenny. “Didn’t anything get done?”

“They were arrested,” replied Christian, “but they all clammed up. The Sowerland Police messed up the case. There was talk about strings pulled in high places. One of the lads was the son of a good mate of the Principal. I know whose side she was on; it was not mine. To get on in Sowerland, you needed to have a lot of slush money and know how to do funny handshakes. But I am here now, and I like Corscadden.”

“Why did they do it to you?”

“I wasn’t ‘hard’. In Sowerland you have to fight to get anywhere. You have to look aggressive. If you were a man, you had to have your hair shaved (or a number one). You had to have a staffie. You had to eat fast food. You had to be on benefits. They were horrible. They started to get at me because I have no father. Also, I wanted boys to look really nice, like they do in Europe. I am also a socialist. They are all fascist. You name it, they hated me. Could we move back to the fashion? I want to forget about Beckton and think about Corscadden.”

“Of course, Christian,” Sarah replied. She felt that both she and her sister had somewhat put their feet in it (a Walker Family trait) and wished they had quizzed their nephews a bit more about Christian’s past. “You have come to the right place. And your talents are genuinely appreciated here. Where did you learn your artistic skills?”

“Well, I have always enjoyed drawing. I found that while I was in hospital, I could draw much better than previously. I had loads of time, so I drew everything out on paper and scanned it into the computer. I used the computer and a good graphics tablet to do the colouring. I showed it to Aidy and Eejay. They liked it and encouraged me to do more. Finally, I showed them to your father.”

“Yes, and as you know, he liked them. And we do as well.”

While Christian was talking to them, there seemed something that started Sarah thinking. Although Christian was blond, there were so many similarities between him and Joby. Their little brother had been a gentle and engaging teenager with distinctive mannerisms, many of which he still had as he approached forty. Like Christian, Joby had long hair as a teenager, which he would toss from time-to-time. The way Christian would sit with his legs folded up to him reminded her of her brother. Christian’s accent, originally Northumbrian, was now Scottish, and he had picked up the more refined tones of the Walker family. There were physical features that so reminded Sarah of her brother, his long legs, his nose, and eyes. In many ways he was a blond version of Aidy, who was nothing other than the spit of his dad.

There were, of course, differences. Aidan had brown hair, rather than blond. Aidan was very slightly taller. Both boys looked a lot younger than their age and were smooth skinned. Ewan had picked up much more of the Fairbairn traits. He had light brown hair, almost sandy, and was taller than both Aidan and Christian. There were the very first signs of youthful fluff about Ewan’s face that were surely soon to bring about a “Walker! You need a shave, laddie!”

“Surely not,” said Jenny indignantly when Sarah put forward her thoughts on the matter. “Joby isn’t capable of that sort of thing.”

“He told me back at Christmas ’95 that he had a guilty secret but didn’t want to say what it was.”

“What was that?”

“He didn’t say. Mum and Dad came into the room. I don’t think he ever told Mary. He hasn’t told Mum or Dad.”

“Now he’s so love-struck with Laura, will he tell her? If he was up here and she was in York, it’s ridiculous!”

“Not really. He was in York in November that year. He was off the leash and could well have been a naughty boy. He did say that there was a party during the conference he was at.”

“Not Joby. He was twenty, going on sixteen. He hardly knew what his willy was for. He was lost in his world of trains.”

“Mary had just taught him; Aidy was on the way. Our Joby can be a bit of a dark horse...”

The same theme came about while Joby and Laura were together in Joby’s Edinburgh flat. Joby had cooked a nice meal, and they were relaxing in his living room. Joby had recorded the footy match between Hibernian and Aberdeen in which Hibs had lost 1 – 0 at home. Laura followed York City in English League 2. Conversation had wandered to the subject of York. “I would love to have a weekend in York with you, Joby,” Laura started.

“I was last in York in... it must have been...late 1995,” replied Joby. “I was little more than a kid. I was giving my first lecture to a conference about my work on Corscadden Signal Box. Wow! Sounds gripping, doesn’t it? I was dead scared.”

Laura stared at him intensely, and Joby started to feel uneasy. “Did you go to a party up in Fulford?”

“I remember going to a party with some engineering students...” Joby stopped.

“Well,” said Laura, “we’re going next weekend. The boys can stop with their grandparents.”

Laura had booked them into a comfortable family-run hotel in the rather pleasant suburb of Fulford, to the south of the city. It was a familiar house to her. Eighteen years ago, it was split in a rather amateurish way into a number of student flats. By a total coincidence, the room they were staying in had been Laura's room, which had been separated from the living room by a crudely installed stud-wall typical of the quality of landlord's DIY. Now the wall had been removed to make a very spacious room with a contemporary en-suite that had been the bathroom when the house was separated into flats.

It was a lovely room. It had memories for Laura. It also had brought back some distant memories for Joseph Walker. It made him feel slightly uneasy.

It was the room in which Christian Dominic Hayward Salway had been conceived. Memories flooded back into Laura's mind about her and her flatmates. They were bored with the pathetic stream of boyfriends that had drifted in and out of their flat. So many of them were old before their time and had no sense of adventure. They were going to show them. They were going to have a party which was going to have a twist. The boys would be assessed on their prowess in the bedroom. A couple of extras were roped in from the younger element at a conference that was going on at the university. Naturally, there would be plenty of protection with the use of latex products.

She remembered through an alcoholic haze her first boy. He was not that tall, but he was so pretty. He said he was twenty but looked more like seventeen. He had long soft brown hair and the smallest bit of fluff around his face. He spoke in a very soft and gentle Scottish accent. He was so shy. She remembered him taking his jeans and boxer-shorts off. His legs were smooth with fine brown hairs, with such a tight bum. But he scarcely knew what to do. And his attempt at sex was more like having a large black

flat-coat puppy lying on her. He was so cute and gorgeous. But his prowess was more akin to a wet lettuce.

Phil and Chris from the Engineering Department and Darren who rowed at five in the university first eight seemed to know far more about it. Where had they got that Scottish twink from? He was probably gay, in the nicest possible way. Anyway, after the first round, he had gone all coy and had ended up in the kitchen totally rat-arsed without his jeans on and fast asleep.

Needless to say, the Scottish twink was rated *nul points*, and was a good measure for wetness by which all other boys were compared. Darren from the first eight was declared the master bonker, while the Scottish twink was regarded as the master plonker. But somehow that Scottish twink seemed to be remarkably similar to Laura's new boyfriend, albeit a much younger version.

When Laura found she was pregnant, there was uproar. Who was the father? Phil, Chris, and Darren emphatically denied it, and willingly submitted samples for genetic analysis. When, in August 1996, Christian was born, he too was subjected to genetic analysis. Not that he was in any position to object. Distinctive markers were found on Chromosomes 9, 13, 14, and 22. The Y chromosome bore no resemblance whatever to those belonging to Phil, Chris, or Darren. Laura had been tempted to shout rape - not a good idea as she and her flatmates had invited a good number of boys to a party of highly sordid nature and provided them with condoms. Also, by her own admission, Laura had had to bonk the Scottish twink for anything to happen. It would have been an uphill battle to convince a jury that unlawful carnal knowledge had been committed beyond all reasonable doubt.

As for Joby, memories too came flooding back. He had felt out of place at the conference, which was full of engineers who

were old enough to be his father. He had met up with Phil, a twenty-one-year-old post-grad at the Engineering Department. They were going to a party, which seemed to be a lot more fun than sitting on his own in a bar full of old fogies and pompous farts reliving their times on Type 4 diesels or Stanier Black Fives.

The girls were fun and led him on. Joby at the age of twenty was very gullible. He had the street-wisdom of a young teenager. There was food and drink at the flat, and he had got somewhat worse for wear. He remembered something about taking his shoes off before taking off his jeans and boxer-shorts. She got him going, but he felt very uncomfortable. She was athletic, like Mary. He remembered flopping down on her, and the rest could be left to the imagination.

The next morning, he had found himself in the kitchen. He had put his boxer shorts back on and his trainers, but his jeans were still in the bedroom. The first thing that came into his mind's eye was a glass of brandy, and he felt sick. Straightaway the hangover came, large lumps of pain travelling across his forehead, kicking his eyes in the back of their sockets. He went through to the bathroom, sat down, and found that he had a latex balloon that had filled with wee. It hurt as he peeled the bloody thing off and he threw it down the lavatory. He still felt sick, and mumbled stuff about "going on the wagon". The bloody house had no right to be rolling around like a ship on the high seas.

As he sobered up that day, it slowly dawned on him that he had been a naughty boy. They had been naughty girls as well. If Mary found out, she would have... well it did not bear thinking about. He had been unfaithful, even though they were not yet married. There was an old-fashioned word for it, adultery. He remembered Rowan Atkinson's Devil sketch: *You are here for eternity, which, believe me, is a fuck of a long time... Fornicators? Will you stand over there? My God! There's a fuck of a lot of you... You want to go to the toilet? Well, I am afraid you can't. This is damnation without relief.*

Joby had felt dirty but wasn't sure whom to tell. Mary would tear him limb from limb. If he confessed it to a catholic priest, he would be saying The Rosary for the rest of his natural. Mum and Dad would not approve. Jenny would laugh at him, while Sarah would be liable to spill the beans to Mary who was one of her closest friends. It was through Sarah that he had met her in the first place. He would have to carry it as his guilty little secret, for as long as he lived. He had made love with a woman that he had never met before. He had only gone along to the party for some company. There was no way he could have conceived a child. He had been wearing that latex thing. Even he knew that it would have stopped that sort of thing from happening. While Joby had heard some comments about Chris ("He's the spit of you, Joby."), it must have been impossible. He could hardly do sex, even with Mary. How they had conceived Aidan was beyond him. With Ewan, it was embarrassing and humiliating going into that hospital room with a specimen pot. A love child was out of the question; he had used a latex product for protection. And the girl had provided it.

"Joby," said Laura as she sat on the bed, "do you remember this place?"

"Not particularly," said Joby. He was trying to demur, but knew it was going to be a vain attempt. "The last time I was in York was in late 1995."

"You went to a party?" Laura was staring at Joby intently. Joby wasn't stupid and decided that honesty was the best policy. He had never been a particularly good liar and would have made a hopeless politician.

"I remember I went with two lads called Chris and Phil. I have a guilty secret."

"You can keep your secret safe with me, Joby." Laura knew that she was winning. Joby was as easy a push-over now as he was

then. He was still as cute and gorgeous, like a black flat-coat retriever.

“It’s hard to say,” replied Joby, who was going bright red. “I got drunk and ended up in bed with a girl. I wasn’t very good. I am not very good at that sort of thing.”

“Yes, I knew that back in 1995. I was that girl.”

Joby’s reaction was similar to being hit in the solar plexus. He squirmed in embarrassment. “Laura, I am so sorry. I didn’t know what I was doing.” Joby was expecting a screaming tirade of abuse, just like they did in TV dramas. Instead, Laura burst out laughing.

“Actually, it was quite funny at first. You just lay on me and looked like a large puppy. I had to bonk you for anything to happen. We awarded you zero out of ten in the bonking stakes!”

“Nice to have made a score. I obviously made more of an impression with Mary; she gave me two out of ten.”

“Joby, we all thought you were so cute and gorgeous. When you told us you were twenty, none of us believed you.”

“I was twenty-seven when I was last asked my age in a pub. Mary was once offered half-fare on a bus and indignantly told the driver that she was a twenty-eight-year-old doctor.”

“Joby, you are so cute and gorgeous, and I want you to be mine.”

“I am all yours.”

“There is one other thing, Joby,” said Laura. “Lots of people say that Christian is a blond version of you. He’s very gentle and sweet like you. I think you’re his father.”

“I don’t understand. I was wearing that thing you put on me. It’s meant to stop that sort of thing. How would you know?”

“Simple. I didn’t have it away with anyone before or after. I bonked with four boys. Three of them did paternity tests. They were ruled out.”

“Oh my God,” said Joby who was feeling decidedly uncomfortable. “I wore that thing. It’s meant to stop that sort of thing happening.”

“You do know that sometimes they don’t work. We said that they could have been second-hand cross-ply remoulds.”

“I don’t know what to say. Laura, I am so sorry. You have been through the mill, and it was my fault. Oh my God!” Joby looked like he was about to burst into tears.

“You can’t say anything. But there are two things you can do. Number one is to have a paternity test. Number two is to marry me.”

“We get the ring tomorrow. It is the least I can do.”

“Well, aren’t you going to go on bended knee to propose to me?”

The analysis of Joby’s chromosomes revealed a perfect match with the paternal chromosomes in Christian Salway’s karyotype. The same distinctive markers that had been found on Chromosomes 9, 13, 14, 22 and Y in Christian’s karyotype were matched perfectly to Joby’s. There was no doubt about it. Joseph Oliver Baxter Walker was the biological father of Christian Dominic Hayward Salway. The Scottish twink, despite his utter ineptitude in bed, had got through all the defences to score a direct hit. He had been the butt of many a joke between Laura and her flatmates. Now he was her fiancé and biological father of her son. The irony was delicious. It also helped to explain how incredibly intelligent Christian was.

The main thing now was how to explain to Aidan and Ewan that their friend Christian was actually a half-brother, and to Christian that the mystery of his biological father had now been solved. Since Joby had fucked it (if one could pardon the vulgar engineering expression), he had to fix it.

Chapter 20

Saturday, 7th June 2014

Joseph Walker was a lucky man. He had three delightful sons. A month ago, he had two delightful sons and a delightful young man that they had befriended and adopted. The problem he had now was to tell two of them that their friend was actually their half-brother, and to his other son that he was his biological father. Chris had always called him “dad”; he was right.

Aidan and Ewan had been doing a rehearsal for the Fashion show and planned to do a training run in the afternoon around Rowallan Country Park. Chris was doing his Saturday at Walker Bros. Joby and Laura waited for the second roar of *The Colossus* which told them that the boys were ready for their run and would come downstairs to do their stretching before they trotted down to the station to catch their train to Maunder. As they came downstairs, Laura called them through to the kitchen, and they sat round the large table where they would have their family meals.

“Your dad’s got something to tell you,” said Laura firmly. The sooner this was over and done with the better.

“I think I’ll come out with it straight away,” said Joby. He looked very uncomfortable and nervous. “Christian is your half-brother.”

“Dad,” said Ewan, “have you flipped?”

“No, Eejay,” replied Joby, “I have been a naughty boy. Not recently. In fact, it was before you were born. Aidy hadn’t been born either. I was very young and impressionable. I was also off the leash. Laura, you tell them what actually happened...”

Laura did just as she was bidden, in graphic detail about their father’s lack of prowess in the process of mammalian reproduction.

“Dad,” Ewan carried on, “Mum would have murdered you if she had found out.”

“I know she would. It’s been a guilty secret for eighteen years. She was going to say something when we had got back from Switzerland...”

“Well, at least I am straight-forward about it,” Ewan concluded. “It’s much easier being gay. So, what are you going to say to Chris, Dad?”

“Exactly what I have told you.”

“I’m not sure how he’s going to take it, Dad. Aidy, what do you think?”

“Dad, it’s the second time I have said you’re a dark horse,” Aidan replied and left it at that.

Aidan and Ewan stopped for a rest at Barrock Cross. They sat on a rock and discussed the morning’s revelation. In TV dramas there would have been lots of shouting, swearing, and high emotion, none of which either boy did. Nor was it likely that Christian would either.

“I just can’t imagine it,” said Ewan. “Dad didn’t look like he could bonk anything at the age of twenty.”

“They did something to produce me,” replied Aidan. “It was Dad, wasn’t it? I couldn’t have just budded off from Mum.”

“Mum would have had to bonk Dad to produce either of us. You heard what Laura said about Dad in bed. He was like a black flat-coat puppy. That was the best of it. She might as well have had sex with a wet lettuce. Mum said that as well.”

“Doesn’t bode well for either of us in the future, does it?”

“It’s much easier to be gay. Dad was gorgeous when he was young.”

“Quite a few have said to me how Chris is just like me. Leah said it to me yesterday.”

“I wonder who else Dad has got his end away with. He has been off the leash a number of times. Mum was often telling him not to go off with strange women.”

“Dad said how he felt dirty about it afterwards. I don’t think Mum ever knew. She would have torn him limb from limb. You certainly wouldn’t have happened, Eejay.”

“Aidy, I can’t be a black flat coat. A red setter, perhaps? It’s so much simpler being gay and being turned on by Jordan.”

Christian Salway had now finished his day at Walker Bros and had returned to Brewster House. He came in with his usual cheery “Hi, Mum, hi, Dad.”

“Chris, I need to tell you something,” said Joby. “You need to sit down.”

Christian looked anxious. “Have I done something wrong?”

“No, not at all. You know you call me ‘Dad’.”

“Yes. You don’t mind that, do you?”

“No, not at all. You are right. I am your dad. Your mum has talked about how you were born, hasn’t she?”

“Yes. I know that I was conceived as a result of a one-night stand after a party. A student at York University was responsible.”

“That particular detail was wrong. A York University student brought me to the party. I did the rest. Not very well. I was wearing a condom, but it didn’t work. You do understand, don’t you?”

“Why didn’t you contact Mum and save a lot of worry?”

“I was very young. I was not yet engaged to Mary, and I was unfaithful. I felt terrible about it. I am a terrible coward.”

“In other words, you were a naughty boy.”

“Yes, you could put it like that. I wasn’t the only one. There were several other boys.”

“What? Each of you screwed Mum in turn?” Christian was feeling somewhat disgusted.

“Mum wasn’t the only one. She and her flatmates had this party. They were fed up with the boyfriends they had at the time. She told me that. They scored each of us. I was a big zero. You ask your mum about it.”

“Mum, you were a naughty girl as well, weren’t you? Why didn’t you chase after Dad?”

“We didn’t know who he was. There were four suspects. The three students from York University were ruled out. So, there was only one left, and we didn’t think it was possible. None of us knew who he was when I realised that I was pregnant.”

The front door opened, and Aidan and Ewan came in from their run. Christian said to his parents, “I don’t know what to think. I want to talk things over with Aidy and Eejay.”

The three boys went into conclave in the games room and sat in a circle cross-legged on cushions. Christian was looking shattered. He started the conversation, “Aidy, Eejay, how long have you known that I am your half-brother?”

“About two hours ago. Dad told us just before we went for our run. You were at work,” replied Aidy. “You seem very upset about it.”

“I’m shocked, Aidy. I don’t know what to think. In some ways I did want to know who my father was, but now I know, I don’t want to know, if you know what I mean. The last person I would have thought responsible was your dad. Or should I say, ‘our dad’?”

“He is our dad,” said Eejay. “And we are very close to him. He’s a teenager in an adult body and he loves us to bits. And he loves you as well. Although we were shattered by Mum’s death, and loved her dearly, she was quite dominant. Mum was a tomboy when she was a girl, and Dad was very much her tomboy’s toy-boy. We both feel that Dad is somehow freer. It sounds a horrible thing to say, and I don’t mean it like that. We’re very protective towards Dad, and he has talked to us a lot. Chris, he really likes you and is so grateful for your friendship and what you have done for him.”

“Chris, you are very much part of our family,” Aidy continued. “Now you are family. And we love you. It’s more than simply being a friend. You have been a brother to us.”

Chris had tears in his eyes, “Yeah, I know. Aidy, you have been my first real friend, and I have said that you were more like a brother to me. Same with you, Eejay. I still want that. It’s just getting my mind round it that’s taking time...”

The three boys had a deep conversation about the day’s momentous news and helped their half-brother to take in the solution to life’s mystery. That they were part of an irrational love story helped to deepen their bond even more. Finally, they went back to find the two love-struck adults who were listening to music in the drawing room. Chris spoke to his parents, “Mum, Dad, it’s right that you were naughty, very naughty. Don’t you ever do that again.”

“Chris, I don’t think that such parties are ever going to be on the agenda. Mum has gone through in detail that I was an anti-stud. And I still am. But we love each other.”

“So, what are you going to do about it, Dad?” said Christian.

“I am going to do the right thing and marry your mother. We’re seeing Rob Matheson next week.”

“What else are you going to do, Dad?” said Aidan.

“What else do I need to do?”

“Dad, you need to tell Aunt Jenny and Aunt Sarah, for a kick-off, and Grandma and Granddad. If you don’t, Eejay and I will.”

While the day’s revelations had caused a certain amount of angst and surprise, the gentle nature of the Walker family was such that there were no hissy-fits and high drama that would accompany that kind of story on the television. In fact, the very harmonious nature of the family would have made rather boring television but was so much more pleasant to live with when compared to the endless bickering in the soaps. It was natural for Christian to hug his mother and father, while Aidan and Ewan did the same with their father and stepmother.

The only question that Christian had to consider was whether to keep his surname of Salway, or whether to change it to Walker. He decided to keep it Salway for the time being, at least until he finished University. Aidan and Ewan were sworn to secrecy. The idea of nosy Caddies finding out about it did not bear thinking about. Since Caddies tended to mind each other’s business more readily than their own, there would have been no end to the gossiping. Long tongues would have wagged, and long ears pricked from Secondary One to Secondary Six. Someone would find out soon enough. Since Aidan and he had birthdays

very close together, it was hardly a surprise that they got known as *The Twins*. Indeed, they had agreed that Aidy and he would have a joint celebration of their eighteenth birthdays. As Christian looked at his half-brother, he could easily see how closely he resembled him, apart from the fact that he had longer hair and it was blond. That came from his mother. If Christian wrote it down, it would surely be rejected as bad fiction. But fact often was.

The next day, there was going to be a blitz on the garden. Muriel had noticed that the garden was getting tatty, and it was high time that her son got out the lawnmower. He had a choice of two of these big boys' toys. One was a powerful rotary that required its operator to walk behind it and periodically empty it. The second was for the really hippy-lazy. Its operator rode on the thing and could spend a couple of happy, if rather juvenile, hours pretending that he was at Silverstone. Mary had rather shunned the second machine for that reason. Nettles and ground elder had sprouted where they had no business to do so. While both of these weeds would make splendid vegetables, they were not really part of the flora of a refined and elegant garden. Nor were the brambles which in August would provide delicious tasting fruit.

Joby and Laura came back from church with the aunts and husbands and grandparents in tow. They were ready to hack and slash at the garden. Granddad in his scruffies looked more like Wurzel Gummidge than a master tailor and the proprietor of a business with an annual turnover of several million pounds. Aunt Jenny, Aunt Sarah and Grandma still managed to look elegant. Before battle commenced, it was time for coffee. And Joby made his confession.

Unsurprisingly it was Muriel who was the first to comment, "Joseph, well I never! You have been a naughty boy! What would Mary have thought?"

“She would have murdered me, Mum.”

“She should have kept you on a tighter leash, my lad. I know I am old-fashioned, but I am glad that you are doing the right thing.”

Jenny and Sarah added their bit as well, leaving their brother in no doubt that he was indeed a naughty boy. No mention was made that Laura had been a naughty girl, nor that it had taken two to tango.

Charles Walker said nothing but was smugly satisfied that the ownership of Walker Bros was definitely going to be kept within the family.

By the end of the day, the garden at Brewster House looked much tidier and the compost heap was bulging. While Chris was doing his bit, he was thinking how he could apply his design skills. All was harmony and noisy conviviality in the Walker family. Despite Joby having been a naughty boy some years ago, none of them had believed that he was capable of firing a shot, let alone one that would get through defences and make a direct hit.

Chapter 21

Friday, 27th June 2014

For many schools, the summer term would lose its sense of purpose about three weeks before the end of term and fizzle out with a whimper. The end of the school year at Strathcadden Academy, by contrast, always ended with a bang. Initially the celebrations were primarily for the pupils to keep them focused, but they gradually extended to involve the parents and other community groups. In recognition of the previous tenants of the site, Old Oswaldians were cordially invited and welcomed. In effect it became quite akin to a speech day at an English public school. Unlike the latter, however, there was a refreshing lack of snobbery and one-upmanship that characterised many such events. Strathcadden Academy was owned and cherished by the community it served.

The widespread talent that was part and parcel of the young people was on display for all to enjoy and relish. There were displays from the Wee Caddies that varied from History trips to Science projects. The Art Department had displays that were submitted for the National, Higher, and Advanced Higher exams. In the Technology Department there were projects that varied from beautifully turned articles from the lathe to exquisitely finished pieces of furniture that would have been the pride of many a professional craftsman.

There was drama, music, and sports laid on for the enjoyment of parents, pupils, and the entire community. More recently, the end of year celebrations had become the curtain-raiser for the Corscadden Festival which happened in the following week. The Festival was a reflection and celebration of all local artistic and sporting talent. Strathcadden Academy was the venue for many events, and the Festival kept John the Jannie and his...ae...vannie busy throughout. The locals looked forward to the end of June and first week of July. Usually, the weather in Buchananshire was

glorious, and more importantly, all the events were free (although donations were welcome and much appreciated).

For Keith Mitchell, the Headmaster, and his Senior Depute, Andrew McEwan, it was a busy time as well. Mr McEwan had developed the Celebration Days using his experience from an independent school he had taught at in Northern England. There it dripped with snobbery, which made him avoid the term “Speech Day”. Yes, there were short addresses, but he was determined that it was for the benefit of the community, not the Headmaster, nor the Council, nor the School Board. And he was strenuous in his efforts to avoid the knock-about comedy of errors that had occurred during the speech day of 1998 at Tanswold School. The chances of the Headmaster getting blind drunk were nil.

For Andrew McEwan, another big task for him was the three school services. On Thursday afternoon, there was the End of Year Service for Secondary Years One to Three, and parents. It was followed immediately by a similar service for Secondary Years Four and Five. Afterwards there was the Leavers’ Service on Friday morning which was for students and parents in Secondary Six. The Old Chapel would be chock-a-block, and his service would be a simple but joy-filled occasion to mark the departure of the latest generation of Auld Caddies to their universities or other destinations. The music for the first service was provided by a talented young key-board player from Secondary Four, Tamsin Heady. Her skills were blossoming and at fifteen, she could show many a pianist a thing or two. As part of the Festival during the following week, Tamsin was going to give a piano recital in St Columba’s Church. For the Secondary Years Four and Five, music was provided by Ewan Walker. For the Leavers’ Service, another talented artist from Secondary Six provided the music, Aidan Walker.

It was at the End of Year Service that the new prefects were announced. Among the appointments Ewan Walker was to be

Head of House for Asher House, Jordan Melhuish was Head of House for Baxter House, while the Head Girl was Gemma Hammond, and the Head Boy was Christian Salway.

At the end of the Prize-Giving Celebration after the Leavers' Service, there was a ceremony in which Samuel John Fulton pinned the Oswald Boss and Sash onto Gemma Louise Hammond and swore her in. After that Karen Jayne Lawlor did the same for Christian Dominic Hayward Salway. It was a curious bit of ceremonial that looked as if it should have belonged to Saint Oswald College. In fact, it had been put together by Mr Duffy, the first headmaster of Strathcadden Academy some twenty years before.

Immediately after the Celebration, John the Jannie and his team (on time and a half) set up the Catwalk and rearranged the chairs in the Old Chapel for the Fashion show, a new event at Strathcadden Academy. There were to be two performances, one on Friday Afternoon, and one on Saturday morning.

Christian's grandfather had invited a number of his contacts in the fashion industry to attend, and the catwalk on both sides was surrounded by photographers. With Ewan acting as compère, and Caitlin organising the choreography to perfection, the show was a complete success. The models strutted their stuff on the catwalk, while shutters clicked like so many grasshoppers. As befitted the author of this challenge, Charles Walker sat in the seat of honour at the end of the catwalk, with Muriel and his daughters. Joby and Laura sat holding hands nearby. Both were bursting with pride over the achievement of their son. Each scene was greeted with enthusiastic applause, and, at the end, an encore was demanded. Finally, the young designer went out, rather shyly at first, to meet his audience. He looked so young, almost girlish, in his kilt and smiled bashfully at the rapturous applause.

Afterwards one of Charles Walker's business contacts asked him who this new designer was. "How old is she?"

"He's seventeen. He's a boy," replied Charles who did not add that Christian was his grandson.

"I always thought that Christian was a girl's name. My sister had it as one of her names."

At the end of the second performance, Charles and Muriel went to congratulate their grandson. "Christian, that was outstanding, and it was all down to you," said Muriel.

"Thanks Grandma," replied Christian. It was strange to be calling this dignified old lady 'Grandma', but it was, of course, totally correct. Christian was still getting used to being a true Walker.

"It was a difficult challenge," said Charles, "as hard as any that I have ever set any of my managers. There were several reasons for it."

"You made it easier for me. I couldn't have done it without your help."

"And the help of many others."

"Of course."

"Now Christian, one of the reasons that I asked you to do the challenge was that I knew that you have had many challenges in your life, far more than your dad, or Aidy and Eejay. I love them dearly, of course, but I know that none of them have any business sense. Aunt Jenny and Aunt Sarah hogged all the ration of business sense. Poor Joby had none and still hasn't any. He was much brighter at ten than I will ever be, but he is into technical things like trains and electricity. He taught me everything about trains, but with electricity I got nowhere. I don't even know Ohm's Law.

“The task I set you, and which you succeeded in beyond my wildest dreams, was not just to show your outstanding design skills, but also for you to show me how good you are in managing people. And you did not disappoint. Your management style was gentle and graceful, which is what helped you to get the best out of your clothiers. And that is the management style that I use at Walker Bros. I have no time for macho management. I will never ask one of my staff to do something that I am not prepared to do myself. And they recognise that. If they are working extra hours, I am working extra hours too. At one point, I had to reduce pay. I hated having to do it, but we would have gone under. Their pay went down by ten percent; my pay went down by thirty percent. It was hard, but we got through it, and I restored their pay back to previous levels as soon as I could. So, treat your staff right, and they will do anything for you. Like all employers, I have had to crack the whip, but I have always been careful to ensure it was a fair response. Jenny and Sarah are exactly the same. I know you will do the same.

“Now Grandma and I are getting no younger, and Jenny and Sarah are taking more and more of the business. I will be retiring in the next year or two. After all there is more to life than work. Now I have worked them hard, far harder than I ever worked myself, and they will make a success of the business. They want to retire before they are seventy, and this is where you come in. I would like you to go to university and get a good degree. After that I would like you to come into the family business and get fully trained and experienced. Jenny and Sarah will expect that you will get to know every function of the business. If there aren't enough people to unload a lorry, you will have to help, just as they do, and I do. So, when they retire, I want you to take over the business. I know this is going to be a big ask, but are you happy to do that?”

Christian momentarily looked aghast. Thoughts ran through his mind about the enormity of what was coming up in his life. “What do Aunt Jenny and Aunt Sarah think?” he asked.

“Naturally, they are very enthusiastic. They know how much I have fretted over this. It would have been the easiest thing in the world to sell up. Indeed, I did, which is why I formed the Walker Family Trust. The company I sold up to sent up some goon who crashed the company within weeks.

“That is what the imbecile from London did with Walker Bros. They sold it back to me for a pound, and a fistful of debt. Max the Axe got at me. He was ready to ruin me, but he went and crashed the bank instead. That was when there was the banking crisis in 2008.”

“Who was Max the Axe? Sounds like a gangster,” said Christian.

“And some said he acted like one. He was Maxwell Anderson, one of the bosses of the Union Scottish Bank at the time. If I went and did a bank for twenty-five thousand, I would get fourteen years inside. He did the bank and the country for twenty-five thousand million and got a pension of three hundred and fifty grand a year. That’s four times what I get paid – a man with a big ego if ever I saw one.”

“Charles don’t put Chris off too much,” said Muriel, who had picked up on her grandson’s anxiety.

“We got through it, by hard graft from everyone. Our staff started to come back, and now we are on our feet again. Chris, you have the right talent to take the helm in Walker Bros.”

“I’m only a kid, Granddad. I’ve got so much to learn.”

“Of course, you have. I wouldn’t expect you to take over tomorrow. But you will be twenty-three when you start full-time.

You will do everything, so you have experience of everything. I reckon that by the time Jenny and Sarah have had enough, you will be about forty, your dad's age, and you will have all the skills and acumen you need. In the meantime, you concentrate on getting good Advanced Highers, and a good degree. I'm delighted that Mr Mitchell has made you Head Boy. The most important thing is that you enjoy yourself."

"Granddad, I will do it and do my level best."

"Good lad. I know you will."

Christian was still feeling a little anxious as he told Aidan and Ewan about his conversation with Granddad. But they were over the moon, for they knew how much Granddad was putting his faith in Chris. "I will do my level best to live up to his expectations," said Chris and they knew he meant it.

Another expectation was coming their way more immediately. There was the small matter of a 15-k race up to Rowallan, around the country park, up to Barrock Cross, and back along Barrock Hill and down to Corscadden. Since Christian Salway was to be captain of the men's cross-country team next year, he had to do well. Unlike a fell race, this cross-country race was along well-defined and generally well-made paths, although there was a considerable amount of climbing, about five hundred metres in all. It was long and tough. Although it was a junior race for men and women under nineteen, the standard of competition was still strong. It attracted not only runners from schools and clubs all over Scotland, but also from south of the Border, and one or two from the near continent. The same race was to be run during the Corscadden Festival but was open to all. On this occasion, Aidan was not racing, as he had his recital that evening.

Soon they were warming up outside the Strathcadden Sports and Leisure Centre. Christian had tied his long hair into a ponytail which he had fixed with a rubber band and had a sweatband around his forehead. He was wearing his usual light running shorts and long sports socks.

Christian had developed strongly as a runner under Aidan's gentle tutelage. Like his half-brothers he had the ideal physique for long distance running. His build was slight, and his legs were long. Being quite underweight, he had a very good power to weight ratio. Little wonder – the genes had come from his father.

Mr Mitchell sounded the start horn and stepped back as about twenty tonnes of teenage biomass threatened to engulf him.

It was a tough race, but Christian had a very high stamina. It took the competitors over several hills that formed the Corscadden skyline. For Christian there was one target, to catch the leader, an accomplished athlete who had a long track record of success at junior level.

Just as he thought he had nothing left, Christian kicked down as hard as he could and caught up with the lad at the school gates. One hundred metres to go and both were going as hard as each could. It was anyone's race. For Christian, it was indeed his day, beating his opponent by 0.1 second to win the Gold Medal. The other lad was the Northern Counties Champion. Today he made do with Silver. Ten seconds behind was Ewan to claim Bronze. Ewan was clearly slightly off-form. Jordan was tenth.

Christian flopped in a heap just beyond the finish, but just far enough away not to be an obstacle to other runners. He was like a cheetah that had missed its prey by two centimetres. If he dropped dead now, he would have been on top. His brain was awash with endorphins, which was far better than being awash with alcohol, ketamine, and that other shit whose name he had forgotten. In the films of old, Head Boys did not lie flat out on the

grass, but this was Twenty Fourteen, and if the ghost of Dr Cowan remonstrated with him for doing so, he would tell him to take a running jump.

After an hour or so, the other runners were in, and it was time for the medals ceremony. It was a new experience for Christian. He was the Scottish Schools Junior Champion. Everyone was coming up to congratulate him and he was a little embarrassed at being the centre of attention. Mr McEwan was being Master of Ceremonies while the Mayor of Corscadden and the Lord High Marischal of Buchananshire were to give out the medals. Christian could hear the usual stuff about this being a record-breaking race in 50 minutes and 12 seconds. Was that really his time? He heard, "The Gold Medal for men was won by Christian Salway of Strathcadden Academy. Silver was won by Richard Clarke of Kelferford School. Bronze was won by Ewan Walker of Strathcadden Academy..."

Christian had never been on a champion's podium before. He had been on the catwalk a few hours ago. The last time he had been on stage before so many people for a sporting achievement was at Beckton Sixth Form College when the Principal had berated him in public for letting in so many goals, and how embarrassed she was at his performance. If only she could see him now... A gentle and self-effacing young man, Christian bowed his head coyly as the Lord High Marischal, Sir Hugh Clayden, put the medal around his neck and shook his hand firmly and warmly. Champion? Athlete? Not words that Christian associated with himself.

There were other ceremonies that were taking place as well as that. There had been a seven-a-side rugby tournament, and five-a-side football for both men and women. There would be athletics tomorrow and Christian and his half-brothers were racing in the 5000 and 10000 metres. Joseph Walker had invited his colleagues down for the weekend. James Belson had not been able to come,

but Samuel Proudlock and his wife Jessica had arrived with their children. Brewster House had swallowed them up easily. Sophie was nearly swallowed up by *The Venerable*, but Olivia had rescued her.

Before tomorrow, there was the rest of the day to get through. Aidan was to give his solo organ recital that evening, and Christian, as next year's Head Boy, was to introduce the performance to the audience. Gemma Hammond had done the same the evening before the orchestral concert. The previous evening's music had been a triumph. While the orchestra had performed well in Edinburgh during the Scottish Schools' Music Competition, the performance had become more polished. Jessica Proudlock, who was one of the judges at the competition, was highly impressed by the performance, and was bowled over at the way the orchestra had improved from good to outstanding in so few weeks. She had sought out Peter Struther to congratulate him in person.

Now it was Aidan's turn to be on stage, and he felt more at ease with his close friend and now half-brother acting as compère for the event. So once again Aidan found himself seated at the organ with its rows of noisy keys. A sad thought passed through his mind: this would be the last time he had the chance to play the instrument unless Mr Mitchell invited him to perform at some other time. Aidan was now an Auld Caddie; he would not wear the Caddie Style again. The End of Year Celebrations were, naturally, High Days, so sporrans were to be worn.

The citizens of Corscadden were a cultured lot, especially as Aidan's recital was free and promised two hours of music that would show off the newly restored instrument to its full potential. It was little surprise that the Old Chapel was full of culture vultures, and it was standing room only. The first piece was the massed pipes and drum of Strathcadden Academy led by Karen Lawlor, her final duty as Head Girl. The slow march *Highland Cathedral*

resounded around the Old Chapel, which, by accident rather than clever design, had excellent acoustics. As the final chord died away and the pipers came to attention, the new Head Boy, Christian Salway, complete with the Oswald Boss and Sash, came out to the front and felt like a vicar about to preach a sermon.

“Ladies and Gentlemen, good evening,” he started looking at the script he had carefully prepared. “It gives me great pleasure to welcome you to this evening of music performed by Aidan Walker, a student who is about to leave Secondary Six...”

At this point, Christian, full of nerves, lost his place in his notes. He did not want to make it obvious that he had lost his place after two lines, so he made an instantaneous decision to make it up as he went along. “As well as being a very close friend of mine, Aidan is a very talented organist, as you heard in the introductory piece. The piece he and the pipers played is called *Highland Cathedral*. He will play a number of classic pieces, as well as some music he has composed himself. Finally, Mr Struther, who has been Head of Music for this term, will get Aidan to improvise on a piece that he has made up. Aidan will not have seen this piece before, but Mr Struther told me that last time he did this, Aidan was fantastic. So, Aidan, come on out and tell us what you are going to play for us.”

Aidan came out, and said, “Thanks for that Chris...”

At the back of the Old Chapel, Ewan and Jordan slipped in, hopefully unnoticed. They were still wearing their running kit, but each had a sweatshirt on.

During the interval, Ewan joined his brothers to let them know why he had only just got there. “One of the runners hadn’t got back,” he said, “and some of us went to look for him.”

“I didn’t know that,” said Aidan.

“They kept it quiet, but Mr Drummond, Jordan, and I went out to look for him. They had the cops out as well.”

“Has he been found?”

“Yes. Jordan and I found him halfway down Barrock Hill. He had gone over on his ankle and hurt it badly. We brought him down to Bracklinnen Road where the ambulance was waiting. They’re checking him out at the moment at the Strathie, but he will be OK.”

“He won’t be running for a while,” said Chris.

For Aidan Walker, the rest of the evening went by in a flash. Organ settings of several traditional Scottish folk tunes went down very well with his audience. His final act was to be given another short theme dreamt up by Mr Struther, who explained what the idea of improvisation was, and how it was used to challenge solo instrumentalists at recitals in France. While Aidan was an outstanding amateur instrumentalist, a professional performer would have gone into a greater musical depth. But the audience were not there to be bombarded with a serious academic performance. They wanted to hear music played beautifully on a magnificent instrument, and that is what they got. It was a simple theme, and Aidan’s improvisations did it justice, giving his audience ten minutes of the joyful harmony that the newly restored instrument was now capable of. The arts critic of the *Cadden Guardian* was certainly impressed:

Music at Strathcadden Academy has come out of the doldrums. Those of us who attended the concerts on Friday and Saturday evenings were treated to performances that would rival those given by the best. The Strathcadden Academy Orchestra was revived by the newly appointed Head of Music, Peter Struther (30). It had prepared its repertoire for the Scottish Schools Music Competition in Edinburgh at the end of May. It scored well there, but since it had only been rehearsing for a month, that had come across. However, when I spoke to Mrs Jessica Proudlock, one of the judges and an accomplished

musician, she was thrilled to see how far they had progressed in their performance on Thursday evening. They had a programme that was a joy to hear. With talented youngsters of this calibre, you can be sure that Strathcadden Academy will take its rightful place in developing musical talent in Western Scotland.

On Saturday evening, music enthusiasts were treated to a recital on the newly restored organ in the Old Chapel at Strathcadden Academy. This impressive instrument was restored using a most generous legacy from the family of the late Mary Fairbairn, a well-loved GP and leading light of the Corscadden Festival. It was highly fitting that it was her son, Aidan Walker (17), who should play its inaugural recital. This talented young man gave us a variety of music, varying from Highland Cathedral, in which he accompanied the Strathcadden Pipe Band led by the Pipe-Major, Karen Lawlor (18), to his own composition, a Caddie Lad. Finally, Aidan gave us a spirited improvisation of a short theme written by Peter Struther.

I spoke to Aidan afterwards and he said that he simply wanted to share the joy he gets from music with others, and paid tribute to the influence he had from his late mother. I also spoke to the Headmaster, Mr Keith Mitchell, who talked of the importance of music in his own childhood in Yorkshire. "I am so proud of the wealth of musical talent there is in our school and in the area," he said.

And it was not just Aidan who got himself in the paper. Christian had a glowing write up after his Gold Medal, and Ewan Walker (16) and his boyfriend, Jordan Melhuish (17), were mentioned in the rescue of Ryan Hart (18) from certain death on the exposed hillside of Barrock Hill. The next day Christian gained a silver medal on the running track for both the 5000 and 10000 metres.

Thus, the End of Year Celebrations gave way to the Corscadden Festival. While the architect of the Festival was no longer with them, everyone felt her presence and her delight. The

weather was kind as well, and there were long hours of glorious late June and early July sunshine that bathed Buchananshire in the summer of 2014. Ewan Walker had not finished performing. He played a short gig among several different acts at the main venue in Braeside Park. He performed with several of his Caddie friends in a teen boyband called *Kilted Spice Boys*, which played in a Scottish folksy style. The name reflected not only the boys' sweet and gentle nature, but also because of the highly scented deodorant they applied to their bodies in liberal amounts. Needless to say, many a girl swooned over them. The girls' hopes would be in vain. All the members of this teen-boy band were gay.

Later that week, Aidan, Christian, Jordan and Ewan competed in the open 15 k race over the same course as they had on the Saturday. As the competition was against elite and senior athletes, none of them won the race, but they were top of the junior classes.

As for Christian Salway, he had the satisfaction of seeing his fashion show displayed in the Walker Bros exhibition area outside the restaurant. He could hear the comments, which were overwhelmingly positive. Little would the customers know that the fresh-faced Saturday boy who waited on them was in fact the designer. But more importantly, as he and his half-brothers sat in the sun at the top of Barrock Hill overlooking the expanse of Strathcadden, he felt so totally at home. He was a Walker and his heart that was beating gently in his chest was the heart of a true Caddie.